

Can I Know God Personally?

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Date: 05 November 2023

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from the book of 2 Kings, chapter 5, verses 1 to 19.

Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through the Lord had given mercy to Aram.

He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife.

She said to her mistress, If only my master would send the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy. Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said.

[1 : 1 6] By all means go, the king of Aram replied. I will send a letter to the king of Israel. So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of clothing.

The letter that he took to the king of Israel read, With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you, so that you may care of his leprosy. As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life?

Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me. When Elisha, the man of God, heard the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message.

Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me, and he will know there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.

Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed. But Naaman went away angry and said, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot, and cure me of my leprosy.

[2 : 4 2] Are not Abana and Parpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed? So he turned and went off in a rage.

Naaman's servants went to him and said, My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, won't you have done it? How much more then, when he tells you, wash and be cleansed?

So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him. And his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.

So please accept the gift from your servant. The prophet answered, As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing. And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.

[3 : 47] If you will not, said Naaman, please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry. For your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other God but the Lord.

But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing. When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down, and he is leaning on my arm, and I have to bow there also.

When I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this. Go in peace, Elisha said. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Can I know God personally? That is the seventh and the final question in this Explore God series. Can I know the author of the Bible, the God of the Bible?

Can I know him personally? And I want to engage that question looking at this biography we just read, looking at the life story of this one particular person and his pathway, his process for exploring God.

[4 : 56] Jesus preached about this guy in his first sermon that he ever preached, so I think we're on firm footing looking at Naaman. Naaman was like many people in the Bay Area.

He was brilliant. He was sophisticated, accomplished, successful, had an incredibly impressive CV. And he was a person that you would least expect to be seeking the God of the Bible.

In fact, he's surrounded by many smart people who think that the God of the Bible is irrelevant and even ridiculous. And so it's kind of astonishing that he's exploring God and by the end of the story, converting to God and confessing his faith in God.

So who is this guy, Naaman? Well, verse one says that he's the commander of the army of the king of Aram, the general of the Syrian army, the mortal enemy of Israel.

And for him to go to Israel, which, by the way, is losing the military conflict that's currently going on, and to think that the losing team's God is going to help him, that's sort of a crazy part of the story.

[6 : 10] But it says, in addition, it says, he was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram, and he was a valiant soldier.

So this guy's great in the eyes of the king. He's admired in the eyes of the people. He's won victories. He's a valiant soldier. He has military prowess and skill in battle.

He's athletic. He's like many of the people that come to the Bay Area for school or for work, you know, to get that degree, to get that job. And he's just overflowing with physical, social, intellectual, economic capital.

But in spite of having everything that the world could give you, in spite of having all that he could possibly need or want, there's something missing.

There's something off. There's something that's not the way it's supposed to be. The description of Naaman ends with, but he had leprosy. Here's this remarkable man, natural abilities, natural powers, special skills, highly successful in his career and in his life.

[7 : 25] And then this little word, but. But he was a leper. He has a great life, but there's something spoiling his life. And that's like many of us.

Here we are, we're living in the most peaceful, prosperous era in all of human history. Did you realize that? Life expectancy and wealth has never been higher.

Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, modern medicine, various breakthroughs in science and technology, we are less poor and sick, and we are more healthy and wealthy than we've ever been.

And yet I've never met anybody who says, well, everything's all right. That fatal word, but, always comes in, doesn't it?

The world's never been so wonderful, but. We've never had so many amenities, but. All people are being lifted up in an unprecedented way, but something's wrong.

[8 : 28] Something spoils it all. But he had leprosy. But he was a leper. And so I just want to take a deeper look at Naaman as kind of a picture of us.

A picture of who we are. And I want to look at these three questions. What causes us to seek God? How do we find God? And what is required to meet God?

What causes us to seek God? How do we find God? And what is required to meet God? First of all, what causes us to seek God? Again, Naaman has it all, but in spite of having everything the world could possibly give, he has leprosy.

He's got this terrible, wasting disease. He's literally falling apart. And no human being can cure him. And this tells us that, you know, no matter how well we design our lives, there's always going to be something to come in and ruin it, to come in and spoil it.

No amount of success, no amount of power or achievement can keep these things from happening to you. People you love are going to die. Devastating illness is going to come in.

[9 : 37] Relational betrayal, financial reversal, divorce, addiction. We know this. If you just ask around. We in this room know that these things are going to happen to us no matter how self-sufficient we think we are.

One day we're going to wake up and realize that self-sufficiency was an illusion. And that all along, even though we thought we were in control, we weren't in control. We actually were vulnerable and we were fragile.

But it was not always like this. Right? According to the Bible, none of this happened in the Garden of Eden. Human beings were made in a perfect relationship with God and they enjoyed life with God and there was nothing lacking.

There was no disappointment, no unhappiness, nothing ever went wrong. And in many ways, Naaman's leprosy is a sign that we are living in a sin-sick world.

I want to be careful here because the Bible does not directly and specifically connect this sin with that suffering. Right? In John chapter 9, the disciples come to Jesus and say, Jesus, was this man born blind?

[10 : 53] Is he suffering because of some specific sin that he did or his parents did? And Jesus says emphatically, no. But it is true to say that when sin entered into the world, the wholeness of life was broken.

And disease entered into the body. Trouble entered into the mind. Heartbreak entered into the family and into our friendships. Difficulty entered into our work.

And alienation entered into our relationship with God. And so Naaman's leprosy on the outside is in many ways a picture of our sin on the inside.

Right? We're struggling not just from these problems up on the surface that are right here at our skin. We're struggling with problems down in the depths, down in the heart. All of us have something that's really wrong and really bad that we kind of know about but that we're also sort of masters at minimizing and denying.

But you see it come out of Naaman. He goes to the prophet Elisha and he's expecting a certain outcome. And then he doesn't get what he wants. And then how does he respond?

[12 : 05] Right? If you ever want to see what exactly is in your heart, just pay attention to how you respond when you don't get what you want. Right? Why is he so angry? He arrives with his entourage.

He thinks, I ought to get special treatment. And Elisha doesn't even come out to talk to him. He just sends an intermediary. He gives him a message he doesn't want to hear.

It feels insulting to him. It feels beneath him. And what happens in that moment is Elisha's touching on a raw nerve. Right? He's touching on the raw nerve of his pride and his self-centeredness and his sense of superiority.

And really all of us have that kind of stuff down in the depths that's far worse than we think it is and it's ruining our lives. But of course at this point, Naaman just thinks that his problem is skin deep.

All he knows is that his condition is detracting from all that's good in his life. It's just making him more and more miserable. And so he's exhausting all of the options to get better.

[13 : 11] Right? He goes to the king of Syria. He goes to the best and brightest in the land. All the doctors that have all the ability and all the ingenuity and they're baffled. They can't deal with his problem.

They can do nothing for Naaman and his suffering and his disease. It's just getting worse and worse and worse until finally he gets so desperate he hears that there's help in Israel. And so where does he go? He goes from this king to that king.

Right? He goes to another person at the top. And how does he go? He goes with a letter from his king. He goes with more money than all the money that currently exists in Israel.

He goes with all these fine clothes. And he thinks I'll leverage all my connections. I'll leverage all my wealth. I'll leverage all my power that the world has given me.

And yet that doesn't work either. See most people will not seek the God of the Bible until something goes wrong in our lives.

[14 : 13] And we wake up to this illusion of our own self-sufficiency and we realize that we actually can't handle life on our own. And so we turn to the world for help like Naaman turns to these two kings and other people in power.

And then you realize like Naaman that the world is actually completely failing you and totally inadequate to help you with your deepest problems. And it's until we see what the world cannot give us that we'll never really be a seeker after God.

Unless we learn that the world cannot help us. And until we stop looking to the world and all of its power centers and power brokers to give us what only God can give us will not really make any spiritual progress.

Does that make sense? Amen. Yeah, thank you. What causes us to seek God? It's problems that are way beyond us.

Problems that other people can't fix. Well, how do we find God? How do we find God? Well, Naaman will not find God until he stops trusting in himself.

[15 : 30] He won't find God until he stops trusting in his way that he thinks he should be cured. Right? There's a definite remedy for him. There's an absolute solution.

There's a certain cure, but neither Naaman nor the greatest people in all of Syria know what it is. They're brilliant, but they're unaware and they're ignorant of the one crucial thing.

Right? And the reason that they can't, the reason for that is because the signpost to the solution and the solution itself is utterly different than what anyone imagines that it ought to be.

This cure comes to Naaman in a way that just doesn't fit his plausibility structures and really subverts the dominant paradigm of his people.

Everybody thinks that the cure is going to come from kings. It's going to come from power. But who's the signpost that points to the solution? Right?

[16 : 31] The only reason Naaman goes to Israel for help is because this God whom he does not know has given him victories in the past and it just so happens that in one of those victories this little nameless Hebrew servant girl was captured in a skirmish with Israel.

And that's one of the great ironies of this story is that here's this girl who's in the eyes of everybody else is an unimportant nobody. Who absolutely does not matter and counts for nothing in the world's eyes.

She's the signpost to the solution. What Naaman most needs is not up here in the palace where he thinks it is.

What he most needs is down here in the kitchen. Right? What he needs is down here in the lowest place and in the humblest place.

And that's the story of the Bible from beginning to end that God's salvation comes where we least expect it. Right? We think it's going to come from the great empires of the world and all the great dynasties.

[17 : 42] Egypt and Assyria and Babylon and the Greeks and the Romans. But the scriptures tell us that the key to the history of the world is in this little insignificant people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

These people that were enslaved and these people that were exiled just like this little girl. And God says, the solution, my solution is over here. It's over here.

The world thinks that a savior and a lord is going to come and when he comes he's going to come from Rome. But when he actually comes he comes in the least important town of Bethlehem.

He comes as this little helpless baby in a manger. Right? The salvation of God comes in the place where absolutely no one is looking for it.

And Naaman gets this signpost of this servant girl but he completely misreads the signpost. Right? It says in verse 3 she says to her mistress if only my master would see the prophet he would cure him of his leprosy.

[18 : 52] She doesn't say if only he'd see the king but she says if only he'd see the prophet who could tell him the word of God. But he doesn't listen. He goes to the king instead.

In verse 7 as the king of Israel read the letter from his other king he tore his robes and said am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy?

He says you've come to the wrong place. Only God can give life. Only God can make whole. But this king like so many of the kings in Israel he's spiritually lost.

And so he tears his robe in complete despair that this guy is going to get what he needs. But verse 8 says that when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes he sent him this message why have you torn your robes?

Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel. You see what Naaman needs the most is this unknown unexpected little Hebrew servant girl to bear witness to him that there is a man of God.

[19 : 59] and he needs to know that this man of God is a prophet with a word from God. A prophet who has the truth the divine truth of God a prophet who can reveal to him the solution to his problem.

And so he goes to the door of the prophet and is the problem solved? Does the story end? No it's just kind of heating up in verse 9 it says Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.

Elisha sent a messenger to say to him go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed. But Naaman went away angry and said I thought he would surely come out to me.

You see he expects special treatment and attention but Elisha the prophet intentionally does not go out to him and give him that. He intentionally does not bow down and express pleasure at seeing this very important person.

He sends an intermediary with a message and treats him like ordinary common human clay. And I think the prophet is deliberately hurting his pride and humbling him and this is in fact a key step in finding God is to realize that no matter who you are no matter what your status is in the eyes of the world no matter what you have accomplished before the eyes of God you are a helpless and hopeless sufferer and sinner like everybody else.

[21 : 33] And Naaman is super annoyed at that. He is super irritated right? He gives this outburst that kind of betrays where his thoughts truly lie and he gives us his view of how he thinks he ought to be cured.

In verse 11 he says I thought surely he come out to me and stand and call the name of the Lord his God and wave his hand over the spot abracadabra and sort of cure me of my leprosy. And you see he's suffering not only from a leprosy of the skin he's suffering from a leprosy of the soul and it nearly robs him of the cure and causes him to miss the salvation of God.

The problem that's ruining Naaman's life is his self-centeredness maybe I mean I relate to this I don't know if you can relate to this the self-centeredness where he thinks that other people and that God should revolve around his way of doing things and his ideas of how God should bring the cure.

But of course Elisha does not do it Naaman's way because he doesn't want Naaman or anybody else to think that the cure comes from human power. No he says you're going to have to go out into the desert man.

You're going to have to go out there where nobody is and you'll experience the power of God directly for yourself. Well Naaman he's still ticked and he says in verse 12 are not Abana and Farpar the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?

[23 : 08] And so he turned and went off in a rage. You see Naaman still trusts in himself. He still trusts in his thoughts about what the cure should be.

And that's absolutely crazy isn't it? Because the most powerful people in the world have told him we cannot cure you. And yet he's fool enough to look at the one remedy the one solution the one cure that's been given to him and criticize it and object to it and protest against it.

And you know what? This is how it always is. This is what people were doing in Jesus' day as well. They said you know God's salvation should come in this way.

He should send a conquering Messiah and gather up this massive army of soldiers and whip up on the Romans and drive the pagans out of the holy land and set up this kingdom to dominate all the nations.

But that's not how God operates at all. Instead God comes how? He comes incognito. He comes in the flesh in Jesus Christ small and weak.

[24 : 20] He comes born in a manger. He comes and he spends his time outside of the halls of power in Galilee preaching to ordinary common everyday poor broken people like us.

And he shows them what it means to live a life in the world without this self-centeredness on the inside. And yet at the climax of his life the people see him nailed to a tree and die in utter agony and weakness and they see his body taken down and buried in a grave and they say this is not the way that the salvation of God should come into the world.

This is ridiculous. This is insulting. The signposts of God's salvation should not come from a servant girl and a humble prophet. God's salvation should not come from Bethlehem's manger or Golgotha's cross.

Are you crazy? No, I know the way that salvation ought to come. But friends, if you insist on your own way and you keep trusting in yourself like Naaman trusted himself, you're never going to find God.

The world is looking in every direction except the one direction that has the cure. And like this little insignificant servant girl, all I can do today is just point you to this humble prophet in Israel and say that Jesus has the cure for your disease.

[25 : 57] He can cleanse you and he can restore you. Like Elisha, all I can do today is just tell you that salvation comes in a way that's different than you think it should be and it comes not in power but in the weakness of the cross.

It comes not in victory but in the sacrifice of self-giving love. And you have but one thing to do in the depth of your disease and in the agony of your need and that is just to go to Jesus, the Son of God and you'll be cured.

He can heal you. He can remove whatever curse is on your life. He can restore you and he can give you new life and he can give you new power.

Your one need is to go to him and he can rid you of the leprosy of your soul that's been spoiling life for you and he can give you life abundant.

You say but surely there's another cure but no, the apostle Peter says this in Acts 4, he says salvation is found in no one else than Jesus Christ for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

[27 : 12] You'll never find God if you insist on your own way. What causes us to seek God? How do we find God? And let me just finish by saying what is required to meet God?

What's required to meet God? Verse 13 is beautiful. It says Naaman's servants went to him and said my father if the prophet had told you to do some great thing would you not have done it.

How much more than when he tells you wash and be cleansed. Thank God for these servants right because otherwise Naaman would have gone home diseased and without the cure.

But in love they question his pride with common sense and they say to him look Naaman you came here expecting to pay a whole lot of money. You came here expecting for the prophet to tell you some to do some great deed and you would go out and perform it and you would earn your cure and you would merit a new life for yourself.

But this prophet has actually given you a much simpler way to be cured. You don't have to go do some great thing to earn your cure. You can get cured for free.

[28 : 28] I mean yeah Naaman yes compared to the cold rushing rivers in Syria that we all love and are so beautiful. These rivers of the Jordan are kind of tepid and lethargic and a little less impressive than you would hope.

But man it's free. I mean yes the prophet is asking you to submit yourself to a ritual bath of cleansing that just might humiliate you.

And yes the prophet is inviting you to take a step of faith that might cause you to feel foolish or to look ridiculous in the eyes of other people. But Naaman what do you have to lose?

What do you have to lose? It's so easy. And in the same way the gospel of Jesus Christ can be so insulting to us and so humiliating because it tells us that we cannot pay money and we cannot go out and perform some great deed and live a good life and follow the example of Jesus Christ or practice his teachings or make some great sacrifices and then we'll be cured.

No the gospel is so much simpler and yet so much deeper than that it just says look to the cross. Look at Christ and him crucified. That's God's way of salvation by free grace.

[29 : 57] grace and it doesn't cost you a penny. Friends we don't have to go out and do some great thing because the great thing has been done for us.

Just look at Jesus dying on the cross for you, bearing your sins in his body, receiving the just judgment that your sins deserve.

Look at God laying on him your pride and your self sinfulness and your self righteousness and dealing with all of it there. Just believe that he did that for you and you'll be cleansed.

You'll be cured. Right? We sang it earlier. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole?

Again, nothing but the blood of Jesus. And you might say well that's ridiculous and that is insulting. But friends, Naaman tried everything else and it led to nothing.

[30 : 57] All the attempted cures failed him. And the same will be true for you. You can keep trying all the other religions and all the other philosophies but you're never going to find peace.

You're never going to find rest because here and here alone is the cure and there's no other alternative. If Naaman turns away, he'll go back home a leper and leprosy will spread all over his body until it kills him.

And if any of us turn away from the one cure, the one remedy that God has provided in his son Jesus Christ, we too will remain spiritual and moral lepers for all eternity without God and without hope.

And so as I close, just allow me to plead with you to take the position of Naaman's servants and just plead with you not to turn away from the cure when it's right here for you.

Try it. Just try it. And you'll find that it works. You just confess your sins. You just say, I'm unable to cure myself.

[32 : 12] And you just receive the free gift of God to be cleansed and to be healed and to be whole and to have a new life and to be a child of God and have the Holy Spirit enter into your soul.

Verse 14 says that, so he went down. He went down and he dipped himself in the Jordan seven times as the man of God had told him and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, now I know. Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.

He doesn't say, now I know that your God is more powerful than my God. He goes through this massive worldview change. His map of spiritual reality has been fundamentally altered and he says, there is no God in all the world but this one God.

And you see, that's the transformation because he starts by thinking that his most fundamental need and his most fundamental problem was that he was a sufferer with a disease but then he realizes in the end, no, the need beneath the need, the problem beneath the problem is that I never knew the one true and living God.

[33 : 38] And so the question, can I know God personally? Can I have a relationship with this one God of the Bible? Well, if you ask Naaman, he would say, no.

He would say, no, you can't. Not if you think the world's gonna cure you. Not if you think you know how it's supposed to happen. Not if you're unwilling to pay attention to God's unexpected signposts in his servant people and his prophetic word.

Not if you're unwilling to submit to God's unlikely solution in the cross of his son, Jesus Christ. But Naaman would say to you, if you lay down your pride and if you humble yourself and if by faith you receive this cure as a free gift from God, then yes, you can know God personally.

Yes, you can know personally that there is no God in all the world but this one God of the Bible made flesh in Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.