

3.22.20

**Healing and Humility****2 Kings 5.1-15****Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

A map will show you several places that are mentioned in the scripture to help you picture where the story takes place. We're going to hear about **Naaman (nay'uh-muhn)** a commander of the army of **Aram (ay'ruhm)**, what is present day **Syria**. The capital city of his nation was **Damascus** which had **two primary rivers the Abana and Pharpar**. Aram or Syria is located northeast of Israel and **Samaria**, where the prophet Elisha was from and the most important river there is the **Jordan**. You also should know that the Hebrew word that's translated in 2 Kings 5 as "leprosy," refers to a variety of skin ailments, not just the most devastating kind we imagine when we hear that word. If someone had the worst kind of leprosy, then he or she was isolated from the community and had no contact with others. The fact that Naaman can go in and talk with the king and be in the presence of other people in social situations indicates he has a skin problem that is less severe, but still quite troubling to him.

Here is 2 Kings 5:1-15.

"Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was **a great man and in high favor** with his master, because **by him the Lord had given victory to Aram**. The man, though **a mighty warrior**, suffered from **leprosy**.<sup>2</sup> Now the Arameans on one of their raids had **taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel**, and she served Naaman's wife.<sup>3</sup> She said to her mistress, *"If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his **leprosy**."*<sup>4</sup> So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.<sup>5</sup> And the king of Aram said, *"Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."*

He went, taking with him 10 talents of silver, 6,000 shekels of gold, and **10 sets of garments**.<sup>6</sup> He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, *"When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his **leprosy**."*<sup>7</sup> When the king of Israel read the letter, **he tore his clothes** and said, *"Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his **leprosy**? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."*

<sup>8</sup> But when **Elisha the man of God** heard that the king of Israel had **torn his clothes**, he sent a message to the king, *"**Why have you torn your clothes?** Let him*

*come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.*" <sup>9</sup> So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and **halted at the entrance of Elisha's house.** <sup>10</sup> Elisha **sent a messenger to him**, saying, "**Go, wash** in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall **be clean.**" <sup>11</sup> But Naaman **became angry** and went away, saying, "*I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the **leprosy!***" <sup>12</sup> *Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?*" He turned and **went away in a rage.** <sup>13</sup> But his servants approached and said to him, "*Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, '**Wash, and be clean**'?*" <sup>14</sup> So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

<sup>15</sup> Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and **stood before him** and said, "*Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present **from your servant.***"

This is a fascinating story to me for many reasons. Verse one introduces us to Namaan by first noting **his military status and his foreign nationality: he is the head of the Aramean army.** Namaan is praised for being "*a great man before his master the king of Aram,*" and goes on to give the reason for his greatness, "**for by him the LORD had given victory to Aram.**" The word translated as "victory" when referring to military encounters is the Hebrew word *teshuah*, which also means "*salvation*" or "*deliverance.*" Though this assertion is quite clear in the text, **it's surprising: The God of Israel has been supporting the military victory of Aram.** Wow. To grasp how shocking this is you need to know that **Aram** has appeared several times in the Bible before this text **as one of Israel's major adversaries** (2 Samuel 8, 10, 1 Kings 15, 20). **The most recent reference to Aram before this passage is in the final chapter of 1 Kings, chapter 22, when Aram was responsible for the death of Ahab the Israelite king.** For the Israelites who first heard this story, the idea that God would use another nation's general to accomplish God's will is a stunning thing to ponder. Perhaps God's purposes

are greater than one's own nation no matter how special it may be to its citizens.

Naaman continues to be extolled in the first verse as a **"valiant warrior,"** but his introduction concludes with what will become the major problem in the story: he suffers from a skin disease. That is, in addition to his status, his greatness, his victory, his skill as a warrior, **he's not healthy. Naaman's skin disease didn't prevent him from interacting with others in a variety of social contexts.** However, even if Naaman was not a social outcast, his greatness is marred by his disease.

Verse two introduces **a second character to the story: a young Israelite girl.** She had been captured by the Arameans in one of their military raids into Israel and she is a servant to Naaman's wife. Her lowly status is emphasized by the way the text describes her in Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> She is a 'little little girl.' But **this little, little unnamed enslaved Israelite girl is concerned enough for Naaman's health and has the trust, faith and boldness to speak up to his wife about a "prophet in Samaria" (2 Kings 5:3) who has the ability to heal Naaman's skin condition. She is God's instrument of grace.**

Naaman reports to the king of Aram what the little girl said, and the king gives Naaman permission to go to Israel. The Aramean king sends along with Naaman some lavish gifts: 10 talents of silver (roughly 750 pounds), 6,000 shekels of gold (about 150 pounds), and 10 sets of clothing. The Aramean king also sends a letter to the Israelite king, which commands the king of Israel to heal Naaman from his skin disease.

Can you picture this? Talk about political intrigue and delicate diplomacy. Afflicted with a physical problem, Naaman is going to the king of the country he has fought in battle. Can you imagine someone the US considers an enemy leader coming out of hiding and asking to go to Dana Farber in Boston to get treatment for cancer? I didn't think so. That's why Naaman is bringing such a big bribe, uh, gift with him of silver, gold, and expensive clothes. *"I know I've been defeating your army and capturing and enslaving your people, but now I need your help."* That Naaman is willing to listen to the words of a young slave girl and admit to his enemy, *"I need help, I need something that you can provide, can we work something out?"* reveals both how desperate and

---

<sup>1</sup> She is young, a *na'arah*, but this word is itself modified by the adjective, "little" (*qatanah*).

humble he is at this point. It must have taken incredible humility to admit he needs healing that only his enemy can provide.

Most of us are not as powerful or privileged as Namaan, but we can relate to how hard it can be to admit that we need help, that we have a problem we can't fix on our own. That's why it's one of the core 12 Steps in AA and so many other programs, we have to be able to admit we have a problem we have been powerless to overcome on our own and we need help. **Often in life there's no healing without an act of humility. A cry for help, an admission of sin or guilt, a statement of wrongdoing or accepting responsibility usually precedes the healing we long for and need.**

This is the point Namaan is at when he gives the King of Israel the letter from his king.

When the king of Israel reads that letter, he responds with anguish and despair: tearing his clothes, wondering aloud if the Arameans have taken him to be a god with the power to give and take life, and complaining that the king of Aram *"is trying to pick a quarrel"* with him. What a contrast between the response of **the enslaved little girl** who is powerless, and the king of Israel who has all the power at a king's disposal. **The little girl is confident, bold, and hopeful. The king is fearful, panicked, and lashing out. What a difference faith makes in us.** It's something to think about – when a trial comes, is my first response more like that of the little, little girl or the king of Israel? One of the prayers we can never pray enough is, *"Lord, increase my faith."* That's what the king and perhaps some of us need today with the problems we're facing– we need more faith to trust, believe, and hope in God.

**There is some humor amidst the king of Israel's anguish.** First, the lack of mention in the letter from the king of Aram about a *prophet* has led the king of Israel to assume that *he* is responsible to heal Naaman. And **second, the gift to the king included several new garments, which could presumably replace the ones he tore!** Fortunately, Elisha intervenes in verse 8, telling the king to send Naaman to him so that *"he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."*

**Naaman goes to see Elisha, and gets a second major helping of humble pie.** Instead of meeting with him face-to-face, Elisha sends a messenger to him with instructions to wash seven times in the Jordan River. **Two things stand out in this series of events: first, Naaman comes to Elisha with the trappings of his**

greatness, **"his horse and his chariot" (5:9) and his whole entourage.** It must have been an impressive sight. **Secondly, Naaman is "at the door of the house of Elisha"** (5:9), but even so, Elisha does not come out. Naaman gets angry at this apparent snub and we can understand why – he's a General for crying out loud, he's used to command and giving orders, being fawned over by his subordinates and instantly obeyed without question. What he says goes, men do what tells them or else. And now this Israelite prophet won't even come out of his house to meet him. He's feeling very disrespected. The text reveals his reasons: **"I thought he would come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and remove the skin disease"** (5:11). Naaman objects, stating that the rivers of Damascus in his country are clearly superior to any water in Israel. His complaint was justified, for the Abana is a swift, clean, abundant stream descending from the snows of Mt. Hermon, whereas the Jordan River, at the least the part I've seen is small, you can't see the bottom, it's not very impressive. It doesn't look like something you'd want to swim or bathe in. Verse 12 ends with Naaman departing in anger.

**At this point, Naaman's servants intercede.** Notice how in the story **it's the little people, the little slave girl and the servants of Naaman who possess the faith and the wisdom to do what is right.** So often in the Bible and in life God uses those who are not seen as powerful or privileged to accomplish God's will because God is with the humble in spirit and not with the proud. The General and Kings are not as good role models for faith and behavior as the slave girl, the servants, and the prophet. This is usually the case then and now. The servants suggest that if the prophet Elisha had asked Naaman to **do a "great thing,"** a hard or difficult task he would have done it (as a general probably liked to think of himself as a tough guy). So, they encourage him to follow the simple instruction to wash which is, again, a humble thing to do. Naaman probably would have preferred being told, *"Go kill a lion and you'll be healed,"* instead he's told to take a bath! Verse 14 resolves the problem introduced in verse 1: Naaman does *"according to the word of the man of God,"* and the results are what Elisha predicted. His flesh is restored like that of a little child, and he's made clean. **Thus, the great man (verse 1), through the intercession of the little, little girl (verse 3), is made like a little boy (verse 14).** Though the problem has been resolved, our text

continues with Naaman's return to Elisha in verse 15. This time, he stands humbly before Elisha; previously he expected Elisha to stand (verse 11). This time, he not only knows that there is a prophet in Israel (verse 8), but he confesses that the only God is the one in Israel. And, in the final clause of chapter 15, he refers to himself **as Elisha's servant**. This great, foreign military leader has come to faith in Israel's God, and he has come to see himself as a servant after becoming like a little child.

Interestingly, this is not the end of the story because Namaan appears in Luke 4:27, when Jesus is preaching at his home synagogue and provokes anger among his listeners by reminding them that, although there were many in Israel with "*leprosy*," in the days of Elisha the prophet only a foreigner Naaman, a Syrian soldier was healed. It's a fitting sequel in a gospel that emphasizes reversals (Luke 1:52-53, 6:21-25), including a famous parable in which a Samaritan, a member of a despised race, is lifted up as the example to follow of doing mercy to any in need. In Luke Jesus tells his disciples that the kingdom of God belongs to those who receive it with the humility and faith of a little child, like the little girl in the Naaman story. May we have the **trust, faith and boldness of that little girl and the humility to recognize our need for God in our life**.

Healing, in its many forms, whether for a physical, mental, relational, or spiritual issue, or even in international relations often only comes after humility.

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If you were part of the original Israelite audience for this story, how do you think you would have responded the statement in 2 Kings 5 that God of Israel has been supporting the military victory of Aram, your enemy? How would you respond today if the names and countries were shifted to the USA and a nation you consider an enemy? What does this tell us about God's perspective compared to our own?
2. What do you think about the little unnamed enslaved Israelite girl who is concerned for Naaman's health and has the trust, faith and boldness to speak to his wife about a "prophet in Samaria" who can cure him? Why is it that children sometimes have a bolder more open faith than adults? How does this connect with Jesus' statement in

Matthew 18:3 (NIV) *"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

3. Discuss or reflect on this statement from the sermon— have you seen this to be true in your life: *"Often in life there's no healing without an act of humility. A cry for help, an admission of sin or guilt, a statement of wrongdoing or accepting responsibility usually precedes the healing we long for and need."*

4. There is a stark contrast between the response of the enslaved little girl who is powerless, and the king of Israel who has all the power at a king's disposal. The little girl is confident, bold, and hopeful. The king is fearful, panicked, and lashing out. What a difference faith makes. What can you do so that when a trial comes, your first response will be more like that of the little, little girl rather than the king?

5. Why do you think the prophet Elisha doesn't go out to meet Naaman when he comes to his house? Why is Naaman so angry about Elisha not greeting him and curing him in person and telling him merely to wash in the Jordan River?

6. In this story in 2 Kings 5, the little slave girl and the servants are more the instruments of God's grace than the kings or the general, what does that tell us about how God often works in the world?

7. How will story impact your approach to faith, to people you may believe are your enemies, and to cultivating humility?