

9.17.06

The Healing Power of God 2 Kings 5:1-19a

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Yesterday I had the pleasure of officiating at the wedding of Don and Gini LiSieur's daughter Karen and her husband Kirk. On Friday night Don and Gini hosted a lovely luau dinner for their family and we were there as well. I was talking with Kirk on Friday night by the grill and he was telling me about his family. He is an only child, his mother passed away many years ago and he and his father have been very close. Sadly, his dad has Alzheimer's disease and so he couldn't be present to share in the joy of the wedding. Kirk said, *"It is just such an awful disease, it has got to be the worst."* Alzheimer's, HIV/AIDS, ALS, Cancer – these are among the diseases we fear the most. In biblical times, the most feared disease was probably leprosy. The word leprosy is used in the Bible for a variety of skin diseases, the worst of which was so disfiguring and contagious that people had to leave their homes and communities and were banished to live out their days amongst other lepers, untouched, uncomforted, and alone. Today's scripture is about a very powerful man, who is not an Israelite, who receives the dreaded diagnosis of leprosy.

"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.** 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. She said to her mistress, ***"If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."*** So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 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 ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments (this is a huge sum of money). 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.**"* 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.”

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.”** So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. **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.”* **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! 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.¹³ 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’?”*¹⁴ 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. 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.”*

Namaan is a powerful and proud man, the commander of the army of Aram, what today is Syria, north of Israel. The Lord had given him victory, which implies that God is involved beyond the borders of Israel. Then at the peak of his success he receives terrible news in a way that many of us can relate to who have heard bad news from a doctor. He is told he has a terrible and slowly terminal disease that will rob him of his strength and cut him off from his wife and family and cause him to lose his position. This was obviously a huge topic of discussion with his wife and so we meet a young woman, who was taken captive during a raid into Israel and when she learns from Namaan’s wife of her husband’s diagnosis, she replies with great confidence, **“If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”** Don’t miss

what a statement of faith that is from a young woman who has been captured, taken away from her home, forced to become a servant, and yet she has not given up on God or her faith. Even though she surely couldn't have understood why she had gone through everything she had, she still believed.

When we are desperate we are more likely to try things so based on the word of a captive young woman, Namaan goes to his king and tells him what the girl said and he wants to go to this prophet to be healed. The king basically says, "Go ahead, whatever you want to do, I'll send you with the appropriate papers so the king of Israel knows you come in peace, looking to be healed." Namaan took a huge sum of money with him along with some great clothes to offer as a gift and as a sign of how rich and important he was and set out on the 100 mile or so journey with a company of servants and other men and came to the king of Israel.

The poor king of Israel is immediately thoroughly distraught tearing his clothes crying out in despair that the king of Aram is trying to pick a fight by asking him to do something he doesn't think is possible. The king's response is quite a contrast to the assured confidence of the slave woman who believed that Elisha could cure Namaan.

The presence of this Aramean army commander obviously was front page news in the Samaria Times the next day so Elisha quickly learns about what is going on – there is the potential for the situation to become explosive so he sends word to the King of Israel to send Namaan to see him and he will learn there is a prophet in Israel. So Namaan with his large entourage pull up to Elisha's house with all their horses and chariots. Namaan is a proud, wealthy man used to being treated with the greatest respect and he has a terrible disease and has traveled 100 miles so he is greatly insulted when he is not even invited inside. Elisha doesn't come out to greet him personally. (GO BACK TO PASSAGE ON P. 2)

Namaan wanted some show, he wanted some good sounding prayers, a little physical demonstration, some good old time supernatural intervention that would be impressive and worthy of a man of his stature. Instead, Elisha's servant tells him to take a bath. This is just not what he was expecting his ego and his nationalism come through clearly – "I deserve more personal attention, the rivers in my country are better than any rivers in Israel."

God has always been concerned about and seeking to bring healing to those who are sick and suffering from diseases and to alleviate the pain and isolation that so often are a part of illness. In the story, Namaan is asked to do something he doesn't

understand, to wash in the river. Sometimes God will ask us to do things we don't understand. The only way to understand is to obey. We will all look back with a sigh of relief or feel the pain of regret. The key idea is when God tells us to do something – do it and apply what God's telling you. In other words, **To understand why, submit and apply.**¹ We are called by God to be instruments of the Lord's healing, our task is to submit to God and apply what we know we are to do.

Namaan was healed when he was willing to submit himself to the seemingly silly ritual of taking a bath in the river. He expected something much more dramatic or difficult. But salvation came to him thanks to the testimony of a faithful witness (the young woman), the words of the prophet, and it entailed a baptism. God cleanses not so much through a dramatic performance of a human healer, but through a simple act of obedience. Salvation comes mysteriously when we submit to God's script and not our own.

Namaan's experience of healing and restoration leads to his confession of faith in the Lord. God initiated the whole process of salvation for Naaman and for us. **God healed and cleansed Naaman when he obeyed without understanding anything of the mystery of the experience.** Titus 3:4-5 says, "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

Even when Naaman proclaimed his faith, it was simplistic, inadequate, and not without distractions or hesitation. Elisha didn't condemn him because his understanding was far from mature nor for his lack of one hundred percent commitment at this early stage. **Elisha sends him away with a blessing, "Go in peace!" There was room for grace in Elisha's theology and there should be in ours as well.**

(Elisha's servant Gehazi is not gracious, he is disdainful, greedy and opportunistic and he tries to profit from Naaman's illness, desperation, and gratitude. He puts a squeeze on Naaman to profit himself. In every age there are people looking to use the name of the Lord to enrich themselves – this story is a stern warning against such ungodly behavior.

¹ (phrase is from Andy Stanley's book *Communicating for a Change*).
a *Gk washing*

What a contrast to the young, unnamed woman who even though she was a captive in a foreign land, she remained faithful while the right hand man of Elisha was corrupt and the king of Israel was despairing and fearful.)

I need to say one last thing about this story and that is it highlights **The inclusivity of God's saving activity**. God gives victory (Hebrew word also means "deliverance" or "salvation") to Namaan. It appears to be God's will to bring salvation to Namaan, even though Namaan was not among God's chosen people. The ironic reversal of the story. The Gentile, Syrian commander is restored, while the Israelite Gehazi, the servant of the prophet is cursed.

Jesus points to this story to justify the inclusivity of his own ministry in Luke 4. In preaching to his hometown synagogue, Jesus reads from Isaiah and then mentions two Bible stories they all would have learned in synagogue school.

"There were a lot of widows suffering in Israel during the famine in Elijah's day. "Oh yeah, it was awful." "And who was it received the mercy of God?" "A Phoenician woman." "Yeah, I guess, yeah." "There was a lot of leprosy in Israel during Elisha's time." "Oh yeah, it was awful." "And who was it received the mercy of God?" "A Syrian soldier." What was the response of Jesus' audience to these ancient stories of theirs? Next line in Luke 4? Kill preacher.

"But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." Luke 4:25-30

Just as the prophet Elijah ministered to a Phoenician widow of Zarephath when there was a terrible famine, and Elisha shared the mercy of God to Namaan the Aramean, Jesus also proclaimed the good news to outcasts and outsiders as well. God used the prophet to heal leprosy.

Jesus healed people with leprosy and all kinds of diseases.

d The terms *leper* and *leprosy* can refer to several diseases

The early church prayed for and ministered to people who were afflicted and in need of healing. What are we going to do about it? How are we going to be a part of ministering to people who need healing and comfort? The **leprosy of today is HIV/AIDS. Nearly 40 million people in the world are living with HIV and 64% of them live in sub-Saharan Africa.**

Prayer by Joyce Rupp (adapted):

“May you desire to be healed.

May what is wounded in your life be restored to good health.

May you be receptive to the way in which healing needs to happen.

May you take good care of yourself.

May you extend compassion to all that hurts within your body, mind, spirit.

May you be patient with the time it takes to heal.

May you be aware of the wonders of your body, mind, and spirit and their amazing capacity to heal.

May the skills of all those who are caring for you be used to the best of their ability in returning you to good health.

May you be open to receive from those who extend kindness, care, and compassion to you.

May you be open to extending kindness, care, and compassion to others.

May you rest peacefully under the sheltering wings of divine love, trusting in God’s gracious presence.

May you find little moments of beauty and joy to sustain you.

May you keep hope in your heart.”