

God Empties to Make Room for His Goodness

Preached in New Hope Reformed Fellowship Church, Middleville, MI,
on Sunday morning, March 13, 2022 by C. VanSteenselen.

Text: Ruth 1:19-22

Psalter 115:1-2

Psalter 220:2-3

Psalter 232:2-3

Psalter 196

Congregation,

He was born in 1725. At a very young age, he went to sea and worked at a slave ship. Later, he became captain of several of those ships. When he was about 23 years old, he was on a ship to England. In that night he awoke. The ship was in severe storm. It was about to sink. This made him honest to pray God for mercy. After this moment, he began to read his Bible and other books. He stopped misusing God's name, gambling, and drinking alcohol. And yet, he was not a true believer. This happened later. We move to a few years later. This young man is severely sick of fever. But at this moment, he may profess to believe in Jesus Christ and to ask God to rule all his life. Later he writes that this is the moment of his true conversion. This is the turning point. Now he has peace God. Yes, this man wrote a well known hymn, “Amazing Grace.” His name is John Newton. It shows two things in true conversion. An emptying grace but also goodness God.

Theme: God Empties to Make Room for His Goodness

- I. A Disturbed City
- II. An Afflicted Woman
- III. A Powerful God

I. A Disturbed City

Arrival at Bethlehem

First, we read about the arrival of Naomi and Ruth in Bethlehem. Verse 19 says, “So they two went until they came to Bethlehem.” The previous verses, verses 11 – 18, we saw a moment of farewell. Naomi had urged Orpah and Ruth to return to Moab. Indeed, Orpah did. She kissed her mother-in-law and returned. She wanted only to have material welfare. But Ruth remained. She asked her mother-in-law, please, stop urging me. I will follow where you go. And now they are on their journey. The text says “they two.” We can also say “they both.” No, not All three, neither Naomi only. But they two. Notice, by the way, that Naomi has no servants to help her carry the luggage. The phrase “they two” shows a relationship. This is seen more in the Bible. For example, “Jonathan said unto David, Come, and let us go out into the field. And they went out both of them into the field” (1 Sam. 20:11). Later, they make a covenant. We read, “And they two made a covenant before the LORD” (1 Sam. 23:18). In our passage, it means that Ruth remains closely to her mother-in-law. Gill says, “They stayed together. Although Ruth was younger and could go faster, she followed Naomi.” What do we then read? “They went” (1:19). Yes, they went all the way from Moab to Bethlehem. That is about 60 miles! The same distance when you go from Grand Rapids to Kalamazoo. Remember, they did not have a horse or donkey. Oh, no. This was all by foot. Yes, it was a long journey! The terrain to pass was rugged and steep. Likely it took them 7-10 days to travel. What a challenge! What did they think? We do not know. Maybe how they would be received? And another question you may ask is, what did they eat? What did they drink? Did they have luggage to carry? We are unable to give an answer. The Bible is silent. At least we know that they continued to travel. Till when? We read, “Until they came to Bethlehem.” Yes, that walk did continually happen. Only when came to Bethlehem their travel stopped. They finally arrive at their destination.

Application

Congregation, we are all travelers. Orpah traveled one way. Ruth went another. The Bible tells us that there are only two final destinations. Which ones? The one is heaven, the land of eternal rest. The other is hell, the land of eternal unrest. By nature, we travel like Orpah. We love to continue in this world. We call this traveling on the broad way. It is an easy walk. You simply have to follow your heart. But the end is horrible. That will mean an eternal unrest.

Are there those in our midst that know of a change in destination? Yes, this is only by God’s grace. Then you are placed on the way to that spiritual Bethlehem. That is a narrow way. Ah, this path can be such a challenge! It has steep hills of self-denial. You have to carry your luggage of sin. There are rugged places of challenges of the world. But God gives food when you travel. A promise here and a sermon there. Also, you will experience moments rest. Then your soul longs to be in that heavenly Canaan. There you no longer need travel. No, then it will always be past. Then you may look back on your journey and say, it was only by God’s grace of perseverance. But what happens when Naomi and Ruth arrive? Well, we see much confusion.

Confusion in Bethlehem

We read in verse 19, “And it came to pass, when they were come to Beth-lehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?” When was the city confused? When did this happen? We read, “when they were come.” You could say, it is the moment they came. As soon as arrived in Bethlehem. No, this does not happen days after Naomi and Ruth arrive. But it is immediately. What does then happen? It says, “all the city was moved about them” (1:19). They were disturbed. The city was in commotion and uproar. We read something similar when the ark of the covenant arrives in camp Israel, “All Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again” (1 Sam. 4:5). Can imagine what that was? Much noise. The earth was shaking. In the same way, this happens in the city of Bethlehem with Ruth and Naomi. No, not a part of the city. But it speaks of all the city. Maybe it shows that Naomi was well-known and was highly regarded. It might be proof that Elimelech had been highly esteemed. But now our text speaks about a city. What is the difference between a city and a town in Israel? Well, a city had walls for protection (Lev. 25:29). When it comes to Bethlehem, we read also that they had elders to rule (Ruth 4:2) and a gate for protection (Ruth 4:1). Now, this city is in commotion. But how is this visible? Well, the people begin to talk. We read, “They said, is this Naomi?” (1:19). No, this is not the men of the city but the women. That is what the word in the original “they” shows. The focus of the citizens is fully on Naomi. Ruth seems to be totally forgotten. Can imagine what that was for Ruth? If this is my beginning in Israel, how will my future be? Yes, the question of the women shows that they were very surprised. Even disturbed. Is this the same person we knew? Yes, the outward appearance of Naomi had become old. She visibly changed for the worse.

Application

Let’s apply this in a spiritual way, congregation. What happens in heaven when a sinner repents? Then the whole ‘city of Jerusalem’ is in uproar. Why? First, because man by nature will never come back. No, it is caused by God. But what happens more? The whole ‘city’ is disturbed. They know how God created man. He was good and perfect. But how does this sinner come back? He or she is full of sin and dirt. The image of God is in pieces. They say as it were, “Is this same person God that created?” Let’s draw another line. Naomi was highly esteemed. In the same way, we were highly esteemed in paradise. In the Psalms, we read, “Made a little lower than angels, crowned with glory and honour” (Ps. 8:5). Gladly, certain sinners will return. And when God’s people come home, then they will arrive in a city with walls. Yes, heaven is protected. There never any sin nor evil will enter. There you will only find rejoicing.

Unconverted listener, why do you remain living in sin? Do you see what happened to Naomi? She became old of appearance. Now, sin does precisely the same. Sin makes a person “old,” and him “brakes off” in body and soul. The longer you live, the more decay you will find. It is like a car that in salty rain. Over time, it will become more rusty. The longer you wait, the more you will see its decay. Friend, do not remain this way. Sin will not give you real joy. But turn to God with all your sin. Yes, it will mean that you will have a time to feel disturbed. Disturbed about your sin and lifestyle. But remember this, what was the end for Naomi? It was God’s blessing. But after the question in our text, how does Naomi respond? Does she say, “Yes, I am Naomi?” No. We hear of her afflictions. This is even visible in her name. That is our second thought.

II. An Afflicted Woman

We will see three different things. First, we see that Naomi names her experience. Second, she experienced an emptying, and third, she experienced affliction.

A Naming of Experience

First, we see that Naomi gives her past experiences a name. We read in verse 20, “And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara.” Who answers here? Yes, it is Naomi, not Ruth. Naomi speaks to the women of the city. What does she say? “Call me not Naomi, call me Mara” (1:20). Is that not strange? Why would she say that? Do your remember? Names in the Bible have meaning. Think of Jacob. God changed his name to Israel. Jacob means “heel catcher or deceiver,” but Israel means, “God

Strives.” When did that happen? After Jacob strove with God and prevailed (Gen. 32:28). Similarly, we can say this about Naomi. She has had a bad experience. Now she wants her name to reflect it. Do you remember? Naomi means “Pleasant or Beauty.” This word is sometimes used for the LORD, “One thing...I desired...that I may dwell in the house of the LORD...to behold the *beauty* of the LORD” (Ps. 27:4). In our text, Naomi wants it to change it to Mara. What does that mean? “Bitterness.” What does it remind us of? Yes. The experience of Israel in the wilderness. After a long journey, they come to a certain place. But they could not drink the water there. This water was bitter. That is why they call this place “Marah” (Ex. 15:23). Naomi wants to change her name to Mara because of her bitter experience. That is why she said, “Call me (not),” which expresses a wish or command. What a request.

Application

Congregation, what is our name or reputation? No, not literal. We do have different names. But our spiritual name? Are we ‘good’ persons? Are we better than those in the world? That is often how we could feel. Maybe you say, my name is ‘christian.’ May we ask, how did you become one? Ah, when God is at work, you get a different name. What is it? Sinner. A ‘Mara,’ that is a bitterness. Why? Then you see your own heart. It is full of bitterness. How then? It is against God, my own salvation, grace, and my neighbor. Then you see that you have often murmured. But you may then also see how good God was.

Are there those nameless ones in our midst? Those that cannot give a name to their situation? They know that things have changed. They cannot live in the world. And at the same time, they cannot say that they belong to God. They can only complain about themselves. My wicked heart. Yes, they were good created. But then so deep fallen. May we encourage you? Naomi could no longer call herself “pleasant.” The only thing she saw was bitterness. If that is you, keep listening. Why? God afflicts a people to bring them to salvation. Maybe you have still too much. Do you still build on frames? Do you build on tears? God will not allow that. No, then he needs to afflict more and empty you more. This is what Naomi had. But then, if you are fully emptied, you may also see God’s goodness. How? Only in Jesus Christ. Why did Naomi want to change her name? She had experienced what it was to be emptied.

An Emptying Experience

This emptying experience we find in the verses 20 and 21, “For the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty.” What a statement! Think about this, Ruth stands next her. She hears all of this. She knows about it. But is not just someone who afflicted Naomi but “the Almighty.” Who is this? Is it a weak God? No. Is it the God of creation? No. But the “Almighty.” That means, the God that has all power. He has the highest power and authority. Thus, this God has the power to give but also the power to take. He is allowed to do that. He has a right to do it. Yes, He has not only the power to destroy enemies but also to protect His people. No, this Almighty God cannot be conquered. In the case of Naomi, this God was more powerful than herself and all her family. They could not conquer God’s judgment. No, rather the opposite. God conquered them. What did He do? God “hath dealt very bitterly with me” (1:20), she says. It becomes very personal for her! No, it is not about Ruth. It no longer happened to her husband or children. But it is to “me.” How had the Lord then dealt bitterly with her? Well, in robbing Naomi of her husband and two sons. This word for “dealing bitterly” is the same root “Maram” the name she desires. How did this dealing bitterly look like? She was made empty. She says, “I went out full, and the LORD brought me home again empty” (1:21). What a contrast, I and the LORD. I went full, but the LORD made empty. Even here, the emphasis is on full and empty. Yes, she was full. That means, she had all what she needed: possessions, husband and children. Now she is empty. All this is taken away. Now she is empty-handed. She no longer has any property or family. A similar example we find in Scripture with Jacob and Laban. Jacob says to his father-in-law, “Except the God of my father...had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty” (Gen. 31:42). Yes, Laban changed Jacob’s flock time and again. In other words, if it had been in Laban’s power, Jacob would have been without children and without flock.

Application

These verses contain great spiritual lessons. It is true, God created us “full.” That is, we had all spiritual gifts. We were able to serve Him. But we were sent out of paradise by sin. We lost everything. Now, we are empty before God. But the greatest problem is that we do not see it. We think, I have knowledge, I have a good character. Some even assume, I am righteous. But what does the LORD in conversion? He makes spiritual empty. What does a person then see? Well, that he has no righteousness at all. He gets to know that he cannot keep the law. Not even in the smallest details. He sees that there is no salvation. If he does not change, he must go lost forever! That is shivering. Then my prayer becomes empty. My tears become empty. Yes, even the reading of the

Bible is empty. All has no value in and of itself. Congregation, have we learned this? Do you know that you have no longer excuses for your pride, hatred, anger and lack of love? Or do you still think, my prayer is ok? My Bible reading is good? Or, God will hear me because of __, and then fill in the blank? If that is the case, then we must be honest with you. You are not emptied! But it is necessary to know this. Without it, you will deceive yourself for eternity.

Are there those in our midst that think highly of themselves? Let us say this, you will have no answer in the day when you have to appear before God. You will know that all was a soap bubble. It will shatter! What is then left? Nothing! Absolutely nothing. Ask God, “Show me my emptiness.” Do you know the truth? We not like this! We want to have something in our hands to bring before God. But friend this is absolutely necessary! Without it, you will never seek Jesus Christ. Never! No, do not image otherwise. That is only the deception of Satan. Maybe you ask, but why would God do this? For two reasons. First, because man is totally depraved. Without this knowledge, he will never come to God in truth. Second, God wants to have the glory alone in the salvation of sinners. A similar situation we see with Naomi. Empties. But not only that, also, the LORD testified against her.

An Afflicting Experience

Naomi also had an afflicting experience. It says in verse 21, “Why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?” She responds, he “hath testified against me.” Literally it says, “The LORD has answered me.” It was the LORD’s response as a witness. He replied to her actions. An example when we see a similar situation is the young Amelekite that spoke to David. He told David that he had killed Saul. This was not true. And what was David’s response? “Thy blood be upon thy head; for thy mouth hath testified against thee, saying, I have slain the LORD’s anointed” (2 Sam. 1:16). In other words, his own words condemned him. They testified against him, “I am guilty.” Likewise, Naomi went to Moab. That was a sinful deed. But the LORD responded, this is my answer. Let us give another example. Let’s say that you have to go to court. If you have done something wrong, there will be a witness that testifies against you. The same is true for Naomi. The LORD was a witness of her life and testified of it. And now Naomi acknowledges, “I am guilty.” That the LORD took away my husband and sons was deserved. No, it is not a testifying against her husband or Ruth. But it is against “me.” Very personal. The Targum adds, “Before the Lord my sin has testified against me.” But not only has the LORD answered to her and testified against her. He has also afflicted her. We read, “the Almighty hath afflicted me” (1:21). Literally, it says, “He had done evil or bad to me.” That means, has done hurt or caused damage. She had received calamities. Why was that? She had provoked Him to anger. Jeremiah warns for this in a later time period, “And go not after other gods to serve them, and to worship them...I *will do* you no *hurt*” (Jer. 25:6). Had Naomi served other gods? We do not know. At least we can say that she experienced calamities. No, not only externally but also internal.

Application

What similarities can be found in spiritual life. May we ask you, have you had a time that the LORD testified against you? What do we mean? When you read the Bible, you felt, it is totally against me. Not just a thought, but it became reality. It points to my sin. It tells me what I did wrong. All of the the Bible is against me! Yes, a terrifying thought! But all true! I did wrong. I have sinned. No, no longer in general, “I am *a* sinner.” But it becomes my experience, “I *am* a sinner.” What did that experience cause you to? Yes, nights of tears. Nights of weeping. Then the question arose in your heart, “LORD, am I that bad? All those afflictions thou hast given in my life are deserved. I cannot say anything against it.” You ask, but why did the LORD testify against me? Do you know the answer? It is to make room for grace and for the Savior. Without that knowledge, we think that we deserve God’s help. Oh, yes, we want to be saved. But partially by myself, by my prayer or my Bible reading. But after such testifying against you, you seek it outside yourself in Jesus Christ. Congregation, do we know this by experience? Yes, we must know that in this life! If not, the LORD will one day testify against us. Then it is no longer to bring me to salvation, but to glorify His justice. What shall He say then? “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matt. 7:23). And then to depart forever! Therefore, we beg you, turn from sin! You have enough proof, you are guilty! We may tell you this? The LORD still wants to forgive. You say, is that because of my repentance? No. It is only because He wants it! It is out of His goodness. Out of His mercy! Ah, yes the LORD has still that other testimony. It is the gospel in human form. His Own Beloved Son. But if we think of those afflictions, is that the only experience of God’s people? No. They will also get to know the goodness of God. He is powerful. That is what we will see in our third thought.

III. A Powerful God

The title of our third thought is “A powerful God.” But how God is powerful in our passage? This is in two things. First, He brought Naomi and Ruth back from Moab. Second, He brought Naomi back to His goodness.

Returned from Moab

The return from Moab is seen in verse 22, “So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab.” Naomi returns with Ruth. Do you see? The Bible writer ignores Naomi’s request. He does not use “Mara” but “Naomi.” It shows that God looks different to a person than a convicted sinner himself. Why is that? Well, she returned. We can also say, she repented. That has value in the eyes of God. What a wonder. How can this be? Is it the choice of Naomi? No. Only God’s power caused her to return. Yes, even more, it caused Ruth to come too. A Moabite and a heathen. Still, she comes. That is only because of God’s work in the heart sinners. May we ask you something? What is the difference between the return of Naomi and Ruth? It is this. Naomi knew God but went to that sinful Moab. She did it willfully. Now, she was brought back to a known country and a known God. For Ruth, it was different. She had always lived in Moab. She did not know this God. For her, it was a radical change. It meant to turn from her home-country and to turn to an unknown God.

Application

Let’s draw some spiritual lessons. When a sinner has convictions, he sees only evil within himself. The LORD testifies against him. But does God think the same? No. He rejoices. He sees “beauty” in it. Why? He sees His Own work. He recognizes the change by His power. Yes, it is all from God. It is a sweet smelling savor in His eyes. Maybe you ask, was it the “choosing of the sinner” to repent? No! That unbiblical! You know what we choose? That was *against* God and *for* sin. But if God works, the sinner begins choose to do good. And that is only by God’s grace.

We can draw another lesson from our text. There is a difference between God’s child repenting from sin (with grace) and someone unconverted. A child of God it is like Naomi. He does it with knowledge of grace! It hurts the Father heart. Think of the denial of Peter. Afterwards, Peter wept bitterly. The repentance of an unconverted is like Ruth. It is the first time that he turns from sin. He lived in the world. He turns from it. It is a radical change. Congregation, do you see God’s greatness in it? It is only by Him that sinners are saved. It is founded in God’s eternal love of election. It only comes from His heart. That is why a remnant will be saved. God’s people will always rejoice for that. Yes, it was very costly! God gave His only-begotten Son. The highest price could give.

Trembling people that are listening, maybe you say, “I am too sinful. I tremble to come. I have sinned too much.” That may be all true. You are sinful! You have sinned much. You have all the right to tremble. But may we ask you, who returned? Yes, Ruth, the Moabite. She was an idol worshiper. She had sinned all her life. She had never served God. But God brought her back. Do you think that God would not receive you? He desires to see you. Maybe another says, “But I have seen some grace. God has shown me some of His goodness. But I continued of sin. And the Bible says, there is no more sacrifice for those that sinned willfully.” Ah, is that the case? We are glad to hear that. It is true, God is angry! But may we say this, who returned? It was Naomi! She knew God’s will. She knew God’s grace. She willfully turned to Moab. It was against better knowledge. If she was brought back, yes with affliction, would God not receive you? And notice that those in Hebrews who have sin willfully did it openly. Can you say that? No? Then there is still the time of grace. Beg the LORD for mercy. He wants to see those that have sinned, even after grace. Think of Peter. He denied the Lord willfully. But Jesus Christ brought him back. Would God not do that for you? Confess all your sin. Confess all your iniquity. Then, God will forgive. No, not that He ever saw any good in you. No, that is only evil. But when He sees the blood, it will cleanse from all sin. Yes, then you will see His goodness. That is what Naomi saw as well. She returned unto this goodness.

Returned to the LORD's Goodness

The return to God’s goodness is found in the last part of verse 22, “And they came to Beth-lehem in the beginning of barley harvest.” How is God’s goodness seen in this verse? In two things. First, in what happened just before this time. Second, He had given food to Israel. Let us look to the first one. In what time does Naomi return? That is several weeks before the wheat harvest. The time around Pentecost. How do we know that? Well, think of the plague of the hail. It destroyed all the barley in Egypt (Ex. 9:31). But the wheat was not yet destroyed until the locusts ate them. The period that Naomi and Ruth come in Bethlehem is in March. It is right after the Passover. What is the Passover? Do you remember? That had to do with the last plague in Egypt. All the firstborn were killed. But the LORD had said. I will “pass by” the firstborn of Israel. Oh yes, that could only when He saw the

blood of the lamb. It showed the LORD’s goodness. He spared lives. How was that possible? Because of the blood of the lamb. What did this point to? The same as cleaning a sinner. We can say that the LORD can look upon a sinner because of the blood of Christ. Only then the LORD can give gifts. In our passage, this gift is food. In a spiritual manner, it is all the gifts of Christ. Yes, this time is also when Israel brought the first-fruits of the harvest before the LORD (Lev. 23:9-14). What did that show? That all had to come from the LORD and that all belonged Him. Was this not a wink to Naomi? She came back at the harvest. She had to acknowledge that all was from Him. How did that bringing of the first-fruits look like? Then it was waved before the LORD. If you go to Israel, you still see it happen. Then they wave with a sheaf of wheat in their hands. Yes, this was the LORD’s goodness. But more. Second, we see that the LORD had given food again. Seven years of famine had been past. That means a time of hunger and difficulties. Now, they have sufficient food again. And this is where Naomi returns unto. Notice that they return is at the beginning of the barley harvest. That means that Ruth can glean for weeks. If they would have arrived earlier, there would have been no food. If they would come later than the wheat harvest, there would be no more food to glean. But the moment they come is at a perfect moment.

Application

Congregation, let us draw some applications to today. What had happened just before Naomi returned? Yes, the Passover had taken place. What does that show? That a lamb needed to be slain. Spiritually, the Lamb of God is slain. That means blood. Oh, and how do we need that blood on the doorposts of our heart. What blood? That of Jesus Christ. No, we cannot be without. If that is the case, God will slay us. May we ask, do you have this blood? If you do, can you tell how you got it? Was it by the work of the Holy Spirit? If you do not have this blood, should you not seek it? There is still a fountain of blood. You say, “I have no desire for it.” Ah, one day, friend, you wish that had desired it. You say, “I have many sins.” That is true. But there is a fountain. It can cover many sins. Go to that fountain. Wash all your sins there. Then you are clean before God. You say, “My sins are too great. I cannot be forgiven.” Is that true? You are indeed a great sinner. But here is a great Savior. This blood is extremely powerful.

The text shows us another line. When did Naomi come back? When they had enough food in the land. In same way we can say that there is an abundance with God! He gives abundantly to those who ask for it. You say, “I receive so little. It is so dark in my heart.” May we ask you, “Do you truly ask of God? If so, what do you ask? Is the problem maybe that you think too little of God? God is great. He can do much more than you can ask. Ah, if you would only believe it. Pray for it. God can do wonders in your heart! In that way, you will experience that abundance of Him. No, this is not only to receive forgiveness, but all spiritual blessings and finally eternal life.

Conclusion

We began our sermon with the conversion of John Newton. He wrote a poem wherein he wrote his experience. The name of this hymn is “Amazing Grace.” Let us close with it,

1. Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound!)

That sav'd a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

And grace my fears reliev'd;

How precious did that grace appear,

The hour I first believ'd!

4. The Lord has promis'd good to me,

His word my hope secures;

He will my shield and portion be,

As long as life endures.

Amen