

ELISHA

A MAN WHOSE LIFE WAS BLESSED (2 KINGS 5:1–17)

The Bible holds a mirror up to life. As we look at the colorful personalities who walk its pages, we cannot help but see people around us—and even ourselves. In the story of Naaman, we see familiar reflections in what happened as Naaman got sick, as he sought a cure, and as God’s “prescription” did not suit him. I hope we also see some depicted as Naaman calmed down and finally accepted the remedy.

THE DIAGNOSIS (5:1)

“But He Was a Leper”

The story begins with a description of Naaman. He was “captain of the army of the king of Aram” (v. 1a). We might think of him as “a four-star general.” He was “a great man with his master” (v. 1b). The Berkeley Version calls him “an important official.” He was also “highly respected” (v. 1c). As we shall see, he was respected—and perhaps even loved—by his subordinates. “By him the LORD had given victory to Aram” (v. 1d). God had worked through him even though he was an unbeliever. He was “also a valiant warrior” (v. 1e). He was no behind-the-battle-lines commander. He had proven his bravery in combat.

We might be tempted to envy Naaman—until we come to the little word “but.” How easily that small adversative conjunction can reverse our perception of others!

- “He is ‘a good man,’ *but* he has a bad temper.”
- “She is ‘a good woman,’ *but* she cannot control her tongue.”
- “He has wonderful talent and could be a

great servant of the Lord, *but* he refuses to give up the world.”

- “He is ‘a great preacher,’ *but* he does not live what he preaches.”

Notice the end of the description of Naaman: “But he was a leper” (v. 1f). It is as though an artist had painted a beautiful portrait and then dipped his brush in black paint and slashed it across the picture, destroying its beauty.

Leprosy was one of the most dreaded diseases of the ancient world. In Israel, lepers cried, “Unclean! Unclean!” (Leviticus 13:45b)—and people scrambled to get out of their way. When leprosy first appeared, it looked like a freckle on the skin, but eventually all the flesh became discolored. Nodules formed on the extremities of the body. In advanced stages, the affected areas dropped away, joint by joint. It was not unusual to see a leper without fingers, toes, ears, or even a nose.

No matter how many accolades might be heaped on Naaman, one fact remained: He was a leper. Instead of envying him, the lowliest slave in Aram would have refused to trade places with him.

“But You Are a Sinner”

Can we make application today? From the early days of the church, leprosy has been considered a figure of sin. Warren Wiersbe wrote,

Although there is no direct scriptural statement that leprosy is a picture of sin, when you read Leviticus 13, you can clearly see parallels. Like leprosy, sin is deeper than the skin (v. 3), it spreads (v. 7), it defiles (v. 45), it

isolates (v. 46), and it is fit only for the fire (vv. 52, 57).¹

Others have noted the similarities. The following comments were adapted from F. W. Krummacher:

We can hardly find an emblem of sin more striking and significant. Its incurableness by ordinary means serves to indicate our inability to save ourselves. Its contagiousness sets forth the evil influence of one sinner upon another. The disgust belonging to it reminds us how abominable is all sin in the sight of God. He who was visited by the plague of leprosy was excluded from the camp and separated from the people of Israel.²

The prophet Isaiah may have had leprosy in mind when he wrote of the sinfulness of Israel: "From the sole of the foot even to the head there is nothing sound in it, only bruises, welts and raw wounds" (Isaiah 1:6).

There are, of course, differences between leprosy and sin. Leprosy affected only a small percentage of the population, while sin infects all who are accountable for their actions (Romans 3:23). Again, when one had leprosy, it was soon apparent to that individual and to others, while many today are unaware that they are sinners in need of the grace of God.

If you have not yet thrown yourself on the Lord's mercy, consider your spiritual state. Paul pictured his life before Christ in these words: "For I know that nothing good dwells in me . . . ; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want" (Romans 7:18, 19). Can you see yourself in Paul's words? Do you ever fail to do the good you want to do? Are you ashamed of some of the things you have done? The Bible calls these things "sin," and the Bible declares that such can damn your soul (Romans 6:23).

Naaman had many good qualities, but they amounted to little in light of one tragic fact: "But he was a leper." You may be a man . . . or a woman . . . or a teenager . . . with many admirable attributes; but, regarding your eternal destiny,

all these positive traits are offset by one inescapable truth: "But you are a sinner." If Naaman had been unaware of his condition, he would never have made the trip to find the prophet. Even so, until you are willing to admit you are a sinner—lost and unable to save yourself—you will never turn to the Lord for salvation.

THE "PRESCRIPTION" (5:2–12)

Recommendation

In verse 2 we are introduced to a little Hebrew maiden: "Now the Arameans had gone out in bands and had taken captive a little girl from the land of Israel" (v. 2a). Never discount the power and influence of a child. More than one parent has been moved by a plea from his or her child: "Mommy, please go to church with us!"; "Daddy, please stop smoking!"

This little Jewish girl "waited on Naaman's wife" (v. 2b). She had every reason to be sullen and unhappy, to hate her master, and perhaps even to lose her faith. She had done none of those. Instead of desiring vengeance, her heart had gone out to Naaman (see Romans 12:19–21). One day, she said to her mistress, "I wish that my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! Then he would cure him of his leprosy" (2 Kings 5:3). "The prophet . . . in Samaria" was Elisha. The maiden's faith had remained intact, and she wanted Naaman to know there was hope!

If you have not yet turned to God, it is important for you to understand that you are lost; but it is also important for you to know that there is *hope*. Cleansing *is* available (see John 15:3; Ephesians 5:26)—through the blood of Jesus (Revelation 1:5; see 1 John 1:7)! Paul wrote,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. . . . In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:3–7).

Perhaps you first heard this truth from a child, or perhaps from a friend or a neighbor—or maybe you are hearing it for the first time. Whatever the source, believe it!

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Distinct* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Victor, 2002), 37.

²F. W. Krummacher, *Elisha, a Prophet for Our Times* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1993), 147.

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.³

When you come to the Lord in loving, trusting obedience (see Galatians 3:26, 27), your sins will be “wash[ed] away” in that precious blood (Acts 22:16; see Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38)!

Naaman was told the little servant’s words; and he, in turn, repeated them to the king (2 Kings 5:4). The fact that the remark of a young girl was taken seriously says much about her character. She may have been separated from her family and her people, but she was still behaving like a child of God. She had maintained her integrity!

Response

Preparation was quickly made. Soon Naaman departed with a letter to the king of Israel, along with hundreds of pounds of precious metals, plus clothing from the finest shops in Damascus (v. 5).

As we watch Naaman start his journey, I am reminded of common mistakes people make regarding their salvation. Naaman’s basic mistake was that *he tried to do God’s will in man’s way*. For instance, he thought he could buy his cure. Many today think they can “buy” or “earn” their salvation by good works—but no one can ever be good enough or do enough to merit his salvation (see Ephesians 2:8, 9; Revelation 22:17). Further, Naaman was heading for the wrong person: to the king instead of the prophet (see 2 Kings 5:6). Likewise, many go to wrong religious authorities: to the flawed traditions of men instead of the infallible Word of God (see Matthew 15:1–9).

When Naaman and his entourage reached Samaria, the letter from the king of Aram was given to the king of Israel. This was the message: “And now as this letter comes to you, behold, I have sent Naaman my servant to you, that you may cure him of his leprosy” (2 Kings 5:6). “When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, ‘Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man is sending word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?’” (v. 7a). All the king could see was an ulterior motive; he thought the king

of Aram was looking for an excuse for war: “But consider now, and see how he [the king of Aram] is seeking a quarrel against me” (v. 7b).

Here is what *should* have happened: The king should have laughed and said, “Thanks for the compliment, but I am not the one who can help you. You need to go to the prophet Elisha, who lives in a small house at the edge of town.” That possibility evidently did not occur to him. A little Hebrew slave thought of God’s prophet, but the king over God’s people did not.

Remedy

News of the king’s distress reached Elisha, and the prophet had Naaman sent to him (v. 8). “So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots and stood at the doorway of the house of Elisha” (v. 9). Can you hear the hoof beats, the rattle of the chariots, the creaking of leather, and the murmur of voices as the entourage arrived at the prophet’s humble dwelling? Can you see Naaman sitting proudly in his chariot—in his glittering clothing, his majestic robe, and his metal-and-leather armor and helmet—waiting for the prophet to acknowledge his prestigious presence?

Elisha did not come from his house. Perhaps Naaman had a trumpet blown to announce his arrival. Still nothing. Finally, the door opened and a man came out, obviously a servant (v. 10a). I picture him with an unkempt beard, wearing a worn and patched robe. The messenger told Naaman, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean” (v. 10b).

Why did Elisha himself not come out? Maybe he was busy with other matters, but I think he wanted to cure Naaman of his pride as much as he wanted to cure him of his leprosy. Number one on the list of things God hates is pride (Proverbs 6:16–19; see the KJV).

Reaction

Was Naaman overjoyed when he heard the simple instructions? No, he “was furious” (2 Kings 5:11a). The NIV says he was “angry”; the CEV has “he stormed off, grumbling.” When I was a boy in Oklahoma, we would have said that Naaman “had a conniption fit”; perhaps you have a term that would describe his reaction. Naaman was ready to forget the whole

³Robert Lowry, “Nothing but the Blood,” *Songs of Faith and Praise*, comp. and ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).

thing and go home (v. 11b). He had left Aram with his flesh rotting away, and he would return in the same condition. How tragic!

Naaman said, “Behold, I thought, ‘He will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper’” (v. 11c). He had worked out in his mind exactly what Elisha would do: The prophet would mumble an incantation and wave his hands mysteriously—like the false prophets back in Aram. Naaman was still set on “doing God’s will in man’s way.”

“Behold, I thought” can get a person in trouble. When I was a boy, I bought some fireworks. One firecracker had a propeller on the end. “Behold, I thought” the propeller would spin and make the device go *forward*. I was exploding the fireworks in our backyard, which was filled with trees and had little open space. I placed the firecracker with the propeller under a tree, pointing toward the open area, and lit the fuse. Instead of going forward, the firework went *straight up*, hit a branch of the tree, reversed downward, hit the ground, and then zoomed between my legs—where it exploded. “Behold I thought” resulted in two holes in my jeans and burn scars I have to this day.

Counselors would call Naaman’s thoughts “self-talk”: what a person says to himself. If your “self-talk” is misinformed and incorrect, it can do great harm. I have talked to miserable people who said, in effect, “Behold I thought when I got married, it would be [like this or that].” I have counseled other unhappy folk who said something like this: “Behold I thought when I got this job . . . or when I had this baby . . . or when I started preaching . . . it would be different.” The greatest tragedy, however, is when people engage in misguided *religious* “self-talk”: “Yes, I know the Bible says [this or that]—but, *behold*, I think I will stay with what my parents or a preacher taught me.” Donald Barnhouse said, “Everybody has the privilege of going to heaven God’s way or going to hell their own way.”⁴

Naaman continued ranting: “Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” (v. 12a). Those who have seen the rivers in that part of the world agree that “the

golden streams”⁵ of Damascus are to be preferred over the muddy Jordan. Naaman tried to turn the occasion into a river contest instead of a test of whether or not he could swallow his pride and do what the prophet said.

This mistake made by Naaman has been repeated in religious circles through the years: “Surely it is better to ‘baptize’ a baby than to take a chance on that individual rejecting the Lord when he is older”; “Surely it is better to use a few drops of water to ‘baptize’ people than to get them all wet when you immerse them.” My reply to Naaman and all who repeat his mistake is simple: Nothing is “better” than doing what God has commanded, exactly in the way He said to do it (Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:46; see Isaiah 55:8, 9)!

“So [Naaman] turned and went away in a rage” (v. 12b). He probably felt insulted by Elisha’s failure to come out of the house and acknowledge his importance. He probably felt demeaned by the suggestion that he dip his illustrious personage in dirty water. He had gone to the “doctor,” but he did not like the “prescription”—so he got angry. However, his anger did not change reality; he was still afflicted with “the living death.”⁶ I may get angry at the bathroom scales, but that will not make my weight problem disappear. Getting angry at a barometer will not stop a storm. Even more significant is that getting angry at a gospel preacher will not change the fact that you are a sinner who needs to trust in Jesus and commit your life to Him.

THE CURE (5:13–17)

Cleansed by God’s Power!

Naaman’s pilgrimage was heading for disaster when “his servants came near and spoke to him” (2 Kings 5:13a). They said, “My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” (v. 13b). The fact that his servants spoke up tells

⁵Henry Blunt, *Lectures on the History of Elisha* (Philadelphia: Herman Hooker, 1839), 93; J. Robert Vannoy, notes on 2 Kings, *The NIV Study Bible*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 532.

⁶This phrase is from Charles Swindoll, “Naaman and Gehazi: Characters in Contrast,” radio sermon, n.d.

⁴Quoted in Wiersbe, 38.

us something about them: They cared about their master. It also says much about their relationship with Naaman and about Naaman himself. Many masters would have resented this “interference” and might even have punished those with the “audacity” to talk to them in such a way. However, these servants felt they could speak freely to Naaman, and he was willing to listen.

They said, in effect, “What if the prophet had told you to engage in hand-to-hand combat with your strongest adversary or fight with wild beasts? What if he had told you to erect a monument of gold to his God? Would you not be willing to do *anything* to rid yourself of this curse? Then why not do this simple thing he has asked you to do?”

It has always been a mystery to me why some seem to be willing to do anything and everything to free themselves from the guilt of sin—anything and everything, that is, except obey the simple commands of the Lord.

Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16).

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (Galatians 3:26, 27).

If God asked you to do “some great thing,” would you not do it? “How much more then, when [He] says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean?’”

The words of the servants convinced Naaman that it would be foolish to go home without trying Elisha’s remedy. Thus he “went down” to the Jordan (2 Kings 5:14a). Can you see him standing on the bank of the river, as he stripped himself of his clothing and stepped into the water? He dipped himself beneath the water, then stood aright. He looked at the flesh on his arms and on his chest, but his skin was still ravaged with leprosy. Perhaps, as disappointment showed on his face, one of his servants cried from the bank, “That’s just once! The prophet said ‘seven times.’”

The text implies that when Naaman dipped himself one time, he was not then one-seventh

clean; and when he dipped twice, he was not two-sevenths clean. Rather, it took all seven dips before any cleansing took place. Krummacher suggested that “he dipped once, but without effect; a second time, and the leprosy was not departed; again, and again, and again, but the result was the same.”⁷ G. Rawlinson wrote, “To repeat a formal act six times without perceiving any result, and yet to persevere and repeat it a seventh time, requires a degree of faith and trust that men do not often possess.”⁸

I imagine the servants standing on the shore counting, “That’s once. . . . That’s twice. . . . That’s three times. . . .” Finally, Naaman went under for the seventh time. The text says that he “dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God” (v. 14b). As he plunged beneath the water that seventh time, did his flesh begin to tingle? Did he feel new life surging through his veins? Did he feel infused with renewed vigor?⁹ I do not know, but the text says that when he came up from the water, “his flesh was restored¹⁰ like the flesh of a little child and he was clean” (v. 14c). The next time you see a baby, look at its smooth, sweet, perfect skin. Naaman’s flesh was like that! One writer described “the new Naaman” like this:

. . . his countenance [was] glowing, and his eyes glistening with the brightness, and vigor, and cheerfulness of youth; his scaly covering left beneath the flood, and his wasted flesh again restored, fresh and healthy like that of a little child, and pure from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot!¹¹

Naaman retraced his steps to the prophet and made this moving confession: “Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel” (v. 15b). Naaman understood that it was not the water that had cleansed him. If there had been power in the waters of Jordan to cure

⁷Krummacher, 149. See Elaine J. Fletcher, *Elisha, the Miracle Prophet* (Washington, DC: Revival and Herald Publishing Association, 1960), 48.

⁸G. Rawlinson, “2 Kings,” *The Pulpit Commentary*, vol. 5, 1 & 2 Kings, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 94.

⁹This sentence and the previous two were suggested by wording in Krummacher, 150.

¹⁰If Naaman had lost any extremities because of the leprosy, the word used here would imply that they were also “restored.”

¹¹Krummacher, 150.

leprosy, he would have had to fight his way to the river through crowds of lepers from all over the world. Rather, he realized that he had been cured by *God*—the true God, the God of the Israelites—and he pledged himself to worship and serve only Him (v. 17b).

Saved by God's Grace!

Again, we can draw parallels regarding our own response to the Lord. The Lord tells the sinner cursed with the "leprosy" of sin to believe (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8), to repent (Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30), to confess his faith in Jesus (Matthew 10:32; Romans 10:9, 10), and to be baptized (immersed) in water (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38). In response to this, the sinner believes. Is he one-fourth clean? No, the Lord also said to repent, confess, and be baptized. He then repents. Is he one-half clean? No, the Lord also told him to confess and be baptized. He confesses that he believes Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Is he three-fourths clean? No, the Lord also commanded baptism. However, when the sinner with faith in his heart goes into the watery grave of baptism and comes forth (see Romans 6:3, 4), his soul is washed as pure as the soul of a little child (Acts 22:16; see Matthew 18:3)! He has new life in Jesus (Romans 6:4); he is a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17)!

Does this mean there is power in the water of baptism? No more than there was power in the water of the Jordan River. God cleanses. Only He has that power; only He has that right. However, God cleansed Naaman *when* Naaman did what His servant Elisha told him to do, exactly as he told him. Even so, God has promised that He will cleanse you from the guilt of your sin *when* you do what He has asked you to do—exactly as He says in His Word.

CONCLUSION

It is marvelous to contemplate how God worked step by step to cure Naaman of his leprosy and, more important, to make a believer of him. At any point, however, Naaman could have thwarted His plan. Think of all that has happened in your life to bring you to the moment of decision. Can you see the hand of the Lord; can you see His concern? God desires to cure you of the leprosy of sin (see 2 Peter 3:9); but even as Naaman could have thwarted the

Lord's plan for him, so can you. Dwight L. Moody wrote that Naaman "lost his temper; then he lost his pride; then he lost his leprosy; that is generally the order in which proud rebellious sinners are converted."¹² If pride is holding you back, turn loose of it today. It is still true that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). Come to the Lord today in humble, trusting obedience!

NOTES FOR TEACHERS & PREACHERS

This lesson is based on notes made from forgotten sources. My apologies for any failures to give credit where credit is due.

An alternative title for this lesson is "But He Was a Leper." An outline with that title is on page 25 in "A Survey of the Old Testament" (*Truth for Today*, June 1993). Another source is "The Last Dip," by Eddie Cloer.¹³ A title (and approach) used by some preachers for this story is "The Mistakes of Naaman."

This lesson would lend itself to a visual presentation (chalkboard diagram, chart, overhead presentation, or PowerPoint presentation) that compares Naaman with alien sinners today.

—David Roper

¹²Quoted in Wiersbe, 39.

¹³This lesson was printed on the covers of the "Revelation, 8" issue. (Within the US, it appears on the back covers of the "Revelation, 7" issue [August 1999].)

KINGS REIGNING AROUND THE TIME OF ELISHA

Kings of Judah	Kings of Israel	Kings of Aram (Syria)
Jehoshaphat (873–48 B.C.)	Ahab (874–53 B.C.)	Ben-hadad I (c. 895–60 B.C.)
Jehoram (848–41 B.C.)	Ahaziah (853–52 B.C.)	Ben-hadad II (860–42 B.C.)
Ahaziah (841 B.C.)	Jehoram/Joram (852–41 B.C.)	
Athaliah (841–35 B.C.)	Jehu (841–14 B.C.)	Hazael (842–798 B.C.)
Joash (Jehoash) (835–796 B.C.)	Jehoahaz (814–798 B.C.)	
	Joash (Jehoash) (798–783 B.C.)	

(Dates are approximate. The Ben-hadad in these lessons is Ben-hadad II.)