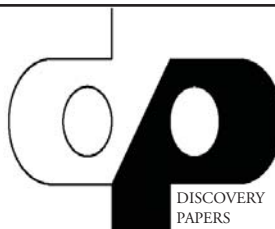


THE RESTORATION OF NAAMAN

SERIES: FIRE FROM HEAVEN



Catalog No. 5208
2 Kings 5:1-15
9th Message
Steve Zeisler
November 12, 2006

Our studies in 1 and 2 Kings have repeatedly reminded us of God's care for ordinary people in dire circumstances. But in the text before us now, we'll see God's saving love offered to someone who is at the upper end of society.

2 Kings 5:1:

¹Now 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.

The region of Aram is to the north and east of Israel. It is located in modern Syria.

There are three things we can note about Naaman. First, he was commander of the Aramean army. In addition to that, he enjoyed the respect of his peers and superiors. Sometimes people who are in high positions are not respected by anybody, but this man was well regarded. The king whom he served and others around him saw him as a worthy person. And finally, he deserved the respect he was given. He was a valiant warrior. He was in every respect a remarkable man. I think we'll find him an attractive man. He was not hard and cruel, but somebody who had many positive qualities.

The most important chapters of our lives are the chapters in which a crisis occurs, when the best things about us don't work anymore—our strengths and abilities are inadequate. Naaman's crisis was leprosy.

The word for leper in Hebrew does not necessarily denote what modern science calls Hansen's disease. It does refer to a disease of the skin. Verse 11 will mention a region on Naaman's body where a skin disease was apparent, and it concerned him terribly. It was a genuine medical problem. In addition to that, in ancient times leprosy carried with it a stigma of judgment, of failure, or sin. A leper was rejected on moral and spiritual grounds in addition to suffering physical distress.

We'll look at the story of Naaman through two lenses. One is how the people of God interact with him. How do men and women who have been given the great treasure

of God's word, his promises, and his presence care for outsiders? We'll meet a slave girl, a king, and a prophet. How well do they serve God in this man's life?

The second lens is Naaman himself. Naaman's crisis was an offense to his pride. What were the challenges that this man needed to hear?

The authority of authenticity

2 Kings 5:2-5a:

²Now 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. ³She 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." ⁴Naaman went in and told his master, saying, "Thus and thus spoke the girl who is from the land of Israel." ⁵Then the king of Aram said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel."

We meet a girl who is not named. Her circumstances were tragic. It was common in those times, and has been too common in all of human history, that war leads to slavery and here was a bright young girl who had been made a slave. The Hebrew word used here denotes a teenage girl. She was taken, apparently by herself, to Aram and pressed into the service of Naaman and his wife.

This girl's life was somewhat like Daniel's. Remember, Daniel as a young boy was taken captive and brought to Babylon to serve an unrighteous regime (Daniel 1). But at least he had friends with him; this girl was alone. She was young and under extraordinary stress, yet she was clear in her testimony of the ways of God.

We've already seen in this series that poverty and loneliness are often factors in the lives of God's servants. Women were frequently at the center of events. The slave of Naaman continues these themes—in this case a poor woman without support who was also very young.

We live in a time when thoughtful Christians are calling

attention to the chasm that exists between young people and adults. In the secular world as well, sociologists are speaking in increasingly dire terms about the distance between adults and adolescents, the difficulty of raising children and helping them gain adulthood. It is debated whether the blame should be laid at the feet of young people who are withdrawn and focused on themselves, or adults who treat children as objects to be molded, but not listened to.

This chasm is not evident in our story. This girl was able to speak about a faith that was real to her and that had changed her life, about a God whom she knew, and the adults in her world who listened to her. Naaman's slave was God's servant, she spoke in the power of his Spirit. We should pray that young people in our day will become strong and capable and filled with hope—a source of blessing to the world around them.

2 Kings 5:5b-6:

^{5b}He departed and took with him ten talents of silver and six thousand shekels of gold and ten changes of clothes.

⁶He 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."

The king of Aram wanted to help his friend and wrote a letter to the king of Israel. He assumed that the powerful prophet of whom the slave girl spoke would certainly be in the king's court. But of course we know that Elisha has long since turned his back on the king of Israel and his palace. Elisha's precise location is not made clear, but it was probably among the families of the "sons of the prophets," the poor and marginalized people who were true to the faith of their fathers.

2 Kings 5:7:

⁷It came about when the king of Israel read the letter, that 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."

The king of Israel was paranoid. "How can I cure leprosy? This is a pretext for war!" He drew the worst possible conclusions, tore his clothes, and was filled with anxiety.

I think the author intends us to compare the servant girl, who had nothing except knowledge of the ways of God, with the king on his throne. The girl cared for her master. She wasn't afraid of him. The king was alarmed. In New-Testament terms, she "walks by faith," and the king "walks by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). The king was parsing out the details of this letter as he tried to measure what the political implications were. The girl had only her faith, she was able to speak about a God who cares for people, and who intervenes to bless. She saw realities that weren't apparent to our eyes but were apparent to a heart of faith. She was the one with maturity and the one who told the truth. The king did not.

Let me offer a final speculation about this girl: When she was taken in the raid, torn from her family, brought by force to a strange place, and served people she didn't know, she must certainly have prayed to God to save and protect her. The Lord was with her on the journey. He had protected her from harm and answered her prayers. She was able to persuade other people because she spoke of her own experience and her testimony was authentic.

Now the second lens through which we'll look at this story is Naaman's need for healing.

Humbling, then healing

2 Kings 5:8-12:

⁸It 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." ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots and stood at the doorway of the house of Elisha. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you and you shall be clean." ¹¹But 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.' ¹²Are 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.

The "valiant warrior" showed up at Elisha's dwelling

with chariots, an entourage, money, armor, and weapons. He spoke in a loud voice. He was tall and commanding and had just come from the king's palace. Elisha was living in some small place among people who were poor, but he ignored the implied threats and sent out his servant. "Tell him to take off his armor and his weapons, to strip to his underwear [humiliating himself in front of all his servants], and dip himself in the river seven times."

The Jordan is not a mighty river. It's not very long or wide; it shrinks down almost to a trickle during parts of the year. So Naaman balked. "We've got great rivers in Aram. How will getting in this muddy little stream and humiliating myself in front of all these people do any good?"

Yet Elisha insisted, which sent Naaman into a rage. He was being required to fall to his knees and reduce himself to nothing in order to receive what God would give him. Most of us are like him, aren't we? We want to retain our pride while receiving God's help.

There are three foolish assumptions that Naaman has brought with him. They are common to rebellious humanity in every time and place. The first is that things like chariots, garments, money, weapons, letters of introduction, and high reputation are going to impress God. He is like any other VIP in the world. If you come with enough trappings of success and connections, if you can drop some important names, then God will be impressed, and you'll be granted his blessing.

Sadly, the church often supports this notion. We are impressed with celebrities and put on flashy events, as if that matters to God. We reinforce the blasphemy that God is a respecter of persons.

The second assumption behind Naaman's approach to God and his people is evident in his statement in verse 11. "I thought that he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper." Naaman assumed that Elijah was a shaman, a worker of magic, somebody with special clothes, and priestly language that would stir the deity from his slumber—God being disinclined to pay attention to us otherwise. It is common in the world to assume that a caste of religious specialists has control of access to God—a lie that has been terribly exploited by the devil.

But Elisha stayed in the house and sent a servant out. He said in effect, "God has already turned his face toward you. He already has blessing for you. You don't need a special

spokesman to shout in his ear and do a dance to awaken him. He already wants to give you everything you long for. The problem is with you. You can't receive any gift if you stay in your chariot and hang on to your weapons, refusing to be humbled."

The third assumption of Naaman is evident in verses 13-14:

¹³Then 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?'" ¹⁴So 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.

Naaman's third assumption is that we can approach God with great accomplishments. Maybe God will ask me to do something heroic—slay a dragon, or overcome poverty in the modern age—something that demands a lot of me and then when I've succeeded I'll present myself to God. However, Naaman's wise servants said, "If the man of God had asked you to do that, you would have done it in a minute! But he requires no such thing. Give up your pride so that you can receive a gift from One who is much greater than you." And finally Naaman is persuaded.

2 Kings 5:15:

¹⁵When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now."

At last, Naaman met Elisha. Not only was he cleansed of his trauma and free of its shame, but the process had allowed him to have a relationship with the living God. He was a changed man and his human capabilities remained, but he knew they did not define him. He was given the gift not only of health, but of faith and his world was changed forever.

So in conclusion, what can we observe here about the role played by the people of God in this story? Who served God well? Clearly the two who did well were the slave girl and Elisha. We can say the following about them: First, they cared for the outsider. The king assumed that those who were different were to be feared. Faith broke down barriers. Jesus will later say that love is the essential marker

of those whose lives please God (John 13:35).

We should also note that authenticity grants a person authority. The reason Naaman and others listened to the young girl is that she believed what she was saying. Obviously, authenticity is not perfection, but it is a real willingness to trust God without double-mindedness and clearly both the servant girl and Elisha had an authentic faith.

Finally, what do Naaman, and all of us who are like him, need to hear? We need to hear that God's ways are not our ways. A breakdown in communication with God is never a breakdown on his side. We are most in danger when we defend ourselves.

Remember the words of the apostle Paul: "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).