

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 419

Perfect Through Christ's Comeliness

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 17th November, 2019**

Text: *“Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God” (Ezekiel 16. 14).*

In this chapter, Almighty God is speaking to His ancient people, and He is speaking in a way of solemn reproof. Really, there are three distinct parts to this chapter. The first part, the fourteen verses I read this evening – in this is the analogy of a child cast out in loathsomeness and blood in the day of its birth. This was Israel. “Thy father was an Amorite, and thy mother an Hittite.” God’s ancient people had no claim to God’s mercy, and yet when He passed by, it was the time of love, and He said unto them, Live. This is an analogy of a husband and his bride, how this little child was cleansed and then grew up to be a beautiful young woman, and richly clothed, richly dressed, blessed with all kinds of ornaments to adorn her. This is Israel in her best days, the days of David and Solomon. “And thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord.” The Lord had done it all.

And then the second section is an exceedingly long section. It begins with “*But*” – Israel’s backsliding, Israel’s sin; and verse after verse goes on: the dreadful state, after all the Lord had done for His ancient people. It is really from verse 15 to verse 59, all this complaint, all this reproof, all this sin, all this guilt, all this backsliding. And then it ends with four beautiful words to ancient Israel. “Nevertheless I will remember My covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant.” That is the Lord speaking to His ancient people, but of course all this looks forward to gospel days.

Some of you will remember that this was a chapter which was made exceedingly precious to William Gadsby. He was abundantly blessed in his early days, but then – he was still young – he became very self-confident and he began sitting in judgment on other people, and the Lord permitted him to fall, and he thought he had made a mistake in all his religion. He was brought to the point of despair. Then he opened his Bible, seeking some relief, and he opened at Ezekiel chapter 16. He did

not really know it, but those early, beautiful verses described exactly what he thought he had known; and then he read this long passage verse after verse after verse, and every verse he read seemed to condemn him more. He said, “Is this people right? Is this sinner right? Is this sinner wrong? Because this sinner is me. If they come safely through, I will, but I don’t know whether they will or not.”

He was not familiar with the end of the chapter. He read on and on in a state of condemnation, till he came to this: “*Nevertheless* I will remember My covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant. Then thou shalt remember thy ways, and be ashamed, when thou shalt receive thy sisters, thine elder and thy younger: and I will give them unto thee for daughters, but not by thy covenant, and I will establish My covenant with thee; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord.” He could not restrain himself. He shouted out, “Lord they are safe! They are safe!”

So it is a remarkable chapter, but really this verse I have read to you is the end of those few verses, the beautiful dealings of the Lord in love and mercy with a sinner, finding that sinner cast out in loathsomeness and blood, none eye pitying, you and I by nature. Where should we have gone, but for grace? O that wonderful language: it was “the time of love.” “Thy time was the time of love”; “I said unto thee ... Live.” That is what the Lord does for all His people, for every sinner saved by grace. The time comes when He says unto them, “Live,” not so much in the word, but by the powerful dealings of His Spirit. He says, “Thou art Mine.” He claims them for His own. But it is all of grace. If you read these verses, it is nothing that the sinner did. It is everything that the Lord did.

I rather think quite a long time ago at Bethel, I spoke from these verses, and perhaps I tried to open up each one bit by bit. I do not think that is altogether the most important point. It is what the Lord did for His people, and at the end it is this: this is the description of a sinner as that sinner stands complete in Christ. “Saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation.”

“Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God.” I am going to tell you a solemn thing, beloved friends. We will never get to heaven unless we are perfect. That may even shock you, if not surprise you. We will never get to heaven unless we are perfect.

And beloved friends, we are not perfect. We are the very opposite. There is no perfection in us.

“My best is stained and dyed with sin;
My all is nothing worth.”

When God created Adam, He created him perfect, and He put him under law. He made a covenant with him. Really, that covenant was later revealed in the sum and substance of the law of works, the ten commandments. God’s holy law demands perfection in thought, in word, as well as in deed. How often we break that law! How often we are guilty! To love the Lord with all our heart and mind and soul, and what about this: our neighbour as ourselves?

Toplady speaks somewhere about the solemnity of the law and the commandment being exceeding broad. He was driving, or being driven, home and he saw that close to where he lived there was a fire, and it was destroying some of the houses. As he got near, he saw his own house, and it had escaped. O, he said, the joy and happiness he felt. But O the condemnation, as if the Lord said to him, Is this loving your neighbour as yourself?

Well, we do not, do we, in all things! “Thy commandment is exceeding broad.” It is no wonder the psalmist said, “I have seen an end of all perfection.” Adam was perfect in his innocence, but when he sinned, he ruined all his future race. “Sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” This is you, this is me, and we have to die. We have to meet our Maker, our Judge, our Lawgiver, and He still demands that perfection. He has a perfect right. We have not got the ability, but it is our own sin. We have not the ability, but the Lord has not lost His right to command. So He commands perfection, and not one of us can provide it.

In a word, the secret of it all:

“In Him” – in Christ – “the Father never saw
The least transgression of His law.”

Now this is it:

“Perfection, then, in Him we view;
His saints in Him are perfect too.”

That is the glorious gospel as I understand it, and it is the only gospel that takes a sinner to heaven, and it is the gospel we need. We need to be made perfect as we have it in Ezekiel 16. We cannot make ourselves perfect. If it were possible that we could never sin once more, what about past faults? We cannot make ourselves perfect. What hope is there? Well, the gospel comes nigh, and it speaks of a spotless perfection in the Person of Christ, and He gives that spotless perfection to all His people, unworthy sinners, sinners saved by grace.

This verse could have well been put in the middle of the Epistle to the Romans. That is why I read Romans 3: “The righteousness of God” – this spotless perfection – “is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all” – and He brings it right down – “them that believe.” So God’s chosen, His elect, those He has redeemed by righteousness and blood, He gives them faith to believe, and believing is resting on Christ. But really it is this: realising we have no righteousness of our own, but being made willing to receive the righteousness of Another as our ground of salvation, even the righteousness of our Lord Jesus. Or in the words of the text, confession we have no perfection in ourselves, but seeing that glorious perfection in Christ, being made willing to receive it by faith.

“Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord.” So all this takes us to Bethlehem, and to Calvary, and the work of our Lord Jesus, the Son of God from all eternity, made a real Man. And why did He come? Well, you could give me many answers to that. Why did He come? That a poor, lost, ruined sinner might be made perfect in the sight of a holy God. Now do you believe it, beloved friends? So what did He do? He came that He might live that perfect, holy spotless life. He became obedient to His Father’s law, the law of works, and He fulfilled it in every detail. Satan tried to stop it – that temptation in the wilderness, the many temptations, and the opposition of the world, the scribes and Pharisees. And then to complete obeying His Father’s will, He had to go to Gethsemane and Calvary. But His Father looked down from heaven with His all-seeing eye, and He could not see a single flaw in that perfect work of obedience of our Lord Jesus. What a word that is: “As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall many be made righteous.”

You know our well-known prayer to be prepared, “Prepare me, gracious God.” When I was a young boy, I could not altogether understand it: “In Christ’s obedience clothe.” What did it mean? It means a desire to have an interest in that perfect life of obedience, because the Lord Jesus reckoned it to the account of all His people, so that it becomes theirs, as if they had lived that spotless life of perfection themselves. It is a wonderful thing. So a sinner, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, is as perfect as God is perfect. A holy God looks on him and says, “Thou art all fair, My love; there is no spot in thee.” Do you believe it? Can you receive it? This is what it means – perhaps you young ones do not know – the imputed righteousness of Christ. To impute something – if I impute something to you, I reckon it to your account. It does not belong to you; I reckon it to you. Now that perfection did not belong to you and me, did it? *Imputed*. We need to explain what these little words mean.

To go back to William Gadsby again, he heard people say, “You will never get to heaven without imputed righteousness.” He said, “Then I am lost. I do not know what imputed righteousness means.” He brought a dictionary and looked up *imputed*. It did not help him. He asked the Lord to show him, and the Lord did: “He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” He said, “I know what imputed righteousness means now.”

“Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord.” Of course there is another thing. If His sinless perfection is reckoned to the sinner, what of the sinner’s vile sins? What has happened to them? Well, the old divines speak of the *active* and *passive* obedience of the Lord Jesus. His active obedience – everything He did in fulfilling the law. And then His passive obedience – we come to the cross here, what He suffered.

“O the sweet wonders of that cross,
Where God the Saviour loved and died!”

And there, having brought in that everlasting righteousness in His perfect obedience, He went to the cross, bearing all the sins of all His people in His own body on the tree. They were all laid upon Him. He bore the punishment they deserved, that His people might be free. In His sufferings and in His death, as His precious blood was shed which cleanseth from all sin, it took away for ever all the sin, all the guilt of His people. So they all

stand perfectly justified through the blood and righteousness – both necessary, both vital, our only hope, our only plea – the blood and righteousness of our Lord Jesus dying, rising again. So perhaps we know a little now of what the hymnwriter meant when he said,

“My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

Our only hope, and we do not need any other.

“Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God.” Of course, this is the great transaction, Christ taking His people’s sin, Christ giving His people His own righteousness. How do they come into it? As the Holy Spirit graciously teaches them their lost condition. They have no perfection of their own. They cannot stand before a holy God. And then it is praying for forgiveness, praying for cleansing in the Redeemer’s blood, praying to be clothed in His righteousness. You sing it:

“Clothed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.”

“Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee.” It is the Lord’s work from beginning to end. It is nothing in the sinner; it is everything in Christ. So it is speaking of beauty here. Really the language is speaking of this wretched infant growing up and becoming a bride. We have Christ and His beloved church, the Bridegroom and the bride. Here she is in all her beauty. You know the ninetieth Psalm; it is well-known. But it ends with a prayer, and it is a good one: “Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us” – His beauty, the beauty of His finished work, the beauty of His righteousness, because we have none of our own. “Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us.” Now that is in the work of justification. It is a standing in Christ. It can never change. It can never be altered. You can never be more justified one day than another.

But this passage – there is cleansing, clothing, and then there are all these other things: the ointment, and the being fed, and the beautiful ornaments – the work of sanctification. There is a beauty in the Holy Spirit’s work. This sinner saved by grace will not be allowed to go on in the world and with his sin and in his unbelief. There will be a difference. But that is not perfect. He will not be perfect until the day of Christ. It is

when His people enter into heaven. But there is a beauty in sanctification. It is the Holy Spirit's work in a sinner's heart, conforming him to the image of Christ. But your standing is not in that work of sanctification on your behalf and in you. Your standing for eternity is in what Christ has done, Christ's finished work, His righteousness, His blood.

So this word speaks of *comeliness*. "Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord" – something the Lord Jesus has done, something He has put upon His people. So the sinner is made comely. We do not use that expression very much, but in the Song of Solomon, speaking of Christ and His bride, we do have this expression, *comely*, coming in once or twice. Let me just remind you. The church, the bride makes this humble confession: "I am black, but comely" – black in myself; comely in Christ. "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon" – exquisite beauty. "I am black, but comely."

But then also in the Song of Solomon, the Lord Jesus speaks of the comeliness of His beloved people. "Let Me see thy countenance, let Me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice" – this is it – "and thy countenance is comely." That is the Lord Jesus speaking to unworthy sinners. He sees that sinner through His own perfect work, and He says, "Let Me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice"; "Let me see thy countenance ... thy countenance is comely."

"Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord." So this subject of Ezekiel chapter 16 is most blessedly opened up in the New Testament, Christ and His bride, and His bride comely. Let me just mention one or two places. "Christ also loved the church." O that is the secret of it all, why He did all these things for His church! "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." The Puritans said this: "Sinner, if you look in a looking glass, you have a wretched, poor, spotted face; but Christ does not see that ugly, spotted face. He sees another face, a beautiful face." Do you believe it? "Thou art all fair, My love; there is no spot in thee." "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with

the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.”

“Perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord.” But then the other. In the Book of the Revelation, you know what the angel said to John. He said, “Come hither.” That is in spirit, into heaven. He said, “I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” What did John expect to see? A view of all the blood-bought church of God. In chapter 19, John sees them, the bride of Christ, and it is a beautiful description, but it also brings heaven into it, because that is the glorious consummation of all this, of the Saviour’s finished work. He said, “I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings.” What were they saying? “Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” If you will, this was a wedding feast. It is the marriage supper of the Lamb. “Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready.” Now this is it: “And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white.” We are not left in any doubt what it was. It was this spotless perfection of the work of our Lord Jesus, perfect through His comeliness. She was “arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write.” What a word this is! “Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.” It will be a wonderful mercy to be found there at last, perfect through His comeliness put upon us.

Now there is just one last thought. The Lord Jesus spoke of this wonderful marriage supper, and the king came in to see his guests, and he found one man there, and he was not wearing a wedding dress. He had to be cast out for ever and ever. That wedding dress is the righteousness of saints, that perfect comeliness; which means, unless we are clothed in it, we will not be welcome there.

Now I do not want any of you, especially you young ones, to misunderstand it. I do not want you to think perhaps the poor man could not afford a wedding garment. The custom at that time with eastern marriages was this: that with the wedding invitation, there came the provision of the wedding dress. That makes all the difference. This man who came without one did not want it. He rejected it. He thought he was

alright himself. He was satisfied with his own clothing. He perhaps even thought it was better. May we never, never be left to that condition! O may it be,

“Clothed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.”

May none of us here at last hear that awful voice, “How camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?” He got a long way, and it seems that none of the other guests could see there was anything the matter. But when the king came in, he saw it straight away. So it will be in the last great day. The Lord deliver us from it. “How camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?” May this be our earnest, urgent prayer, through grace, in Christ, to be made perfect through His comeliness which He hath put upon us.

* * *

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

When from the dust of death I rise,
To take my mansion in the skies,
E’en then shall this be all my plea:
“Jesus has lived and died for me.”

Bold shall I stand in that great day,
For who aught to my charge shall lay,
While through Thy blood absolved I am,
From sin’s tremendous curse and shame?

Thus Abraham, the friend of God,
Thus all the armies bought with blood,
Saviour of sinners, Thee proclaim –
Sinners, of whom the chief I am.

This spotless robe the same appears,
When ruined nature sinks in years;

No age can change its glorious hue;
The robe of Christ is ever new.

O let the dead now hear Thy voice;
Bid, Lord, Thy banished ones rejoice;
Their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus, the Lord our righteousness.

Count Zinzendorf

translated by J. Wesley