

Elisha and the Foreign General

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 0 0] We are returning to the Great Stories series this morning after a hiatus last week. And you'll remember last time we were in the Great Stories series where we were looking at the storybook type stories of the Bible, the types of stories that make it into the children's storybooks.

We were looking at Elijah on the mountain of the Lord casting down the prophets of Baal. And this week we come to his successor, Elisha.

This is 850 BC, several years ago. And you'll remember that, we've talked about this in all of our sermons the last few weeks, that the people of Israel were split at this point in history between a southern kingdom and a northern kingdom.

And we are in the northern kingdom in Israel, and Elisha right now lives in Samaria. So that's where we are in history and where we are in terms of locale.

And the story is about a Syrian general named Naaman, a foreigner who comes to look for healing from a prophet of God.

[1 : 1 1] And you have to know that this is an age of war between Syria and Israel, that they are currently at war. That's why later in the passage the king thinks that this king of Syria is trying to trick him to start up another quarrel.

This is an age of war. But at the center of this passage is a truth about how a person comes to believe and be transformed. This passage is ultimately about deep change.

It's about how someone comes to faith. It's about a real conversion, about being changed from the inside out. And all the Naaman comes in this passage to get healing for his skin.

He actually realizes that the biblical God seeks transformation first in the heart. And so that's what this passage is about. So we're going to look at three things and we'll jump right in.

Why do people seek? Why do people want to be changed? Why do people explore the claims of faith at all? That's the first thing. And then secondly, there's an irony in transformation.

[2 : 1 4] And then finally, there's a call in this passage to change. There's a call to be restored. So we'll look at those three things. So first, why do people seek transformation?

Verse one, look at verse one. The Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. I mean, did you see, there's a juxtaposition there in verse one. Did you catch it?

I hope you called it. There's a grand juxtaposition. In a place like St. Columbus, in a city like Edinburgh, there are lots of Naaman's. Some of us, there's a lot of Naaman's in the room right now.

And Naaman's are people who came to a city like Edinburgh to pad their CV, to build up their resume, to get a job at a reputable institution, to get a degree in order to boost a career.

[3 : 1 5] That's who Naaman is. And there's tons of Naaman's in the city of Edinburgh. There are tons of people that move here precisely for the same reason. Did you catch the juxtaposition?

This first verse is an ancient Near Eastern CV. It's a resume. We have them today. You have to go to get a job. You have to have marketable skills and you need a decent CV and a resume.

And that's exactly what we read about here. And verse one, Naaman. Syria is the most powerful country in the world. And Naaman, it says at the very beginning, is the second most powerful man in the most powerful country in the world.

He is much more powerful than any of us know. He's actually more powerful than we really can imagine in the 21st century because of the shape of the world at this time.

He's immensely wealthy. And it says more than that, he was great. The text is commending him. He was a great man. He was a master with his master.

[4 : 15] He was in high favor. The Lord had even given him victory as a foreign general. He was a mighty man of valor. In other words, he was a great warrior.

He had a pretty padded CV. He had everything that an ancient Near Eastern person would tick the box of success story that was this guy.

But you see the juxtaposition, the very end of the verse. But he was a leper. He had leprosy.

And that means that no matter how much your CV and resume is padded, no matter how fabulous your life is, no matter how successful you've been or great, great of a person you are in this life, there is no security or escaping leprosy.

Metaphorically, of course, suffering. This was a truly great man, but he was not safe. He had leprosy.

[5 : 15] He had immense suffering. Now the meaning of Naaman's leprosy is more than just skin deep. I was joking, but it's all right.

We'll keep going. This is not Hanson's disease. Today leprosy is Hanson's disease.

In the Bible, leprosy is consistently described as something that makes the skin turn white.

Hanson's disease does not do that. So this is not the same thing as modern day leprosy. But biblical leprosy, whatever skin disease it was, it turned the body into sores that turned white.

It literally looked like death. You looked like you were dead, like you were a zombie. And for that reason, leprosy meant more in the ancient Near East than a mere biological condition, like it might mean for us today.

It meant more, not only in Israel, as some of you that know the Old Testament know this, but it meant more in the whole ancient Near East, leprosy for ancient peoples was an outward sign of an inward problem.

[6 : 22] It meant there was some deep internal flaw within you, whatever it might be, something you had done, that you were, something was wrong with you and you were outcast in almost every single society in the ancient Near East.

If you had leprosy, you looked like death and it represented a condition inside of you that was the condition of death. That's who you were. And so leprosy was a really big deal.

And so that means Naaman's problems were much bigger than white skin. It was much bigger than that. And whether you live in 850 BC or 2017, suffering like this takes you out of your depth, no matter how good your resume is when you go to get a job, no matter how many degrees, no matter what you've done in life, suffering like this takes you out of your depth, no matter how well we do in life.

The wine always runs out, as Jesus puts it in the Gospels. The wine always runs out at the best of parties, the best moments in life where you're with your friends and with your family, the greatest memories they will always fade into shadow.

Now this is the part where we get depressed, where one person at every single party will ultimately see every other person in that room buried at some point, one person.

[7 : 39] The wine will always run out. Something will happen. You will get leprosy. You will come to the end of our rope at some point in life, suffering always comes. And that's exactly what happens here to Naaman.

And you know what that means. That means that Karl Marx in the 19th century, when he perpetuated the grand secular myth of modernity, which is that religion seeking hope in the midst of suffering is nothing but an opiate for the people.

It's a drug that poor people who have no material means, who have no access to great health care, who have no financial security, religion is ultimately just something that they seek out because it's the only thing they can possibly hold on to, but not Naaman.

And I think if you go out into a city like Edinburgh, what you find is that people that are very well put together and are doing very well in life are clandestine seekers of truth.

They're covert hoppers. They're doing it under the radar. Everybody out there walking in the streets, as soon as they face something that brings them to the end of their rope, no matter how great their life has been, they can't help but look for the prophet of God, just like Naaman began to do here.

[9 : 02] There are other responses to suffering. One of the extreme responses that was very popular in the 20th century, especially in France, where it kind of grew up, it was called French existentialism.

One famous guy, Albert Camus, who wrote a bunch of novels, you might have seen some of them, *The Stranger*, as one, he wrestled with Shakespeare's famous phrase in *Romeo and Juliet*, the one that every single person knows, to be or not to be.

That is the question, right? And of course, in Shakespeare there, he's wrestling with suicide, to be or not to be. That's the question, does life have any meaning? And should I just end it here, to be or not to be?

That's what Shakespeare was wrestling, and Camus wrestled with that. And this is what he came to. The great crisis of human existence is coping with our ultimate fight with nothingness, with non-existence, with death.

And so he said, the only way to really meaningfully describe the meaninglessness of life is through the ancient sycophus, sycophus, sycophus, yes, myth, that's right, sycophus, ancient mythology.

[10:15] What does he do? He wakes up every day, and he rolls a giant stone, a giant ball, up a hill, and then when he gets to the top, it rolls back down again.

This for Camus and others was the point of life, and that's that there's no point. And so what you have to do is you have to make your own meaning, you have to find your own hope.

You have to go through this life and define who you're going to be through your feelings, through your thoughts, through your hopes, through your dreams, through building a great CV. You have to find meaning for yourself.

And the 21st century, the 20th century, it found out that this was empty, that this was one response to the suffering that we experience in life and that it's empty because every single person at some point in life comes to a place where they are out of their depth, whether that's because of a biological problem, an ethical problem, a relational problem, whether it's inside or outside, you come to a place where you know that there are deep flaws within your own person.

It's not just biological, but you come to wrestle with the fact that you might be a person who some of us struggle with holding on to deep grievances, holding on to people who have grieved us deep, who have sinned against us and not being able to forgive.

[11:35] And it's crushing your spirit or people who struggle with lying or whatever it may be, that you come to a point where you find that there are deep flaws both inside of you and outside of you, ethically and biologically.

It brings you to the end of the rope and what else can you do but seek hope, try to find an answer and that's exactly what's happening here with Naaman. No matter if you try to climb every mountain and forward, every river and climb Rapunzel's hair and kill the mighty dragon, you still come to a point where you're at the end of your rope no matter what you've accomplished.

And so the first lesson here in this passage is that true change, true hope, real transformation and renovation from the inside out begins with a deep reckoning with the truth that no matter how well you have done in this life, no matter how fabulous or fantastic your life might be at any point, the reality confronts us that we are deeply flawed.

The Bible calls it sin, the Bible calls it sin. So that's the first thing that Naaman had to come up against to wrestle with. Now secondly, the irony of change, the irony of restoration.

How does restoration happen? That's basically the question we're asking here. If you look down at verse 2 and 3, now when I say look down at verse 2 and 3, you might be thinking he just did a whole point on verse 1 and now he's saying look at verse 2 and it's this point going to be entirely on verse 2 and we follow that pattern until we get to 14.

[13:12] No, I never do that. You know that. I'm almost always on time. Verse 2, now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife and she said to her mistress, would that my lord or would the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy.

So Naaman went and he told his lord. So the irony of change, there's a stark juxtaposition in this verse too.

Did you catch it? Not only is Naaman a great man who has leprosy, but now the second most powerful man in all the world is brought to the only possible hope he has through a little slave girl that he had captured in a raid.

A person who ultimately has no consequence to Syria at all. And so the writer of the book of Kings is wanting to come aware that sometimes hope actually might be when you seek for it found in places that are unexpected.

In other words, that the process of finding hope might begin with humbling yourself and this is what Naaman has to do. We get the sense here that he's actually searched out all the possible answers in his own country for healing and that he is humbling himself in a way here and listening to the little girl and going to his king.

[14:42] Now jump down to verse 10 and 11 when Naaman actually gets to Samaria and comes to see Elisha, verse 10 and 11, Elisha sends a messenger to him and says go and wash in the Jordan.

And he is incredibly angry Naaman is about this. So when he finally takes his journey south and he gets to Elisha, Elisha the prophet of God won't come out and see him, won't even step outside of his door and he sends a messenger, a servant instead.

And that makes Naaman extremely angry and verse 12 it says that it put him into a rage. So this is a very extreme anger that he's in.

Now why is he so mad about this? And I think there's two reasons and the first reason is this.

Naaman is a great man and great men want to do great things in order to earn favor to get the rewards that they're seeking in life.

Great men want to do great things to earn the favor whether that's of a prophet of God or God or whatever else. Just think about this. If you go back to verse 5 he went first to the king of Syria in order to get a letter of recommendation.

[16:04] So he goes to the king of Israel and the first thing he carries with him is a letter of recommendation saying this guy's worth it. This guy's worth healing. This is one of the ones that's worth expending your magic powers for.

That's what he's doing. And then the very next thing is it says that he in verse 5 and 6 he also takes with him 10 talents of silver and 6,000 shekels of gold.

10 talents of silver. 10 talents of silver is 300 kilograms of silver. In yesterday's market the last time I checked the silver price it was \$391,370 U.S. dollars of silver that he brought with him.

This is in 850 BC. We can't even calculate the real wealth that that's actually worth in that time. But wait 6,000 shekels of gold.

A shekel is I think .41 grams. And that means 6,000 shekels of gold is 70 kilograms of gold.

[17:12] And if you're keeping up with the current gold prices that is worth 1.75 million pounds today. And what that means is that this is a wealth that nobody in the world today probably even knows.

I mean this is beyond billionaire. This is an immense wealth that he's bringing to Israel. He wants to buy it you see.

He wants his letter of recommendation to get him through the door to the prophet. He wants his money to get him through the door to the prophet to earn his favor. When he actually comes to the prophet he brings horses, he brings chariots and he brings his army in pomp and circumstance and stand outside the prophet's door.

And what is he saying? He's saying I deserve this. I deserve it. I'm a great man. I deserve to be given salvation by healing. This is what I deserve. What does he want to hear?

He wants Elisha to come out and say if you really want to be healed you have to go. Go to the mountain and defeat smog. He wants to be told you have to climb Rapunzel's hair and slay the dragon.

[18:13] He wants to be told you have to go take the broom back from the wicked witch of the west. He wants to do something great. He wants to be sent on an adventure.

A man, he's worth that and that's what he thinks. And the lesson that he finds out is that the stuff of this world cannot help him.

The stuff of this world is not an answer for you when you are at the end of your rope in the face of real suffering.

The materials of this world cannot help you. You cannot buy salvation or healing. You can't earn it. The second reason I think that he's so mad is he thinks that the Israelite religion is exactly the same as all the other religions of the ancient Near East.

[19:12] So two things really here. First, he goes to the king of Israel first to make his petition. Why does he do that in verse 6 and following?

He goes to the king of Israel. He wants the king to make this happen. And the reason he probably does that is because for all the religions in the ancient Near East, the king is a demi-god typically.

The king is recognized as a deity. It would have been the case for him in Syria. You go to the king. The king is the one that's closest to the gods. The king is the one that can interact with the gods. And the prophet of any king is the puppet of a king. And so what he thinks is that if he goes to the king, he can basically get the god to do whatever the king wants him to do.

And he can get the prophet of the king to do whatever the king wants him to do. In other words, he thinks that Israelite religion works exactly like Baalism as we looked at it a few weeks ago.

[20 : 15] And so in verse 7, when he comes to Joram, this is Ahab's grandson, by the way, Joram the king, this is Joram's response.

Am I a god to kill or make alive? In other words, I don't have control over God. You're completely confused.

You think that the king can get God to do things. I am not God. I have no control over God. You've come and confronted the real God.

And the real God doesn't answer the kings. The real God doesn't answer the prophets. He can't be controlled. He can't be conjured. He can't be manipulated. You actually need to come and face reality that the god that is real, the god that is creator, the god that can truly heal you and give you salvation is a god that you can't define, that you could never expect.

He's a god that, as John puts it in the first John, that is greater than our hearts. He's greater. And so then he goes instead to the prophet in verse 11.

[21 : 23] And when Elisha refuses to heal him, this is what he says. This is what Naaman says, verse 11. I thought first that the prophet would have come out to me because I am great.

That's what he's saying. I thought the prophet would have come to me because I'm a great guy and I deserve that. But secondly, I thought he would call his god and wave his hand over me and heal me.

Now when he says call his god and wave his hand over him, what he's saying there is, if you remember, if you were here two weeks ago for Elisha on the mountain, the prophets of Baal on that mountain cried out to God in rhythmic ritual like their god, Baal, in rhythmic ritual like fashion.

They babbled before their god. It was a ritual. And so what he's saying is I want this prophet to come out and perform the ritual, cry out to God in repetition so that God will do what you say.

This is how it works. It's mechanical. It's mathematics. If you put in the words and the magic, it will happen, right? And that's exactly what Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says don't pray like the pagans who babble.

[22 : 38] He's saying who rhythmically, ritualistically cry out the name of a god and expect to be heard. Don't pray like that. And that's what he thinks that Elisha's going to do.

And then when he says he'll wave his hand, that can also be translated. That verb wave there is sprinkle. And he thinks that when you call on God ritually and you sprinkle a potion, then it will just work.

So in other words, he thinks this is straight magic. That's what he thinks is going to happen here.

Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York City, he was recently giving a speech where he was talking about and thinking about his legacy, he's 72 years old.

And he spoke about initiatives in this speech that he had spearheaded, initiatives like reducing obesity in New York City, eliminating secondhand smoke from public spaces, putting down or diminishing gun violence on the streets.

And in each instance, the article this journalist says, Mayor Bloomberg demonstrated a desire to promote human health, safety and flourishing. And then this is how Bloomberg finished his legacy speech as he reflected on his time as mayor.

[24 : 00] Quote, I'm telling you, if there is a God when I get to heaven, I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I'm heading straight through that door.

I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close. And you see, the religion of Bloomberg in 2017 is exactly the same as the religion of Bale and Naaman in 850 BC.

And that's that if there is the hope of an afterlife, if there is the hope of getting past this world of suffering and truly being saved, truly being healed from the inside out, then the only way that we'll possibly get to it is if we earn it.

If we clean up the streets of New York City or whatever else. Naaman, for Naaman, salvation is a commercial transaction with a God that can be manipulated.

And Alicia here is saying no, not so fast. And Jesus Christ in the New Testament says no, not so fast. No magic, no hand waving, no ritualism, no family line, no bloodlines, no success stories, no material wealth, no security, no general goodness, no heroic feats will buy the Christian God into salvation.

[25 : 27] And so the third lesson Naaman has to learn here is from his slaves, ironically, again, when Alicia tells him go wash in the river and he rages.

His slaves come to him and said, would you not just humble yourself and try it? In other words, do you not take a step of faith supposing that you don't actually have all the answers?

And so that's what he does. And thirdly and finally, briefly, the call to transformation. Go down to the river and wash. That's what Alicia tells him.

And he did it in verse 14. You see that he went down, he 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.

Now the text there does not use the word healed, which it could have, that he was healed, but it uses the word clean. He was made clean.

[26 : 26] And I think that's for a pretty specific reason. And that's that any person that's familiar with the Old Testament, any Israelite that's reading this, knows that leprosy, as I mentioned earlier, is a lot more than simple skin disease.

The leprosy for a Hebrew for an Israelite in the ancient Near East means that you were wearing the condition of the world upon your skin.

And that's the condition of death. And that's why any Israelite who contracts leprosy has to be cast out of the camp. They cannot be in the presence of the camp because the camp symbolizes the Garden of Eden recapitulated.

There can be no leprosy in the place where God dwells in the holy garden. So any Israelite that gained leprosy had to be cast out of the camp until they became clean again. And that's why this word is being used here, that when he was rid of his leprosy, it wasn't just about a skin disease, it was about being transformed, cleaned from the inside out.

It was a symbol of being forgiven, of being cleansed from sin. It's more than physical. And that's why 800 years later in Luke chapter 4, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, recounts this story.

[27 : 41] We read it a few minutes ago at the beginning. Jesus is in Luke 4 in Nazareth. He's talking to his hometown. And he quotes from Isaiah, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.

I have come to free the captive from slavery. And then they say to that, the people of his hometown who reject him, is this not Joseph's son?

He's a carpenter's boy. He has no marketable skills. He doesn't have a great CV. He's a carpenter's boy. And he's from Nazareth as well, which was kind of a dump of a town in Israel.

And then Jesus says, well, every prophet is rejected in their hometown. And then in verse 27, he says this, he quotes or he recounts the story.

There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed but only name in the Syrian. Now what is he saying? What he's saying ultimately is I came for the foreigner, not just for the people in my hometown, but in doing that he identifies himself with Elisha.

[28 : 53] You see, he's recounting the Elisha story in order to say, I am the new Elisha. I've come here doing exactly the thing that Elisha did for naming.

I've come to heal the foreign leper. I've come to send people down to the Jordan River to wash. And you remember when we talked about this two weeks ago with Elijah on the mountain that Jesus in the gospels regularly says that John the Baptist is the new Elijah, and who comes after Elijah?

Elisha. And so now in the same parallel way in the gospels, the gospel writers present a pair of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ following after the ministry of Elijah and Elisha.

And so in the very next chapter, Luke chapter five, right after he identifies himself as Elisha, he heals his first leper.

And this is what happens in Luke 5:12. He was in a city and a man came to him full of leprosy. And when the man saw Jesus, he fell on his face and he begged and he said, Jesus, if you will, you can make me clean.

[30 : 08] Now every Hebrew that would have been standing there who knew the Torah, who knew the law would have been saying one thing. And that's don't touch him.

Jesus, don't touch the leper. Don't touch him. If you touch him, you will become unclean. You will be cast out from the presence of God.

You will not be able to go to the temple. You will be outside the land of Israel. Don't touch him. No prophet in the Old Testament could touch a leper, you see? And that's exactly why some speculate Elisha never went out to actually meet with Naaman, because he couldn't touch him.

He couldn't be with him lest he become unclean. No prophet in all of history could make people clean. No prophet could do it. And then Jesus turns to him and he reaches out his hand and he says, I will touch him, be clean.

And the man is clean. Jesus doesn't become unclean when he touches sinners. They become clean. He is the new and better Elisha. And he is the River Jordan.

[31 : 12] You see, Elisha had to send Naaman out. I can't touch you. I can't be around you. Go to the River Jordan and wash a simple act of faith. But Jesus himself is the River Jordan.

His blood is the river that washes lepers clean. He is the new and better Elisha, you see? What happens when he touches the leper?

He absorbs leprosy, just like he who knew no sin became sin for you. And he went to the cross in the most ironic of ways to destroy death by being swallowed by it, just like a little girl, a nobody, a slave had to go tell Naaman the only hope you can find is in the God of the Bible.

Two grand ironies. He knows exactly how to heal you. He knows exactly how to heal you.

And some of you may come and say today, but you don't know what I've done. You don't know what I've done. And I don't.

[32 : 20] But he does. And he became it, you see? He swallowed porn addiction in himself.

He swallowed all of our addictions. He swallowed gossip that some of us are addicted to. He swallowed the lies and the deceit. He swallowed the leprosy. He swallowed cancer.

He ate it up. He went in and swallowed death and it ate him up from the inside out so that he might destroy it. The cross is the grand irony of all of history and it's how he came to destroy death.

And we'll just close with this. Hebrews 2.15 addresses it directly. Through death, he destroyed the one who has the power of death. That is the devil.

He has come and is this you? Is this you? To deliver those who fear death from the pangs of lifelong slavery.

[33 : 17] And the Bible puts it straight up. Do you fear death? And the hope is this, the end of life for those who will go down and wash in the river Jordan, the blood of Jesus Christ by faith is not death but resurrection.

And that's an invitation. That's an invitation whether you have never believed in Christ before or whether you've been in the peace for a long, long time and your heart has gotten hard.

That's an invitation to come down to the river and wash. Let's pray. Father, we give thanks to you for the gospel, for the blood of Christ for us and the beauty of that gospel presented even in the pages of the Old Testament.

So we ask of the Lord that you would give many here eyes of faith, maybe for the first time we pray. Do the work of God as we proclaim the message. And we pray this in Christ's name.

Amen.