

# God Brings Outsiders In!

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our reading this evening is from 2 Kings chapter 5 and it's on page 311 of the church Bibles. It's the story of Naaman and we're going to read the whole chapter.

So 2 Kings chapter 5 and verse 1 on page 311. Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria.

He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. Now the Syrians in one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife.

She said to her mistress, would that my Lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy. So Naaman went in and told his Lord, thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel.

And the king of Syria said, go now and I will send a letter to the king of Israel. So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten changes of clothing.

[ 1 : 27 ] And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman, my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy.

And 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 sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?

Only consider and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me. But when Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king saying, why have you torn your clothes?

Let him now come to me that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house.

And Elisha sent a messenger to him saying, go and wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.

[ 2 : 29 ] But Naaman was angry and went away saying, behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord as God and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.

Are not Abana and Farper, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.

But his servants came near and said to him, my father, it is a great word. The prophet has spoken to you. Will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, wash and be clean?

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan according to the word of the man of God. And his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child.

And he was clean. 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.

[ 3 : 38 ] So accept now a present from your servant. But he said, as the Lord lives before whom I stand, I will receive none. And he urged him to take it, but he refused.

Then Naaman said, if not, please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth. For from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any God but the Lord.

In this matter, may the Lord pardon your servant. When my master goes into the house of Roman to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Roman, when I bow myself in the house of Roman, the Lord pardon your servant in this matter.

He said to him, go in peace. But when Naaman had gone from him a short distance, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, the man of God, said, see, my master is spared this Naaman, the Syrian, in not accepting from his hand what he brought.

As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something from him. So Gehazi followed Naaman. And when Naaman saw someone running after him, he got down from the chariot to meet him and said, is all well?

[ 4 : 58 ] And he said, all is well. My master has sent me to say, there have just now come to me from the hill country of Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.

And Naaman said, be pleased to accept two talents. And he urged him and tied up two talents of silver in two bags with two changes of clothing and laid them in two of his servants.

And they carried them before Gehazi. And when he came to the hill, he took them from their hand and put them in the house. And he sent the men away and they departed.

He went in and stood before his master. And Elisha said to him, where have you been, Gehazi?

And he said, your servant went nowhere.

But he said to him, did not my heart go when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept money and garments, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male servants and female servants?

[ 6 : 07 ] Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever. So he went out from his presence a leper like snow. Let's pray and ask God's help as we consider his word.

Lord, we thank you for your word that it has power to bring us cleansing and salvation. And so, Lord, we do pray that you would open it up to us this evening. Help us through your Holy Spirit to be able to understand it and to know how you would have us respond to it.

Amen. Some of you, I'm sure, will have watched the Downton Abbey series or films.

The programme was incredibly popular with fans as far away as China and America. Downton Abbey is an example of what's called an upstairs, downstairs drama.

Upstairs referring to the aristocratic family who own the abbey. And then downstairs in that it also tells us the story of the servants living down below.

[ 7 : 21 ] A story that's separate from, but interwoven with those they serve. Well, 2 Kings 5 could also be described as an upstairs, downstairs story.

It tells of a serene aristocrat and soldier called Naaman and his miraculous cure from leprosy. It's a story, too, of how Naaman was cured from spiritual illness.

How he moved from idol worship to worship the Lord, the one true God. In modern terms, we'd describe it as the story of Naaman's conversion.

The beginning and end of the chapter, however, focus more on two downstairs stories. The stories of two servants. It opens with an unnamed girl, a maidservant, to Naaman's wife.

And at the end, it pivots to Elisha's servant, a man called Gehazi. Although it was amazingly popular worldwide, some of Downton Abbey's cultural subtleties were, by all accounts, missed by overseas audiences.

[ 8 : 37 ] A bit of background, you see, is helpful to understanding a story from another time and place. So, before we look at Naaman and the two servants, we'll think briefly about the background to what we read.

Chapters 2 to 10 of 2 Kings is the story of the prophet Elisha. Elisha's ministry took place in the northern kingdom of Israel in the 800s BC. Spiritually, it was a low point in Israel's history, marked by rampant idolatry.

It was surely a mark of God's grace that it was then, of all times, that God sent two of his most powerful servants and prophets, Elisha himself and his predecessor, Elijah.

It's helpful also to know that this was a period of frequent warfare between Syria and Israel. Chapter 5 seems to have taken place in a rare period of peace.

Verse 1 sets the scene. Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria.

[ 9 : 50 ] It's a reminder right at the start that the Lord is God of the whole world, not just Israel. That and God's concern for all peoples is a theme we've sung off in our two psalms, and it's one we'll come back to later.

Successful soldiers, though, were honoured in any society, so it's not surprising that Naaman was valued by his master. There was, however, a problem.

The author introduces it with the word, but, at the end of verse 1. But, he says, he was a leper. It's probably difficult for us to appreciate the force of that statement to an early reader.

Leprosy can cause terrible physical deformity, but in some ways its biggest effects weren't medical, but social and religious. Lepers were excluded from society in case they passed the disease on. And, in Old Testament law, leprosy made you richly unclean, so you couldn't take part in your community's religious life or in temple worship. Naaman, you see, came to Israel, not just as an outsider, but a double outsider.

[ 11 : 12 ] He was a foreigner, a non-Israelite, and he was a leper, richly unclean. Well, that's the background.

Let's consider the chapter, then, through the eyes of the three characters. They each have important lessons to teach us. So, the young maidservant teaches us to follow God faithfully, from verse 2.

Naaman himself to seek God's salvation, in the central part of our passage, from verse 9. And Gehazi teaches about the need to pursue God's priorities, from verse 20.

Follow God faithfully, seek God's salvation, pursue God's priorities. So, firstly, we're to follow God faithfully, even in difficult or unfair circumstances.

Verse 2 introduces us to Naaman's wife's servant. It describes her as a little girl. Hang on to that description, because it's going to be important later in the story, but spare a thought for this poor girl.

[ 12 : 32 ] She was, we're told, an Israelite who'd been carried off in a Syrian raid in one of the frequent wars between their countries. In modern terms, she'd been people-trafficked.

People-trafficking still exists, and it's difficult to overestimate the oppression and suffering it causes. And, as with leprosy over the ages, Christians today are often at the forefront of the battle against this modern evil.

But, despite her situation, God had a plan for her there. Rather than becoming resentful, as she might, she seems to have kept the faith which her parents taught her.

And, most remarkably, she found the courage to tell her mistress about the God in Israel, a God who, unlike the false gods of Syria, had the power to heal and to save.

She was, we might say, an Old Testament evangelist. She's also, perhaps, a challenge to us, who are often so slow to tell people about the God who saves.

[ 13 : 49 ] That young girl teaches us the importance of serving God, even in difficult places. I wonder if some people here find themselves stuck in a situation they hadn't looked for.

Perhaps at work, perhaps through illness or other responsibilities. We might never see it, but God has a purpose for us there.

That servant girl encourages us to stand fast in God, to use what opportunities we have to point people to him. Her story is also one of how God uses insignificant people to achieve his purposes. There weren't many people less significant in ancient society than a young foreign female slave. We don't even know her name. And yet, through her witness, God did great things.

Naaman was not only healed, but converted. And who's to say what effect that conversion had on international relations? Not many of us here are important in the eyes of the world.

[ 15 : 03 ] But if we're faithful to God, if we're willing to tell people about his goodness and what he's done in our lives, who knows what God might do through us? Anyway, Mrs. Naaman tells her husband what the servant said, and Naaman tells the king of Syria, who's probably Ben Hadad at the time.

And Ben Hadad writes a letter for Naaman to take to the king of Israel, assuming such a powerful prophet must surely be in the royal court of the king of Israel.

So Naaman sets out with a fortune in gold and silver and fine cloth. Silver and gold alone would be worth close to eight million pounds in today's money.

Naaman assumed the God of Israel was like pagan gods that favors from him wouldn't come cheap. He didn't as yet know that the Lord, Israel's God, was a God of grace, a God who gives, not a God who takes.

Verse 7 introduces us to Jehoram, the king of Israel. A picture of Jehoram scathing. Jehoram seems to have completely forgotten God's power to save and forgotten altogether about his prophet.

[16:28] Jehoram assumes that Ben Hadad simply after a pretext to renew the grumbling war between them. That young servant girl, exiled in a foreign land, shows a greater understanding of God than the king of Israel does.

In fact, even Ben Hadad and Naaman, the pagan Syrians, seem to have a faith in God's power that Jehoram lacks. Jehoram's failure is a challenge to Christians so often we can be shown up when we should know better.

Naaman's maidservant then teaches us to follow God faithfully even when our circumstances are difficult. But in verses 9 to 19, the focus shifts to Naaman himself and his conversion.

The message to us is to seek God's salvation. Seek God's salvation. The Bible doesn't promise us all healing from physical illness as Naaman experienced.

but it does promise spiritual restoration to anyone who calls on the name of the Lord. The author carefully lays out the story of Naaman's transformation, how he turned from idolatry to worship the one true God.

[17:55] It's the story of how God brings outsiders or double outsiders as we saw into his covenant family. and it's been included in the Bible because it's still the story today of how God brings outsiders in.

Naaman, it seems, had at least the beginning of faith. If he hadn't, he'd never have travelled well over 200 miles to see Elisha. Faith is simply trusting God.

It's the belief God exists and that he does what he says in his word. And faith is still the way we come to God. But for all that, there were things God needed to change in Naaman if he was to come from outside into God's family.

Let's briefly consider three of these things. Firstly, Naaman had to give up a sense of his own importance, his own importance.

He needed to let go, in other words, of his pride to realise that for all his human importance, before God he was nothing. So verse 9 tells us Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door to Elisha's house.

[19:11] Imagine if a presidential or royal motorcade turned up at your door tomorrow. I'm sure you'd rush out eager to welcome the VIP.

But Elisha seems to deliberately insult his visitor. He doesn't even bother speaking to him but sends a mere messenger instead. It was no way to treat an important dignitary.

No wonder Naaman was angry. But Elisha, of course, isn't just being rude. Rather, Naaman, so used to deference and respect, needs to be taught to let go of his pride and self-importance.

It's the same for us. There's no room for pride as we come to God as we confess that we're a sinner in need of forgiveness.

Secondly, Naaman needed to give up the belief he could demand healing or salvation on his own terms. His own terms. His nationalistic prides peaked when Elisha sends him 20 miles to wash in the muddy river Jordan.

[20:21] Are not Abana and Farper, the rivers of Damascus and Syria, better than all the waters of Israel, he objects. People today often want salvation on their own terms too.

But God doesn't offer that. There's an exclusiveness to Jesus' claims about himself. Jesus isn't one way of salvation among many for us to choose from.

The third thing Naaman had to give up was the belief that he could earn salvation by his own effort. Naaman, you see, brought eight million pounds of gold and silver expecting to pay for his healing. Elisha refused to accept it because Naaman needed to learn that you can't pay for salvation. God is a God whose dealings with people are characterised by grace.

He gives us what we haven't earned, what we can't pay for. That's one of the most fundamental truths in Christianity and it's the one thing that completely marks it out from every other religion.

[21:37] Of course, people nowadays don't try to buy their way into heaven with gold or silver. In general, we're a little more subtle. Modern people try to buy their way in with a good life or by being religious.

It still doesn't work. Salvation is by God's grace alone, through faith alone. You know, Naaman came dangerously close to refusing to do what Elisha told him.

Indeed, if it hadn't been for his servant's intervention, he'd have stormed home uncured. To Naaman, the prophet's instruction seemed just too simple. Had he really travelled so far just for this?

But the gospel is simple, perhaps dangerously simple. Jesus summarised his message at the start of Mark's gospel as a call to repent or turn to him and to have faith, to trust in him.

But it's so simple, we're in danger of forgetting we actually need to do it. So our passage this evening asks each of us the most important question in the world.

[ 23 : 00 ] Have you turned to Jesus? Have you actually undergone that conversion that Naaman did? Have you come from outside in?

Like Naaman's servants? To Naaman let me plead with you to do so. Don't let the simplicity of the gospel be a barrier to actually receiving it. I doubt if many of us here worship physical idols like Naaman had, but the Bible sees an idol as anything that takes the place of God.

Our tendency as humans is to run our lives with ourselves in charge. that in the Bible sense is the ultimate idolatry. So Naaman's conversion from idolatry to God is relevant for all of us.

Each of us has to experience Naaman's conversion for ourselves. As Naaman obeyed God's word and washed in the Jordan, he was wonderfully healed.

verse 14 tells us, he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored, like the flesh of a little child.

[ 24 : 25 ] Like a little child. Actually, it would be better translated as a little boy. The phrase in Hebrew is almost identical to the description of Naaman's servant as a little girl in verse 2.

It's just the male form of it. The author has chosen his words carefully to make a point. For all the social and ethnic differences between Naaman and the servant girl, they've actually become alike on a much more fundamental level.

They're both now worshippers of the one true God. God's God's God's We're reminded too of what Jesus said in Matthew 18. 3. Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Conversion coming from the outside into God's inside means giving up our pride and self-sufficiency and adopting the humility and dependence of a child.

Naaman took a detour to Elisha's home on his way back to Syria. It perhaps reminds us of a story in Luke 17 about Jesus healing ten lepers.

[ 25 : 46 ] Only one of them, a Samaritan, came back after they were healed. Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner, Jesus asked. Perhaps he was thinking about the story of Naaman.

Naaman, another foreigner, also came back. Not so much to thank Elisha, but to learn how to worship the God who'd saved him.

We might smile at the naivety of taking two mule loads of earth back home. After all, you can worship the God who made the earth and the heavens anywhere on any soil. But perhaps Naaman intended it as a statement of his new identity to those around him back home.

We could spend time discussing the significance of verse 18, where Naaman asks that he be pardoned for accompanying the king into the house of Rimen, another name for the idol Baal. I don't think it's about Naaman compromising. Rather, he's clarifying that he's not worshipping Rimen, even although he might be surrounded by others who are.

[ 26 : 56 ] everything, in fact, points to Naaman's single-mindedness for God. He has, it seems, become a monotheist, an exclusive worshipper of the God of Israel.

There is no God in all the earth, but in Israel, he says in verse 15. He'll worship and sacrifice to him alone in verse 17. And he refers to God as the Lord, Yahweh, in Hebrew, God's covenant being revealed to the Israelites when he called them out of Egypt.

So Naaman, in the second part of our chapter, teaches us to seek God's salvation. God brings outsiders into his community.

In the final part of the chapter, the focus shifts to Elisha's servant, Gehazi. it's about the importance of pursuing God's priorities.

If the story of Naaman declares how God welcomes outsiders in, the story of Gehazi is a solemn warning to insiders not to miss out on God's grace.

[ 28 : 12 ] The writer of Second Kings does like to make his point by contrasting characters, and Gehazi, privileged to be Elisha's servant, is sharply contrasted to Naaman's maidservant at the start of the chapter.

Gehazi should have known better, but while she got everything right, he, it seems, gets everything wrong. The charge sheet against him is lengthy.

He's guilty of taking God's name in vain in verse 20. His contemptuous reference to Naaman, the Syrian, suggests nationalistic prejudice. And it gets worse.

Gehazi tells a blatant lie about having been sent by Elisha. I suspect he wasn't too bothered about lying to a foreigner, but lies beget more lies, don't they?

And soon he finds himself lying even to Elisha to cover his tracks. Your servant went nowhere, he brazenly says, as if he could hide what he'd done from God.

[ 29 : 14 ] But perhaps we do something similar when we think that God won't notice our actions or thoughts, or that he won't hold us to account for them.

Yet when Elisha confronts Gehazi, it's not actually about any of these things. Rather it's about his greed and his wrong priorities. Was it a time to accept money and garments, orchards and vineyards, sheep, oxen and servants, he asks.

What did Elisha mean when he said that it wasn't a time to accumulate such things? Well, perhaps he meant it was a time when the message of salvation was to be prioritised, a time when God's grace was to be proclaimed.

In demanding payment from Naaman, Gehazi had misrepresented the gospel. He'd given the impression God's favour could be bought by human effort or money.

Or perhaps Elisha was referring to a time of coming judgment. 2 Kings 6, you see, will describe the siege of Samaria, the city where Elisha and Gehazi lived.

[ 30 : 33 ] So severe was the famine that some of the inhabitants resorted even to cannibalism. And what good silver when there's no food to be bought? Actually, both these things are true.

Elisha's not saying we can't take reasonable care of our needs, but it's a question of priorities. The current time is a time to be holding out the offer of salvation for those who would receive it, not a time for accumulating wealth and luxury.

It's a challenging message for us. We also live in an age of grace, but with the prospect of final judgment when Jesus returns and Jesus calls us to order our priorities.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures in earth, he says, where moth and rust destroy, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Naaman, you see, was the idol worshipping outsider who became an exclusive worshipper of God, but Gehazi was the insider who ended up worshipping the idols of wealth and greed.

[ 31 : 59 ] In Luke 4, right at the start of Jesus' ministry, he speaks to worshippers in a synagogue in Nazareth about this very passage. They, like Gehazi, were the ultimate insiders, people who'd grown up with Jesus in his hometown.

But Jesus uses his sermon to warn them of the danger of taking their insider status for granted.

There were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha, he says, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.

Let's not be like Jesus hearers or like Gehazi. Let's not take God's grace for granted and miss out on it. Naaman was a relatively rare example of an Old Testament foreigner coming to faith, but it shouldn't surprise us that he did so.

right at the start of Israel's history when God called Abraham in Genesis, he promised that all peoples of earth would be blessed through him. That promise is fulfilled in Jesus.

So Jesus, after his resurrection, gave his disciples a commission in Acts 1-8 to take the gospel even to the ends of the earth. The rest of Acts is the wonderful story of how they started to do that, of how the gospel was preached throughout the known world.

[ 33 : 26 ] It's a story that continues today, and so right at the end of the Bible, in Revelation, we have a picture of those from every tribe and language and people and nation falling down before God's throne in worship.

Naaman was the forerunner of what would become a flood in New Testament times as the Holy Spirit sent the church boldly throughout the whole world. our passage though finishes with Naaman going out a leper.

What a tragedy. What a waste. It's a reminder to us to keep our eye on God and the gospel and not be distracted by money or success or other priorities.

But imagine for a moment Naaman's arrival home in Damascus. I think you would have told everyone who would listen of the God he'd found in Israel.

A God who had the power to save, to cure even the incurable. A God of grace who gives and doesn't take. a God who welcomes even the outsider, the foreigner, the unclean like him.

[ 34 : 55 ] And imagine to that first meeting with the servant girl who'd started him on his long journey. Can you imagine the smile on her face as she saw his restored skin, the skin of a young child like her own?

and how much bigger that smile when she found he discovered for himself the God that she'd spoken about. Do you not want to have this God as your God?

And if you do already know him, are you not encouraged to boldly tell those around you of this God of grace? Perhaps some of your hearers too will find that God for themselves, the God who calls the ultimate outsiders into his family.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you that you are indeed a God who brings outsiders into your family.

We do pray that if there's anyone here who hasn't experienced that, who doesn't know you, that you would graciously draw them to you and cause them to seek your salvation. And for all of us, we pray that you would help us to know more deeply the wonder and joy of knowing that we're cleansed and healed and brought into your presence and eternally made one of your people.

[ 36 : 26 ] Amen.