

NAAMAN THE LEPER

Recorded in 2 Kings 5 is the amazing story of an “other” seeking a cure for a dreaded disease. He was no ordinary other, but a distinguished, well respected, and accomplished military leader and advisor to his king. The disease was leprosy, which in ancient times was incurable and traumatic. It typically led to disfigurement, intense pain and social isolation. The other in this story is Naaman, the “commander of the army of the king of Aram” (Syria). He sought the cure in Israel due to the testimony of his captured Hebrew servant girl. She spoke of the prophet Elisha to Naaman’s wife. Having nothing to lose and potentially everything to gain, Naaman sought the advice and permission of his king, and then set off to Israel to find Elisha. In this story we see once again, God’s concern for the other; how God uses unlikely folks to witness for him; and how God uses the other for his purposes.

The Intersection of Two Cultures

After receiving the green light from the Syrian king, Naaman departs for Israel carrying a letter of recommendation from the king as well as loads of expensive gifts and money. It is his intention to make clear his purposes along with impressing and rewarding.

He first approaches Israel’s king Joram who misreads Naaman’s purpose. He becomes alarmed thinking Naaman’s presence is some type of snare—intended to perhaps provoke conflict. Apparently he never considers the option of God’s prophet Elisha, but Elisha comes to the rescue and Naaman is directed to him.

The intersection of two cultures becomes apparent as Naaman journeys to see Elisha. Naaman is resplendent in his chariot and entourage, while bearing wealth and gifts. Elisha is none of that. The two cultures clash when Elisha does not even make an appearance, but rather sends out one of his servants with instructions for Naaman to wash in the Jordan river—specifically dipping seven times in order to be cleansed of his leprosy. This amounted to an affront for Naaman. He had grander expectations—something fitting his elevated station in life. Not only did Elisha not personally greet him or perform some grandiose ceremony over him, the Jordan River did not measure up when compared to rivers back home in Syria. Naaman’s pride almost got the best of him, but after listening to advice and with nothing to lose, he followed the prophet’s instruction and was cleansed. Obviously grateful he returned to Elisha offering him the money and gifts, which Elisha refused. He—this other—also became a believer in Jehovah. Here is his faith statement to Elisha:

Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. (5:15)

It was no momentary merely emotional statement, but one of conviction. So much so that he desired to take Elisha’s culture back home to Syria literally by returning with the very ground he was standing on—taking loads of dirt back with him. He further anticipated having to participate with his king in worship to the Syrian god, Rimmon, and sought forgiveness in advance. So here is this other—desperate, but still full of himself, who encountered God and was completely transformed both physically and spiritually. Another account of God’s blessing going far beyond the boundaries of Israel.

Stories Within the Story

There are several interesting stories unfolding in the larger narrative of Naaman's healing—stories that give us glimpses into how God works in the world to make his presence known to others.

First there is Naaman's Hebrew servant girl. The text reveals that she had been captured in raiding excursions into Israel. So here she was a captive, serving in Naaman's household—very much an unexpected person to trigger the entire story, but she did. Without her testimony to the prophet Elisha's power to heal, none of the following events would have occurred. Once again she illustrates how God uses the least likely people to further his will.

Then there was Joram, Israel's king. While Elisha was the first thing the servant girl considered, he never crossed Joram's mind. Joram made this all about himself, not about God. Often we see in scripture, those who should be most likely to seek out God, do not do so while the "servant girls" do. Echoes of Christ's teaching about the first and the last are glimpsed in this story.

Next is a contrast of power. Naaman's culture appreciated a show of power—chariots, horses, impressive military victories, gold, gifts and money. In the culture of God's kingdom those often just get in the way. Instead simple obedient faith is valued. Naaman had to discover humility before God could work within him. The Jordan River was not an impressive body of water. Elisha did not respond as expected to gifts and money. There was no pomp or circumstance to greet Naaman. But Naaman was cleansed by a power that far surpassed any he could muster up with the Syrian army. He understood that too after he emerged from the seventh dip in Jordan. God still promises to lift up the humble. Pride remains a spiritual problem preventing God from working within us. God's salvation remains a free gift—no amount of gold can purchase it—it is his power working with us; nothing we can attain or achieve on our own. Naaman's cleansing in the Jordan River is certainly a metaphor for New Testament baptism and being willing to submit in simple faith to God's will. It is all about God—not about us.

Finally, there is the unusual (to us anyway) request by Naaman to take the dirt of Israel back to his home in Syria. For Elisha this was not so unusual however. This was a custom of the ancients to take back with them the very soil of a place that was meaningful to them. In this way they would actually have a physical representation of that place with them. In Naaman's case it has been speculated that he used the dirt to sprinkle on the floor when he had to kneel to Rimmon. He may be bowing in the presence of this god, but he was really kneeling to Jehovah on Jehovah's soil. Others state that he may have used the dirt upon which to build his own altar to God (holy ground). What the gesture does reveal (regardless of how it was used) is Naaman's commitment to follow Jehovah once he returned to Syria. Naaman the other becomes, in a sense an evangelist/witness for God in the other's land. Just imagine his return completely cleansed from leprosy! No doubt his witness was powerful.

The other part of this story concerns Gehazi, Elisha's greedy servant. That is a sad epilogue on this otherwise powerful encounter between God and an other—and the ways God worked through many to bring about Naaman to faith along with who knows how many others through his witness. Wonder what God is up to in our world today in unusual ways to bring people to faith?