

The Hero Who Became a Servant

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[0 : 00] I'm going to be preaching once again from the ESV, the English Standard Version, rather than your Pew Bibles.

They're very, very close. There's one or two words that have just a little bit of a nuance difference. But if you're reading in the Pew Bible, which we encourage you to use, or if you have the NIV on your smart device, then you'll know what the difference is.

This morning is a two-part sermon, and I hope that you will return and join us once again here at Glasgow City Free Church for this evening's service.

This morning I want to look at Naaman, and I want to take you on a journey where a hero becomes a servant of the God of Israel.

A hero of Syria becomes a servant of the God of Israel. Tonight I want to take you on a reverse journey where a servant girl of Israel becomes a great hero, because she's the true hero of this story, this historical account in the Scriptures of how a great man with leprosy became not only cured of his leprosy, but he became a member and a faithful follower of God, the God of Israel, our God, the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus, our Father.

[1 : 41] Dr. Paul Brand, who was later awarded the CBE, like our own Dr. Colin Mackay is with us, but I am fascinated by Dr. Paul Brand, who years ago in India was a child of a missionary.

He was an MK, a missionary kid. And later his parents sent him off to university, and he went on in the United Kingdom through medical university.

But all the while he had a heart to go back to India to minister to the poor lepers that he saw there. He saw the lepers there not only without any hope of medical treatment, but without any attempt to treat them in their particular dilemma and in their crisis.

He would go back to India, and he would go to set up a clinic that would particularly minister and to serve and seek to better the life and health of the lepers.

When he first arrived, one of the lepers, as he was beginning to get acclimated there, he interviewed him, and he reached out his hand and put his hand on the shoulder, and he said, I'm a Christian as well as a doctor.

[3 : 10] I am going to pray for you. And the man began to weep, and he left in tears. He turned to one of his colleagues, and he said, did I give the man pain when I touched him?

And he said, no. It's just that no one has ever touched him. He wants for human touch. Later, Dr. Paul Brand would develop a particular technique of tendon replacement surgery.

A tendon replacement surgery for the hand that would allow those hands that would begin to form a claw that they would be able to have the use of their hands.

But I think his greatest contribution to us was that he was able to communicate that the greatest tragedy in a life of a leper was not the presence of pain, for leprosy affects the nerves, but the absence of pain.

As many a leper would decry to him, how can we live? How can we experience life without pain?

[4 : 41] Dr. Paul Brand would go on and with Phil Yancey write a book, and the book's title says it all. Pain. The gift nobody wants.

The gift. A gift from God. But nobody wants it. If I were to continue the title, I would, in the Puritan tradition, I would have a great long title.

Pain. The gift nobody wants, but everyone needs, to be useful to God in this life, and not rot away for themselves.

Pretty long title, so they didn't ask me to contribute to the book cover. But the point of this morning's text is this.

Observe how in this man Naaman's life, with his condition, with his self decaying, rotting away through leprosy, how God uses that suffering for his salvation.

[5 : 58] I will dare to say this morning, that if you are a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, if you have come to take him at his word, and be forgiven of your sins, his life for yours, that you have come to that point, out of desperation, out of coming face to face with your suffering, and because of the gift of pain, that drove you there, to receive a savior.

I need a savior, rather than simply a pain-free life. I know that's a daring thing to say, but I believe that.

I believe that we can see in Naaman, a number of things, and the first thing that I want you to see, is I want you to see a hero, who has reached the end of a Syrian road.

I want to take you on a journey, in the time that remains. And I want you to see first, this hero on a journey. And it's a very heroic road that he is on.

But on this Syrian road of life, that he is on, he's now reached the end. We read in verse 1 that, first of all, Naaman discovers the road of self-sufficiency is disappearing like an illusion.

[7 : 45] His life of self-sufficiency, self-dependency, even self-confidence, is beginning to erode around him like a mirage.

We read here that he's a number of things. He's the commander of the army. He's a general. And he's not just one general.

He's over the whole army. An army that I might say has defeated Israel, and at this point, of the writer of 2 Kings, has no foes.

They're at the top of their game. He's a great man with his master. We believe him to be, as we would see at the very end of our text this morning, when he makes his request of Elijah the prophet to carry dirt back on donkeys, so that when he goes into the temple of Ramon, and he has to carry his lord, the king of Syria, in there on his arm, that Elijah would forgive him of that, that he's not worshipping his king's god.

He's not worshipping his nation's gods anymore. We believe by that statement that he was the prime minister of Syria, number two guy over all Syria, a great, great man.

[9 : 18] He's in high favor. He's renowned. He's a celebrity. He's a celebrity. He's a celebrity. He's a celebrity. He's a celebrity. He's a celebrity. He's famous.

And because of him, the Lord had given victory to Syria. He had actually been used of the Lord to judge and to convict Israel.

He was a mighty man of valor. He's brave. And this means he has prowess. Give him a feat, and he will accomplish it.

Give him a task. Count it done. And he is brave. He counts not his own interest to cause him to retire or be shy.

He's someone, as we might say, he gets after it. And then it appears. Three little letters in my Bible.

[10 : 20] B-U-T. But. One small word. But he was a leper.

He is at the point where the road of self-sufficiency now ends. There's not one thing that his possessions, his power, or his prowess, his good name, his good heart and courage can do nothing, nothing about leprosy.

At that time, it was a death sentence. At that time, he would be shunned. At that time, he is no longer, he is probably soon to be removed from his leadership position.

You can, you can certainly know that the king of Syria is thinking, I'm not sure I want to lean on your arm as long as it stays attached to your body much longer.

Fear being that they would catch leprosy as well. But that's not the only thing that causes him to realize that he's at the end of the road.

[11 : 39] If we just realize that we're at the end of the road because we are no longer able to do it of ourselves, we still need to go down the road a little bit further to see that there's nothing that the world can do for us as well.

Naaman discovers that the world has no avenue of help as well. We see this in verses 5 and 7 where it says that he is now by the king of Syria's commission, he is now in the courtroom of the king of Israel.

He has taken his possessions, he has taken money, he has taken his wealth, he's taken a whole wardrobe of clothes, but most importantly he has a letter.

He has a letter from a conquering country sent to an underling, Israel. And there he stands with his leprosy and the letter is given over to the king of Israel, the king of Israel opens it up, tears his robe, proclaims, am I God?

Now he's a good theologian at this point, the king of Israel, because it is true that only God can heal leprosy.

[13 : 14] Because what happened was is they might not have realized it during that time and that day. Because we see of many of the treatments, particularly by isolation of the leper, they would have thought like perhaps many of us have thought that leprosy was highly contagious by contact.

The outside of the flesh, the outside of the skin coming in contact with my skin and I've got leprosy. Not at all. Leprosy could be transferred by fluids.

But the problem of leprosy was not on the outside, it was on the inside. And dare I say, the cure therefore of leprosy would not be inside of a man or a woman or a young person.

The cure would have to be outside as well. And that is at the point that Naaman arrives. So far, every problem he's encountered, he's been able either through his own self or through others, other nations, other venues in the world.

He's been able to say, the problems are outside of me and I can use my mind, I can use my strength, I can use my possessions, I can solve it inside of me.

[14 : 58] But now, at the end of this road, he's seeing the problem is inside of me. And the solution, if one is to be found, lies outside of me and my own ability.

the Scottish minister and preacher Alexander McLaren puts it this way, quote, there is a but in every fortune as there is a but in every character.

There's a but in your life. There's a but in my life. There's a but in every situation that I have.

We bought a home in the Carolinas. We had greatly downsized and we thought that we would, we got a great deal on a home. We bought it out of auction, stand in the yard, bid on it, and we thought we're going to remodel it just like they do on TV.

We've got that ability, we thought. A couple of weeks into it, we found the but. The house was riddled with problems.

[16 : 21] We did not have the patience, even the perseverance, or the skill set to do that. We found the but. The Greeks in writing their tragedies and their tragic plays had something in every character that they called the tragic flaw.

The tragic flaw, the but. I am this, this, this, this, but inside is an issue.

Perhaps it's an addiction. Perhaps it's anger. Perhaps it's a debilitating, not a skin wasting leprosy that's on the inside, beginning to express itself on the outside, but it's a great loss.

Maybe it's a loss of health. Maybe it's a loss of a relationship that I'm grieving over. Maybe it's a loss of a loved one. Maybe it's a loss of finances.

But it's there and it's inside. Secondly, on this journey of following Naaman from hero to servanthood, I want you to see that as a hero, having reached the end of the Syrian road, he now goes down into a muddy Jordan river.

[17 : 49] But he didn't do that without argument. He didn't do that easily. There's two things.

There's two things in this part of the journey that are required. The first thing that is required is a shift from human effort to trust in God's grace.

Here's the scene as the writer of 2nd King gives it to us. The great and mighty Naaman man, he has gone to the king of Israel who says, this guy is trying to start an international event, a war with us.

He knows if I'm not God, am I God that I can do this? I would that more kings would say that. But he says, there's nobody in the world, only God can solve your problem.

Now remember, he's been put on this journey by a little servant girl from Israel who is the servant girl to his wife.

[19 : 06] He's been put on this journey. He has gone to the king of Israel because he thinks that religion works in Israel like it works in Syria.

Religion is nationalized and all the prophets and all the priests and all the ministers are just lackeys of the politicians. And that's a way that the politicians and the kings can control their people.

You must believe this and by the way, you must honor the king and you must see the king even as a deity in some cases. So he goes to the king and he says, hey, get one of your prophets to cure me.

What? I don't control prophets. I don't control ministers like you guys do. Only God can do this. Elijah sends word so that this one can know that there is a God in Israel, a real God, not a pretend God, not a statue, not an idol God, or a fickle God, but a God who knows a God that we are in relationship with, send him to me.

So Naaman, Naaman, in all human effort must learn about God's grace. He must make a shift from human effort to trust in God's grace.

[20 : 43] grace. He rolls up, it says, with horses plural, chariots plural, and remember all the swag that he's got. He's got, he has got enough money.

Now, commentators are really divided about trying to sum up what he's carrying with him. But they're all agreed, it's more money than the state and the government of Israel has.

It's more, it's more money than can be found in the nation. And he's offering that to Elijah.

So he leaves the palace and he goes to Elijah's place, which is not described, but I would dare say it's very humble.

And he rolls up in a dusty little small collection of mud houses. And I mean, he's got the armed guard, he's got the limo services, and he pulls up and he's like, man, this is the back of nowhere.

[22 : 02] And he says, all right, hey, listen, go tell Elijah to come on out here, do his thing. And Elijah doesn't come out. And I don't think that Elijah was doing something, watching his favorite TV program, so he said, hey, I can't be interrupted right now.

I think Elijah said, I am intentionally not going out. Because the problem, the problem is not what he thinks is the problem.

The problem is his self-sufficiency. The problem is his pride. And he intentionally offers him an offense, an offense to see and to gauge his reaction, which I might say is a great test.

How much does it take for you to feel slighted? What do you do when your work, your effort, your possessions, your prowess?

You are criticized, are slighted, or as Elijah did, rejected him. Elijah doesn't come out.

[23 : 40] He just sends a messenger. He says, go wash. Naaman, his own voice here and in the Hebrew, the Hebrew places the emphasis in verse 11.

Behold, I thought that he would surely come out, and in the Hebrew, emphatic is, to me. I surely thought that he would come out to me, the big man, the big woman, that he's of God, that God would come out, or he, God would send a messenger, he's got it all scripted.

This is what my cure is going to look like. This is the prescription that I want you to give me, and I don't want any humiliation, and I don't want any pain, and I don't want any suffering.

And Elijah doesn't do that. God, he says, your journey is going to take you to a muddy river, a humble river.

I've not gone to Israel yet, but I have many, many friends who have gone and toured Israel, and everyone has come back and said, you know, the most disappointing thing was the Jordan River.

[25 : 12] I thought it was so grand until I got there. I almost didn't. I mistook it for something else because it's so humble.

It's so common. It's so muddy. It's so ordinary. It's so simple, and that was what Naaman's pride was facing.

And until he set aside and shifted from knee to mercy and grace alone, there'd be no cure.

And the second point under this, and it's a necessity, is that there must be a necessary shift from help for suffering to forgiveness for sin.

This is important. He came, he came as a great man looking for a cure for his suffering to be less even removed.

[26 : 19] But in the process, he came to see that what was afoot was not his leprosy, but his pride.

That it wasn't a cure for his malady, his physical malady, that was great. It was a cure and the forgiveness for his sin that was great and needed.

It reminds me of Jesus in Mark 2, where the four good friends lower their paralytic friend through the roof.

faith. And as he comes before Jesus and all the Pharisees and teachers of the law are looking to see what Jesus will do, Jesus, before he heals him, says, son, your sins are forgiven.

And the Pharisees go ballistic. Who is this man who blasphemes and forgives sins?

[27 : 32] And Jesus said, but that you may know that I am this man who can forgive sins. I do have this authority. I tell you, take up your mat and walk.

What was going on? What Jesus was saying was that the priority was not the disease or the suffering. Indeed, that was what led the paralytic man before Jesus.

the priority was the forgiveness of sin. A new heart, not a new body. The body is temporal. And apart from the forgiveness of sins, will not be redeemed for eternal life in heaven with God.

The body is deteriorating. It's the sin. It's the sin within. sin. And it's the cure outside. So he must make that shift.

And we see in verse 13 and 14 how he makes that shift. His servants, so he's in a rage. He said, you know what, we've got cleaner rivers where I came from.

[28 : 47] Now remember, Elijah is not outside. He's inside. And so Naaman is just blustering before this servant, this lackey in his mind, this messenger, this lowly guy.

I mean, he's like, I've got ten set of clothes and you're just dressed in some little humble burlap cloth in this lowly place and you're telling me to go wash in a muddy river.

What is this? I'm expecting you to come out and just hocus pocus, mighty, mighty, mighty, give us your goods. That's the way it works around the world.

God is a vending machine. You bring a gift, you make a sacrifice, but gods are pleased, hocus pocus, poof, and you're cured.

I say, nope. I must disappear. In fact, I'm not going to, he sends him away to the Jordan River, a place that he's alone and will be alone with just his servants.

[29 : 57] Elisha will not even be present, only God. The focus is on God and his work, not Elijah's work, and he doesn't want any mistake about that.

He wants Naaman come to see that if there is a cure, and if he shall be cured, the cure must come from God, and that cure will only come to the humble.

Will you humble yourself? And he all but turned away. I believe he was on the road back. And his servants, man, he had some fantastic servants.

They came to him, and here's where the NIV and the ESV differ. in verse 13, the NIV says, my father, if he had given you a great work to do.

So the NIV, and it's correct, has the servant saying, listen, if he had asked you to go and get the broom of the wicked witch, you'd go do it.

[31 : 11] How much less should you do this? What does it hurt? You go and you dip seven times and nothing happens, come back and off with his head.

I like the ESV. My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you. Will you not do it?

His servants come to him and I believe these are servants like the little girl, the little servant girl that are also from Israel. They have a knowledge and an understanding of the ways of the God of Israel, our God.

And they're saying, he's spoken to you a great word. There's a sermon in what he said to you. And that sermon is this.

you need to humble yourself that you don't write the script, you don't write the prescription, that you would trust, you would put your weight into this prophet who speaks for God word.

[32 : 27] That's the word that he's spoken to you. Unlike every other God, this God has spoken through this prophet. will you take him at his word? No matter how humiliating, no matter how scandalous, no matter how common, will you trust it?

Zechariah 13.1 says, On that day there shall be a fountain open for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.

when I was in seminary working on my master's, I had a professor and we had at that time a number of seminary faculty had worked on the Trinity hymnal, which in the Presbyterian Church in America as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was a collaborative effort to have a new hymn book.

And so they were working on this hymn book to produce the Trinity hymn book. It hadn't come out yet and my professor was one of the editors.

He was one of the men that was working on which hymns to put in and which hymns to take out. And there was a fabulously wealthy woman in St. Louis who approached him.

[33 : 57] And she said, you know, I know you need, all publications need for money. She said, I'll underwrite whatever is left to bring this project to completion.

Great! But I only have one condition. What is that? There's this hymn that grosses me out. And I don't think she said gross.

There's this hymn that is disgusting! It's embarrassing! And I don't want it in. Well, we're not going to have, of course, we're not going to put in disgusting, gross, embarrassing.

What's the hymn, by the way? There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins.

And sinners plunged beneath that blood, they lose all guilt and stain.

[35 : 17] Well, I'm glad to say it's in the Trinity hymnal. And it is gross. We Christians are a bloody religion.

But we believe with all humility that that blood is drawn from the veins of a Savior. And we must come under that fountain.

We must plunge ourselves into that muddy, bloody river of His blood for forgiveness. Will we be humbled to do that?

Will we continue to claim that there must be another way and I can find it? There must be another way in this world and I can Google it. I can find an answer on Google. Revelation 1.5 To Him, and this is Christ, who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood.

that's a song of praise that is offered up even in this apocalyptic vision of the end, that we'll always be singing the praises of one that has directed us to a very humble fountain, something that we wouldn't have chosen.

[36 : 45] Let me give you the last point as we end, and then I'm going to encourage you to return this evening because this is the conclusion of his journey. The last part of his journey is we've seen the hero reaching the end of the road.

We've seen the hero now, he does plunge himself. He takes the direction of his servants and he goes down into that muddy river one time, two times, three times, four times, five times, six times, seven times, and he comes up.

We don't know if this is more like baptism or more like resurrection, but he comes out like a new boy. Youthful flesh, he is born again.

Now where does he go? Like a servant, he steps onto a disciple's path. He's reached the end of his road, he goes to this humble, common, humiliating river and he goes down, he rises to his feet and he steps out to follow God.

He steps out as a servant. Naaman becomes a servant and he becomes a worshiper. In verse 15 we see that he becomes a servant in relationship to God and I can't spend but just a passing moment with this but it's important that you see that he's not pledging himself to be Elijah's servant but he's a servant to God.

[38 : 26] If you were healed of cancer, if the doctor said there is no cure, you shall die.
and you are cured of cancer, a doctor in our midst cures you of cancer.

As soon as you see the cure and the promise of new life where there was only the promise of death, what are you going to do?

I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to run to that doctor and I'm going to say thank you, thank you, thank you for curing me. Naaman doesn't do that.

He's not thanking Elijah. This is a Gentile, a Gentile, not an Israelite. This is missions in action. This is a Gentile coming to Elijah to make a public confession that there is only one God and it's the God of Israel.

[39 : 39] There is no God but this God and I want to be his servant. Five times from verses 15 through 19, five times he'll use the term servant.

A servant, your servant, your servant, your servant, but not meaning Elisha that he is now going to be at his beck and call and a servant to him, but he's going to be a fellow servant.

He's going to be in community. He wants to join the church and says he is. And then in verse 18, Naaman becomes a worshiper of God.

I, again, I'll pick this up tonight, but this is where we get the, you know, it's kind of strange to us where Naaman says, Elijah, can I carry, can I do a soil removal and transport?

I'm going to start a service. I've got two mule movers that are going to, we want to move some soil from here to the temple of Ramon. And he says, when I go in, the soil that I want to kneel, when I kneel with my master, I want it to be Israel.

[41 : 07] And I want everybody to see that and to know that. But also, I want to know that. What was he doing? Because Elijah said, okay. What he was saying is, I'm not leaving this God of Israel with just the cure.

I am now a servant and I join you and I also am a worshiper of God. And he carries God as a worshiper not simply into church on Sunday morning, but into the workplace.

This was his job. It would be like a student who moves to Glasgow to attend university here.

Your mom, your dad, your family, you've left them somewhere. You've left your church and now you're in Glasgow.

Will you be a worshiper? Will you allow your fellow students to know that you're a Christian? Maybe you've taken a new job and you get a chance to reposition yourself.

[42 : 23] No one who really knows you is not necessarily close to you here so you get to start over again. Will you include fellowship with the saints?

Will you include worship? And what will it look like played out in the workplace? We know that Naaman was a true convert because he didn't compartmentalize, he didn't separate it out.

This to him was the gospel and what is the gospel? The gospel is the complete cleansing for our sins when we take a man hanging on a cross upon his word.

A word to forgive us and to make us like a little child. That's gospel. And it plays out in that we join others who have received this good news, the forgiveness of our sin, because a man scandalous asleep, half naked on cross beams on the town garbage heap died for us.

It's narrow, it's simple, it's humiliating, but we say he did it and I am cleansed and I am forgiven and I will forever serve and worship him.

[43 : 49] That's the gospel that transforms us. The island of Molokai in the 1800s, 18, oh I'll say to about 1830 till about 1920 was the Isle of Lepers.

And they quarantined lepers by taking them to this isolated island of Hawaii. And they would dump them off on the shore, not leaving them any way or any means by boat or any link to get off that island.

And they were miserable. They found caves, they tried to sleep in the trees, they scrambled for food, they were cruel to one another in their effort to survive.

And then a priest in Leuven, Belgium, was called to go and be a missionary to that leper colony in Molokai, Hawaii.

when he was supposed to board the ship, he was taken deathly ill. And his brother, Damien, who was also a priest, said, I will go.

[45 : 19] I will go. And I will be one of them. He wasn't simply going to go and stay on the shore or stay in a boat and minister to them.

He went into the leper colony. for 11 years, he planted with them, he built their houses with them, he ate poi with his fingers with them.

And in his 11th year, he was bathing his feet with hot water, scalding water, and he didn't feel anything.

He knew that that was a sign that he was a leper. That morning was a Sabbath.

And in his sermon that day, he opened like this. Oh, my dear brothers and sisters, today, I am one with you.

[46 : 27] Jesus Christ left heaven and he came to earth.

He humbled himself and became a man. He went down low. And then he lived a life that we should have lived, not seeking for his own self, but seeking for us.

Seeking us as the sick who needed a physician. And then God became a man. He became one with us.

He became the sinner, the scoundrel, the lowest of life on the cross in my place.

He became one of us. And he died. But dying a sinless death, he was risen again.

[47 : 40] By God he rose again on the third day, showing that he had conquered sin and death. And he had conquered it for all that would receive that humble death, one with us, sin in our place, that we would receive him.

But it takes getting low to receive that. It's humbling to admit that I am that sick and I need that cure. And I need that cure again and again and again.

But he ever offers it and that by his grace. This is God's word. May he bless it to our hearts this morning. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, I pray that you would help us like Naaman to see that our real sickness is inside of us.

The real problem is not outside of us and someone else's fault. If circumstances were only different, it's me.

[48 : 58] But you have come from the outside with an offer to change my heart by the forgiveness of my sin, by the washing away of all sin, by your shed blood on the cross, that I might rise up out of that fountain forgiven, whole, healed, and new.

Now, Father, may I ever be a debtor to such mercy by my loving service and my faithful worship, as I would pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.