

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 430

Go ... Wash ... and Be Clean

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B.A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 18th April, 2021**

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

The cleansing of Naaman the leper is a most interesting and a most remarkable subject. I know there has always been that little difficulty at the end when he said he would still have to go into the house of Rimmon and bow his head, and it could not be avoided, and could he be forgiven, could he be excused.

As far as I can understand, almost all the godly writers over the years have felt that Naaman was truly a saved character. They have excused him on the grounds of him being just a new convert, the difficulties he had, the wonderful profession he made, the setting up of an altar to the God of Israel right in the centre of ungodly Syria, but especially that the godly prophet Elisha listened carefully to what he had to say, and bade him, "Go in peace." So I do not really want to touch upon that this morning, but I felt constrained just to mention it in case some of you have been troubled over the years, or were troubled even this morning in the reading: was Naaman right?

How I would like to deal with this subject with the Lord's help: first of all, this remarkable series of divine providences that brought an ungodly heathen into contact with the godly prophet in Israel. It is a remarkable string of circumstances. And then secondly, looking at the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian as a wonderful type of the gospel: only one place of cleansing, only one way of cleansing, that is in Christ, the fountain opened in His blood for sin and for uncleanness.

So we are introduced at the beginning to this outstanding man. Obviously, he was a great man. He was captain of the host of the king of Syria. We are told he was a great man, and that he was an honourable man, and as captain of the army, the Lord had granted him some wonderful deliverances. It is very remarkable that it mentions the Lord being with him and in his dealings even before he knew anything about the true God of Israel. We cannot help but think of that hymn (we do not sing it very often these days):

"Twas fixed in God's eternal mind
When His dear sons should mercy find;

From everlasting He decreed
When every good should be conveyed.”

That is the glory of the gospel of free and sovereign grace.

So you have this striking beginning of this great man, this famous man, this outstanding man, and then this *but*. “*But* he was a leper.” Leprosy in those days was completely incurable. That is why there is such emphasis made on how our Lord Jesus could cleanse the leper by a single word. Of course, leprosy, both in the Old Testament and in the New, was always a very solemn type of sin. Now, “He was a leper,” and so he was a dying man, and he did not know the remedy, either for his leprosy or for his sin.

And then a most unusual circumstance comes in. “The Syrians had gone out by companies.” They must have been very successful in battle. They must have been rejoicing. But just a tiny detail: it was everything in the Lord’s hand. How much hangs on how little! They “brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid.” That is the beginning of this wonderful string of divine providences. The next thing is, that of all the people in Syria where she was sent to be a servant, it was the wife of this great man who was a leper, Naaman, and the wonderful thing, especially, she knew something of the God of Israel.

When you think of this little girl for a few moments, it must have been a sad thing when she was snatched away from her parents and she was hurried into a foreign land. She did not know what was going to happen to her. She was made a servant, but she did not forget what she learned as a girl about the God of Israel – who He was, what He could do, and all through the power of Israel’s God. For our children and young people, there is a lot to think about in the little Israelitish maid. If you were suddenly snatched away into a foreign country, and they were all heathens, you had no friends, no relatives, no worshipping of God, I wonder how much religion you would have, and I wonder how much grace you would have to be a witness, a living witness to the God of Israel. This lady who was Naaman’s wife must have been high and mighty, but didn’t the Lord honour the little maid and didn’t the Lord bless her testimony!

Of course, just in passing, beloved friends, isn’t this just one of the many, many places in holy Scripture when we would like to know what happened to this little girl – what her life was afterwards! But so many of these things are wisely hidden from us.

And the next turn of providence: she spoke to her mistress. “Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover

him of his leprosy.” Well, it is a simple statement. The wonderful providence to me is that they took her seriously. Wouldn’t you think most people would say, “It is just a little girl, and this is just an old wives’ tale, just some fable from this country”? But they listened to her. Somebody went and told Naaman: “Thus and thus said the maid that is of the land of Israel.” And this great man took it seriously, and the next thing is, we have the king of Syria coming in. He must have been notified, and he was taking it seriously. Not one of them seemed to hesitate and say, “Well, it is a nice story, but we do not believe it, and we are not interested in the God of Israel.” “His providence unfolds the book” – not just here, but with you as our congregation this morning.

“His providence unfolds the book,
And makes His counsels shine;
Each opening leaf, and every stroke,
Fulfils some deep design.”

And there was a deep design here to be graciously fulfilled.

So the king of Syria obviously contacted the king of Israel. The king of Syria said, “Well, we will go forward with this. I will contact the king of Israel.” I want you to notice this: “He departed” – I take this to be Naaman – “and took with him ten talents of silver.” Now those who understand that, it was a fantastic amount of money. He was willing to do anything, he was willing to give anything, if he could have a cure. But the gospel is “without money and without price.” How many people there have been in our own country, and when the Lord has taught them something of the inward leprosy of sin, they would do *anything* to gain salvation. But they have to learn, “without money and without price.” The gospel is free. “Ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment.”

Now the king of Israel does not seem to have been much more godly than the king of Syria. When he got this letter, he was bewildered. He thought, “I cannot do anything; I cannot make people alive; I cannot cure diseases. Surely the Syrians are seeking to pick a quarrel with me.”

But another providence. How, when, where, Elisha heard of all this. Well, the Lord brought it to his notice. When Elisha heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, he said, “Wherefore?” He said, “Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel,” and he shall know that there is a God in Israel, and an answer in Israel, and a cure in Israel.

“So Naaman came.” You can imagine, he had a retinue of servants with him. He was in a noble chariot. He had horses with him. But he was willing, he was made willing – that is another providence – to go to the door.

It must have been a humble door of the prophet Elisha. That is where Naaman received his first shock. It was his first dealings with the people of God, and the first thing was, before he was going to be cleansed, his pride had to be brought down into the dust. Elisha did not even go through the door of his house. He did not even go to see who this great man was. He did not even speak to him. He just sent this message, and obviously this is the message he received from the leading of his God. Just a messenger was sent. "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." It is clear that Naaman was absolutely furious, and his only thought was getting rid of all this and going back to Syria. His pride was offended, and he said, "Behold, I thought."

Just pausing here, an interesting point. When I was at Haslingden, I remember there was a little old minister and he preached from this chapter, and he took two texts, two of the sayings of Naaman: "Behold, I thought," and, "Behold, now I know." There is a lot in that! "Behold, I thought"; "Behold, now I know." And what happened in between? "Herein let self be all abased."

"Behold, I thought." He thought that some kind of wizard would come out with a wand and make all kinds of peculiar mumblings and mutterings, and walk by, go around about him, do something with his wand. He thought there was going to be some kind of wonderful thing. Go and wash ... and ... be clean." O how many of us, how many of the Lord's dear people when the Lord has begun with them, they have in their own mind some wonderful way in which the Lord is going to deal with them. They have read all these old accounts, and they have it all chalked out. They are going to have some wonderful thing before they can ever be right. You have to come away from all that. A sinner under a sense of his need: "Go and wash ... and ... be clean."

But you can imagine this man in a rage before his great retinue, all these people who are ready to bow before him. "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" Well, they probably are. "May I not wash in them, and be clean?" No, Naaman. It has to be God's appointed way, not your choice, not these wonderful things you want. "So he turned and went away in a rage." It is almost as if he left his own chariot and all the people. He was just fed up with it all and was going back to Syria. But he had some faithful servants. I think that is one thing that has been lacking in England in a lot of high places, that people will fawn to those who are greater than themselves in the hope that they too will get promotion.

We have to avoid it in the church of God. They are a great blessing, these who will speak out very clearly for the truth's sake.

Thinking of my own case, when I first started preaching, I was far too long. Well, I was clearly told about that, and that was kindness. And then also apparently, I went too fast. I was told about that, and that was kindness. And then I thought of all these wonderful ministers I had listened to, and I thought I would try to walk up the pulpit like they did, until I heard a voice say, "I wish he would walk up into the pulpit properly." But these are the things – "These shall profit, if not please."

But what a blessing to Naaman these faithful servants were! "His servants came near, and spake unto him." It must not have been easy for them, but they did it very kindly and courteously. "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?" Of course he would! That is why he brought all this wealth with him to pay for it. "How much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?" That is another providence in the hands of God, in constraining those servants to speak like that.

Then you get the final providence, and there must have been much of the power of God attended it. You see a complete difference. You see a humble sinner. "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." That was a miracle performed. Of course, he has only just had his eyes opened. The first, immediate thing was his gratitude, and then it seems he was blessed with faith. There is a difference, a transformation. He says, "Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel."

But he was still a bit on legal ground. He wanted to pay for it all. And Elisha refused it. He did not want to compromise the grace of God. He did not want to compromise the free gift. He did not want to compromise his God and Saviour. "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none." Naaman urged him, but he refused.

Now just coming to this in a gospel sense: "Go and wash ... and ... be clean." It was a strange remedy, but it was the only remedy, and it was the divinely-appointed remedy, and it availed. So it is with the gospel of the grace of God. To the world it is a strange remedy. Are we not told, "We preach Christ crucified," and to the Jew it was a strange remedy? They could not understand how a poor Man being put to death, a cruel death on the cross, could be the way of salvation for thousands of sinners. To the Jews it was "a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness." Now the Greeks were the

learned of this world. The Greek philosophers still today are counted some of the greatest minds this world has ever known. I remember at university I had to do a paper in political theory, and I had to study Socrates, and Plato, and Aristotle. But this thing about a Man dying on the cross was just foolishness to them. They could not make any sense of it.

“We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness.” And this is the glorious *but* of the gospel: “*But* unto them which are called” – Ah, this is where salvation lies! – “Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.” There is no foolishness with God. This is still the gospel remedy. As I said at the beginning, in the Old Testament and the New Testament, leprosy was a terrible type of sin, and in those days there was no cure. So it is with us. There is no human cure. We are all plagued with that leprosy of sin, whether we feel it or we do not. We need forgiveness. We need acceptance. We need cleansing. We need a Saviour. But where can these things be found? Now the gospel speaks of a fountain, the fountain of Jesus’ blood, opened for sin and for uncleanness. Well, to the world it is a strange remedy, but it is God’s appointed remedy, and it is the only remedy – there is no other – and it does avail.

The blood of Jesus was shed on the cross when He was bearing the wrath of His Father against the sins of His people, when all the sins of His people were laid on Him, and He made atonement for them. They were forgiven; they were removed. So as His blood flowed, the sins of all God’s people were forgiven, atoned for and taken out of the way. It was two thousand years ago, but the value of that open fountain, the preciousness of that blood, is the same this morning as when the Lord Jesus was suffering, bleeding and dying, and a sinner awakened by faith, the Holy Spirit leads that sinner on and gives that sinner faith to see his need of cleansing, and the only way of cleansing, the only Person who can cleanse, the only place of cleansing – “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

O but then the Holy Spirit’s work is to enable you to go by faith, to go away from your past life, from your sin, from all carnal remedies, from anything else, to go by faith, to go in prayer, to go in confession, to go in repentance, to go to the Lord Jesus, to go to the cross, to go to Calvary, and there to confess your sin, and there to seek that you might be cleansed in the Redeemer’s blood.

“Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.”

“Go and wash.” And here is the faithfulness of God: “And thou shalt be clean.” Did it hit you? Did you notice it with Naaman? His flesh – it was not just that he got rid of all those scars and scabs. His flesh became just like the flesh of a little child. Older ones have a blemish here and a blemish there, but it was like the flesh of a little child. His flesh became like the flesh of a little child. It was a perfect cure. We cannot help but think of that beautiful verse, of the effect of Christ loving the church and giving Himself for it, that the church might be left “not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” His flesh became as the flesh of a little child. “Go and wash ... and ... be clean.”

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Ho, ye despairing sinners, hear,
Ye thirsty, sin-sick souls, draw near;
Here’s water, whose all-powerful stream
Shall quench your thirst and wash you clean,
Its healing power has always wrought
Beyond the reach of human thought.

Bethesda’s pool is not like this,
Nor heals nor cures such leprosies;
Nor Siloam’s streams, nor Jordan’s flood,
Could to my heart seem half so good;
’Tis Jesus’ blood, that crimson sea,
That washes guilt and filth away.

To this dear Fountain I’d repair,
With all the wounds and pains I bear;
I’d keep my station near its side,
And wash, and drink, and there abide;
Nor from the sacred streams remove,
Till taken to their source above.

J. Cennick