

A MAN WHOSE LIFE WAS CURSED

(2 KINGS 4:14, 27, 29, 42, 43; 5:5, 10, 14–16, 19–27; 6:15; 8:4, 5)

The account of Naaman's healing is remarkable in several respects, including its length. The entire fifth chapter of 2 Kings is given to this event. We have devoted two lessons to this story, but we still have one to go: the sequel centering on Gehazi. Chapter 5 might be thought of as a contrast between two men: Naaman and Gehazi. "Naaman begins as a leper and ends up as a servant of the Lord. Gehazi begins as a servant and finishes his life as a leper."¹

GEHAZI'S TRAITS

(4:14, 27, 29, 42, 43; 6:15; 8:4, 5)

The name "Gehazi" may mean "valley of vision."² Beyond that, we have no background on Gehazi. We do not know when or where he began to serve Elisha. One possibility is that Elisha selected him from one of the schools of the sons of the prophets. Perhaps he was the brightest, most promising of those students. At any rate, he had been given the opportunity of a lifetime: to travel with Elisha and learn first-hand from him as Elisha had learned from Elijah. If Gehazi had taken full advantage of that opportunity, today we might be talking about *three* great prophets of the northern kingdom of Israel: Elijah, Elisha, and Gehazi.

Thus far in our studies, we have seen the potential in Gehazi. Gehazi's insight is seen in his conclusion that the Shunammite woman de-

sired a son (4:14). Gehazi's dependability is shown in the fact that Elisha entrusted him with his staff when the boy died (4:29). Gehazi's reputation is evident in the royal command to tell about his master (8:4, 5).

At the same time, Gehazi's spiritual immaturity occasionally shows through. Gehazi was ready to repulse a grieving mother (4:27). It was probably Gehazi who doubted when told to feed one hundred men with a small sack of food (4:42, 43). It may have been Gehazi who was paralyzed with fear when he saw the Aramean army (6:15).³

However, all of Gehazi's shortcomings could have been forgiven and forgotten. His failures were no greater than those of Jesus' apostles, most of whom went on to become great spiritual leaders. In the end, Gehazi's destiny rested on the outcome of some crucial tests, which the servant failed miserably.

GEHAZI'S TESTS

(5:5, 10, 14–16, 19–26)

A Test of Compassion

Gehazi's first crucial test was a test of compassion. In a previous lesson, we suggested that Gehazi was the messenger sent by Elisha to tell Naaman to dip in the Jordan (5:10). Try to imagine the dazzling display of wealth that greeted Gehazi's eyes when he came out of the house. Perhaps his heart beat faster as he saw the gold, silver, and costly garments in the arms of

¹This statement was made by Charles Swindoll, "Naaman and Gehazi: Characters in Contrast," radio sermon, n.d.

²M. A. Macleod, "Gehazi," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 2:423.

³M. R. Wilson, "Gehazi," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 2:670. This story will be covered in the next lesson.

Naaman's servants (5:5b). He was probably greatly disappointed when the riches were loaded on the pack animals and Naaman's procession moved eastward, toward the Jordan.

To his delight, Naaman returned in a few days, again bringing his treasures (5:15). However, when the soldier tried to press them on Elisha, to Gehazi's dismay, the prophet refused them (5:16a). I can imagine Gehazi's thoughts: "If anyone deserves a reward, we do—and no one needs help more than we do. Our cupboard is bare, and Elisha could use a new robe. For that matter, so could I! Besides that, what about the needs of the schools of the prophets? I'm sure \$80,000 is nothing to this heathen, but just think of the good we could do with it! What is my master thinking?" Nevertheless, Elisha remained firm on the matter (5:16b), so Naaman's caravan departed (5:19b).

The inspired writer revealed what was in Gehazi's heart as he watched the procession leave: "Behold, my master has spared this Naaman the Aramean, by not receiving from his hands what he brought" (5:20a). Note the word "spared": "has *spared* this Naaman the Aramean." To Gehazi, Naaman was still the hated enemy, a foe "who kidnapped little Jewish girls, and a leper who should have been isolated and left to die."⁴ In Gehazi's mind, Naaman deserved punishment; Elisha should have taken all he offered and more. Instead, the prophet had (as we say) "let him off easy."

Gehazi had failed the test of compassion. One purpose of this story was no doubt to teach the Jews that they should have compassion on people with tragedy in their lives, no matter who they were or what their nationality might be. However, the Jews had a hard time learning that lesson (see Luke 4:27, 28). In the New Testament, Jesus emphasized that God desires compassion (Matthew 9:13). Time and again, it is stated that Jesus Himself was "moved with compassion" (Matthew 20:34; Mark 1:41). Paul wrote, "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion . . ." (Colossians 3:12).

In Luke 10 Jesus told of a priest and a Levite who underwent a test of compassion and failed

that test (vv. 30–32). He then told of a Samaritan who passed the same test (vv. 33–35). You and I take the compassion test every day; we are surrounded by people with needs. May God help us not to be self-centered and "pass by on the other side," but to respond in a helpful, loving way to those needs (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 4:28b).

A Test of Honesty

Gehazi decided that if Elisha would not relieve Naaman of his treasures, he would. He thought, "As the LORD lives, I will run after him and take something from him" (2 Kings 5:20). Gehazi's use of the oath "As the LORD lives" (compare with v. 16) is disturbing; he invoked the sacred name of God to sanctify his lying and deceit. I am reminded of those today who use the name of God to punctuate their speech with little or no reverence for that sacred name. God's name is to be "hallowed [kept holy]" (Matthew 6:9; AB); it is not to be spoken lightly or frivolously (see Exodus 20:7).

Naaman's company had already left (2 Kings 5:19b); but so large a group, with some on foot, would have traveled slowly. If Gehazi ran, he could catch them. "So Gehazi pursued Naaman" (5:21a).

Naaman saw Gehazi chasing after them and stopped the caravan. Verse 21b says that "he came down from the chariot to meet him." Here is another demonstration of the dramatic change in this distinguished leader. Before his Jordan River experience, he would have thought it "beneath him" to dismount his chariot to greet a lowly servant.

The commander must have had a worried look on his face as he asked, "Is all well?" (5:21c). I see Gehazi trying to catch his breath after his hard run. Finally, he was able to answer, "All is well" (5:22a).⁵ Then a series of carefully crafted lies came from the servant's lips:

Lie #1: "My master has sent me" (5:22b).

Lie #2: "[Elisha said to tell you], 'Behold, just now two young men of the sons of the prophets have come to me from the hill country of Ephraim'" (5:22c). (These

⁴Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Distinct* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Victor, 2002), 36.

⁵Both Naaman and Gehazi used a form of *shalom* (Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, vol. 2, *Joshua—Esther* [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.], 499).

imaginary young men would have come from the school at Bethel.)

Lie #3: “[Elisha sends this request:] ‘Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothes’” (5:22d). (Gehazi probably desired more, but his greed was modified by the need to tell a believable story.)

Naaman had no reason to doubt Gehazi and was probably delighted by the request. It gave him the opportunity to express his appreciation in a tangible way. Gehazi had asked for one talent of silver, but Naaman offered to give him two (5:23a). The servant would have been elated at the offer, but Eastern courtesy required that he refuse. Naaman played his part in the ritual and “urged him”⁶ to accept (5:23b). With the formalities completed, Gehazi “reluctantly” agreed, so Naaman ordered that two talents of silver be placed in two bags, along with the clothing (5:23c). Since these items would have weighed around 120–150 pounds (55–68 kilograms), he assigned two servants to help carry the gifts back to Elisha (5:23d).

Finally, Gehazi and Naaman’s servants reached “the hill” (5:24a). Although the Hebrew word for “hill” is obscure⁷ (the KJV has “tower”), the term probably refers to a “well-known hill” just outside the city.⁸ Gehazi did not dare allow the men to proceed farther. If they came closer to the city, they might be seen—then people would ask questions. Plus, if Naaman’s servants went all the way to Elisha’s house, they might ask to meet the two young trainees who had come to visit Elisha.

Gehazi stopped the men and sent them back to Naaman (5:24d). He probably said something like this: “I can take it from here, but thanks for your help. I know Naaman is anxious to get home, so you probably need to get back to the caravan. Be sure to tell Naaman again how much this will help the prophet.” The men were perhaps surprised, but they handed their sacks to

Gehazi (5:24b) and departed (5:24e).

The text says that Gehazi “deposited [the gifts] in the house” (5:24c). This may have been some other house in the area, but it was probably the simple abode Gehazi shared with his master. I picture the following sequence:

Gehazi struggled down the hill, a heavy bag in each hand. He reached the outskirts of town and started through the narrow streets. Occasionally he stopped to catch his breath and ease his aching muscles. Finally, he reached the house. Setting the sacks down, he opened the front door and peered inside. Elisha was not in sight. Good! He picked up the bags and hurried to where he slept. He deposited the sacks in a corner, covered them with worn-out clothing, and stepped back to inspect his work. Perfect! No one would suspect a fortune was hidden beneath the rags. He gave a sigh of relief. He had done it! He had robbed Naaman (as the soldier deserved) and, at the same time, made himself a rich man. His mind began to envision all he could buy with the silver and gold and the proceeds from the sale of the valuable clothing.⁹ He could be a wealthy landowner and have “olive groves and vineyards and sheep and oxen” (v. 26c). He could buy “male and female servants” (v. 26d). Instead of being a servant, he would be served! However, he did not want to make Elisha suspicious. He had already been gone too long. He straightened his garments, dusted off his robe, mopped his brow, ran his fingers through his hair and beard, and went to find Elisha.

“He went in and stood before his master” (5:25a), trying to look innocent. When I was a boy and had done something wrong, my mother invariably showed up. I tried so hard not to look guilty! Maybe you had similar experiences when you were young.

Elisha asked, “Where have you been, Gehazi?” (5:25b). He answered, “Your servant went nowhere” (5:25c). Earlier, Gehazi may have rationalized that there would be no harm in lying to a hated enemy, but now he was lying to a prophet of God! That is one of the problems with lying: Once a person starts lying, he has to keep it up; he has to invent new lies to cover the old lies. One lie begets another. “Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to de-

⁶The words “And he urged him” imply that Gehazi first refused as part of the traditional ritual.

⁷Clyde M. Miller, *First and Second Kings*, The Living Word Commentary series, vol. 7 (Abilene, Tex.: A.C.U. Press, 1991), 337.

⁸C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, “1 and 2 Kings,” *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 3, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 322.

⁹Most writers believe that Elisha’s words in verse 26 indicate that this had been Gehazi’s thinking. One of the ancient Targums adds, “He had thought in his heart to do” (see Clarke, 499). (A Targum is a translation of a portion of the Old Testament into Aramaic. These translations paraphrase and offer explanation of the Scriptures.)

ceive!"¹⁰ Gehazi had failed the test of honesty.

I fear that many are still failing that test; dishonesty seems to abound. Gehazi apparently thought it was all right to lie to a heathen, and some today (who probably consider themselves "honest" people) evidently have no problem with lying in certain circumstances: lying to the government regarding their income tax, lying to patrolmen who stop them for speeding, lying to big corporations in fraudulent claims. However, lying is lying—no matter who is lying, or to whom. The Bible still declares that "all liars . . . will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone" (Revelation 21:8).

Paul's words challenge each of us: "Laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor" (Ephesians 4:25a). Again, he emphasized that we should speak "the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Some find it harder than others to be honest; but, at one time or another, all of us have to take the honesty test. As a rule, lies are told for gain or to escape the consequences of one's actions. The next time you think it may be profitable or less painful to lie than to tell the truth, remind yourself of the consequences of Gehazi's lies. God does not take lying lightly; He hates "a lying tongue" (Proverbs 6:16, 17)!

A Test of Covetousness

When Gehazi lied about where he had been, he was probably hoping that this was one of those occasions when God would hide the facts from his master (see 4:27)—but it was not. The Lord had revealed everything to Elisha. The prophet said to him, "Did not my heart go with you, when the man [Naaman] turned from his chariot to meet you?" (5:26a; compare with John 1:48). Thus Gehazi's deed was revealed.

Elisha asked, "Is it a time to receive money and to receive clothes . . . ?" (5:26b). The prophet had even read the heart of his servant regarding his plans for the money: "Is it a time to receive . . . olive groves and vineyards and sheep and oxen and male and female servants?" (5:26b, c). Thus Gehazi's greed was exposed.

It *was* the time to show Naaman that the prophets of Jehovah were different from the false prophets of Israel and Aram. It *was* the time

to show that God's gifts cannot be purchased with money. It was *not* the time to profit personally from God's graciousness. It was *not* the time to lie and deceive; it is *never* the time for that.

The Bible does not tell us how Gehazi reached the point where his greed was so great that he was willing to do almost anything to satisfy it. Perhaps he had started his apprenticeship to Elisha with great enthusiasm. Maybe he thought that being by the side of the prophet would make life easier. If so, he must have quickly become disillusioned. I can imagine him thinking, "We have so little—and when someone does give us something, Elisha gives it away [see 4:42]! If my master had any business sense at all, we could both be rich men!" Again, I say that we cannot know what went on in Gehazi's mind, but this we can know: He failed the covetousness test—failed it miserably.

From the beginning of time, covetousness (greed) has been one of mankind's greatest problems. In the Old Testament, the last of the Ten Commandments was "You shall not covet . . ." (Exodus 20:17). In the New Testament, Jesus said, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). In describing the sinfulness of mankind, Paul said that people are "filled with . . . greed" (Romans 1:29). He also wrote that "men will be . . . lovers of money . . . rather than lovers of God" and others (2 Timothy 3:2–4).

No one is immune to the sin of covetousness. The poor often do not have what they need, and the rich never have all they want. The writer of the Book of Hebrews challenges each of us: "Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5). Elisha knew when greed consumed Gehazi's heart, and the Lord knows when we succumb to this ever-present temptation: "There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:13). May the Lord help us when we face the test of covetousness!

GEHAZI'S TRAGEDY (5:27)

Can you imagine how Gehazi felt when his

¹⁰Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion* [1808], 6.17; quoted in John Bartlett, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed., ed. Justin Kaplan (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1992), 378.

dishonesty was exposed, how embarrassed he must have been? However, the worst was still to come. Elisha continued, “Therefore, the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants¹¹ forever” (2 Kings 5:27a). Some have called this “poetic justice”; others have observed that “the punishment fit the crime.”

Some may protest: “Wait a minute. I can understand why Gehazi should be punished, but why punish his descendants? They were not the ones who were guilty.” The law of Moses said that God would visit “the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hated [Him]” (Exodus 20:5; see Exodus 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9). Clyde Miller suggested, “Perhaps the severe punishment is meant to reveal the fact that sin is so dangerous that it harms those beyond the sinner himself.”¹² F. W. Krummacher simply wrote, “Let those dispute with God who will.”¹³

Perhaps I should stress that it was the *consequences* of iniquity that were passed on to the children, not the *guilt* of that iniquity. Today we do not live under the law of Moses. However, as we look about us, we see that it is still true that “the sin of the fathers” (Exodus 20:5; NIV) is often passed on to their children:

- A child of an abusive parent is more likely to be abusive to his own children.
- A child of divorced parents is more likely to get a divorce.
- A child of an alcoholic is more likely to be an alcoholic.

Am I saying that if your parents or grandparents committed a particular sin, it is inevitable that you will also commit it? No! With the help of God, you can break the cycle. What I am saying is that, before you commit a sin, you need to consider not only the consequences to yourself but also to others. The ones who suffer most may be those you love the most!

¹¹It has been noted that, if Gehazi never married, he would probably have no descendants to contract leprosy. Since it would be unlikely that anyone would marry a leper, this may have been the case.

¹²Miller, 337.

¹³F. W. Krummacher, *Elisha, a Prophet for Our Times* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1993), 218.

The verdict had been given, and the punishment was carried out at once. Gehazi “went out from [Elisha’s] presence a leper as white as snow” (2 Kings 5:27b; compare with Numbers 12:10). In an instant, Gehazi’s greedy dreams disappeared. He would never be a rich landowner; he would never own servants. Instead, he would be a lonely outcast the remainder of his days, a man with riches no one would want to touch.¹⁴

The world makes light of sin and ridicules the idea that sinning will result in punishment. Look at the rotting and putrefying flesh of Gehazi and learn that “the way of transgressors is hard” (Proverbs 13:15; KJV). Today the penalties are usually not physical, but spiritual; but that does not mean they are less. Paul wrote, “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23a)—spiritual death (see Ephesians 2:1), separation from God (Isaiah 59:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:9). Jesus said of those who “die in [their] sin,” “where I am going [heaven], you cannot come” (John 8:21).

If there is unforgiven sin in your life, do not wait a moment—do not hesitate—but throw yourself on the mercy of God at once! “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near” (Isaiah 55:6)! John wrote, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Acknowledge your sin and do His will that He may bless your life. Do it before it is too late (Hebrews 3:13; 2 Corinthians 6:2)!

CONCLUSION

In our studies on 2 Kings 5, we have seen the contrast between Naaman and Gehazi. Today, you can be like Naaman: You can be cleansed from the leprosy of sin and become a servant of the most high God. On the other hand, you can be like Gehazi: You can reject servanthood and end up a spiritual leper without hope. The choice is yours. A moment ago, I quoted the first part of Romans 6:23. Let me now share the entire verse: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift

¹⁴One writer suggested that Gehazi repented of his sin and was cleansed as Miriam was (Numbers 12:10–15). This conclusion was largely based on Gehazi’s appearance before the king in chapter 8. However, as noted earlier, the incidents of 8:1–6 are probably connected with the famine of 4:38 and thus almost certainly occurred before the story of Naaman. The Bible does not tell us what happened to Gehazi after he left Elisha’s presence.

of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Christ can cleanse you through His blood (1 Peter 1:18, 19)! Come to Him today!

NOTES FOR TEACHERS & PREACHERS

When you use this sermon, you will want to make clear the way a sinner turns to God (Mark

16:15, 16; Acts 2:38) and the way an erring Christian returns to the Lord (Acts 8:22; James 5:16).

An alternate title for this lesson is “Gehazi’s Greed.” If you would prefer to use three “C’s” for the subheadings under the second main heading, you could substitute “candor” for “honesty.”

—David Roper

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