

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 196

The Cleansing of Naaman

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 15th July, 2001**

Text: *“And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean” (2 Kings 5. 10).*

“Go ... wash ... and thou shalt be clean.” I want to speak this evening on this simple account, the cleansing of the leprosy of Naaman the Syrian, as a beautiful illustration of the cleansing of sinners from the leprosy of sin in the blood of Jesus, the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness.

Now we begin with this great man, Naaman, and he *was* a great man, a famous man, an eminent man, captain of the host of the King of Syria, a great man, honourable. By him the Lord had given deliverance to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valour. So you have this great man and everything in his life is right, and then there is one thing, this terrible *but*, this awful *but*, this solemn *but*: “*But* he was a leper.” He had a loathsome disease, an incurable disease, leprosy.

Often, beloved friends, I have spoken to you of some of the glorious *buts* of Scripture. Things like this: “*But* God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ.” The wonderful *buts* of Scripture. But this is one of the awful *buts*, the solemn *buts*. “*But* he was a leper.” Then what did all these other things mean to him, all these possessions, all this greatness, all this fame? He was a dying man. He had a loathsome disease. It was incurable. And beloved friends, this is your condition and my condition by nature. We may have all kinds of other things. There may be wealth. There may be prosperity. There may be earthly happiness. There may be earthly comfort. People may be well liked. There may be all kinds of things, but written across it all is this: “*But* he was a leper.” Now that is you, that is me by nature. In Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, leprosy is brought before us as an awful type of sin, this terrible disease, this loathsome disease, this wasting disease. It rendered a person ceremonially unclean. It isolated him. And above all, it was incurable. This is a sad, solemn picture of you and me by nature, whatever we are, whatever we have. “*But* he was a leper.”

Then we have the most mysterious way in which this great man (and yet this poor man) was brought into a wonderful connection with Israel's God. Now how was it possible? Israel and Syria were enemies. There was Naaman living outside the commonwealth of Israel. He did not know anything about Israel's God. He did not know anything about the way of truth, the way of grace. Now notice the mysterious sovereignty of God. There was a terrible war and there was a little girl, an Israelitish girl. She was taken captive. It must have been a dreadful sorrow to her to be dragged away from her own home. It must have been a dreadful sorrow to her parents and her loved ones and her friends. Perhaps she would never see her home again. Perhaps her parents did not know whether she was dead or alive, what had happened to her. Now, you say, whatever good could come out of this? There are a lot of sorrows in our congregation at present, and I know many of you are feeling, if not saying, Whatever good can come out of this? Well, may you live to prove what we sing:

“It is the Lord, whose matchless skill
Can from afflictions raise
Matter eternity to fill
With ever-growing praise.”

That is just what happened here. In the mysterious sovereignty of God, this little girl was the Lord's messenger, the messenger of salvation, and in the fulfilling of God's purposes there were so many links in the golden chain of salvation. But they did not seem like golden links, they were so terrible. She was taken captive. She was carried away to an enemy land. Now why, why was she bought as a slave by Naaman? Why was she appointed to wait on Naaman the leper's wife? And why was her heart moved because of his leprosy? And why did she feel led to make this very simple statement? And why did her mistress take notice of it? She might have thought this was some vain superstition. But why did she take notice of it, and why did even the King of Syria act on it? All these golden links, pure gold, though they did not seem to be, all these links in this chain of salvation. And just to think about this little maid. She said, “Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy.” How did she know that? How did she know God could heal leprosy? There was not any cure for it. But you see the simplicity of her statement. So much hung on so little.

Beloved friends, we do not speak enough. I know there is a time to be silent and a time to speak, but we do not speak enough. Sometimes just a little word. I believe often in our churches over the years there has been salvation in it. Perhaps there has been a sermon and the preaching has not accomplished anything, but some young person has been going out and a godly soul has made a little comment, and the Lord has sealed it home and that has done the deed. Those of you who profess the Lord's name, do you ever make a little comment like the little maid did? Do you ever try to speak a word in season? Are you ever able to speak a loving word of tender rebuke? Or can you speak a word of comfort? What of our attitude to children? Do not treat them as if they do not care. There was a little girl years ago and she was in hospital for several months. She said people were very kind and used to visit her regularly, but no-one ever thought of saying anything about the things of God, which were her chief burden as she lay in hospital. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." A little word applied with power by the Spirit of God will do the deed.

That is just what it was here. You might say it was a casual comment, but the Lord used it. These links in the chain of salvation. Naaman, a great man in a foreign country, can be brought into contact with Israel and Israel's God. See the unfolding of divine providence: the King of Syria sending a letter to the King of Israel – yet how terrible things were in Israel at that time! When the King of Israel received the letter he despaired. He was a stranger to Israel's God. Things had sunk so low. But Elisha said, "He shall know that there is a prophet in Israel."

But you see how Naaman started out in a wrong way. "He departed, and took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment." In other words, he was going to buy his cure. He was going to pay for his cure. The great point about salvation in the Old Testament and the New Testament is this: it is completely free. It is entirely of grace. There is the little story that I like so much of the poor woman who was very ill and very poor, and she longed for some fruit. So her little boy saved up his pennies. He knew the nobleman who lived near had most beautiful fruit trees, and in the end when he had saved up a few pennies, he went along to the mansion. The steward spoke to him kindly and asked what he wanted. He said, "I have a sick mother and I have come to buy some of that fruit for her." "Just a moment," said the steward. He went to see the nobleman and came back with a lovely box of fruit. But he

refused the money. He said, “My master does not sell; he gives.” That is the gospel! Everybody in this chapel knows it, don’t you? Or do you? Because it is one of the hardest lessons for us to learn, that salvation is free, that mercy is free, that grace is free. And it is a most beautiful truth. It is a glorious truth. It is the foundation of the gospel.

But like Naaman, we come with our hands loaded. You say, what do I mean? No-one would go to God with a handful of money or anything like that. Well, we wait until we think we have a nice, quiet spirit. We feel guilt on our conscience and wait until the sense of it has worn off a bit; or we wait until we can go with a soft heart; or we wait until we can pray a bit better. And if we go and think we are getting on quite well in prayer, we think we can pay for it. There is only one way of salvation, and Naaman had to learn it. We want to do something, to give something. We want to buy. The gospel is free. But it will bring us right down. “When they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both.”

“Bring no money, price, or aught,
No good deeds, nor pleasing frames,
Mercy never can be bought;
Grace is free; and all’s the Lamb’s.”

O but he took his “ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment.” It did not do any good, did it? He had to take the present back home with him. You know, the gospel is full of love and full of mercy, full of grace, and it is free. But it will always humble you.

Now what did Elisha say? “Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel.” I think Naaman felt he was a great man, and being sent by the king, and this wonderful present – he thought he was going to have very special treatment. But nobody gets special treatment. We are all on the same level here. We are all on the same ground. There is no special treatment in grace.

At the time of the glorious evangelical revival in England, Whitefield was privileged to preach at the king’s court and preach the way of salvation, and some of the people were wonderfully wrought on by his preaching. But one eminent lady asked to speak to him. I think it was the Duchess of Marlborough. She said, “I want to ask you a question, Mr. Whitefield.” She said, “You don’t really believe, do you, that I have to be saved in exactly the same way as my footman?”

Our carnal minds want to be something. It is this being brought down. “Let him come now to me.” See this great man Naaman with his horses and chariots standing at the door of Elisha’s house, and Elisha did not even come down to see him, Elisha did not even speak to him. “Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.” It was a wonderful truth. It was worth everything that this man could give – a simple direction, and the promise of a perfect cure. “Go and wash ... and thou shalt be clean.” But the great Naaman was offended at it. Let us be clear, by nature our hearts are offended at the gospel. We are offended at the sweet simplicity of it. We are offended because it always humbles us. It always brings us down. It always lays us in the dust. It will never puff us up. “Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.”

Really, in all its simplicity this is the essence of the preaching of the everlasting gospel to lost, ruined, guilty sinners who are brought to feel the leprosy of their sin. “Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.” It was a strange remedy, but it was God’s remedy, it was a divinely-appointed remedy, it was the only remedy, and it worked. “Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.” Now to the world the way of salvation is a strange remedy. The world thinks if only it can do this or that, or bring some great price, or merit salvation. Now it is still,

“There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.”

Now that is God’s remedy. It is a divinely-appointed remedy, it is the only remedy, and it avails. For every sinner who has ever come to heaven has come to heaven as washed in the blood of Christ, the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness.

“Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.” And Naaman was angry. We are told that Naaman was furious. Why? One thing was that it humbled him. “Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?” Yes, Naaman. “May I not wash in them, and be clean?” No,

Naaman. “So he turned and went away in a rage.” There is only one way of salvation. There is only one name whereby we must be saved. There is only One who can forgive sins. There is only one fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness. What about Abana, and what about Pharpar? May I not wash in them? And the gospel says, No, none other fountain, none other blood, none other remedy for sin and shame, none beside this. “So he turned and went away in a rage.” The gospel humbles. It is without money. It is free. It is glorious. There is salvation, there is heaven, there is cleansing in it, but it offends our flesh.

But there is something else. Naaman said, “Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.” He thought there was going to be all kinds of ceremony. He was looking at the door for the prophet to come with all kinds of motions and ceremonies and drumming his hand over the place, and all he got was, “Go and wash in Jordan ... and thou shalt be clean.” He stumbled at it. He was offended at it. But I think he was doing what a lot of you are trying to do. I think he was chalking down lines for the way the Lord was going to heal him. There is a lot of this in Strict Baptist chapels. I think most of us fall into this snare by nature. We are brought into a concern about our immortal souls, and really we have thoughts how the Lord is going to deliver us, but there is a lot of flesh in it. If we are honest, sometimes we would like to tell a good tale before the church. Let us be honest. Grace will make us honest. Perhaps we have read of some kind of remarkable experience. We think we are going to wake up in the middle of the night and hear a voice from heaven. We think we are going to see a vision in the sky. We think all kinds of things, and the gospel remedy still stands: to go as a sinner to that precious fountain, to that precious Saviour, to go and wash and be clean. Wasn't it Huntingdon who said, “Beware of chalking out two lines and asking the Lord to walk between, because He never will”? He has His own way to bless you. It is not the way you have devised. It is His way, and it is the best way.

“Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place.” “Naaman was wroth ... and went away in a rage.” Right down the ages, the gospel still stands, “Go and wash ... and thou shalt be clean.” When the Lord Jesus died, when He shed His precious blood on the cross and died, all the sins of His people were laid on Him and He for ever took them

away. And so as His precious blood flowed from hands and feet and side, so all the sins of all His people were washed away. Now one by one they need the experience of it, because one by one under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, they feel, "Thou art the man." Like Naaman, I am the leper, defiled from head to foot, a loathed incurable. "My best is stained and dyed with sin; my all is nothing worth." And the great thing we need is to be cleansed from the leprosy of sin. How many of you, I affectionately ask you, how many of you this evening are there? You want to be cleansed from the leprosy of sin, and you see this wonderful way of salvation.

I was only reading this afternoon again how John Kershaw, when he was young, went to hear old John Hirst at Bacup, one of the old-fashioned Particular Baptist ministers, and the old man preached on the way of salvation. John Kershaw did not really get the blessing and did not get the deliverance, but he had such a clear view of the way the holy God forgives a sinner. He did not feel his interest in it, but he saw it so clearly. I think a few of you have come there. You have seen a beauty in the gospel, seen a glory in the blood of Christ. You have seen the way of salvation and believe it can save you, even you, but you want it personally. The gospel says, "Go and wash ... and thou shalt be clean." Go to the Lord Jesus. Go to the fountain opened.

"Fly, then, awakened sinners, fly;
Your case admits no stay;
The fountain's opened now for sin;
Come, wash your guilt away."

Go by precious, God-given faith. Go in prayer. Go just as you are. Go without any excuses. Go in repentance. Go confessing your sin. Do not wait for a soft heart; go with your hard heart. Do not wait for a spirit of prayer. Go with all the poverty of your prayer, and go and cast yourself down at Jesus' feet, and, "Go and wash ... and ... be clean."

I know what some of you are going to say to me. You will say, "Yes, I know Naaman was a leper, but he had legs to go to Jordan. I don't feel I have any legs to walk." Well, ask the Lord to carry you and plunge you "in that crimson ocean, His atonement made for sin." Perhaps if you have no legs to walk, the Lord will give you wings to fly to the fountain opened. I remember when I was only a little boy being struck by that verse of Berridge:

“‘Run, run, and work,’ the law commands,
Yet finds me neither feet nor hands;
But sweeter news the gospel brings;
It bids me fly, and lends me wings.”

Well, go as the Lord enables you. Go if you need the Lord to carry you. Beg Him to carry you. And if you have no legs to run, beg that the Lord will give you the wings of faith to fly. But if you stay away, you know you must for ever die.

“Go and wash,” and then you see that sweet promise, “Thou shalt be clean.” “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” “And the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.” “Go and wash in Jordan seven times ... and thou shalt be clean.” Naaman would not. He stumbled at it. But there was one thing. Naaman had some good friends, though they were only his servants. They were probably slaves, and really they risked his displeasure and risked their lives, but they most kindly and lovingly rebuked him. They said, “My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?” Now value those friends who, when you are wrong or when you are acting foolishly, come and tell you. Naaman fell under it, and what a mercy that he did fall under it! Perhaps we need to say to some of you, If the Lord bid thee do some great thing, thou wouldest have done it. How much rather when He saith to thee, Wash and be clean?

“*Then*” – “Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power.” “*Then*” – God will have the last word. “*Then*” – “He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” “*Then* went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan ... and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” The promise was fulfilled. The promise was true. John Newton says, “If you but touch that purple tide, you then have peace with God.” “Put me in with Thine own hand, and that will do me well.” “His flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” You know what that means. A little child’s flesh, there are not all those marks and spots and wrinkles and blemishes. When people get older, all kinds of things begin to appear, perhaps a spot here and a scar there. But when the Lord cleanses a sinner from his sin and guilt, it is a perfect cure. “Not having

spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” “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.” “Go and wash ... and thou shalt be clean.” It does not matter how great the malady, how vile the sin. “And thou shalt be clean.” “And his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”

This reminds us of that wonderful chapter 33 in the Book of Job. It has often been called “the gospel in the Book of Job.” Now this is a leper: “His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen.... Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave.” This is the gospel in Job: “If there be a messenger with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man His uprightness.” That is not the sinner’s uprightness; it is Christ’s uprightness. “If there be a messenger with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man His uprightness: then He is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom.” Now this is it: “His flesh shall be fresher than a child’s: he shall return to the days of his youth.” “His flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” This is this confessing sinner, Naaman venturing to Jordan, a guilty sinner venturing on the blood of Christ. “He shall pray unto God, and He will be favourable unto him: and he shall see His face with joy: for He will render unto man his righteousness. He looketh upon men.” Now the Lord is listening. He was listening then. He is listening now. He hears all kinds of sinners. “If any say, I have sinned” – the fact of it; no excuses. “And perverted that which was right” – the evil of it. “And it profited me not” – the foolishness of it. Then, “He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.” “His flesh shall be fresher than a child’s: he shall return to the days of his youth.” “Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.” That is the gospel in the Book of Job, and this is the gospel in the Book of Kings: “Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.”

A guilty sinner, a loathsome leper, unclean, unclean. A precious fountain opened for sin. O and the blessed freeness of the gospel, without money and without price, led by the Spirit, enabled by the Spirit, made willing in the day of the Spirit’s power. “Go and wash ... and thou shalt be clean.” O may the Lord enable many of you tonight by precious faith to

look to Calvary, to venture there, to fall down at the foot of the cross, to pray that the Lord Himself will plunge you “in that crimson ocean, His atonement made for sin”. And may you prove that “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

“Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” “Not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” “Thou art all fair, My love; there is no spot in thee.”