

The Humility of Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as Dan mentioned earlier, I am also Dan, another Dan G. Occasionally we get each other's emails, and depending on what kind of mood we're in, we might forward them on in time to be able to respond in a timely manner.

We also chatted. We have the same issue when we're writing an email quickly. The N and the M are really close to each other, so sometimes we'll sign off an email with damn and then hit send, and then people will respond and say, what did I do? What did I say?

So if you ever get one of those, it was probably unintentional. But it's good to be opening the word with you this morning.

2 Kings chapter 5. This is a really compelling text, I find. It's a really good story because there's enough about the characters in here that you feel quite a bit of sympathy, and there's enough detail you feel like you're in the scene.

At least I do. I can picture this playing out in film or something. It's a compelling story, most of all, though, because it's a story that is all about the grace of God to somebody who does not deserve it and doesn't understand it.

[1 : 2 3] So let's recap the story that we just had read. The first character we meet is Naaman, and he's described with just a string of superlatives.

He's the commander of the Syrian army. He is a mighty man of valor, and it is through, and this seems a little odd maybe at first, it is through him that God, Israel's God, has given Syria victory over Israel.

Now, you'd have to have read 1 and 2 Kings up to this point to understand why God would be giving victory to Syria over Israel. But it's because I know there's at least one small group that's going through Kings, and one thing you see in Kings is that Israel is constantly being led by unfaithful kings into idolatrous worship of the gods of the nations around them.

So God is using Syria and Naaman, the commander of their army, to discipline a wayward Israel. But Naaman, of course, doesn't recognize that it's God who's given him victory.

He is a mighty man of valor, after all. So he thinks this has come about by his own hand. Now, he is highly esteemed by the king of Syria, and by all worldly standards, Naaman is a very important and a very great man.

[2 : 5 1] But the text tells us he is a leper. This is not the ultra-contagious sort of flesh-rotting disease that we think of when we think of leprosy.

The Bible uses this term for just a host of conditions of the skin and of the flesh. This can't be terribly serious or terribly terminal because it doesn't prevent Naaman, for example, from leading Syria in victory over Israel, or from being the right-hand man of the king, or for living in his household with his wife and his servants and so on.

But it is a physical and a social grief to him, and it does cause him suffering. So Naaman, understandably, wants healing, but there's nothing that this great man can do about it.

He's as helpless as anyone else in the face of this disease. So next we learn of a servant in Naaman's household. In one of Syria's raids, perhaps even one that he led, the Syrian army had carried away this little girl and taken her captive back to Syria, and she ends up a slave for Naaman's wife.

And this kind of invites a bit of reflection. Was her family killed in this raid? Did maybe her father and brothers die in this attack by Syria?

[4 : 31] Maybe her family is still living in Israel, and she's just been carried off. Or maybe her family has been enslaved elsewhere in Syria.

We don't know. But interestingly, the text here uses a very rare word. We're told she was a little girl or a little maiden.

How would you feel? How would you feel if this was you? Or if you're a parent, how would you feel if this was your little girl? This little girl, whatever we might feel if we try and put ourselves in her place, she does something very, that I at least would not expect.

She tells her mistress, Naaman's wife, that if her master could only go and see Elisha, the prophet of God in Samaria, he could be healed of his leprosy.

Think about that. It's an interesting thing for this little girl who is serving as a slave in the household of the person who is in charge of her enslavement, right?

[5 : 46] I think it would have been very natural for her to be mad at Naaman, to say the least. You know, he took me from my home, separated me from my family, he's made me a servant.

I hope this guy dies of his leprosy. Or she could have been mad at God. God, you let these idol-worshipping Syrians march in here and haul me away from my family.

She could have been bitter towards God about her situation, but she must not have been. For she goes to her mistress and says, I know how Naaman can be helped.

He needs to go see the prophet of God, the prophet of Yahweh. Interestingly, Naaman trusts her. He just believes her.

So much so that he goes to his master, the king, and tells the king what this little girl has told him. And the king says, well, by all means, go to Samaria then.

[6 : 47] Go visit this prophet. But, of course, the king wants his right-hand man healed. Now, Syrians would have expected Elisha, who they're talking about, the prophet of God, probably to be a court magician or a court sorcerer in the palace of Israel's king.

So naturally, the king of Syria writes a letter of introduction from one king to another. Introducing Naaman. So Naaman can bring it to the king of Israel when he goes.

Now, Naaman takes a huge treasure with him, perhaps to purchase the healing, to bribe Israel's prophet, to heal this commander of the army of Israel's enemy.

Right? Hey, remember me? I'm here to be healed. Probably wouldn't go over too well. So he brings a big treasure with him, right? Money talks.

The king of Syria's letter, the letter he writes, sounds like he expected Israel's king to just order a healing. You know? Oh, Elijah?

[8 : 01] This gentleman needs to be healed. Would you please look after that? Or it kind of also sounds like he might have expected the king to do it himself. The letter says, when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman, my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy.

Clearly, if you've read Kings, the king of Syria is unaware of the strained relationships between the kings of Israel and the prophets of Israel.

They generally don't see eye to eye. The kings of Israel are constantly falling into idolatry and leading the people and the prophets of Israel are steadily standing up to them and proclaiming for them to repent in dust and ashes.

That sort of thing. The king of Israel, at any rate, reads this letter and he panics. He tears his clothes in fear. Am I God to kill and make alive?

That this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? And the king turns to his court officials and he says, this is just a pretense to cause another, he wants to cause another war.

[9 : 18] And he's clearly very afraid. Now, Elisha hears that the king is distraught and so he sends to the king and says, send Naaman to me for what purpose?

He doesn't say, you know, I'm having a sale on healings this week or anything like that. He says, send Naaman to me so that Naaman may know that there is a prophet of God in Israel.

So what Naaman intends by this trip and what God intends by this trip may be different slightly. So Naaman comes to Israel with his big entourage, his guards, his horses, his chariots, his wagons full of treasure and he stands at Elisha's door and we have a very comical scene here.

At least it hits my funny bone. Here's this big entourage at Elisha's door and you can picture Naaman telling one of his servants, okay, knock on the door, you know, and he's standing there and the door opens and it's not Elisha.

It's one of Elisha's, it's just a servant of Elisha, it's a messenger and he comes to the door and he relays some instructions to Naaman. Maybe he says, Elisha says, you're supposed to go to the Jordan, you're supposed to dunk seven times and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.

[10 : 47] Okay, have a nice day. Slams the door. And this is not how Naaman is used to being received.

He's the commander of the king of Syria's army. Wherever he goes, people tremble before him and they, he says, jump and they say, how high and how many times would you like me to jump, sir?

He is a great man, you know, medals all over his uniform. He's a big deal. And Elisha sends a messenger to him.

He won't even come to the door. Naaman is angry. The text tells us that he goes away in a huff.

This is not what he was expecting. He was expecting, he tells us what he was expecting, doesn't he? He goes into quite a bit of detail. He probably pictured this scene in his mind as he was riding in his chariot to Israel.

[11 : 51] He was expecting for Elisha to come out and to stand before him. Probably quite an honor to be healing the commander of Syria's army. He expected Elisha to come and stand and to call on the name of the Lord and to wave his hand above the leprosy and for the leprosy to be miraculously healed.

A bit of a, a bit of pomp and circumstance, right? Instead, he's told to go and dip in the muddy, murky, weedy stream of the Jordan River.

He says, look, if all I had to do is dunk in a river seven times, there were two perfectly good rivers back in Damascus. They were snow-fed, clear, swift rivers instead of this muddy little trickle here.

And he's mad and he storms off in a rage. But his servants approach him, says they approach him. I think you can picture this quite gingerly, right?

Naaman, master, they're trying to convince him just to give it a try, right? And the, the, the translation here is a little tricky, but maybe it's something like this.

[13 : 15] Master Naaman, if it was a great thing that this prophet would have commanded you, you, you would have tried it. After all, you're a mighty man of valor and all. Because it's a simple thing, though, don't, don't you think you should just try it anyway?

I mean, we've come all this way. So Naaman gives in and he goes and he dunks himself in the Jordan seven times as Elisha had instructed.

And lo and behold, his flesh is restored like the healthy skin of a young child, the text tells us.

He's washed and clean. He does what the prophet of God tells him to do. There's a little resonance here with the gospel of Matthew that we've been working through.

Jesus says, unless you become as a little child, well, Naaman does what God says to do and his flesh is made like the flesh of a little child. Look at Naaman's response to this.

[14 : 23] In his response, you can tell God didn't just heal his skin. God got a hold of his heart. Naaman returns to Elisha's house, which is not on his way.

It's not on the way back to Syria. It's a big backtrack for him, but he, along with his entire entourage, goes back to Elisha's house. And this time when he comes to Elisha's door, he is a different man.

He stands there now and he confesses, now I know there is no God in all the earth, but the God of Israel. You'll notice Naaman uses the name of the God of Israel, Yahweh, throughout the text, where you see the word Lord in all uppercase.

He is referring to the God of Israel by God's revealed name. The first time he came to Elisha's door, he stood there in pride and self-importance.

And now he comes in humility and thankfulness. He is a converted man. When Naaman is healed, his reaction is to declare that there is only one true God, Yahweh.

[15 : 43] And he immediately realizes that the gods he has previously worshipped were no true gods at all. But Naaman knows he must return, that he must go back to Syria and continue serving as the king's right-hand man.

But this is going to be difficult. He recognizes that a heart turn to the one true God is going to cause him some serious friction with what he does, his role back in Syria.

So he now says that he only wants to worship the one true God. So notice he asks for pardon from God for having to continue to support the king when the king goes into the house, into the temple of Raman to worship.

And he asks for pardon through Elisha from God for that. And Elisha says to him, go in peace. So this is a story about the healing of Naaman.

It's a story about the grace of God to somebody who did not recognize God, did not worship God. but it is about more than just the healing of Naaman.

[17 : 07] It is actually a story about the grace of God. And God is the main character in this whole story. Naaman's real problem wasn't leprosy.

It was idolatry. But God had to heal him of his leprosy for Naaman to recognize that. Naaman was ignorant of the one true God before he came.

He thought that his greatness was all by his own hand. But his gods were unable to do anything for him in the matter of his leprosy. But now that he's healed, he recognizes that Elisha's God is real.

And it was in obedience to his word that Naaman was not merely healed, but his heart was turned right around. The only help for Naaman was to trust God and to do what God said.

Now, I don't know about you, but I can identify with Naaman in this story, and in some ways it reminds me a bit of last week's message on the rich young man from Matthew's gospel.

[18 : 19] Right? He came to Jesus saying, what must I do to be saved? And when Jesus told him what he needed to do, it didn't fit with what that rich young man expected to hear.

It was not what he wanted to hear, so he went away. And Naaman did that very same thing. He did not hear what he came expecting to hear.

So when he heard the prophet of God's instructions to him, he thought, this is beneath me, I'm out of here. But his servants convinced him and he followed through. And sometimes we are this way, aren't we?

We are this way. We expect God to work in certain ways in our lives. If you're a Christian, perhaps you can think back to when you first came to Christ and you expected perhaps to be able to prove yourself to God in some way.

And grace was quite an offense to you. Grace was just, you expected to have to do something, maybe like the rich young man, some sort of task. What must I add to what I've already done to be saved?

[19 : 35] But we don't like the humility that grace demands of us. The humility of grace bruises our egos, as it did Naaman's, because it means that we're completely helpless in and of ourselves.

Now, Naaman's story deals with his physical disease of leprosy, but our stories, we're talking now about our spiritual disease, our disease of sin and idolatry.

And you can see that, yeah, Naaman worshipped the idol of Rimon, but his real idolatry was himself, wasn't it? He expects the God of Israel and the prophet of Israel to do what he thinks, right?

and he's quite offended when that's not the case. And I think that's like us. Our true idols are what we construct in our own hearts and then expect God to be like that.

Not so much made in the image of God, but kind of remaking God in our image. Well, disease, leprosy, is a great leveler in the ancient world.

[20 : 48] if you were rich and powerful like Naaman, the right hand man of the king, it doesn't matter. You're as helpless in the face of leprosy as the lowest slave is.

And isn't that the way sin is for us? Sin is the great leveler. The rich young man coming to Jesus was no better off, in fact, arguably worse off than someone who comes poor and empty.

It doesn't matter if you're wealthy or powerful or well connected or have great renown as a mighty man of valor. In the sickness of sin, everyone is infected with it and the treatment for everyone is the same.

It's just God's grace, his unmerited kindness to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus' blood is the only cure for our souls.

We must dip in it, figuratively. And like Naaman, looking at the Jordan, we think there's certainly got to be something more honorable that I can do, but we're told no.

[22 : 03] Christ's blood alone cleanses our hearts and our souls from sin. This does not appeal to our pride. God. Or perhaps we're like the Galatians.

I know I am sometimes. The Galatians began with grace. That made sense to them. But as Paul writes to them, he's writing to convince them that they have to continue in grace as well.

It's not enough to begin in grace and then you keep walking in God's favor. You keep walking in fellowship with God by your own might and by your own strength. No.

It's grace all the way along. Now Naaman attempted to give Elisha when he returned after being healed, he attempted to give Elisha the treasure that he'd brought in payment for the healing that he had received.

Now why does Elisha refuse this? Because Naaman's healing wasn't something that Elisha did, first of all. And secondly, well, it was purely God's grace.

[23 : 06] It wasn't Elisha's doing. It was God's grace. But Elisha knows that God's grace cannot be bought. It can't be paid for. And this is true for us as well when we talk about what Christ has done for us, isn't it?

God's grace can't be purchased up front, and it certainly can't be paid back in installments. Reconciliation to God is purely on the basis of God's grace to us in Christ Jesus.

The only remedy for sin is to be washed in Christ's blood. There's no way to pay for that. Or, if there is, Jesus has fully paid it already, hasn't he?

You can't bring stuff to God to pay for the grace you've received, because then your hands are too full to cling to the cross. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

And this grace is profoundly humbling. Now, wrapping up, in Luke 4, Jesus brings up this story, says that there were many lepers in Elisha's day, but because Israel had turned away from God and ignored God's prophets and his call to repentance, God chose only to heal Naaman, a foreign enemy of Israel.

[24 : 36] Elisha gives aid to the enemies of Israel. This kind of reminds us of Daniel becoming the trusted advisor to the king of Babylon, the military power which in that day had destroyed Jerusalem and carried Israelites off into exile.

And this reminds us too of Jesus, actually, who just scattered throughout the gospel, Jesus shows grace and kindness and healing to a number of Roman centurions, the hated occupying power in Israel in his day.

This is because grace flips our worldly categories upside down. God's redemption is about turning those who are his enemies and who oppose him into his friends and bringing them into his kingdom.

God's love. So Naaman teaches us the humility of grace in this story, but the little girl teaches us something also.

And I think it's a very important lesson that we can take away for today, our own context and time. She teaches us about the faithful service and humble testimony that we can have.

[25 : 55] You notice she doesn't, all she really does in this story is she simply tells her master about Israel's prophet, about the prophet of the one true God who is the only one who can help Naaman.

And something in her personal conduct gave weight to her words, to this little girl's words. We live in a culture which is increasingly antagonistic towards Christianity, isn't it?

Many in our society have a very low opinion of the church and a very low opinion of the Christian faith. But I think we can learn from this little girl how to serve our society, our city, faithfully, as Christians, as believers in Christ.

I think we can learn from her how to be the kind of people that others can trust to act for their good. We are exiles like this little girl in a sense, and like Daniel and his three friends, we will face demands to bow to the idols of our culture.

But if we are the kind of people who always act out of love and compassion for our neighbors, those who are different from us or perhaps hostile toward us, then perhaps the church's reputation for love, for grace, for kindness, can give a weighty legitimacy to the message of Christ that we bring into our contexts.

[27 : 43] And maybe it can give a weighty legitimacy when we are called upon to make a profoundly counter-cultural stand. God. So, we're like Naaman, humbled by God's grace toward us.

And we're called to be like this little girl who humbly points to her God as the source of salvation, even for those who in the world's eyes are above all that, or who in the world's eyes are enemies.

that, of our faith? We imitate her. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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