

An Offensive Command

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[0 : 00] Shall we turn back a while to the passage of scripture we read in 2 Kings chapter 5? We'll read again in verse 15, when Naaman, the Assyrian general, had returned to Elisha, the man of God.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him, and he said, Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel, so now accept a present from your servant.

Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel, so accept now a present from your servant. Naaman was a great man. He was a general.

He was a field marshal over the army of the Arameans, the army of Syria. It's interesting to notice here in verse 1, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria.

When we look at the Bible, we're focusing upon what God was doing amongst his own covenant people in Judah and in Israel. But we're told here that the Lord had given victory to Syria, whether that was victory to Syria when they were fighting against the armies of Israel, that the Lord would be chastising his own people, or was it when Israel was fighting against some of the other nations, the Hittites or the Assyrians in that part of the world.

[1 : 38] But we must never forget that although the Bible focuses upon what the Lord was doing primarily amongst his own people in that part of the world, yet God is sovereign in every single area of life and in every single part of the world.

He is working out his eternal purposes as he builds to himself a church and as he gathers to himself a people. So here was a great man, a man who had won much favor by the king because of the victories that he had won.

And when I think of Naaman, I'm often reminded of the late General Norman Schwarzkopf, who was the leader of the coalition armies that drove Saddam Hussein and his army out of Kuwait almost 20 years ago.

Because following on from that tremendous victory, General Schwarzkopf was invited all over the world and he met world leaders, he met kings and queens and he met states people and he was showered with honors and medals from all over the world.

I remember once listening to him on television and he said that when they were fighting against Saddam Hussein on the left wing of the coalition army, he was a tank unit from the French foreign legion and he had been given a card by the head of the foreign legion and it said that wherever he was in the world, if he was in trouble, just phone that number and they would come and help him.

[3 : 15] I thought that was quite remarkable. But here was a man who had everything that the world could want. He had fame, he had fortune, he wanted for nothing.

And yet he was a man who had leprosy. It was that fearful disease. It must have been in its early stages because he was still living with his family.

He was still able to go in and out of the presence of the king. And we're told by Hebrew scholars that the Hebrew word in the Old Testament that describes leprosy is also used for a variety of different skin diseases.

So this might not have been full-blown leprosy. But there's one thing that I can be sure of, that he would have gladly exchanged all his honors, all his medals, all the accolades that had been given to him, he would gladly have exchanged them in order to be cleansed of that fearful and dread disease.

It is indeed a fearful disease. But the real problem for Naaman was that he had leprosy of the soul. He had leprosy of the soul.

[4 : 27] He was a pagan. He was an idolater. He was a man who was a stranger to God's grace. And had he ended his days in that state, then he would have gone to hell to a lost eternity.

But the wonderful thing about this particular chapter here is it shows that God was at work outside of Israel. He was at work building his church.

When Jesus says, I am building my church, he didn't just begin during his earthly ministry, but he began at the very beginning of time. And as we look back through the Old Testament, we see how God was at work outside of the covenant people, bringing individuals and families to himself.

Rahab, the prostitute, the innkeeper from the city of Jericho, she and her family saw the wrath of God descending upon the city of Jericho.

And yet she somehow saw that behind this exterior of a wrathful God, there was also a God of mercy. And so she cast herself and her family at the mercy of the living God.

[5 : 38] And then, of course, Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Zarephath and her son, the Roman centurion Cornelius, and us Gentiles, that God was at work from the very beginning of time, building his church and gathering to himself a people.

This man had everything that the world seeks, and yet Jesus says, what good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world and yet forfeits his soul?

The rich man that we read of in the parable of Jesus, he was famed for his lavish banquets. People would go away and they would probably talk for days of the amazing and rare foods that turned up on his table.

Money was no object. And yet at the end of the day, this man went to a lost eternity. Whereas poor Lazarus, the beggar who sat at his gate and whose wounds even the dogs came and licked, he was there hoping for a crumb that would fall from the rich man's table, and yet he went to heaven.

He would have been scorned by those who were passing him as they went in through the gates of the rich man's house or palace. They would have paid him no attention, and yet he was the one who went to heaven, and the rich man went to a lost eternity.

[7 : 04] And we might have all the honors in the world, but this life is short, this life is fleeting, and all these honors will be left behind. And at the end of the day, the most important thing of all is to know that we are right with God.

I grew up in London, and when you go around the center of London, just as in the center of Edinburgh, there are many fine statues to famous men and women who did amazing things, especially in the creation of empire in past days, who won glorious victories over all sorts of enemies from India to Africa, and yet how many of them today are in the presence of the Lord, rejoicing because they had, during their lifetime, trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I have no doubt that Naaman knew of the God of Israel. He didn't know much about him, because in those days people believed in a God that was unique to their own territory, or to their own particular nation.

And he mentions here the Lord God. He expected Elisha to come out and to pray in the name of the Lord his God.

There was one occasion in Kings, I can't remember exactly where it is, where the Syrians were fighting against the Israelites, and they were fighting against the Israelites in the mountains, and they suffered a great defeat.

[8 : 35] And when they licked their wounds and tried to work out what was the cause of their defeat, the advisors to the king said, well, their God, the Lord Jehovah, is a God of the mountains.

Our God is a God of the plains. So if we can entice them down onto the plains, then we will defeat them. And that's what they did. They enticed the Israelite army to come down from the mountains and to meet with them in battle on the plains.

But once again, it was the Israelites who came away victorious, acknowledging the fact that our God is the God of the mountains, he is the God of the plains, he is the God of the cities and of the villages.

He is the one true God who reigns throughout the whole world. And although the Lord God himself might have been a stranger to Naaman, yet Naaman was not a stranger to God, because here was a man who, although he did not know it, his name was written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

He was a man, a pagan idolater, whose name was numbered amongst the Lord's people. And so the Lord was at work in order to bring him to himself.

[9 : 49] And the Lord will often go to quite extraordinary lengths just to bring an individual from darkness and to bring him to himself. I'm sure some of you here, if you were to go back and to think about your testimony and how the Lord worked in your life to bring you to himself, you would see that sometimes the Lord would take a very long and circuitous route.

But in the end, his purposes will be fulfilled. God is at work building his church. And in Revelations, John tells us when he was transported into heaven at the end of time that he saw around the throne of grace a multitude that no one could count from every single nation and tribe and tongue. And of course, when Jesus came to the end of his earthly ministry, he gave his disciples and he gave us, the church, the great commission to go out into all the world and make disciples of every nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And of course, when we are transported into Revelation 7, we see the success of that work. We see that people have come from every tribe and every tongue and every nation. We sometimes lament our own lack of zeal and our own lack of effort in evangelizing the people of our community and of our nation.

[11 : 20] But we must never forget that it is God himself who is at work. I will build my church, says the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet, in grace, he uses ordinary men and women such as ourselves to help him in that work.

And so here was a man who had leprosy. And in order to bring this man to himself, the Lord did two things.

The Lord did two things. The first thing was that he had this man inflicted with this fearful disease because if this man had never had leprosy, he would never have reason to cross over the border into Israel.

He would never have had a meeting with Elisha, the great prophet. And so the Lord inflicted him with leprosy.

But it was for his own good in the end. And the other thing was that the Lord had directed raiding bands of Syrian soldiers. They went to a particular village somewhere in Israel.

[12 : 29] And amongst the captives that they took back into slavery was this young Israelite girl. A girl whose name we do not know, but a girl who is the key to the events that take place in this particular chapter.

I'm sure this young woman often was homesick, often thought of home, perhaps of the young man that she was pledged to marry. She must have often wondered why it was that the Lord had brought her there to be a slave to the wife of a great commander in a foreign country.

But we must remember that God does all things well. He has a plan and a purpose for everything. He doesn't do anything at random.

And we must ever remember that the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost. He went out of his way. We read many times in the New Testament in order to save individuals.

We're told he had to go through Samaria, the usual route from Judah up to the land of the...

[13 : 43] to where Jesus came from, to Nazareth, was to go up the Jordan Valley. But we're told that Jesus had to go through Samaria. He had to go through Samaria because he was going to meet a woman who would come to faith through that meeting with Jesus.

And that woman would herself testify to her neighbors and her fellow townspeople and bring them to salvation as well.

And so God has done two things. He inflicted this man with leprosy and he directed raiding bands who captured this young Israelite girl.

And she ended up working for Naaman's wife. And it's obvious that Naaman must have treated her well because she desired that her master should be healed of this terrible disease, even though her nation was frequently at war with the Syrians.

And yet she took pity upon him. But more than that, the Lord used her as his instrument because it was through what she said and the words that got eventually to the king that Naaman came across the border into the land of Israel.

[14 : 59] And it's remarkable when she said that if her servant, if her master came to Israel, he would be healed of his leprosy.

Would that my Lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy. Not that he might cure him of his leprosy. And there's an amazing faith behind the words of this young girl because people in those days in that part of the world were not being cured of leprosy.

When Jesus began his preaching in his hometown of Nazareth, he said there were many lepers in those days, but none were healed except Naaman the Syrian and his own townspeople took offense at his words.

There were many widows in Israel in those days, but the Lord sent his servant to none except the widow of Zarophath. And so it wasn't as if the healing of lepers was commonplace.

And Naaman must have known that. But yet when so fearful was the disease of leprosy, that he would have clung to any hope whatsoever of being healed.

[16:12] And so he went to his king, and the king gave him a message to give to the king in Samaria, together with gold and silver and garments and all sorts of gifts to try to assuage what he required.

And so here he set off with his servants, with probably a band of soldiers we don't know, and he went to the king in the city of Samaria. And of course the king of Samaria had never heard of people being cured of leprosy.

That's why he tore his robes. That's why he thought that the king of Syria was picking a fight with him. And then when he tore his robe, word got to Elisha the prophet.

And Elisha the prophet said, Send him to me, and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel. Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel.

And so Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. This was a man who was used to other people kowtowing before him, bowing before him, acknowledging his presence and just exalting him because of his generalship.

[17:30] And yet Elisha didn't even bother to leave the house. He sent his servant out to him and said, Go and dip yourself in the Jordan River seven times.

And the man went away furious. Are not Abanad and Farpa, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?

He was asked to do something ridiculous. He was asked to go and dip himself seven times in the River Jordan. And the River Jordan wasn't running next door to Elisha's house.

He would have had to go down into the valley of the Jordan. It was quite a long journey. And in a fury, he turned his back upon Elisha's house and he was going to go back home to Damascus.

But his servants prevailed upon him. You know, go and do what the prophet has told you to do.

Absolutely ridiculous, isn't it?

[18:28] Imagine if a man or woman came to the session wanting to become a member in the church today and they were commanded to go to a nearby loch or to go down to the River Creed or something of that nature and dip yourself seven times in and then come and meet with the session and come to the table.

But you know, there's something even more ridiculous than dipping yourself seven times in a distant river. It's believing that a man who lived and died 2,000 years ago could somehow have an impact upon us living in the year 2019.

A man who lived and died 2,000 years ago. A man who died an inglorious death upon a cross. The death of a criminal. A man who suffered at the end of a short ministry of about three years.

A man whose followers went away disappointed because they had hoped that he would be the one who would bring about the restoration of Israel's glory.

And yet he ended up dying the death of a criminal. And how ridiculous to think that we, through trusting in what he was alleged to have done on the cross could find forgiveness for our sins, could find a right relationship with God.

[19:55] And in the eyes of the world, it is simply foolishness. I was reading the other day of Islamic fundamentalists in different parts of the world going around smashing Christian graves because they are enraged at the sight of a cross incised on a stone tombstone.

And so they smash it. But they can do all that they want through their acts of violence. But they will never, change what God has done for us at a point of time when his son left the glory and the adulation of the heavenly host and came into this world and became flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone and went to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

The greatest reality in the world. The turning point of world history. And my friend, we might live in a time of great sophistication.

We might live in a time of a great knowledge. What we know today far exceeds what our parents knew and what their parents knew before them. People are now planning to send people to

colonize Mars Mars at some distant point in time.

The technology is there but maybe the money isn't. But at the end of the day all the knowledge in the world will do us no good at all if we turn our backs upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 27] In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul's desire is that we would know the sheer dimensions of God's amazing love. His height and the depth and the length and the breadth of that love which he says surpasses knowledge.

And the great quest of humanity is for knowledge. But the love of the Lord Jesus Christ surpasses knowledge. Knowledge will pass away as Paul says.

But the love of Christ will never ever pass away. It will never wane. And if you tonight know the love of Christ dwelling in your heart that is a love that is with you forever and forever.

And will only grow as you come to the end of your earthly life and you come face to face with your Savior and with your Lord.

And so here was the Lord working to bring this great general to himself. And so he listened to his servants and he went down and he dipped himself seven times in the Jordan River and he came up and we're told his flesh was clean like that of a young child.

[22 : 37] And it wasn't only his body that was healed but his soul was healed also because he came back into the presence of Elisha and he said I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.

I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. The God whom he had worshipped perhaps two days before when he left the city of Samaria maybe he had gone up to the temple of Rumen and asked Rumen to guide him and to favor him and that he would find cleansing for his leprosy.

And yet when he comes now into the presence of Elisha the prophet he comes to realize that the God who he has worshipped all his life is nothing but a dumb idol is nothing but an impotent caricature of the evil one.

And I don't know how many of you here have at some point in the past come to faith in the living God but perhaps if you go back in your mind and you remember the things that were precious to you before you came to faith the things that had such an important part of your life.

It could be that once you came to know the Lord Jesus the hold that they had on you was listened. You lost your interest in them because you started to show an interest in the Lord Jesus Christ and the interest you had in Christ took over your life and it was greater than anything else that you'd had before.

[24 : 11] Note here this man he said are not the rivers Arban and Farpa the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel and now he is saying to Elijah give me two mules to carry the soil of Israel back home.

The soil of Israel of course is no different to the soil to be found in Syria but now he sees that this is the soil from the place where the Lord God is active amongst his people.

He had come to a change of heart and a change in the way he looked at the world. I could say something about the fact that he wanted to take this soil back with him but it's interesting isn't it when you read the words of Elisha he simply said go in peace.

Elisha he could have said to him you don't need to do that the soil of Israel is no different to the soil of Damascus that's just superstitious nonsense but no he just said go in peace because you recognize the inner change as well as the outer change of this man.

When the man came to Elisha he might have been looking through the window and he saw a man covered with this sort of white leprosy whatever it was and yet when the man came back up from the Jordan Valley he was cleansed his flesh was white it was like the flesh of a young child but Elisha was looking at the inner man and he saw the change he saw that here was a man who had forsaken his idols and from now on would worship the true God just as Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians reminded them that they turned from the worship of idols to worship the one true and living God and there are so many idols in this world that want to keep their grip upon us that want to keep us away from the Lord Jesus Christ and behind all the idols of the world no matter how wonderful they may seem there is the evil one who will go to any lengths to prevent a man or woman from coming to know the Lord

[26 : 21] Jesus Christ but here was a man who but for his leprosy would never have come to Israel and would never have been healed of his leprosy and who would never have found faith in the Lord God of Israel and we might ask ourselves what is all this how is this relevant to us in our own day

and age this is an interesting story of an event that took place two and a half or more thousand years ago what's the relevance of it for us today and the relevance is this the Lord might inflict some of you with a very hard providence it could be that for a long time you've been avoiding the Lord you've been turning your back upon him you've been shutting out those who were trying to tell you about Jesus and it could be that the Lord in his wisdom has dealt a hard providence with you but he has done that in order to bring you to himself

I remember for many years I resisted the call to ministry my mother had passed away she left me a sum of money but my late wife was ill with ME and she couldn't work and I had to give up my work offshore and our savings started to become depleted I became very frustrated at not being able to work frustrated at my wife's continuous unwellness and then one evening I went to a preparatory service in Kiltality and the Reverend Kenny Stewart was preaching on the the vine and the gardener and there is that bit in that passage in John where a Jesus says that the gardener cuts back those branches that bear fruit in order that they will bear even more fruit and he was leaning over the pulpit and he was he had his hand like this as if he was grasping an imaginary bough of the vine and in his other hand he had the pruning hook and he was sawing through this branch and he said if you were the branch it would be a very painful procedure for that saw to cut you back but he said the Lord does it in order that we might grow anew under his direction and bear more fruit and I realized that the Lord had been working in my life that his providence to me was a difficult providence but he did it in order to bring me to himself and when I went home that night

I went in to Margaret and I said that's it no more excuses from now on we're going to apply to the ministry and the timing you know God does all things well and the timing was perfect and so when Naaman went back home when he was sitting there in his old age perhaps and musing over his past life he would have realized that but for the hard providence that God had dealt him by giving him leprosy then he would have remained an idolater he would have remained a pagan he would have remained a stranger to God's grace but now he was a saved man the assurance in his heart that one day he would go to be forever with the Lord he had forsaken his idols and he had come to trust in the true and the living God and at the end of the day we do not know who will come to faith that little girl's few words were instrumental in bringing

Naaman to faith in God she simply said would that my Lord with the prophet who was in Samaria he would cure him of his leprosy that's all she said and the Lord did the rest Adam whom we know travels back and forth to his home country establishing the church there and working amongst his fellow countrymen in Europe in America when he went to America originally as a student he was a Muslim and he was telling us that he was walking in a park one day and he went past a man sitting on a bench and the man said to him son do you know that Jesus loves you that's all the man said but that but that's all he said and the Lord did the rest and since that moment through Adam's ministry many many thousands of his fellow countrymen have been brought to faith and there are churches established for that particular nation in cities in this country sometimes we find it very difficult to speak to people about the Lord we imagine that somehow we've got to have a theological education that we've got to be able to go into some deep and complicated doctrine but all that man said to Adam was son do you know that

Jesus loves you we don't need to see anything fancy anything elaborate just a simple word and trust that the Lord himself will do the rest the farmer sows the seed the seed falls into the ground and he has nothing more to do with it it's watered by the rain but it's the Lord himself who makes that seed grow and multiply and bring about a great harvest and as I was saying with that young lassie she must have wondered many times why it was that she ended up in a foreign land divorced from her family her friends her community but the Lord had done it for a purpose and I'm sure that when Naaman went back home cleansed and now worshipping the Lord God of that little Israelite girl imagine the fellowship they would have had together and I'm sure that he would have told his men to take her back to her home back to her a community wonderful isn't it how the Lord moves and how the Lord works in his providence simply to bring to himself a man or a woman a boy or a girl why because his people are precious to him every single one of them and if you are in Christ here tonight then you are the apple of God's eye you are so precious to him that he did not hesitate but to send his son the Lord

[33 : 22] Jesus Christ to die for your sins on the cross and as Paul said and as I quoted this morning he loved me and gave himself for me amen may the Lord add his blessing to these thoughts and meditations on his word shall we pray