

COMPASSION FOR THE APPARENTLY INCURABLE

ELISHA: PROPHET OF COMPASSION AND CONFRONTATION

By Ron R. Ritchie

John Thompson:

I would like to start by saying how uncomfortable I felt about coming to speak to you today. The more I thought and prayed about it, the more I was aware that what I would be talking to you about was the very situation I was afraid of. You see, I have what some would call the 1994 leprosy—I have AIDS. But God is good.

In 1976 I was hit by a car, which left me a paraplegic. Eight years later I had major back surgery in which I was given 26 pints of blood. That is when I caught the HIV virus.

Now, I don't want to sound as if I don't struggle with different issues. I have had to restructure all my expectations for the future because of this disease. My thoughts of growing up, getting married, and having a family are pretty much at risk.

The biggest issue I'm dealing with now is people using this information about me as a point of gossip instead of support. It doesn't really bother me that people are given this information as long as they are responsible enough to handle it. But here I am telling you about it, and I don't know how it will be received.

One of the most important things I have tried to get across to people is that I have never wanted to be treated any differently because of my disability or because of this disease. One way that I may be able to help you understand where I am is to ask you, if tomorrow you found out you had AIDS, how you would want to be treated. Would you want people to move to a different seat at church, or to hear people whispering about you? Would you want to lose your job? Would you want to be excluded from the normal, everyday activities of life that you have always enjoyed? What I am talking about is real qualities of good relationships.

The way I get through each day is to remember that God is in control. A scripture that has meant a lot to me is Exodus 4:10-11. This passage tells me that the Lord knew about my accident and my operations, and he knows the end of the story. He knows my hurts and my longings. So I rest in the sovereignty of his role in my life.

During Jesus' ministry he came upon many who were lame, blind, demon-possessed, and stricken with the incurable disease of leprosy. One day, "...there was a man full of leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.' And He stretched out His hand, and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' And immediately the leprosy left him." (Luke 5:12-13.)

We are surrounded by men and women who are at this moment suffering from some incurable physical disease that eventually will lead to their untimely and often painful physical death. To have an incurable disease like

cancer or AIDS leaves many with a heart filled with hopelessness, anger, frustration, and fear—fear of living and fear of dying—because they have no one to turn to for a cure. But others have come to the spiritual realization that every one of us has been born with an incurable disease called sin, and the present physical diseases are but the natural consequences of being born into a fallen humanity inherited from our parents Adam and Eve. And our Lord is willing to heal physically on this earth, many like the man with leprosy who came to him for healing, as a symbol of how willing and available he is to heal all of us spiritually from sin.

In the adventure ahead of us in 2 Kings 5:1-19, we are going to be reminded once again by the ministry of the prophet Elisha that not only does God love his people of Israel and Judah, but he has always loved the pagan world that surrounds his people. He is always willing to bring physical and spiritual healing to anyone who will place their faith in him as Lord and Savior. Let's meet Naaman, the commander-in-chief of the army of Aram, a political enemy of Israel.

Naaman: commander-in-chief of the army

Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." (2 Kings 5:1-6)

Elisha ("God is His Salvation") was *God's instrument of compassion*, a prophet who had been sent to speak God's word of truth, grace, and warning to the northern tribes of Israel as well as to Judah, Moab to the east, and Aram to the north (848-797 BC). His ministry foreshadowed that of Jesus. In his time the government was corrupt and there was impending war with Aram, but God continued to move him around to minister to the common and at times hurting people within the spiritual remnant. He was called upon to purify the spring in Jericho, provide oil for a new widow in debt, provide a child for a barren wife, and when the child died, raise him from death. Elisha then was used of the Lord to purify some poisonous stew and multiply twenty loaves of bread for a hundred hungry prophets, with some left over after the meal. (See 2 Kings 3-4. Does that story sound familiar? See Luke 9:12-17.)

And now Elisha was about to get involved with this pagan general from Aram who had leprosy. Aram was a small country situated at the northeastern corner of Israel, and it later became modern Syria. A century earlier King David had conquered Aram and collected taxes from them. At the time of the rule of King Joram (Israel's ninth king, who reigned 853-842 BC), Aram was ruled by King Ben-Hadad II, who kept growing stronger and bolder and eventually became a thorn in the side of Israel, leading to a war between the two nations (841 BC; see 2 Kings 6:8-7:20). Meanwhile Aram would boldly send out raiding parties into Israel's territory and take food, supplies, and men and women who were to be used as slaves.

The commander-in-chief of King Ben-Hadad II's army was Naaman ("Pleasantness"). This valiant soldier had been rewarded with a victory in an earlier battle by the hand of Jehovah, which placed him in a position of high

esteem in the eyes of his king. (Only God knows the heart of each individual, and he knew the heart of this general, as he would later know the heart of a Roman centurion named Cornelius [see Acts 10]. And he is willing to offer salvation to all who call upon his name.) But for Naaman, in the words of Charles Dickens in the opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....”—for he had leprosy.

Everyone in that day knew that leprosy was a terminal illness, like so many that we hear about today. It was a disease that eventually isolated one from all the common joys of life: family, friends, and community life. Naaman’s case of leprosy apparently was not so advanced that he was in fear of losing his high-ranking position immediately, but he knew as everyone did that it was just a matter of time. He also knew that in spite of his rank, position of respect, and power in the Aramean kingdom, he was personally helpless to do anything but wait for death. He was a good man, but he had leprosy! And he was a good man, but in the sight of God he was a sinner like all the other good men and women of every generation. “...For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” (Romans 3:23). No matter how nice non-Christians are, they are still sinners in the sight of God, and they need to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Now earlier, bands of Aramean soldiers had raided an Israelite village, and they had taken a young girl captive. In time she was placed in the home of Naaman and became a servant of his wife. Once she heard about her master’s illness, she said to her mistress, “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” What a wonderful woman of faith. She had heard about Elisha and perhaps had even seen him in Samaria, the capital. She surely had heard about his many miracles, especially the purification of the poisonous food and the raising of the Shunammite’s dead son, which gave her the faith and courage to say to her mistress, “The Jews believe in Jehovah, the one and only living God, a God of compassion and healing. And if your husband would put his faith in him, he could be healed. And our God has placed among us his prophets who minister on his behalf, and all your husband has to do is ‘show up’ in Israel—not as an enemy, of course, but as a man who desires to be healed by God. Why don’t we see what happens—it’s certainly worth a try!”

God puts his people in the right place at the right time. You never know how God will use you as a witness to his glory and power, even to bring healing and salvation to many, regardless of whatever uncomfortable circumstances and captivating situations you may find yourself in at the time.

Many years later (586 BC), a young man named Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego would be taken captive by the Babylonians led by King Nebuchadnezzar, and would become witnesses for Jehovah in a pagan nation. One day Daniel’s three friends were arrested because they would not bow down to the golden image that the king had set up to be worshiped. As a result they were cast into a furnace of blazing fire. Then the king looked into the fire and saw four men walking around unharmed, and the appearance of the fourth was like a son of the gods. So the king asked Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego to walk out of the fire; and when they did, they did not even have the smell of the fire on their persons. “Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God.’” Then he made a decree that anyone in his kingdom who spoke against this God of Israel would be destroyed. (See Daniel 3.)

Naaman’s wife told her husband what the servant girl from Israel had said about a man named Elisha in Samaria who was a prophet of the one and only living God Jehovah. So Naaman had an audience with King Ben-Hadad II, and the king greatly encouraged him to take time to visit the prophet, and was even willing to write a letter of introduction on his behalf. So Naaman put together a caravan and took what appears to have been most of his life’s savings in order to pay for his healing: 10 talents (750 pounds) of silver, which in this modern market is worth about \$63,360, and 6,000 shekels (150 pounds) of gold, which in this modern market is worth about \$838,000. (Now, the value of the ten suits depends on whether he bought them at the Men’s Wearhouse or Nordstrom’s!)

Naaman also took the letter addressed to Joram, the king of Israel, that King Ben-Hadad had written on his behalf. It said, “With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.” A quick fix. How many terminally ill people do you know personally or have you heard about who have gathered up their life’s savings and headed off to Lourdes of France, the Philippines, or Mexico to be healed by some holy water, sleight-of hand operation, or new miracle drug turned down by the medical community in the US but claimed by other countries as a cure-all?

Naaman was willing to try anything at this point of his life—even the God of Israel. So with his caravan, his money, and his suits, his letter from the king, and a heart filled with hope, he headed off to Israel.

There is a prophet in Israel

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, “Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!”

When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: “Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.” So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.”

But Naaman went away angry and said, “I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?” So he turned and went off in a rage. (2 Kings 5:7-12)

Joram, King of Israel, son of the late Ahab and Jezebel (who at that time was still alive), was sitting in his palace when he was told that a man had just arrived with a letter from King Ben-Hadad of Aram. He opened the wax seal and read the words, “With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.” When the king read these words his heart became filled with fear, and he tore his robes in grief. He immediately realized that he was not God, only a king. “Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow put me in this impossible position? I have no power to cure leprosy! He is setting me up to fail. It’s a no-win situation that will result in another war with Aram.”

In contrast to King Joram, Elisha the man of God was delighted. Since most of the children of Jehovah were bowing down to Baal, he had time to minister to a pagan general who was willing to check out the God of Israel. So he said, “Send him to me so that he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.” And Elisha was not just any old prophet; he was a prophet of the one and only living God Jehovah. For Jehovah, in spite of the apostasy in Israel, was still available to make his saving grace and power known through his prophets to all who were interested. And Naaman was interested, for he knew that you could have a great kingdom, a great name, a great rank, and a great bank account—but leprosy would turn all that, and you, into dust.

So Naaman received the message from King Joram that Elisha the prophet of God would be willing to see him. He got up into his chariot and ordered his men and the other chariots to follow him, and headed off in the direction of Elisha’s home. But once he arrived, instead of being met by the prophet himself, he was confronted by one of the prophet’s servants who gave him a simple message: “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.” (Seven is the number of perfection; God created the universe in seven

days. It is the stamp of the work and healing of God.)

The general was piqued: “Yes, it is true that I have leprosy. Yes, it is true that it is incurable. But at the same time, let’s keep everything in perspective: I am a valiant soldier, loved and respected by my king and our people. I have journeyed at my own expense more than a hundred miles over mountains and through valleys to get to your city of Samaria, to see the prophet of the God of Israel. And he sends me a lowly servant to tell me to dip myself seven times in a mud hole!”

Today we can hear the proud voices of the world: “I will not kneel in front of a horrible Roman cross on which Jesus has been hung and has died!” But we are told in God’s word, “Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD...” (Prov. 16:5). All this proud man wanted was some quick magic: “I thought that he would surely come out to me and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot, and cure me of my leprosy. Besides, my rivers at home are cleaner than this Jordan mud hole.” So he turned and in essence said, “Nuts to this,” and rode away in anger and pride. He really did need both physical and spiritual cleansing.

In the *San Francisco Chronicle* of June 11 was an article, “Americans under a Magic Spell” by Molly O’Neill of the *New York Times*. She wrote:

Like the lady who vanished and then reappeared at the wave of a wand, magic is back...

Americans are increasingly enchanted with products and notions that promise a simple route to transformation, salvation or cure....

...Lionel Tiger, a professor of anthropology at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J. [said that]...sleight-of-hand and escape artists, spiritualists and mediums appear whenever society feels powerless or overwhelmed....

George Rosenbaum, a market research executive in Chicago, looks at current fads and sees a society hungry for simple belief systems.

“The rise of tattoos, which are magical amulets, the explosion of state lotteries and legalized gambling, which both court Lady Luck, are manifestations of this hunger,” he said.

The diverse phenomena share one characteristic, Rosenbaum said: “They are simple convictions. None require soul-searching or serving a demanding or complicated god. Each requires, and in turn yields, a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ which is the hallmark of magical thinking.” Today’s “time-pressed, high-tech society,” he said, “makes people want to short-circuit complicated, rational decision-making and put their faith in a simple belief system.”

Now, however, Naaman’s pride would be replaced by humility before the prophet of God....

Faith results in physical and spiritual healing

Naaman’s servants went to him and said, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’” So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please accept now a gift from your

servant.”

The prophet answered, “As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.” And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.

“If you will not,” said Naaman, “please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD. But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this.”

“Go in peace,” Elisha said. (2 Kings 5:13-19)

These servants must have had conversations with the young Israelite woman who had been working in the household of Naaman, and in time she certainly would have told them about her wonderful and compassionate God, the one and only living God Jehovah. They apparently were so convinced that the God of Israel lived that they were willing to approach their master in a humble and respectful manner, addressing him as “father.” And then they appealed to his sense of reason: “If the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? Of course you would have, because you are a valiant warrior, the great commander-in-chief of the Aramean army. How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and you will be cleansed’! If the end result is your healing, then it’s no big deal!”

King David had written a century earlier of the spiritual cleansing that he desired after his sin with Bathsheba. He approached the only living God of Israel with a humble heart full of faith and cried out to him (Ps. 51:1-7),

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin....
Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

“So [Naaman] went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.” This proud and glorified man of valor, this powerful and fearsome man of power, humbled himself first by listening to the advice of a humble young Jewish girl who was his captive servant, and then after his rage calmed down, by listening to the reasonable advice of his humble servants. He probably stripped down before his troops, drivers, and servants; walked down the muddy banks of the Jordan; and stood for a moment looking at the muddy water, then at the sores of his leprosy. Then in a humble moment of faith, with the words of the man of the God of Israel echoing in his ears, in the power of God he slowly walked into the water, stood for a moment or so, and then began to dip himself: once, twice, three times...four, five, six times, and finally seven times. As he came up for the seventh time he looked at his body, and to his amazement his flesh was restored and clean like that of a young boy!

Naaman came out of the muddy water of the Jordan with his heart racing with joy and humility. He looked up to heaven and gave thanks to the one and only living God Jehovah. He showed his new skin to his troops, drivers, and servants; and as all gathered around him he rejoiced in this newly discovered God, the God of Israel. He then got dressed and ordered his men to drive him to the home of Elisha, the man of God. He stood before Elisha healed and cleansed of leprosy and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.” Here was a man who lived in a pagan world and had been taught to bow before all kinds of pagan idols throughout his life. He was aware that every nation had their gods who were supreme: Baal in Phoenicia, Chemosh in Moab, Moloch in

Ammon, Rimmon in Aram, and Jehovah in Israel. Some of the idols were personal in nature and some were only to be bowed before in public ceremonies. It was obvious that he had called upon many gods from his position of power and influence, and yet not one of them was able to heal him of his terminal illness. Now at last he was set free from the slavery of the demon worlds by the God he had just found because of his healing. Jehovah, the God of the Jewish nation, was not just another god. Now Naaman understood that he was the one and only living God of the whole world.

Jesus would use this story to rebuke the Jewish leaders in his home town of Nazareth who had rejected him as their Messiah. He said, "And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27). In this he was explaining to the Jews that God had been willing to cleanse that generation of Jews of their incurable leprosy and their incurable sin of idolatry, but none of them had come to the prophet Elisha in faith to be cleansed. But when the pagan general came to the prophet, the Lord saw his heart of faith and was willing to cleanse him physically and spiritually.

Later Jesus himself would bring healing to those with leprosy during his ministry. These healings would become a testimony of our Lord's messiahship to the Jewish priest, who would have to go back to the Law (Lev. 13), have the former leper examined, pronounce him clean, and offer certain sacrifices (Lev. 14). In one case Jesus healed ten men who had contracted leprosy, and only one former leper came back and thanked him. And he was one the Jews hated—a Samaritan. (See Luke 17:11-19, also Matt. 8:1-4.)

"Please accept now a gift from your servant." Elisha set the general straight right away. We cannot purchase or pay for God's favor. He is a God of mercy; and our salvation (spiritual and sometimes physical) is a gift from the God of grace, "not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). This same salvation is offered to the rich and poor alike if they will but humble themselves before God. So Elisha's response was, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." And even though Naaman urged him, he refused the personal gift, which may have been the entire \$901,360 in silver and gold (in this modern market) as well as the invaluable ten new suits.

This new worshiper of the one and only living God Jehovah then asked the prophet Elisha, "...Please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD." He wanted to take a load of earth with him out of the land of Israel and sprinkle it on Syrian soil to make it holy so that he might be able to offer sacrifices upon it to the God of Israel. He was still a slave to polytheistic superstition, and he thought that no god could be worshiped in a proper and acceptable manner except in his own land.

And because Naaman's knowledge of God was still adulterated with superstition, he was not yet prepared to make an open confession before men of his faith in Jehovah. So he asked Elisha, the prophet of the living God, "...May the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this." Naaman was a new believer, but he still had certain pagan responsibilities to fulfill with the king once he arrived home. One of those duties was to accompany the king to the pagan temple of Rimmon, the god of rain and thunder, and simply provide support to him when he bowed to the god, which unfortunately made him bow also. But in his heart he would no longer bow to this god. So he wondered, "How will God look upon this outward act? Will he forgive me?" Elisha assured him that the Lord would see his heart; though he was involved in the rituals of his culture, God understood who he was now. By God's power Naaman would eventually become a mature believer and a witness of Jehovah. Therefore he said, "Go in peace." Elisha had to trust the God of Israel who had saved this pagan general to also guide him in his new relationship with God.

My Italian Catholic grandmother Nana became a true follower of Jesus Christ at age seventy and was cleansed of

her sin, but she still had scores of old religious rituals and just as many questions about her new faith. One day that I will always remember, I arrived at her small home in “Little Italy,” the heartland of Catholicism in south Philadelphia. Nana informed me that though she still had respect for Mary, she no longer found herself praying to her but only to Jesus. Then she asked me if I thought she should leave the church that she had attended and served all her life, for it had really been a place where her social needs had been met. I told her that until the Lord moved her heart to leave that congregation, perhaps she should stay where she was and use that position to witness of the love and grace of her savior Jesus Christ. In time she decided to stay in her local church of some fifty years, until she stepped into eternity to meet her God, Jesus, a few years later.

Leprosy was an incurable physical disease in the ancient world. Sin has always been an incurable spiritual disease in every generation since the fall of Adam. The only way any of us can ever experience spiritual healing, and many of us physical healing, is to turn with a humble faith to the one and only living God, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, and say, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” And as willing as our Lord was to cleanse the man with the physical disease of leprosy, he is even more willing to cleanse all of us from our sin against him. For he is our compassionate Lord who once said and continues to say to all who are willing to listen, “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:31-32.) There is no forgiveness of sin without the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only one we can come to in order to be spiritually and physically cured as Naaman was.

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Ron R. Ritchie
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