

God's Mercy to a Humbled Gentile

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is from 2 Kings, chapter 5. Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and in high favour, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria.

He was a mighty man of valour, but he was a leper. Now the Syrians, on 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 clothes.

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.

[1 : 15] 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. 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 his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.

Are not Abana and Farfather 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.

[2 : 25] 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.

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.

[3 : 26] In this matter, may the Lord pardon your servant. When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, 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 has 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?

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 festal garments.

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 festal garments and laid them on two of his servants.

[4 : 36] 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? 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. Thank you, Penny. So I'm a bit nervous about giving this sermon for several reasons.

But the main reason is the first time it was preached on, the congregation was so offended they tried to kill the preacher. So what is it about this passage that is so offensive? Why was it so hard to hear that God could have mercy on this man, Naaman?

[5 : 50] Well, the offense here is who it is God saved. This is a story of God saving an outsider. And for those on the inside, it was deeply offensive.

Those who felt they had a right to God's mercy, God's free gift to this outsider was not popular. This story tells us about who God saves. For those of us here who are Christians, it's a wonderful reminder of God's grace to us.

And those who would not call ourselves Christians, I hope this message will show you that God welcomes people of all kind. Over the past few weeks, we've been hearing the story of Elisha, God's prophet and savior, who had come to judge and save God's people.

We have seen before that before judgment, he offers salvation. Today, we see who we bring salvation to. Let's start with Naaman, a Syrian army general.

He was an enemy of Israel who had defeated them in battle. We're told he had a skin disease. We're also told that he had taken a little girl captive as one of the spoils of war and kept her as a slave in his home.

[7 : 01] He was an enemy of Israel who had taken a child of Israel to be his slave. He was an enemy of Israel.

She saw her slave master suffering with his skin ailment. She must have known the miraculous things that Elisha had done, some of which we've been reading the past few weeks. And she says to Naaman's wife, as we see in verse 3, Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy.

What a paraphrase, if only he met the prophet in Samaria. Naaman hears of her recommendation of this healer prophet in Israel and goes to ask his boss for permission to see him.

We see down in verse 4, his boss, the king of Syria, agreed to write a referral letter to the king of Israel. He packs up his money and fine clothes, the medical bills, and sets off to Israel.

On arriving there, he gives this letter to the king, asking for help with this skin problem. And this seems to cause a stir. At this time, there must have been a ceasefire between these two warring nations.

[8 : 29] The king of Israel is worried that this request to do the impossible and heal this enemy general was just provocation. We read in verse 7, But God's prophet Elijah hears of this and sends a message to the king.

We see in verse 8, Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman, who has travelled all this way with all these fine clothes and money, goes to Elisha's house.

Naaman stood there with his huge entourage and knocks at the door. While they come to see his patient, Elisha sends a messenger to the waiting general. As we see in verse 10, Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.

Naaman's travelled all this way, brought substantial payment to this great healer. And what does he get? A second-hand message from his assistant. In my work as a doctor, I have been that

underling, working in the professor's clinic, seeing patients on their behalf.

I know that look of disappointment when the patient who's travelled two hours to see this eminent professor walks into the clinic room, sees me, devoid of all the professorial presence.

[9 : 54] After coming all this way, with all this money and expensive clothes, to pay for the best medical care in the Middle East, the healer does not bother to see him, and the prescription is to go swim in the river. There are many rivers in Syria. Why does he need to wash in this one?

Not only did the professor not see him, but his prescription was for something he had in the bathroom cabinet at home. So he storms off in a huff. But before he heads back to see his servant, before he heads back home, his servant stops him and says in verse 13, Father, it is a great word that the prophet has spoken to you.

Will you not do it? He has actually said to you, wash and be clean. So he went and dipped himself 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 made clean. He did what the prophet in Israel said, and the miraculous happened. He was healed. The leper, an enemy army general, who came to see this Jewish healer, found the treatment he needed.

So that's quite a nice story, isn't it? God was kind enough to heal this enemy general of this dry skin. But this story is not about God's dermatologist. As we've seen in the past weeks, Elisha was sent with the purpose to point towards Christ.

[11 : 10] Elijah came to call to repentance, and Elisha came to save and to judge. He was not in the business of fixing people's skin problems. He was there to save. The deeper reality of this event is revealed in the words used.

Nowhere does it say he was healed. It says, if you look down, he was made clean. This richly unclean enemy of Israel, who kept child slaves, was restored and made clean.

Made clean like who? Well, let's look back at verse 14. His flesh was restored like that of a little child, and he was made clean. Made clean like that little Jewish girl.

The foreign enemy of God's people had been restored to be like one of God's people. The general had become like that little girl. Naaman's response underlines that he knows that this is not merely about not having to buy any more E45 cream.

Look down at verse 15. 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.

[12 : 18] The general of a foreign army who had defeated Israel is now proclaiming the God of Israel to be the one true God. Later in verse 15, we see that he wants to express his gratitude to Elisha with grace.

He promises not to make sacrifices to other gods, and he asks for forgiveness in assisting his master in the temple of false gods in the line of his work. This enemy of Israel is now proclaiming the God of Israel to be the one true God.

He has done nothing to deserve it, and this restoration, he gives nothing for this restoration. God's grace to the enemy of his people was freely given to this totally undeserving outsider.

Last week in 2 Kings 4, we saw that the way to be saved was to cling to Elisha, the man of God. Here we see that people of all nations can do that. Elisha, God's prophet, saved this enemy of Israel.

Elisha came to save and judge. Here he saved the unexpected, undeserving foreigner. God saves people from all nations, people like Naaman and people like us.

[13 : 26] 800 years before Jesus came down to break down the dividing wall of hostility between Gentiles and God, here we see that those from any nation who clung to Elisha could be saved.

How often do we stop to think how amazing that is? How often do we thank God for his mercy that he would save people like Naaman and people like us? Do we understand how shocking it is that we can be part of God's family?

If we're struggling to see how shocking it is, then Elisha's servant Gehazi helps us. As we turn to the second half of our passage, Gehazi serves as our ancient Jewish commentator.

He sees this richly unclean enemy of Israel being miraculously brought into God's commonwealth. He sees that this is undeserved. He knows how remarkable this is and his bitter response we can see down in verse 20.

See, my master has spared this Naaman, the Syrian, in not accepting from his hand what he brought. Gehazi is outraged that his master, the man of God, would restore this foreigner to attain the same status as God's people.

[14 : 38] He should at least have to pay something to be in this privileged position. He is outraged that God's saviour judge, Elisha, spared this man who deserved judgment. So motivated out of bitterness and likely also out of a bit of greed, he chases after Naaman.

And he asks if he can take that gift that Elisha had previously declined. And Naaman willingly gives it to Gehazi. He takes it all for himself. On return, Elisha, God's judge and saviour, knows what he's done.

And his response we can see in the last verse of our passage. Therefore, the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever. So he went out from his presence, a leper like snow.

The man who did not accept God's saving work, the man who rejects God's grace to all peoples, faced God's judgment. I really wish we knew more about this little slave girl who evangelized her slave master.

But it would seem her evangelism is not the main point of the story. The real focus is Gehazi's rejection of it. The writers of Kings want us to see that God's wonderful plan to bring salvation to all peoples would not be popular with everybody.

[15 : 52] Through Elisha, God saves a totally unworthy outsider. Outsiders just like us who can rejoice in that amazing truth that we can be saved. It was shocking that the perfect God of Israel would extend his grace to his enemies.

It is shocking that the perfect God of the Old Testament would save outsiders like Naaman and outsiders like us. God saves unworthy outsiders and some people won't like it.

I mentioned at the beginning that the first person to preach to this passage upset the congregation so much that they tried to kill him. Well, I used a little bit of poetic license calling it a sermon. It was actually Jesus speaking on this passage in the temple.

The reason they tried to kill him? Well, his audience, like Gehazi, they understood this story. They understood that God saves people from all nations and like Gehazi, they did not like it.

This occurred right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and can be found in Luke chapter 4. If you can turn there or look to your service sheets if you have one. The story starts in verse 16.

[17 : 05] To summarize, Jesus stands up in the temple and reads from Isaiah in the Old Testament. He claims to be the promised Savior, the Savior who will bring liberty to the oppressed. Those listening to him marvel at this.

Their long-promised Savior had finally arrived. But before they had a moment to get too excited, he burst their bubble. He says, no, you don't understand. Look down at me at verse 24.

And he said, truly I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I will tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the heavens were shut up three years and six months and a great famine came up over all the land.

And Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elijah.

And none of them were cleansed but only Naaman the Syrian. At the very outset of Jesus' public ministry, he is making clear what his ministry will look like.

[18 : 10] And it will look like Elisha in this story, saving people from all nations, saving people like Naaman. The story of Naaman was how Jesus chose to launch his public ministry.

Saving unworthy outsiders was what he came to do. You can read on later that those in the temple, like Gehazi, did not like this message. And it's at that point they tried to throw Jesus at the cliff.

Jesus came to save the unworthy outsiders, outsiders like us, people who are not just Jews, people from all nations. So what does this ancient story mean for us today?

This side of the cross, it seems elementary. Surely we understand that God saves people from all nations. But the responses to God's grace that we have in the story of Naaman serves as a mirror to hold up to ourselves.

How do we respond to God's grace? Do we respond like Naaman, knowing how undeserving we are and abounding in thanksgiving that God would rescue us, the unworthy outsider?

[19 : 14] Do we respond like the little girl with such confidence in God's ability to save, such a deep understanding of who he saves that we are poised, ready to tell anybody about it?

