



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 22

A Cry for Prosperity

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 24th May, 1987**

Text: *“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine” (Psalm 60. 14).*

Here is a cry for real prosperity in the church of God. Beloved friends, are you concerned about it? or are you happy to drift along at this poor, dying rate, death everywhere, God's name dishonoured, little fruit upon the bough, Zion languishing? Or do you sometimes find that cry, that inward cry (and that an earnest one!) not just for yourself personally but for the church of God: “O Lord, I beseech Thee, send now prosperity”?

O what is the prosperity of a gospel church? Do you long for it? Do you long to see some good days, days such as you and I have never yet seen? And do you ever find it in your heart to pray for it? Well, here is a cry for real prosperity in the church of God. It is the spirit of what we sometimes sing:

“My soul shall pray for Zion still,
While life or breath remains;
There my best friends, my kindred dwell;
There God my Saviour reigns.”

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” There is one thing that is very clearly realised here, and that is that every blessing must come from above. If there is to be any prosperity, God must send it; and the only way in which this prosperity can ever come is if the Lord in His love and mercy condescends to visit us. “Visit this vine.” Now I wonder how many of you here long for a visit from the Lord? When you meet here in this sanctuary, do you long that the Lord Himself might come and visit this spot and that He might visit you? Are there any of you who can look back to former days and you can echo this:

“His former visits we recount,
On Mizar's hill and Hermon's mount;
Yet still our souls desire anew
His sweetest, loveliest face to view”?

Now nothing else will do it. There is no substitute. Nothing will do but these gracious visits of the Lord Himself to the church and to the soul. No doubt many of you here this evening are longing for these personal visits. You remember what the old woman said to Gadsby in that wretched room where she lay: “The Lord Jesus visits me in this room each day and His visits are most sweet.” Now do you long for these visits from heaven? “More frequent let Thy visits be, or let them longer last.”

I take it that the word “visit” has a very simple meaning. It means you go somewhere, but you go with a special purpose. You have some intention at the back of your mind. Well, when the Lord visits His people He does so with some gracious purpose. I wonder if this is the desire of anyone here this evening: “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O visit me with Thy salvation.” Here is one who knows that God has a people. She knows that God has a favour towards them. She knows that God remembers them with that favour. But she wants it herself. “Remember *me*, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O visit *me* with Thy salvation. She knows that God’s people are saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation. She knows that the Lord delights to visit them. But it is this: “O visit *me* with Thy salvation. Now there is no substitute for this. Only this will bring true prosperity to a nation or to a church or to a person. So here is the earnest cry for it, the earnest longing for it, for real, spiritual prosperity.

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” Now beloved friends, you notice here that the church of God is compared to a vine. We have this comparison over and over again right through Scripture, in the Old Testament and in the New – the church of God compared to a vine. Now in this beautiful Psalm, first of all the vine represents Israel, and then also the church of God. “Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: Thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it, and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river” (verses 8-11). There you see this vine, this fruitful vine, this vine that God Himself has planted, representing the church of God in all ages, and you see, it also represents each local church. So as we seek to pray a prayer like this this evening, we pray it for the whole church of God on earth and we think especially of those portions

that are dear to us, that we love. We think of our own beloved congregation here and along with it, we think of our own souls personally and our own salvation.

“This vine.” Of course, the figure of a vine is very apt. There is no beauty in the vine. Apart from its fruit, it is useless. Its wood is not used for any purpose. It is a feeble plant. It needs to be propped up. It needs to be supported. But it is the most fruitful of all trees, of all plants. Now there is no purpose whatsoever in a vine, apart from fruit. If it does not bring forth fruit, it is useless; all it needs is to be cut down, to be cast out. That is why I read Ezekiel 15 this evening. That chapter just makes one point, that a vine is the most useless of plants, the most useless of trees, apart from this one thing – fruit-bearing. The church of God here on earth exists for this one purpose, no other, to bring forth fruit to the honour and glory of the Lord’s name. “This people have I formed for Myself; they shall shew forth My praise.”

Now the Lord would have this vine to be a fruit-bearing vine, that He might look down from heaven, that He might see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. But the solemn thing is this: so often these vines, these churches that God Himself has planted, are not fruit-bearing vines. Either they bring forth no fruit, or little fruit, or bitter fruit, but not fruit that is pleasing to God. Now that should be the great concern, the great burden. Is this a fruitful vine? O to be like Joseph, “a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall.” Here is this vine, Joseph. Of course, you can take it of Joseph personally, or of the gospel ministry, or of the whole church of God, or of the local church, or of a sinner saved by grace. But here is Joseph, a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall. What is the secret of his being so fruitful? He has a secret supply and a secret support. There is that well for all his felt emptiness; He lives on that fulness in Christ. In all his felt weakness he leans on omnipotence in Christ. O to be a Joseph! Now where will you find a church on earth today that is like Joseph, “a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall”? It is only the Lord Jesus, the great Head of the church, who can judge our fruit-bearing. But He does say, “Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit.” And in John 15 He reveals the secret, which is cleaving to Him, clinging to Him, depending upon Him. It is only the Lord that can judge it.

If you read the second and third chapters in Revelation, there is the divine Husbandman coming down to visit the seven vines, the seven churches of Asia. There was one which thought itself to be a fruitful vine. The Lord said, “Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not” – O what sad and appalling ignorance! – “that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind and naked.” Here was this church. It thought it was such a fruitful vine. There was another one and the Lord said, “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich).” Now here was one which did not really think it was fruitful, but it was. It is what we are in the sight of God, personally and as churches. “Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

Look at the church at Sardis. “Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.” Here was a church with a reputation. The reputation was this: if you want a fruitful vine, you go to Sardis. “Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.” It is a wonderful thing that the Lord says, “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments.” It is a wonderful thing if the Lord says that to this church, to this congregation: “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white: for they are worthy.” It is what the Lord thinks, not what you and I think. It is what the Lord calls fruit, not what you and I call fruit. O but we do want to be a fruitful vine, don’t we? We do not want to dishonour the Lord, to dishonour His name.

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” Now what is it in the context? This vine that God Himself has planted, the hedges are broken down. There is not the same hedge of gracious separation that there was a few years ago. The hedge is broken down – with what result? “All they which pass by the way do pluck her. The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it” (verses 12 and 13). Once there is that lowering of the hedge, once there is that breaking down of the hedge, then you have the wild boar out of the

wood and the wild beast out of the field, and even where there are the little gaps, the little foxes squeeze through. “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.” This is a good analogy. Here are these beautiful vines, this beautiful vineyard, but there are a few gaps in the hedge and the little foxes get in. And let us be clear, little foxes can get in where big ones cannot. How much there is today of the spirit of Lot: “Is it not a little one?”! And once these little foxes get in, you cannot get them out. That is why the church had to cry, “O take us the foxes.” There are not many Samsons who can get one hundred foxes and tie them by the tail. Have you ever seen a little fox? I do not think amongst all the animals there is one that is more attractive than a baby fox. But they have sharp teeth and O the havoc they cause! But little foxes grow into big foxes.

“Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes” – these little foxes of worldliness, worldly conformity in the church of God, in dress, in appearance, in behaviour, in our homes. These little foxes! And do not just limit it to outward things. These little foxes of a wrong spirit, a hard spirit, an unforgiving spirit, an unloving spirit, an ungracious spirit, or these little foxes of disobedience to the Lord, walking contrary to His revealed will, despising His commands. These little foxes, wanting to have our own way, wanting to do our own thing. You can get them in, but you cannot get them out. There are too many little foxes creeping through the hedge or jumping over the hedge, and they either destroy the bark or they eat the vines. The point is that when the husbandmen comes, there is no good harvest.

“O look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” “Take us the foxes.” Sometime people can be foxes. Sometimes godly people can be foxes – the things they do and the things they do not do; the things they say, and sometimes the things they do not say, when they are silent, and they should say something. Beloved friends, do not be little foxes, because you will only spoil the tender vines. “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes.” For Satan is the chief fox, both crafty and cruel. Look at the havoc he works. “A whisperer separateth chief friends.” Don’t be a whisperer, and don’t listen to a whisperer. But Satan is the chief whisperer. What does Satan whisper to you and what does Satan whisper to me? Satan is the chief fox.

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” “Take us the foxes.” Never let the foxes into the church of God, into your home, into your life. But pray that the Lord will take them and overturn them and trample them beneath His feet and slay them. “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.” “Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” Now may there be that watchful spirit. Each church member, each parent, may there be that watchful spirit for these little foxes that you can so easily let in, but you can never turn out. “The work exceeds all nature’s power.” We need the Lord Jesus Himself to come and to drive out these little foxes from the church of God and from our lives.

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” You see, the great thing is to be a fruitful vine. O to have that heart made soft where the Word of God enters and abides and takes root, where there is a bringing forth of fruit, the fruits of the Spirit, where there is much prayer, and where there is much of the holy, tender fear of God, “a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death,” where there is much humility and where there is much love, where there is much of the Spirit of Christ. You see, this is a fruitful vine.

But of course there is a second view of it. You can take the fruits on the branch, the grapes of the vine, on the one hand to represent all these precious graces of the spirit but on the other hand you can take them as representing new converts born again of the Holy Ghost. There are the two sides to fruitfulness in the church of God. There are those who are born again of the Holy Ghost, quickened into life, brought to repentance and faith. It is not a fruitful vine if we know nothing of this. And then in the people personally there are these precious fruits of the Spirit. “Come, My beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear.” That is the point in this prosperity. See if the vine flourish and if the tender grape appear. Does it?

Well, whether you are thinking of new converts or of the precious graces of the Spirit, in either case it will be this: tenderness. It is whether the *tender* grape appear. New converts are always marked by this spirit of tenderness, and all the graces of the Spirit are marked by this, the tenderness. That is, your heart will be tender, your spirit will be tender.

You will not want to offend against your God. You will not want to do anything to hurt that dear Saviour who has done so much for you. You will not want to grieve the Spirit of God, neither will you want to grieve His people. It is nice to see these tender grapes appearing. They are so humble. They are so gracious. They are so solemn. They do not want to grieve the people of God. They do not want to sin against the Lord and dishonour Him, however much it hurts them, however much it costs them. And you see, they seek to flee from the very appearance of evil. Let their name perish, if the name of Jesus be exalted. Let them suffer, suffer loss, financial loss, any other kind of loss, but let not the cause of God and truth suffer loss. Where can you see this fruitfulness? We have known them; we have had them; we have witnessed their tenderness; and how much the poorer we are when they are taken from us! How we mourn over their loss! Is there one person here tonight who is going to take up this burden – not leave it behind in chapel, take it home with you and not only remember it at the prayer meeting, but in your secret prayers? It must be divine help.

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” When the husbandman visits the vine, he comes there for a purpose. He is looking for fruit and he cannot be satisfied unless he finds this fruit. He is determined he will have it, and if the Lord Jesus has a favour towards us, He is determined we will bring forth fruit to eternal life. So He will visit this vine. “Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: Thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water.” So we need to pray for those refreshing showers – when the doctrine of Christ and Him crucified shall fall as the rain and sweetly distil as the dew, when our souls shall be like a well-watered garden. There is much of the drought, isn’t there, the withering, the marks of death? That is a beautiful word: “The times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.” They cannot come from any other source or in any other way. Now seek them. “There shall be showers of blessing” when the Lord shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, when this vine shall be well-watered and when it shall be made fruitful, when it shall revive, when it shall grow.

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” You want it personally (don’t you?) as a branch of the living vine:

“Fruit to eternal life would bear,
The feeblest branch of Thine.”

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” And you know, if the Lord comes to visit His vine, then one of the first things He will do will be to repair the hedge. Some people will not like that. As the hedge has been lowered and as the hedge has been broken, when the Lord comes, then He will repair that hedge, and that will mean that those wild boars and those little foxes will be cast out and they will have to remain on the outside. It is a solemn thing when the Lord breaks down that wall of protection around His church, and it seems that perhaps this is the chief reference in the Psalm, because God Himself has broken this hedge down. “Why hast Thou broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her?” There is a hedge of protection the Lord sets around the churches. It is a solemn thing if we grieve Him, sin against Him, dishonour Him, and then that hedge of protection is broken down. And when the hedge of protection has been broken down, then the hedge of gracious separation is broken down, and the wild beasts come in. “The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it.” Now when the Lord comes down and visits His vine, there are not only the showers, not only the watering, but to use the Lord’s own language, there is the digging about and the dunging to see if it will be fruitful. But there is that repairing of the hedge.

And then there is another thing. What did we read this evening? “Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.” And what of the branches that do not bring forth fruit? Then they are cut off and cast out. We would not say “Purging”; we would say, “Pruning.” And if there is no pruning, the vine grows wild and it is not really fruitful. There may be the grapes, but they are very small and they are useless. So when the Lord has a favour, then He will at times come down and He will purge His vine, and this is not pleasant, but it is profitable. This may be painful. It may be that one is cut off here and another cut off there, that one is separated here and another separated there. Why? Because they are not fruit-bearing branches. But with the Lord’s living family, “whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.” So at times you will feel that knife. There will be the reproof. There will be the cutting of the Word, and it will show you that this is wrong and you will have to put it right, and it may be this idol, and it has to go, and maybe this besetting sin that has to go; and all this is in love that it might be a

fruit-bearing vine, a fruit-bearing church, that He Himself might see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.

Then can we, dare we, still pray this prayer: “Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine,” if it may be the Lord’s knife in our midst? O but beloved friends, these things are in the light of eternity. We have so much of the flesh about us. We do want reality in the church of God, in our own homes and in our own lives. Well, may some of you take up this burden. May it fall upon some of you personally. May it fall on some of you concerning our church. May it fall upon some of you concerning the churches here and there throughout the earth, that the Lord Himself might be glorified in seeing His churches as fruit-bearing boughs, fruitful vines, bringing forth fruit to eternal life. We think of that word,

“Quickened by Thee, and kept alive,
I’d flourish and bear fruit;
My life I’d from Thy sap derive,
My vigour from Thy root.

“Each moment watered by Thy care,
And fenced with power divine;
Fruit to eternal life would bear,
The feeblest branch of Thine.”

“Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.”