

The Gospel of Naaman
A Sermon by Eric Hall
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Introduction

One of the most fascinating events in the Old Testament is found in 2 Kings 5, and it involves a Syrian named Naaman. Naaman was a captain of the host of the King of Syria, who at that time was probably Ben-Hadad III.

And Naaman, it would seem, had everything going his way. He was great man in the eyes of the King, he was honorable, he had been given military victory by God, and he was a mighty man of valor.

“But he was a leper,” the Bible tells with a classic understatement. Just five simple words in English, and in fact only one word in Hebrew, but what a word it was – leprosy. It changed everything about Naaman. We know how lepers were treated and ostracized by the Jews, and the Syrians’ treatment of Naaman would no doubt have been no better and probably much worse. Despite all his honors and successes, Naaman was unclean and diseased and soon to be outcast and forgotten. What could he do?

Verse 3 introduces us to the next character in these events – a young servant girl out of the land of Israel who waited on Naaman’s wife. She had been captured from Israel during a Syrian raid. Although at the time of these events, Israel and Syria seem to have been enjoying an uneasy truce, they had often been at war with each other. And as a result, this young girl was now serving Naaman’s family as a captive.

This chapter is filled with famous and important people. We meet not one, but two kings. We meet the great prophet Elisha. We meet the mighty man Naaman himself, and we meet his wife, no doubt also powerful and influential. And yet sometimes I fear we may skip over perhaps the most important character – this young servant girl.

What courage she had! What faith she had! She saw Naaman’s problem and knew that God could cure him through the prophet Elisha. Can you imagine the courage it took for her to speak up and make such a promise? Can you imagine her position had Naaman come back from that long journey still with his leprosy, as he nearly did? Wouldn’t it have been far safer for her to remain silent? But she did not. She spoke up.

And Naaman’s wife and then Naaman himself believed the servant girl. And let’s pause for just a moment to think about that remarkable fact. What sort of life must that young girl have lived before Naaman and his family to get that sort of reaction to what they might easily have considered a preposterous claim? Although nameless, she deserves a place along side Daniel, Joseph, and other exiled servants of God who maintained lives of holiness and obedience in foreign lands. Why would they believe such a story? But they did believe her, and the Syrian king granted Naaman permission to go to Israel to be cured by the prophet.

Many Old Testament events include a touch of humor for the careful reader, and this event is no exception. Somewhere between the servant girl, Naaman's wife, Naaman, and Ben-Hadad, the message from the servant girl has been changed. Instead of asking Elisha to cure Naaman, the Syrian king's letter now asks the King of Israel to cure Naaman! And the king of Israel is in a panic!

The King of Israel at this time was Jehoram, the second son of Ahab. You might recall from 1 Kings 22 that King Ahab had been killed when a certain man drew a bow at random and shot the king with an arrow. Interestingly – and without any particular basis as far as we know – the historian Josephus tells us that the Syrian who shot that arrow was none other than the great Naaman himself.

In any event, King Jehoram is in a great panic. He tears his clothes and cries out in fear, believing that the Syrian king is setting him up for a fight. It tells us much about Jehoram that – unlike the servant girl – he does not think to call Elisha. And although Jehoram mentions God during his rant, he does not turn to God for a solution to his problem.

So now, instead of one person with a problem, we have two: Naaman and Jehoram.

Enter Elisha. Elisha hears about Jehoram's distress and tells the king to send Naaman his way, which Jehoram, no doubt, very gladly and very quickly does.

And in verse 9, Naaman and his entourage finally arrive at the door of the house of Elisha. The great and mighty Naaman has arrived. And what is Elisha's reaction? He stays inside and sends a servant out to tell Naaman what he must do.

Let's pause again for a moment to consider how Naaman must have viewed that response. Even in a normal situation, it would have been viewed as a great insult for the master of the house not to personally greet such an honored traveler, but this was not a normal situation. Naaman had leprosy. He was very used to people not wanting to be near him. Naaman, no doubt, thought Elisha just didn't want to be in the presence of a leper, and that almost certainly had much to do with his angry reaction.

The servant tells Naaman to go and wash in the Jordan river seven times, and then his flesh will be clean. Seven days was the period for quarantine from a skin disease in Leviticus, and so that may explain why he was to wash seven times.

And Naaman's reaction? He is filled with rage and fury, and he turns and goes away. This was not at all what he expected, he tells us. He wanted fireworks! He wanted a great show by the mighty prophet, and now he finds out he won't even get to meet the mighty prophet! And washing? He could have done that from home. In fact, the water is much cleaner back home. And so proud Naaman prepares to take his leave.

And yet once again an unnamed servant plays a key role in his life. He suggests that Naaman would have gladly done some great thing had the prophet asked him, so why not do this small thing? Why not wash and be clean?

So Naaman obeys the prophet – whom he had not yet even met – and is cleansed of his leprosy. Verse 14 tells us “his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”

And to go along with this dramatic change on Naaman’s outside, we see a dramatic change on Naaman’s inside. The remainder of Chapter 5 shows us a very different person from the proud and angry man we saw in verse 11.

And I have always wondered about Naaman’s homecoming back in Syria, and thought of that young servant girl as she waited at the door watching with her eyes of faith for her master Naaman to return clean and whole.

2 Kings 5 – It is a beautiful account of a fascinating historical event, but why should we study it today?

In fact, why should we care about the Old Testament at all? Why should we study it? There are many reasons. It could be studied simply as history. It could be studied as science. It could be studied as literature. And yet the Old Testament is so much more than just history, science, or literature.

In Romans 15:4, Paul tells us that what was written before was written for our learning. He tells us in Galatians 3:24 that the law is our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.

And so our question should be: what is the great schoolmaster teaching us with these events recorded for our learning in 2 Kings 5?

And the lessons leap from the page! Few Old Testament events have more to say about the gospel of Jesus Christ than this event from the life of Naaman.

What Can We Learn About the Gospel From Naaman?

First, we learn that there is a great and desperate need the gospel.

Naaman may have felt alone in his leprosy, but Naaman was not alone in his leprosy. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Apart from Christ, we all stand before God as lepers.

No one will believe the good news until they first understand the bad news. The bad news is that sin is the disease, and we all have it. The good news is that there is a cure – the gospel. We can be made clean by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Second, we learn that the gospel is for all.

We saw Naaman’s fury in verse 11, but it is interesting that he was not the only person to have that reaction to these events. In Luke 4:27 Jesus reminded his Jewish listeners that

while there were many lepers in Israel, none of them was cleansed save Naaman the Syrian. And their reaction? Luke 4:28 tells us they “were filled with wrath!”

And yet Naaman was a Syrian. He was not a Jew. Naaman stands beside Ruth and Rahab and Ninevah as evidence that God’s plan has always been to bless the entire world through the gift of his son.

God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son. The gospel is for all.

Third, we learn that we must proclaim the gospel to all.

We have already talked about the servant girl who told Naaman about Elisha. Can you imagine a more unfertile field in her mind than the great and mighty Naaman? Why would Naaman possibly listen to a thing she had to say? How could she possibly know more about anything than he did? Naaman had his own religious beliefs – why would he care about what a foreigner had to say? He would never listen to her in a million years, right? Wrong.

We plant. We water. It is God who gives the increase. And woe to us if we fail to plant or water while God is standing ready to give an increase! The gospel is for all.

Fourth, we learn about the power of a Godly life in bringing others to God.

Again, we have already spoken about the faithfulness and courage of that little servant girl. Think again about the life she must have led before Naaman and his wife to be so quickly believed.

There is a great lesson here for us. At some point we will each have an opportunity to proclaim the gospel to someone we have known for years or worked beside for decades. What will our lives over those years say about the message we are now proclaiming to them? Whatever it says, it will be speaking more loudly than the words we say, and it will have much to do with whether we are believed as readily as that young servant girl.

Fifth, we learn that the gospel cannot be separated from obedience.

Romans 10:16 tells us that the gospel is something that we obey. There are things we must do to be saved. We are active rather than passive participants in the process. Naaman understood this at the end.

At first, Naaman wanted Elisha to come out and strike his hand over the place, while Naaman just stood there. But later he understood that his cleansing would follow his obedience to Elisha’s command, and not come before. In like manner, the gospel is something that we obey.

Sixth, we learn that the gospel puts water between life and death.

No student of the Bible could possibly be surprised to learn that water stands between the lost and the saved. Water stood between slavery and freedom in Egypt. Water stood

between the wilderness and the promised land in the Exodus. Water stood between leprosy and health for Naaman. And today, water stands between those lost in sin and those alive in Christ.

Romans 6:4 tells us: “Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

Naaman’s cleansing came at a definite point in time. It happened at the moment he obeyed the command to wash and be clean. In like manner, our cleansing happens at a definite point in time – when we too obey the command to wash and be clean.

Seventh, we learn that the gospel creates a clean person – a new creature.

Lepers were unclean. In fact, Leviticus 13:45 tells us: “And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, Unclean.”

Sin has the same effect. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 51:2, “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” John tells us in 1 John 1:7 that “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Elisha’s servant told Naaman to wash and be clean. Ananias told Paul in Acts 22:16 to arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins. The gospel turns unclean people into clean people.

And so these events have much to tell us about the gospel of Jesus Christ. But they also tell us something about false gospels, and we know from Galatians 1 that there are false gospels.

Let’s look for a moment at one of them – the Gospel of Naaman.

What was wrong with Naaman’s plan?

First, Naaman’s Gospel was driven by excitement and drama.

Naaman thought Elisha should come out in person, wave his hands all around, and dramatically call on the name of the Lord. God’s plan was much too dull for Naaman.

Second, Naaman’s Gospel was driven personal convenience.

There were a lot of rivers back home in Syria that Naaman could use, and the water was much cleaner back home. God’s plan was much too inconvenient for Naaman.

Third, under Naaman's Gospel, if you get your feelings hurt then you don't have to do anything at all.

Naaman traveled all that way to see Elisha, and then he was slighted. Elisha hurt his feelings, and when that happens under Naaman's Gospel you are allowed to just get mad, go home, and never come back.

Fourth, under Naaman's Gospel, it is you rather than God who gets to determine what you must do to be saved.

If what God commands you to do doesn't make sense to you or isn't what you expect, then you can just ignore it and do what you want to do instead. Baptism doesn't make sense to you? Fine, then under Naaman's plan just don't do it. If you don't like the command, then just change it. Those rivers back home are just as good as the Jordan river. After all, it worked for Naaman, right? Well, no. It didn't.

Fifth, under Naaman's Gospel, just showing up is all you really need to do.

Naaman came all that way with all of his entourage and all of those expensive gifts. Was he really required to do something else? He was there! He never missed an opportunity to travel to Elisha's house! You mean that's not enough?

Of course, Naaman's gospel was not a gospel at all. Had Naaman persisted in following his own plan, he would have returned to Syria a leper, and he would have died in his leprosy.

And yet, as bad as it was, Naaman's gospel was not as bad as some false gospels we see around us today. Naaman didn't fall for some of the things that people fall for today! Let's look for a moment at what Naaman got right.

First, Naaman understood he had a serious problem.

Naaman knew he had leprosy, and he knew the ultimate outcome of that terrible disease. Many today have no idea that they are suffering from a disease that is infinitely worse and that carries an eternal penalty. Naaman did not ignore his leprosy or explain away his leprosy; he set out to find a cure. Likewise, our first task in reaching the lost is to convince them they are lost apart from Jesus Christ.

Second, Naaman understood that belief alone was not enough.

Naaman believed the prophet could cure him even when he was back in Syria. (Otherwise, why did he travel this great distance?) But Naaman knew that belief alone was not enough. He never questioned that some further action would be required either on his part or on Elisha's part. Likewise, belief alone is not enough today. As James reminds us, even the demons believe ... and tremble.

Third, Naaman understood he had not been a leper from his birth.

Naaman knew that leprosy was something that came upon him later in life. In fact, what he wanted and eventually obtained was to return to the condition he was in at his physical birth. The Bible tells us his flesh became like that of a little child. Likewise, Jesus tells us in Mathew 18:3 that unless we become as little children we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

Fourth, Naaman understood that he could catch leprosy again if he came in contact with lepers.

Naaman no doubt was very careful after his cleansing to avoid catching that terrible disease again. There is no indication that his cleansing granted him immunity. Likewise, a Christian can return to a life of sin and fall from grace.

Finally, Naaman's gratitude shows us that he did not believe he had earned his cleansing by his obedience to the prophet's command.

Look at what Naaman did by his mighty work of washing seven times in the Jordan river! He earned his cleansing by his works, right? Wrong – and no one looking at these events could possibly believe such a thing – and yet we hear similar statements today about baptism all the time.

Naaman's obedience was absolutely necessary to be healed, but his healing was nevertheless a gift from God – as Naaman knew very well. Naaman was not saved by his works, but he would not have been saved without them. There were actions he had to take to be made clean, and the same is true today for those who would be saved.

Invitation

Naaman is here today. Someone here today, like Naaman, has traveled all the way to Elisha's doorstep, but has found there something he did not expect. Something perhaps he wishes were different about the plan of God. I want to talk to that person for a moment.

Perhaps you do not think baptism makes any sense, or perhaps you disagree with the mode of baptism. For some reason, you have come to the brink of a decision not once but probably many times, but each time you have balked at baptism.

What if instead God commanded you to do some great thing? Would you do that if you could?

What if God commanded you to go up to Heaven and get Christ to come down? What if God commanded you to descend into the deep and bring up Christ again from the dead?

Those are the very questions Paul asked in Romans 10:6-7, but of course God has already done those great things.

What if God commanded you to crown Jesus king? Again, there is no need. Hebrews 2:9 tells us that God has already done that great thing.

What if God commanded you to make Jesus lord? Again, there is no need. Acts 2:36 tells us that Jesus is already Lord. We obey him because he is Lord and King, not to make him Lord and King. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, and what that means is that he is everyone's Lord and King.

Friends, there is no need for you to do those great things because God has already done them all. What you must do is a small thing by comparison – you must obey the gospel. You must hear it, believe it, confess that Jesus is the Son of God, repent of your sins, be baptized for the remission of your sins, and live as a faithful servant of God the remainder of your life. That is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and there is no other.

For Naaman, I have one more question. What will your answer be on that last great day? What will you say to Jesus when you stand before him having heard and rejected his gospel? How will you explain your decision to replace a step of obedience with an eternity of regret? What will you say?

I don't know what you will say or even what you could say, but I know what he will say to you. "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

There is no need for anyone here to ever hear that. The water is ready. Why do you tarry? Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins.