

ELISHA AND NAAMAN

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II Kings 5

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This morning we continue our series of “Fifty Old Testament Stories that Every Christian Should Know” with the story of the prophet and the general, Elisha and Naaman.

They are both strong willed, accomplished men, men not to be trifled with, men who cut a wide swath. Both are getting along in years. Tradition holds that Naaman was both rich and handsome. He was not just a general; he was *the* general, the commander and chief of the army of Ben Hadad II, king of Syria.¹

Elisha was bent and bald, something of a curmudgeon. Sensitive about his baldness, impatient with kings and servants alike, he did not suffer fools gladly, if at all. He was known to rebuke kings who annoyed him and curse children who teased him.

In today's story these two iron-willed men run right smack into each other. If it were not for their servants, there might have been an explosion.

It has even been said that this story is the story of their servants and/or slaves as much as it is the story of the two main characters. Two of those servants are unnamed – an Israelite girl who was captured in a raid and taken to Syria to serve as a slave, and a man, the majordomo or head servant of Naaman. The third is Gehazi, the servant of Elisha. While the story teaches us several important lessons it is Gehazi who teaches what may be the most important and painful lesson of all.

NAAMAN'S PLIGHT

It all begins in the house of Naaman.

We are told that he is rich and powerful and has the ear of the king, Ben Hadad II. And, we are told, he has developed leprosy.

Now we don't know exactly what kind of leprosy it was that he suffered from because, in biblical times, nearly any skin disease – serious or benign – was referred to as leprosy. To say that he had leprosy would be like, today, saying he had cancer. What kind? How serious? Is it treatable? We don't know.

It might have been Hansen's disease – genuine leprosy. Or it might have been psoriasis. Or it might have been as serious and deadly as skin cancer or as simple and annoying a poison ivy. We simply don't know. What we do know is that it was driving him crazy.

Now this was at a time when the Syrians and the Israelites were in a state of detent. A year or so earlier, they had been at the verge of war, sending raiding parties into each other's territory, stealing, kidnapping, terrorizing each other. But at this point they are relatively at peace, with Syria holding the upper hand. During one of those raiding parties into Israel, Naaman had captured a young Israelite girl and brought her home to serve as a personal servant/slave to his wife.

One day he's complaining about his skin condition and the girl mentions to Naaman's wife that, “Too bad my lord isn't in Samaria. There's a prophet there who could cure his leprosy... or whatever it is. I'm just sayin'.”

Naaman goes to his king and tells him what the girl has said and Ben Hadad gives Naaman a leave of absence and a letter of introduction. They both assume that the “prophet in Samaria” must be the king of Israel so Ben Hadad attaches to his letter a request that the king of Israel heal Naaman of his leprosy.

Naaman heads off to Samaria and takes with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of garments as payment for the treatment he expects to get. (Just in case you're keeping score, a shekel of gold was worth about 65-75 cents, so 6000 shekels would be about \$4,000. A talent was 3,000 shekels so ten talents of silver would be about 30,000 shekels of silver or about \$20,000. A suit of clothing worn by the aristocracy would be worth about a half talent of silver or roughly 1500 shekels, so the ten suits of clothing would come in at about \$1,000 each or \$10,000 giving us a grand total of somewhere between \$35,000 and \$40,000 that Naaman expected to pay for being cured of his leprosy.

(I think he must have had the same insurance company I have.)

THE KING'S PREDICAMENT

Naaman makes his way to Samaria with his entourage and his gold and silver and clothing and presents his letter to the king of Israel.

We don't know which king this was because he is not named in the story. Some scholars think it was Jehu but others argue that the behavior we shall see in a moment was not in character for the wild man that everyone knew Jehu to be. More likely, it was Jorham, Jehu's grandson.

¹ The authors of II Kings actually call the area from which Naaman comes, Aram. The people were called Arameans and the language they spoke was Aramaic. In those days people identified nations not by geographical boundaries but by influence and power. The nation of Aram was huge, taking up most of what, today, is Syria and just about everything east of the Jordan River all the way up to modern day Iraq, but those boundaries were constantly changing and fairly elastic.

At any rate, Naaman presents himself to the king and hands over his letter of introduction from the king of Syria that asks the king of Israel to heal Naaman of his leprosy. The king reads the letter and, in a scene that is right out of Hollywood, manages to conceal his true reaction to the request, which is panic.

He swallows, takes a deep breath, and says, "Uh, yes...I see... uh, well, you know...this healing business is rather complicated and...uh... I, uh... uh... need some time to prepare, so...uh... why don't you be my guest in the guest quarters and... uh... I'll call you when I'm ready to do the actual healing... uh, thing. Okay?"

Naaman, probably a little disappointed, leaves to go to the guest quarters and the instant he's out of the room the King of Israel throws a tantrum. He tears his garments and begins to weep and swear and storm around. "Really? Really? He expects me to heal this guy? I'm not a healer! Who told him I'm a healer? What am I supposed to do now? He thinks I can heal and if I don't... well, the entire peace treaty could be in jeopardy."

Some of the king's advisers allow how that may be the whole point. Maybe this is a trick, just an excuse the king of Syria has cooked up so he can justify invading Israel and starting another war.

The king decides that the most prudent course of action is to stall and see if any solution presents itself.

And, sure enough, a solution DOES present itself in the form of that surly, bald, curmudgeonly prophet named Elisha.

ELISHA'S SOLUTION

Word of the king's problem reaches Elisha and Elisha sends his servant, Gehazi, with a message to the king: Tell the king to relax. Tell him to send Naaman to me and I will teach him that there is a prophet of the one true God living in Israel.

The king can't get rid of Naaman quickly enough so he sends him to Elisha. Naaman arrives outside Elisha's house and is announced and this is where the egos start clashing.

Gehazi comes into the house and tells Elisha that Naaman has arrived and wants to speak to him.

Elisha doesn't even get off the couch. "Just tell him to go wash in the Jordan River seven times and his leprosy will be cured." Gehazi goes out and delivers the message.

Naaman is insulted and leaves in a huff. "Does he know who I am? Bathe in the Jordan River, indeed. I would have thought that the least he could do would be to come out and say some things and wave his arms around over my wounds. If all I have to do is bathe in some river there are rivers a plenty in Damascus that are every bit as good and a whole lot cleaner than the Jordan. Well, I won't do it, that's all. It's degrading and I won't do it."

Now, at this point, another servant enters the picture. He's Naaman's head servant, his majordomo. Usually this character is depicted as sort of humble and meek because he refers to Naaman as "father." But, in fact, the Aramaic is not so exact as that and could simply be a title that is used for someone who is older or has more authority than the speaker.

I like to think of this character as something like... well, do you remember the movie, "Arthur?" The original with Dudley Moore? I like to think of this guy as Hobson, Arthur's butler played by Sir John Gielgud. Or, if you're old enough to remember with me, I like to think of him as something of a Mr. Belvedere or even a Jeeves like character. A servant, yes, but with a mind of his own, perhaps a sharper one than his master.

Naaman has thrown his tantrum about being forced to do something undignified like bathing in the Jordan River and he refuses to do it. Now, here comes the servant: "Yes, how undignified. Of course, all that digging and scratching and whining you do about your skin condition, that's not undignified at all. I dare say if he had told you to climb a mountain or conquer a nation or rescue a damsel in distress to get relief you would have done it in a second. Is it possible that what you're really mad about is that he didn't come out and bow and scrape and grovel before you?"

Naaman: "Maybe."

Servant: "So, why not give the Jordan river a try? What have you got to lose but a little of your ego? And heaven knows you've got more than enough of that and to spare."

Naaman: "Oh, all right."

So he changes direction and makes for the Jordan River. When he gets there he immerses himself seven times as instructed and lo and behold, when he emerges from the seventh dunk his skin is restored, soft and smooth like that of a child.

PAYMENT OFFERED AND REFUSED

So happy is Naaman with his new skin that he hurries back to Elisha's house and offers him all the gold and silver and clothing that he has brought, not as payment, he makes clear, but as a gift of gratitude for teaching him that there is only one God in the universe and that is the God of Israel.

Elisha refuses to accept any gift or payment even when Naaman pushes the issue. Finally, Naaman relents and says, "Well, if you won't accept a gift from me, then will you do me a favor?" And here follows one of those strange little bits of dialogue which lend a story credibility because they are so strange. Actually, Naaman has two requests:

First, he wants a load of dirt – soil of Israel – to take home with him. This is because, as a new convert, his theology is rather unsophisticated and he believes that deities are tied to the land and could not rule outside the country where they were worshipped. So, he says, he wants to take some soil of Israel home with him, just as much as one

donkey can carry, and, in doing so, take the lord God, YHWH, home with him, too! He intends, he says, to worship YHWH and no other god, ever.

The second favor he asks is that he be allowed to break this promise from time to time with no penalty. "See, the king, Ben Hadad II, is getting old and when he goes to worship at the temple of the Aramean storm god, Rimmon (Thunder), he expects me to go with him and, for form's sake I'll have to pretend to worship Rimmon, too."

He asks that Elisha intercede for him with YHWH and work it out so he can be forgiven in advance for this one exception to the first commandment.

Elisha responds not by giving permission or condemnation but by saying simply, "Go in peace." Scholars say this was his way of saying, don't worry about it. Or, today we might say, "Yeah, whatever." Naaman leaves happy and Elisha goes back to his couch having saved the king from embarrassment and made a new convert in the bargain.

Cool story, huh?

Naaman humbles himself and, because he is willing to do so, he is healed in both body and in spirit. His skin disease is cleared up and the theological bankruptcy that has led him to worship false gods and idols is corrected when he becomes a new convert to Yahwism, the religion that will eventually become Judaism.

And everyone lives happily ever after.

Well, not quite.

GEHAZI'S TREACHERY

Gehazi, Elisha's servant, is dismayed when he sees Naaman leaving. Elisha, he says to himself, has let "this Aramean" off too easily. His disdain for the foreigner, his jingoistic and racist attitude is on view for all to see. "I will," he says, "get something from him."

So he runs after Naaman, who sees him coming and leaps from his chariot to ask if something is wrong.

Gehazi breathlessly tells Naaman a huge lie: Elisha has changed his mind about the gift Naaman offered. A couple of young men, brother prophets, have arrived seeking hospitality and Elisha can't afford to offer it. Could Naaman please provide two sets of clothing and one talent of silver to take care of these two visitors?

Isn't Gehazi clever? His story is believable precisely because the amount he requests is so modest.

Naaman generously says that he will, of course, give the clothing and TWO talents of silver, not just one. And he will package them up nicely and send two servants to return with Gehazi and carry the gifts.

Gehazi and the servants arrive at a fort near the frontier and, there, Gehazi dismisses the servants and hides the loot with the intention of coming back later to retrieve it.

When he gets back home Elisha confronts him with a question: "Where have you been, Gehazi?"

"Nowhere." Another lie. That's two – one to Naaman and one to Elisha.

Elisha sighs and says, didn't you know that even though I was not with you in body I was with you in spirit? Gehazi, this is not an occasion for lining our own pockets and getting rich. The money you took is tainted. Now, you will be afflicted with the skin disease that afflicted Naaman.

And immediately, Gehazi realized that his skin is beginning to turn white and scaly.

REFLECTION

Choon-Leong Seow, professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at Princeton University calls this story the best story in the two books of Kings. It has, he points out, "entertaining drama, a rich cast of characters, a well-developed plot, many ironic twists and turns, comic relief... keen insights into human flaws... and a satisfying conclusion."²

He wonders that it has never been produced, to his knowledge, into a movie or at least a church play. It does, after all, provide several theological insights.

1. Perhaps the most important insight of the story is that of God's inclusive and prevenient grace. Naaman is in need of healing and salvation and God sets both into motion before Naaman has done anything to earn them. He is a foreigner, a pagan, a man of war and, yet, God reaches out to him in love and acceptance.

How surprisingly often we have seen this message in the stories of the Old Testament. Our God is a God of inclusion, reaching out to his creation in acts of grace, forgiveness, love and reconciliation. Gentile, Hebrew, Christian, Pagan – red, yellow, black or white – God loves us all. If we take no other lesson from this text, let us take this one.

2. Naaman is described as an important and powerful man in his own right but his healing and salvation come by way of a circuitous route that requires him to heed the advice of an Israeli slave girl, get the permission of his king, ask another king for help, follow the instructions of a grouch who won't even get off the couch to greet him, and then go through a ridiculous and possibly humiliating baptism ritual in the shallow, muddy Jordan River.

² *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes.* Volume III, p. 197.

Shortly after I was ordained I was called to a meeting with Bishop Dwight Loder who wanted to meet with all of the new ordinands. It was just to see how we were doing after a year in the ministry and when we arrived at the church where the meeting was to take place the room had not been set up. Without a word, Bishop Loder sighed, set his briefcase on the floor, went out into the hall, took two folding chairs off a rack sitting there and carried them into the room. Every single minister did exactly the same thing and there was not one of us who didn't realize the symbolic importance of that moment, when the Bishop carried his own chair.

3. Gehazi, the servant, erred in two ways. One, he wanted Naaman to pay a price for his salvation. Elisha – and, by extension, God – had been too easy on the gentile, foreigner. Salvation, as everyone knows, should come at a high price, as should healing. The Aramean general should be forced to pay for who he has been. The second error is in profiting from the misfortune and suffering of a fellow human being.

There are, Choon-Leong Seow points out, “people in every era who are so terribly afflicted with diseases and other ailments, who are desperate to find any word of hope” such that they will follow anyone from any field – religion, science, spiritualism, pseudo-science – who offers even a glimmer of hope. And there have always been charlatans, quacks, and opportunists in every field, ready to take advantage of those who suffer.

This text sternly warns against such opportunistic behavior.

4. Finally, in stark contrast to Gehazi, stands the unnamed slave girl who, even though she is far away from her home remains faithful and sees, by faith, that there is hope for her master. How different she is from the also unnamed Israelite king who can only weep and rage in despair without realizing that the promise of hope and healing is just right down the street from the palace at the humble house of Elisha.

The story challenges us all, as we leave to enter the work-a-day world, which of these two we will emulate in our lives.

AMEN