

Healing of General Naaman

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read our passage for tonight from 2 Kings chapter 5 on page 311 in the Bibles that we have here and it will be on the screens as well.

So from verse 1, naming 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. 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 Namun's wife. She said to her mistress, would that my Lord were the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy. So Namun went in and told his Lord thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel.

And the king of Syria said, go now and I will send a letter to the king of Israel. So he went taking with him 10 talons of silver, 6,000 shekels of gold and 10 changes of clothing.

[1 : 03] And he brought the letter to the king of Israel which read, when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent you to Namun, my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy.

And when the king of Israel read the letter, he told his clothes and said, I am I God to kill and to make a life that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy.

Only consider and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me. But when Elisha of the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king saying, why have you torn your clothes?

Let him come now to me that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel. So Namun came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. And Elisha sent a message to him saying, go and wash in the garden seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.

But Namun was angry and went away saying, behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.

[2 : 10] Are not Abana and Pharper 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.

But his servants came near and said to him, my father, it is a great word that the prophet has spoken to you. Will you not do it? Has he actually said to you wash and be clean?

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the garden 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.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel according to Elijah and Elisha. We are in the Elisha narratives and it's a great story that we read.

It happens around 850 BC somewhere in that time and the book of Second Kings takes us away from the land of Israel up north into a faraway land called Syria, also known as Damascus and tells us about this guy named Naaman, General Naaman.

[3 : 17] He's a Syrian commander of a great army and he is looking for healing in this passage. And at the very end he goes into the water into the river Jordan.

He's back down in Israel. He washes and he becomes clean. And what we learn here is what it takes to become clean. This passage is about what it takes to become clean both inside and outside.

You got to be washed to become clean. And we're going to see the problem that Naaman faces. It's the same problem we face. The wrong solutions that he searches for and then what it means to become clean.

So let's do that. The problem, here's the problem. One day you are the general of the mightiest army in the world and the next day you have leprosy.

That's the problem. It's right there in verse one. Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Syria was a very great man. Yet he had leprosy. So there's a really strong juxtaposition happening in that first verse.

[4 : 19] And I think that a lot of people in our city can relate to this very closely. A place like Edinburgh, a city like Edinburgh, a place like St. C's.

There are a lot of people who move here to Edinburgh to seek an education. And there's a lot of people who move here to start a career, to advance a career. There's a lot of people who move here to be great in the industry that God has put them in.

And there are lots of people in this room tonight that have a lot of marketable skills. You can get a job. And Edinburgh is full of impressive people.

Most of the central cities are. And that means that there's a lot of people in our city that are Naaman's, that are like Naaman. And you see that verse one, we get Naaman's CV.

He is the commander of the army of the king of Syria, the greatest power in the world at the time.

He's the number two, only to the king of Syria. And it says to us that he was a great man, which probably means he was a warrior.

[5 : 20] He was a mighty man, really strong, really powerful. And he had high favor with his master, the king. So his boss loved him. He was very strong.

He was very fit. He was very accomplished. He was the number two guy, really in all the world, in a sense. He had a really good CV. He was a success story. They would have made a movie about him, The Rise of General Naaman, you know.

And I think if he was alive today, he would be the kind of person that we would enter. He'd have a YouTube channel. We would say, tell us how did you become a CEO or a CFO?

And he would say, you know, I wake up at 5 a.m. every day and I drink AG1. I eat all my minerals, all my vitamins, all wrapped up in one drink and my protein. I go to the gym.

I'm at my desk by 7 a.m. I accomplish more in the morning than anybody else does. He would have been the number two at BP, the number two at Shell, the number two at Blackrock.

[6 : 19] That's the kind of person we're talking about here in the ancient Near East. But he had leprosy. That's what the end-averse one tells us.

What we learn here is that no matter how much your CV is padded, no matter how much your CV is truly great, no matter how much you are seeking success and achieving success in your life, and no matter how much you become a person of accomplishment, driven by accomplishment, you can't escape suffering.

You can't get out from under the plight of disease and disaster and death that is coming for everybody.

That's the only relationship we have to it, is that either we have it or it's coming. And it doesn't matter how accomplished of a person we are. This is the second most powerful man in the world, but he's got leprosy.

The meaning of name and leprosy is not Hanson's disease. That's what we call leprosy. That's leprosy today is technically Hanson's disease. And instead in the Bible in the ancient Near East, leprosy is really a word that covers a whole range of skin diseases.

[7 : 29] So the real mark of being a leper in the ancient Near East is that you have a visible skin condition that probably covers most of your body, probably incurable.

And so when people had leprosy in the ancient world, they literally walked around looking like death. Their skin was very white and they had sores or whatever it may be all around them, all over them.

And so Naaman, such a great man in every way, so accomplished, walking around the palace in Syria. And yet he's the kind of man that everybody bows down for when he walks through the hallway, when he's in the room.

But he looks like death. He's wearing it on his outside, on his skin. And you could see his pain, you could see his misery all the time.

Now, it's been pointed out by many others in a passage like this, something very, very important. And the depths of this passage, you really get into it when you realize that in the ancient world, leprosy in Israel, leprosy outside of Israel stood for something more than just a skin disease.

[8 : 35] Leprosy in the ancient world, we see this very clearly in Genesis to Deuteronomy. Leprosy was a sign and a symbol of what was wrong with human beings. So in Israel, if you had leprosy, you had to stay outside the camp of Israel.

Why? Not because you had committed a particular sin or anything like that, no. Because leprosy was a sign of not just external, an external lack of cleanliness or something, being unclean as the Bible puts it, but something much deeper.

Leprosy was a symbol, a sign, that pointed to a disease of the heart. That's the way ancient Near Eastern people understood it. That's the way the Bible talks about it. And so everybody that looked at Naaman in the ancient world, when an Israelite looked at Naaman, they would say, this stands for something greater than just a skin disease.

This reminds me that there's something broken, there's something diseased about my inside, not just my outside. That's what everybody would have seen when they saw Naaman.

Because he looks like death on the outside, but that visibility describes a condition on the inside for all of us, for everybody. It reminded everybody, there's something wrong with my heart, there's something wrong with the world, there's something wrong with human beings and the world we live in.

[9 : 49] It's diseased, it's full of death, it's full of disaster. It reminds us of sin. That's what leprosy did in the ancient mine and in the Israelite mine in this day. And that just, the point is simple, I've already made it.

For us, you can take life by the horns, you can cross every barrier, you can pick yourself up by your bootstraps, you can really make something of yourself and make a great name for yourself.

And the Bible comes with an unpopular message, but a message that's true empirically for all of us, that we all still face the hard things.

We all still face disease and death. And that external condition exists because of an internal condition. And that's the disease of the human heart, the sinful heart, the heart that's been pulled away from the living God, the real God.

I think Edinburgh is probably full of namens, full of very successful people that have lots of marketable skills, but are covering something, the true problem, which is deep down.

[10 : 52] And probably wrestle with that truth, deep down is this you that, deep down in your heart, you know, as good as life may have gone for you so far, maybe. You know, I know that my circumstances are going to change at some point.

I know that I'm going to face something. And what the story of Naaman really tells us is that we're no match for it. We're no match for the great problems. We're no match for disease, death and disaster, and we're no match for the sin problem that that describes within us.

The very difficult truth we have to face is that no matter how much we've built a fashionable and secure lifestyle, suffering is coming, suffering is coming.

Now secondly, Naaman goes after the wrong solutions to the problem of being unclean, both internally and externally here. And Naaman, you know, he chases healing.

He chases healing in this passage. And you can see so far that, you know, so far we've made it through one point and we've covered one verse. So we've got 13 more verses.

[11 : 53] So just get ready. No, we'll cover the rest right here. Verse 2 and 3 is also a very stark juxtaposition. Verse 1, Naaman has a great CV, but he's got leprosy.

Verse 2 and 3, then this funny moment almost, the Syrians in one of their raids have carried off a young girl from the land of Israel.

And now she's a slave in Naaman's household. And the second most powerful man in all the world is desperate to be healed.

And so this young slave girl that he carried away on a raid is the one who comes and tells him the great solution he needs.

And even more, she says, you need to go back to the little land of Israel that you conquered that you probably don't even think about anymore. And that's the only place that you're going to find a man that can deal with your problem.

[12 : 47] It's a great juxtaposition. It's unexpected for him. And he realizes he's being asked, we're being asked in this moment to realize that the path to being clean begins with humility by listening to the young girl.

The person he never expected would be the one that would bring the solution, is the one that brings the solution. And he's being asked, will you humble yourself? You know, it's subtle, it's a foreshadow, will you humble yourself?

And so you jump all the way down to verse 10 and 11. It's a big jump down to verse 10 and 11.

When Daimon gets to the prophet's house, Elisha, Elisha will not come out and see Naaman.

The second most powerful man in all the world has come and Elisha will not even come out of his house. And Naaman is so mad. Elisha sends a messenger out and just says, just go talk to him for me.

And he says, go tell him, I'm not going to see him, but go down and wash in the river and he'll be okay. And it says literally Naaman was outraged, he was enraged, he was raging.

[13:53] Do you not know who I am? You know, he hadn't got the message yet about the path, the path being humility. And he's so angry and I think there's two big reasons, two big reasons and we'll move on to the final thing.

This has been pointed out to me by others, by the way, as I've read about Naaman. The first reason I think Naaman is so mad when Elisha says, all you need to do is go down to the river and wash.

The reason he's so mad is because human beings, I think all of us, we want to earn. We want to earn things. You know, we want to, if we're going to get something great like Naaman's being offered, we want to walk away from it feeling like I deserved that.

And I think people who are especially successful people, people who are chasing accomplishment, people who chase accomplishment especially really do not want to receive gifts, not truly.

Even when we get gifts, we want it to be because we deserve to be loved. We deserve it. And Naaman, you know, when he's told, all you got to do is go down to the river and wash, he wants to be told, I want you to go to the mountain and defeat smog.

[15:05] You know, bring smog's head back to me. I want you to go finally find Nessie. Is he in there? And if you can prove it, then you can be healed. He wants an accomplishment. He wants to prove himself.

He wants to earn the favor of the God, of the prophet of Elisha by working for it. He wants to be a success story.

He wants the movie made about him ultimately. And you know, you can see this in what he does in verses five and six. In order to prepare for this encounter with the prophet, he gets a letter of recommendation from his king, from the CEO of the land.

You know, he says, I'm about to go see the prophet. Will you give me a letter of recommendation from the greatest man in all the world, the most powerful man? So he brings that, you know, I've got a letter of recommendation.

I deserve to be healed. But if that doesn't work, then we're told right after that, that he brings 10 talents of silver, 6,000 shekels, and 10 changes of clothing, which is a big deal in the ancient Near East.

[16:06] So based on what the commentators say about how much that amount of cash would buy a person in that time, I think this is about 2 million pounds equivalent in our time about what it would buy you, something like that.

He brings about 2 million pounds. So he has a letter of recommendation from the king. He's got 2 million pounds cash. And then right after that, it also says that he came to the prophet's door with horses and chariots, with an army, you know, with pomp and circumstance.

And he says, you know, if my letter of recommendation from the king and my 2 million pounds don't do it, then I'm going to impress this guy to death. You know, he's going to have to heal me when he sees me. I've got an army.

I've got horses. I've got chariots. And Elisha says exactly what Naaman does not want to hear. He says, just go to the river and wash. And it's too easy.

He wants to earn it. He doesn't want to be told. Just receive. Just receive. He wants to chase it.

What do we learn? We learn here very, something very simple, and that's that your accomplishments cannot save you before the living God.

[17:18] When it comes to the living God, the real God, a God that Naaman had never encountered before, your performance is not going to cut it.

Your performance is not going to get you there. And sometimes that is not easy for us to hear. The message that you can be saved by grace, through faith, and not by your works is too, it's so easy

that it's almost impossible.

It's so easy that we almost say, I don't want to hear that. I want to earn it. I want to deserve it. You know, I want to be a success story. And Naaman's having to be confronted with the hard fact that you will never earn the favor of the real God.

He wants to heal you as a gift, not because you deserve it. Now the second reason I think that Naaman is so angry here is because he is thinking of Elisha's God, Israelite religion, the biblical religion, the true God in the same way as he understands his own religion, paganism.

And so this is a little more subtle in the passage, but it's there. And I'll just show it to you. In verse six, he comes to the king of Israel, first King Joram.

[18:32] Joram was not a great king, not at all. But the reason he does that is because even though the young girl told him, go to the prophet. No, he goes to the king.

Why? Because in his mind, the king in any land is like a demi-God. The king is the closest one to the divine.

And it's the king that both can get God to do what he wants, but also get the prophet. So he thinks the king is in control of God. He thinks the king is in control of the prophet. And I love what Joram says.

Joram was not a very good man and was not a very good king, but it's very clear that Joram does understand the God of the Bible because Joram says, who do you think I am?

You think I'm God? You come to me and say, hey, well, you could get God and your prophet, your God and your prophet to heal me. He says, I can't do that. There's no chance. I can't control them.

[19:28] He, Joram, this king, he knows. He knows that God is unlike the gods of the pagans. God is unlike the gods of the ancient Near East, that he's good, but he's not safe.

He can't be controlled. He can't be tamed. He can't be tricked. He can't be negotiated with. And so he's realizing that. And then he comes after that in verse 11 to the prophet.

And he says, he's so angry because he says, I thought that the prophet would come out to me because I'm a great man and I thought he would call upon his God and I thought he would wave his hand, he says, and I thought he would, you know, sprinkle the potion and say the magic words and I would be healed.

And again, he's thinking according to the religions of the ancient Near East, he thinks that the God of the Bible, the true God, the God of Elisha can be manipulated by magic. And when you put it all together, what you realize is that Naaman, Naaman is encountering the true God, biblical religion, Christianity, as we might say now, and he's learning that to become clean, to be forgiven, to have salvation cannot be brought about by performance or by magic, by ritual, by religion, by incantation, by any of the things that most of the peoples in all the world throughout all world history have thought they could use to get the gods to obey them, to do what they wanted to do.

And you know that in our city, there are a lot of people who are, a lot of us, and maybe this is you tonight, you don't know exactly what to think about God, you would say you're spiritual in general.

[21:08] And usually what that ends up cashing out as is that you hope beyond hope that by your own performance, by your success story, by doing something great, by being a good person, you'll earn divine favor on the one hand, or you turn to ritual, to religion, to spiritualism, to magic.

There's lots of people in our city that have gone both ways, and this is exactly what happens in Naaman, he goes both ways. I can get it by performance or I'll get it by magic, by ancient Near Eastern religious practices, one of the two.

And he gets confronted with the command, just go down to the river and wash, and you'll be clean. And when he hears that, he says, wash in the river.

I come from Damascus, have you seen our rivers? He names them here, those names. The rivers in Damascus, the far part, and the obana, they're way better.

The rivers in Damascus, I could have washed there. Our rivers in Damascus don't have microplastics. They don't have any metals in them. They were much better.

[22:20] But instead, I've come to Israel to be told, just wash in the river. Sometimes we can't believe, we can't dive first into the grace of God that's been offered to us precisely because it's free.

We struggle with that. We want to earn our own way. We're being confronted here and told that God wants to heal you, he wants to forgive you, he wants to clean you, and all he wants you to do is wash in the river.

I came across an article from a while ago, 2015, by Michael Bloomberg. Michael Bloomberg was a former mayor of New York City, and he gave a speech around this time reflecting on his legacy in New York as the mayor.

And he was 72 years old. He spoke about all the initiatives that he had spearheaded and all the things he had accomplished in New York. He said that he had reduced obesity, he had eliminated smoking from public places, he had neutered gun violence across the city, taken the guns off the streets in many places.

And this is what he said, 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 the doors. I've earned my place in heaven.

[23 : 38] It's not even close. And that's the name and mentality. I've earned my place, God has to give me my rights, I've defeated smog, you know.

I deserve it. And the God of the Bible says, you don't deserve it, and that's not how you can be clean. So how can you become clean? How can name and become clean, finally?

At the very end of the passage, Naaman's own slaves say to him, will you not just go and wash in the river? Will you not just go and try?

Just go and do it. And so he goes and he does it. And it says he went down, he dipped himself seven times into the Jordan, and according to the word of the man of God, his flesh was restored like that of a little child, and he became clean.

And so he goes down to the water seven times, he comes back up, his flesh is like the skin of a chubby little baby, brand new. And immediately when you're reading this passage in the light of the whole Bible, you realize there is something more here than just the physical.

[24 : 41] That this man, if we were to keep reading, he rises up from the water and proclaims, the God of Israel is the true God. You see, he's been healed not just on the outside, but also on the inside. He's experiencing that.

In the ancient Near East, when a person was a leper, remember, it symbolizes a problem, not just on the outside, but for all of us. It shows us something's wrong deep on the inside, and so becoming clean, this language of cleanliness throughout the whole Old Testament was always about the restoration, not just of physicality, but of the whole person.

This is about the restoration of the spirit, not just the body. And that's what happens with name. And now listen, 880 years later, it's a long time, 880 years later in the Gospel in Luke chapter 4, Jesus Christ actually tells this story.

He recounts this exact event, the healing of Naaman, and he was in Nazareth, his hometown in Luke chapter 4, and just before he talks about Naaman, he says that John the Baptist is the new Elijah, the Elijah that has now come.

He says, John the Baptist, do you see that he's like Elijah from the Old Testament? And then he turns and he's in Nazareth in his hometown, and he says in verse 18 of Luke 4, the spirit of the Lord has fallen upon me.

[26 : 05] Now, you'll remember back a couple weeks ago that when Elijah retired, the spirit of the Lord fell down upon Elisha, a double portion. So in Luke 4, Jesus says, John the Baptist is the new Elijah, and now the spirit of the Lord has fallen upon me.

That's what Jesus says. And what do the people say in verse 22? They say, is this not just the carpenter's son, Joseph? You see, they say, is he truly great?

Naaman came to Elisha's house and said, this is the guy that I'm supposed to come see. He won't even come out to me. I'm supposed to go to Little Old Israel, to this little old prophet in this poor town, and this is where I'm going to be healed.

And Jesus says, John the Baptist is Elijah, and now the spirit of the Lord has fallen upon me. And when he says that, everybody just says, this is just Joseph, his Joseph's son.

This is just the carpenter. And Jesus takes it even further in verse 27. He says, every prophet is always rejected in his hometown, and there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha.

[27 : 17] None of them was cleansed, but only name in the Syrian. Now, what is Jesus saying? The elders that heard that in that moment were so outraged that they tried to throw Jesus off of a cliff.

Why? And it's because they knew exactly what he was saying. He was saying, I am the new and better Elisha.

I am the one who's filled with the double portion of the spirit. I am the one who has come to cleanse and wash Jews and Gentiles alike.

Remember Elisha, he told a Gentile commander, a Gentile general, go down to the river and you too can be cleaned? And Jesus is saying, and that's me. I'm the one who has come now, and I will wash you.

And if you want to be cleaned, if you want to be forgiven, you've got to come to me. You know what he was saying? Jesus Christ was saying, I am the new Elisha and I am the river. And they knew that.

[28 : 15] They understood that. That's what he meant. And so, the elders, the scribes, the Pharisees, they literally tried to throw him off a cliff for it. It's like what we saw this morning. They said, he has committed blasphemy. They knew that he, they thought that he had.

And that means that if you come tonight, you come tonight, the main point, maybe you say, you know, I'm a person of accomplishment.

I'm a person of success. And Jesus comes as the new Elisha and says, look, if you want to be forgiven, if you want to be washed, if you want to be cleaned, you've got to come to the true river. And it's Jesus Christ himself. Look, some of the commentators, let's take this one step further as we close. The commentators, I've read this from a couple people.

I'm not sure about it. It's hypothetical. But they suggest that the reason that Elisha didn't come out to see Naaman is because according to the law of the Bible, the Old Testament, if he would have, if he would have encountered Naaman, he would have become ritually unclean himself.

[29 : 20] That's what the Torah says. It says that you can't touch, you can't confront a leper, lest you become unclean and you have to undergo ritual impurity law.

And maybe that is why. And I'm not totally sure. Elisha had no power in himself. I think what he was saying is, I have no power in myself to heal you. So go down to the river and God will take care of it. And in the very next chapter in Luke's gospel, Luke chapter four, Jesus says, I'm the new Elisha, Luke chapter five, the very next chapter, a leper comes to Jesus Christ and a leper falls on his face and says, I know you can heal me and you can make me clean.

And I first heard my old minister, Ligand Duncan, point this out. Everybody, there was a big crowd. Everybody's standing there had to have all been thinking the same thing.

Don't touch that man, Jesus. Don't touch him. If you touch him, you'll become unclean. You can't touch a leper. And Jesus looks at the leper and says, I will heal you.

[30 : 30] I will touch you. Be clean. And Jesus touches the leper and the leper becomes clean. You see, Elisha was great, but he did not have the power to heal Naaman.

Elisha was great, but he did not have the power to forgive sins. Elisha was great, but he cannot cleanse you. But the new and better Elisha comes and he touches lepers and he doesn't become unclean.

They become clean. The new Elisha comes and he touches sinners and he doesn't become unclean. They become clean. The new Elisha comes and he eats your sin.

He swallows it. He takes it into himself. It takes him all the way to the cross, but it can't keep him down. He can't stay down because he takes sin, but he does not become unclean.

You become clean. Tonight, friends, just come to the river and wash. Let me give you a challenge this week. Make every day marked by waking up with prayers of confession and repentance and gratitude for the cleansing that you can have now and forever in Jesus Christ.

[31 : 36] What this gives you the power to do is to say a couple things. One, when I go out into the world, I know that no matter what happens to me, no matter how bad it gets, no matter how great my success story was, and it completely gets flipped on its head.

No matter how the world caves in beneath my feet, I know that I'm okay because I've been washed by the river himself. Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter. I'm okay. You can say that.

You can face anything. You can suffer if you have that. You can go out into the world with courage to say, I know what God thinks about me, no matter what my boss does, no matter what anybody else does at my workplace, no matter how bad of a job I might be doing in life.

You say, I'm okay because I've been washed. You can go out into the world and you can say, I know that no matter what, God is not judging me today by my performance, that I've been received by the one who can make me clean.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the story of Elisha and Naaman, for the gospel that's in it, and we ask, Father, that you would draw our hearts to the only river that can truly wash us, Jesus Christ, as we close tonight and prepare us, Lord, for this week in the light of this great gospel.
[32 : 49] And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.