

“Naaman the Leper”

2 KINGS 5:1-14

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In Romans 15:4, the apostle Paul was referring to the Old Testament when he said that ***“...whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*** Most of us could probably use some encouragement! And so this morning, then, I would like for us to consider a rather well-known passage from the Old Testament book of 2 Kings 5, a scene from the life of Elisha the prophet. You might remember that at the time of Elisha, the greatest enemy of the Israelites were the Syrians (also referred to as the Arameans). As far as a timeline, we are talking roughly 895 BC. The prophet Elijah had been taken into heaven in a chariot of fire, in a whirlwind, and we find in the Scriptures that Elisha takes over where Elijah leaves off. This was a very wicked time for the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the kingdom was in the process of being punished by God. In fact, in the last battle that King Ahab had with the Syrians, an anonymous Syrian soldier raised his bow and shot an arrow at random, and hit King Ahab in the joint of his armor and killed him. The Bible does not tell us the name of that Syrian soldier, but Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that it was a man by the name of Naaman, and Josephus said that for killing King Ahab, Naaman was promoted to the position of captain in the Syrian army. Naaman, therefore, was the hero of his day (think about Seal Team Six, for killing Bin Laden, kind of fame); however, Naaman had a very serious problem – he was infected with one of the worst diseases of the ancient world, the disease of leprosy.

Most of us here this morning are not very familiar with leprosy, and the reason is, it has been virtually eliminated from our part of the world. In 2004, for example (the most recent year for which I could find figures), there were 131 cases of leprosy diagnosed in the United States, and only 25 of those individuals were born in the United States, meaning that a vast majority of the cases are among those who have moved here from other nations. When we look at the map, we discover that the disease is most prevalent in India and Brazil. According to the World Health Organization, there are roughly 2-3 million people in the world who are permanently disabled due to leprosy. I should point out that it is also referred to as Hansen’s Disease, after the Norwegian doctor who discovered the bacteria back in 1873. That was a turning point, and leprosy (or Hansen’s Disease) is now controlled with a variety of antibiotics.

Of course, with only a handful of cases here in the United States, most of us are at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding what leprosy meant to those who lived in the ancient world. When we start researching, we discover that leprosy starts out with tiny little red spots on the skin, and then it starts to

spread all over the body, the spots get bigger and start to turn white and have a scaly appearance. Often, the person's hair begins to fall out, first from the head, then the eyebrows. A person then loses feeling in the extremities. The fingernails and toenails get loose and start falling out. The joints of the fingers and toes deteriorate and begin to rot and fall off one piece at a time. The gums begin to shrink, and each tooth is lost, one a time. The face is affected, even to the point of eventually losing the nose, and lips, and even the eyes, and death comes soon after that. And again, let us remember that in Bible times, there was no cure, and Naaman was infected.

This man was wealthy, he was powerful, and yet there was not a beggar in the entire world who would have traded places with Naaman. No matter how many battles he won, no matter how many medals he received, Naaman continued to wake up every morning as a leper. This morning, then, let us consider 2 Kings 5:1-14, let us notice what happens next, and let us be encouraged (as the apostle Paul told us we would be). In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on p. 599 – 2 Kings 5:1-14...

1 Now Naaman, captain of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man with his master, and highly respected, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man was also a valiant warrior, but he was a leper. 2 Now the Arameans had gone out in bands and had taken captive a little girl from the land of Israel; and she waited on Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "I wish that my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! Then he would cure him of his leprosy." 4 Naaman went in and told his master, saying, "Thus and thus spoke the girl who is from the land of Israel." 5 Then the king of Aram said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." He departed and took with him ten talents of silver and six thousand shekels of gold and ten changes of clothes.

6 He brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying, "And now as this letter comes to you, behold, I have sent Naaman my servant to you, that you may cure him of his leprosy." 7 When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man is sending word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? But consider now, and see how he is seeking a quarrel against me."

8 It happened when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, that he sent word to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Now let him come to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." 9 So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots and stood at the doorway of the house of Elisha. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean." 11 But Naaman was furious and went away and said, "Behold, I thought, 'He will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.' 12 Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. 13 Then his servants came near and spoke to him and said, "My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean?'" 14 So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean.

Again, as we look back at what we have read, I would like for us to be encouraged as we ask ourselves why this account has been preserved for us in the Scriptures.

I. **And one of the first main ideas that comes across right away in verse 1, is a warning about THE DANGER OF PRIDE.**

In verse 1, we find that Naaman is the captain of the army of the king of Aram (or Syria). And beyond that, Naaman was ***“a great man with his master...highly respected...a valiant warrior.”*** And yet there is something else in verse 1 that gives us a clue to his position, something that Naaman himself might not have even known at the time, and that is, Naaman was a powerful and popular man, ***“...because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram.”*** In other words, God was *allowing* Naaman to be successful in his military career. So, here he was, serving as a captain in the military of a nation of one of Israel’s main enemies, and the Lord was giving him success. The Lord was using Naaman to discipline the nation of Israel. God was using the Syrian army to discipline the Northern Kingdom. In many ways, this goes back to a promise that God made to Israel many years earlier, in a passage that we hope to get to in a few weeks in our Wednesday evening adult Bible class. In Deuteronomy 28, as Moses was giving his final words of encouragement to the people before they crossed over the Jordan River, Moses had some words of encouragement: If you obey the Lord, things will go very well with you. If you obey the Lord, you will just move in to the Promised Land. But then Moses goes on to give a long list of horrible things that would happen if they ignored the Lord’s instructions. In Deuteronomy 28:25-26, for example, Moses said that if they did not behave, ***“The Lord shall cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways before them, and you will be an example of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your carcasses will be food to all birds of the sky and to the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away.”*** Naaman, therefore, as the captain of an enemy army, even though he did not believe in the one true God at the time, was being used by God as a tool to fulfill that prophecy made hundreds of years earlier back in Deuteronomy 28. For that reason, Naaman was having tremendous success in his military career.

And yet we find at the end of verse 1 that Naaman was a leper. And we find (in verse 2) that somewhere along the line, Naaman’s armies had gone out on a raid and had brought back a young Israelite girl who ended up as a slave, serving Naaman’s wife. At some point, this little girl suggested that Naaman should go to the prophet Elisha for a cure. We will get back to the girl in a little bit, but for now, I just want us to notice what happens when a rich, powerful, arrogant man goes out looking for a cure. Instead of going directly to Elisha, Naaman goes first to his own king, who then sends a delegation to the king of Israel. Along with the letter, the king also sends 750 pounds of silver and roughly 150 pounds of gold. I checked the price of silver and gold this past Friday, and if my calculations are correct, we are talking about a gift in excess of \$4.5 million.

Well, of course, this really upsets the king of Israel, because at this point the kings of Israel were scoundrels. They were evil men who did not really believe in God. Remember: They are being punished by Naaman! So, the king of Israel has a little panic attack: Here is my powerful neighbor who has been attacking us at will, and now he thinks I can cure leprosy! The king then tears his clothes, which must have been rather public, because Elisha hears about it, and tells the king to tell the other king to tell Naaman to come on down. So, Naaman comes on down to Elisha’s house with a huge entourage of horses and chariots and pulls up to Elisha’s front door. I’m thinking this would be a little bit like the presidential motorcade that we see today – the motorcycle cops, the armored limousines with the flags on the bumpers, the black SUV’s, and with all of this being followed by the ambulance...just in case something goes wrong. Well, this huge parade pulls up to Elisha’s front door, and Elisha doesn’t even get out of his La-Z-Boy! But instead, Elisha sends a servant who then tells Naaman that he needs to go wash seven times in the Jordan River so that his flesh would be restored! Sometimes God’s prophets communicated with words, but often they used their non-verbals, and that is what happens here. Elisha was sending a message to Naaman: Almighty God is not impressed with your motorcade,

and all of your military medals, and your wagon full of gold and silver! And it seems that Naaman got the message loud and clear.

At this point, I can picture Naaman just flying into a rage – his face (or what’s left of it) turning red, veins bulging, fists clenched, and Naaman says (in verse 11), **“Behold, I thought...”** And that right there is the problem! Naaman, in his arrogance, had this preconceived picture in his mind of exactly how this thing was going down. In his mind, he pictured this huge ceremony where Elisha would come out and wave his hands and make a big deal out of it. And so Naaman starts reasoning to himself: Why the Jordan? We’ve got much nicer rivers back home! Why did I even come down here? Why did I waste my time on these people? We know that rivers don’t cure people! So, he leaves (according to the end of verse 13), **“...in a rage.”** Naaman expected to be treated like a great man who happened to be a leper; but instead, Elisha treats Naaman like a leper, who happened to be a great man. [Ken Gehrels; The Scandal of Faith]

And from an earthly point of view, I think we can understand some of what Naaman must have been thinking. Compared to most bodies of water, the Jordan River is not much more than a drainage ditch. In his pride, then, Naaman was basically offended at the idea of dipping himself in the nastiness of the Jordan River. Thankfully, though, as Naaman turned to leave, he was encouraged to listen to Elisha, he was encouraged to reconsider (by his own servants). The servants got it! In their humility, they were not blinded by wealth and power, but they understood exactly what needed to be done.

But here at the beginning, I just want to emphasize how close Naaman came to missing out, and it all came down to a matter of pride. From his point of view, dipping seven times in the Jordan River did not make sense. And yet with the benefit of hindsight, we see the wisdom of Solomon in Proverbs 14:12, **“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”** Looking back on it, we can see it, but Naaman was blinded by pride and came so close to dying as a leper. This morning, then, let us be encouraged by this passage – encouraged to watch out for the sin of pride in our own lives. Especially when it comes to matters of faith, let us not be blinded by Naaman’s argument, **“Behold, I thought...”** Let us not get upset when something we read in the Bible seems different from the way we expect it to be. Let us not get upset when something we read in the Bible is different from the way our parents or grandparents did things. But rather, let us approach the Scriptures with humility. Our attitude needs to be: God, we will do whatever it is that you want us to do. So we have a warning concerning the danger of pride.

II. Before we get to the last verse of this paragraph, I want us to notice something else in this passage, by looking at A VERY COURAGEOUS LITTLE GIRL.

In verse 2, we find that this little girl had been taken captive when several bands of Arameans had gone out on several raids into the land of Israel. So, we find that as a little child she was ripped away from her family. Whether she was out in the front yard playing or whether she was snatched from her bed in the middle of the night, we do not know. But we can certainly imagine how terrifying that must have been. This is what we warn our children about: A parent’s worst nightmare is that a child is kidnapped and taken away, never to be seen again. We are not told exactly how old she was. On one hand, she was old enough to know something about the prophet Elisha, and yet she was young enough to be described as being **“little.”** So, if I had to guess, I would say she was probably somewhere around the age of ten, give or take a few years.

So here she is at a very young age, she is snatched away and taken to a far-off land to be a servant to the wife of a great military leader, and when she learns that her boss’ husband has leprosy, she has the courage to step forward. To me, it is interesting that she is not bitter. Many of us might have thought, “Oh, the guy who

snatched me has leprosy! Well, that is just too bad! God works in mysterious ways!” She could have reveled in that diagnosis. However, the little girl has the courage to step forward and speak up with a possible solution. And with that, it seems that she was living out the words that our Lord would speak roughly 900 years later, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘ You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. ’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”** This little girl, then, had some serious courage. Think for just a moment about the balance of power here. There was no balance of power! A foreign slave, a little girl vs. a highly decorated military leader. The girl had no way of forcing Naaman to do anything, and yet she had the power of life and death and had the courage to speak up. She might not have had the answer to any potential theological question, but this girl knew that God’s prophet would be able to do something, and so she spoke up. Let us, then, never underestimate the power of speaking up at the proper time. Here in Madison, Wisconsin, we are living in a city surrounded by Naamans—our neighbors, coworkers, classmates, teachers, and friends. Like the little slave girl, maybe you are working in a job you don’t like – even in that situation, there is power in speaking up as we should. Even if we do not have all of the answers, even if it is not comfortable, even if we are a little bit nervous, all of us can say something to point our friends to God as we should.

III. Beyond a reminder about the danger of pride, and beyond the awesome example of a courageous little girl, there is something else we need to consider here, and that is: We have a reminder about THE IMPORTANCE OF OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD.

Verse 14 tells us that Naaman **“...went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean.”** This mighty warrior, a man of incredible power, a man of great influence, set aside his pride, he repented of his anger towards God’s prophet, he took off his robes, he laid aside his medals, and humbled himself to the point of going down into the Jordan river. And in a moment of great faith, with Elisha’s words still ringing in his ears, Naaman dipped himself once, and then twice, and finally seven times in that river.

As we look at what Naaman did, it is impossible to ignore what the New Testament teaches on the subject of baptism. In fact, the same word is used. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the ancient scholars used the word baptism to describe what Naaman did when he **“dipped”** himself. Literally, he baptized himself in the Jordan River. It is hard to imagine that this is by accident. And I say that because there has been so much controversy on the subject of baptism through the years. A lot of times, when we tell people they need to be baptized, they come back with the objection, “But the Bible says that salvation cannot be earned.” And yes, we agree with that 100%. As Xavier read for us earlier (from Ephesians 2:8-9), **“...by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** With that verse in mind, let me ask a question: Did Naaman “earn” the right to be cured? Did Naaman “deserve” this healing? When he dipped in the Jordan, was this something that God somehow “owed” Naaman? Could Naaman say that he healed himself of leprosy? “Look what I did! I’ve discovered a cure!” We would say “No!” Naaman’s healing was a gift from God in every possible way; however, Naaman’s healing was conditional upon his obedience to the word of God. God told him what to do, and Naaman did it. It took him a little while, but he did it! And please also notice: He did not stop after dipping four times or five times, but he dipped himself seven times, just as God had directed. And please also notice: Naaman did not dip himself in the Nile River, Naaman did not dip himself in the Yahara River, Naaman did not dip himself in the Mediterranean Sea, but Naaman dipped himself in the Jordan River, just as God directed.

And I would point out here: From Naaman's point of view (and from our point of view for that matter), God's instructions do not always have a clear connection to the promised result. But that is the point! That is where faith comes in! Being immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins makes just about as much sense as killing a perfect one-year old lamb and smearing its blood on the doorpost. It makes just about as much sense as marking around a fortified city for seven days and expecting the walls to come tumbling down. It makes just about as much sense as spitting in the dirt, and making mud, and using that mud to bring sight to a blind man. In the same way, everybody knows that the Jordan River does not cure leprosy. Personally, I would be more afraid of CATCHING leprosy from the Jordan River than being healed by the Jordan River. But that is the point! Only God can promise that going down into a muddy river can make a person clean. Only God can do that!

In a similar way, I would say that the water we put in our baptistery has absolutely no miraculous power on its own. We use tap water from the City of Madison. It comes through our water meter, and we pay for it just like any other customer. It is pumped out of the earth, it comes through water mains and copper pipes. It is pretty cold water right now, but hopefully soon that water will be heated by natural gas as it makes its way through a heater hanging on the wall of the utility room down there. The water gets into the baptistery through a garden hose from Sears. There is nothing magical about the water itself. However, the Bible explains that we must be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins as we put our faith in the power of God.

Human wisdom tries to explain it away, "Oh, you guys believe in water salvation!" Some will say, "Don't you know that we are saved by grace and not by water?" And yet you know, I wonder what Naaman thinks about water salvation? I bet he could enlighten some people today. Naaman obeyed the Lord, and the Lord cured his leprosy. In a similar way, God has told us to change our lives and be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. Will we arrogantly argue with God, will we make excuses, will we lecture God ("God, don't you know we're not saved by water!"), or will we fill the baptistery downstairs and allow ourselves to be dipped in the water? Really, it's pretty simple.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would call your attention to one small verse in the New Testament, to Luke 4:27. Jesus had just started His public ministry, and he making a point about having faith and doing something about it, and the Lord makes the only reference to Elisha in the entire New Testament. Elijah is mentioned 29 times, but Elisha is mentioned only once. In Luke 4:27, the Lord said, ***"And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."*** What an honor, to be mentioned by the Lord! There were many lepers in ancient Israel, but none of them were healed; instead, only a foreigner had the courage to step up with obedience to the word of God. This morning we are looking for men and women with humble and obedient hearts like Naaman.

If we had time to explore the following verses (in 2 Kings 5), we would find that Naaman came to believe in the one true God. In verse 15, in fact, Naaman would go on to say, ***"Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel...."*** And then, as he left, he loaded up two mules with as much dirt as they could carry. Naaman took that dirt back home so that he could worship the one true God (in Syria) on Israelite soil. Not perfect by any means, but it seems that Naaman's heart was certainly headed in the right direction.

As we close, I would like to share something that was posted by a Facebook friend two nights ago. She lives up near Minneapolis, and we hope to be with them for the Minnesota lectures in a month or so. Her grandfather lives in Iowa, and this is what she posted Thursday night:

OH, THANK GOD! For those of you who might not have heard, my Grandpa has been suffering with lung cancer for a while, and though the chemo hasn't rid him of the cancer, it HAS given him second thoughts about the purpose of life... HE'S BECOMING A CHRISTIAN RIGHT NOW! I just got a text from my sister in Iowa that he's decided to commit the rest of his life to God (no matter how long that may be) and be baptized for the forgiveness of his sins.

A short time later, this young woman's sister posted this picture of her grandfather, now also her brother in Christ, along with something he said at the time of his baptism, "Now I can go to sleep with out being afraid." What an amazing example! This morning, if you are ready to follow this man's example, if you are ready to follow the example of Naaman, we would encourage you to make that decision sooner rather than later. If you have any questions, please ask, but if you are ready to take God at His word, you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com