

Food for Thought: Reflections on the Story of Naaman (II Kings 5)



There is much to glean in the story of Naaman, the Syrian officer who was healed of leprosy. This is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but let's take a look.

One of the first things to note about Naaman is that he was, well, a Syrian. At this point in history, Syria is a dangerous super-power north of Israel and not at all Israel's friend; however, it is a Syrian whom God will heal (Jesus highlights this point in Luke 4). Naaman, furthermore, is not just a Syrian, but the highest officer in the Syrian army. This is the man whom God will heal. It is a good reminder that God often does things we don't expect.

A young Israeli girl is captured in one of Syria's forays into Israel, and she becomes a servant to Naaman's wife. This young serving girl tells her mistress that there is a prophet in Israel who truly walks in the power of God (Elisha) and that she wishes Naaman could go to him and be healed. One conclusion to be drawn from this is that this girl could have responded to her experience of being captured and carried away into Syria by developing an abiding spirit of resentment and bitterness, but she didn't. If she had, she wouldn't have shared the information that could help Naaman. A miracle will occur, partly because this girl chose not harbor and feed bitterness.

The girl's voluntary and sincere concern for Naaman also tells us that Naaman had to have been a person of integrity (presumably his wife was also). Otherwise the girl wouldn't have cared about him and wouldn't have wanted to help him. This is a good reminder that the way we behave (with integrity, fairness, mercy, etc.) really does make a difference—to God, to ourselves, and to the people around us.

Naaman's wife tells him about what the Israeli serving girl has said, and he and his men decide to seek out this healer in Israel. They make a trip to Samaria in the Northern Kingdom of Israel with a letter of introduction from the Syrian King. Naaman first makes a humorous (to us) visit at the court of King Ahab (which terrifies Ahab because the King of Syria sent a letter with Naaman which is worded in such a way that it looks like he expects Ahab himself to heal Naaman of leprosy). Then Elisha sends a message to the court telling Naaman and his men to come to him. When Naaman arrives, Elisha gives him a message telling him to wash in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman is angry. If he needed a bath, he says, he could've stayed in Syria to do that; then he leaves in a huff. Naaman had imagined Elisha coming to him in person and waving his hand over Naaman's body or something more like what one might associate with a supernatural situation. This is a good reminder that the way God does things is often very different from what we expect and that we fail sometimes to receive a blessing because we are angry when He doesn't do things in the manner we had envisioned.

As Naaman heads home, his men speak up to him and say, "If the prophet had asked you to do something difficult or huge, would you have done it?" (they know Naaman would have). They go on: "Why not go back and do the small thing he asked?" Naaman sees that their point is a good one and heads back to Elisha. Here are additional things to notice. First, Naaman is someone capable of seeing reason and open to a valid appeal or objection; he listens to his men and thinks about what they said. Naaman's men probably deserve even more credit. They had to have been brave to challenge him (they could be killed simply for angering him). To be brave and take that risk, they had to have loved him. This is a good reminder that it takes courage and love to bring about that which is good. Also, we are again reminded that Naaman was a man of integrity and good to his men. If he were not, they wouldn't have taken that risk for him.

Naaman returns and does what Elisha had bidden him do, and he is healed. In this he rejoices. Then, however, he sees that his encounter with Elisha and God are going to change things. He can tell now that the God of Israel is real and that other gods are not (including Rimmon of Syria). Naaman says he will no longer worship or make sacrifices to Rimmon. This is a good reminder that real faith changes our lives, changes our behavior.

Naaman is worried, though, because one of his jobs is to help the feeble Syrian king hobble into the temple of Rimmon, and he asks that God would pardon him when he performs his duties in the Temple of Rimmon. Elisha tells him to go in peace. This is a good reminder that it is important to seek God's will regarding difficult situations in this life. Also, the fact that God showed mercy and understanding to Naaman regarding this situation doesn't mean that we have license to do whatever we want to, but it does remind us that some of God's answers are not of the one-size-fits-all variety.

As the story nears its ending, Naaman offers Elisha costly gifts. Elisha demurs, but his servant Gehazi is overcome by temptation and follows Naaman down the road and lies in order to get some of Naaman's gifts. This is a sobering side story. Gehazi did this sinful thing after serving Elisha for quite some time; this was not his first day at work. He knew Elisha's God was real, yet acted as if God wouldn't notice or care. This is a good reminder that nobody is beyond temptation. This is why we are called to be diligent about it. —*Sally Mahoney*