

2 Kings 5:1-14 Wash and Be Clean
July 7, 2019

One of the themes running throughout the bible involves the contrast between Israel's exclusive claims about the superiority of their God and their calling, and the idea that God is one, the God over all creation, whose judgement, love, and mercy reach across to all people everywhere, and at all times. There are stories about the faith of people outside Israel. And, of course, throughout the New Testament, the running theme is about the inclusion of the Gentiles.

One such story from the Old Testament Book of 2 Kings is the one read in our presence today, the story of Naaman the Leper. Naaman was a military sort and whenever we see that mentioned we are always meant to understand that for him, authority and chain of command were absolute in life. He was a man of order and discipline. He received orders and carried them out. He gave orders and expected them to be obeyed.

He came down with leprosy. It is unclear from the text what the actual disease was. The term "leprosy" could refer to fatal and very contagious diseases or to lesser afflictions of the skin. It seems that Naaman was *not* confined to a colony of lepers, so perhaps it was one of the less serious cases. In any case, it was a problem for him. For all his success as a soldier, he was unable to conquer it.

Troubling Things

When we read these old stories sometimes we find in them troubling things. In this case it is the unquestioned acceptance as normal of the practice of slavery. A band of Arameans had conducted raids in Israel and taken captives. There was, among others, a young girl who was made to serve Naaman's wife. Neither Israel's king nor Elisha himself questioned the practice and demanded that the girl be returned to her people.

I hope it is generally understood that the apparent acceptance of slavery among the people of the bible, right up to and including Paul, is *not* to be taken in any way as an endorsement or justification for this vile practice; or for any other practice that oppresses, harms, exploits, or subjugates any human being. Actually, the bible hammers away at slavery so that believers can't in good conscience remain ambivalent about it.

One of the ways in which the bible hammers away at slavery is by presenting slaves in very positive, human ways. Sometimes they are the heroes of the story, honest, loyal, intelligent. In this case, the girl has compassion for her captor, not in some Stockholm Syndrome sort of way, but just humanly, she could see how much he was suffering, and knew of a way to liberate him from his disease.

He was in enough pain, and I suppose, embarrassment, that he was willing to follow the

suggestion of a *slave girl*, imagine that, big strong soldier that he was. He went to the king to ask permission and receive a letter of recommendation.

The Other King's Faith

One can't help but notice the difference between the faith of the slave girl, along with Naaman's desperate faith, with the King of Aram joining in, all on the one hand; and the utter failure of Israel's king to believe in anything but an impending disaster.

He was astonished when he read the letter at the idea being proposed. "Am I God? Can I kill and restore?" We are told that he was afraid that if the venture failed it would result in a war with Aram, a war he feared the Israelites would inevitably lose. We are told that he was so upset that he tore his clothing. It really is astonishing sometimes to see the lack of faithfulness and resolve in those who've been given leadership.

Humiliation

Elisha found out about all this, rebuked the king and sent for Naaman. The way the story reads at this point one gets the impression that Naaman saw himself as a "knight in shining armor" who believed he could be healed if he completed a knight's errand, perhaps the slaying of a dragon, who knows?

Instead Elisha never even gives him an audience, only the strange command to baptize himself seven times in the Jordan River. If Naaman had been alive today he

might have had a different attitude about such a command. Today some people are willing to bend time and space to get to Israel so they can be baptized in the Jordan River. Instead, Naaman, the soldier, who always followed orders, became indignant, and refused to obey, claiming the superiority of the Aramean rivers.

The Cleanse

Once again, it was the servants who saved the day. They told him that if he had been given a grand task, he would have done it, all he was being asked to do was "wash and be cleansed," which was all he had requested. So he calmed down and obeyed; and was miraculously restored, made like new.

The story doesn't end there. The next thing that happened is that Naaman tried to pay Elisha for the favor. But Elisha refused payment in the concern for the integrity of things.

One of Elisha's subordinates, however, disagreed and chased after Naaman and told him the prophet had changed his mind about the payment. He negotiated a deal with Naaman, who was all too happy to pay, and then Elisha's subordinate pocketed the money for himself.

Elisha had spiritual eyes in the back of his spiritual head and somehow knew about the corrupt servant, who was then cursed with the same disease from which Naaman had just been cleansed.

Interestingly, one of the favors Naaman did ask for was which Elisha did grant, was to be forgiven for still participating in the religious rites of his homeland, ostensibly because his master still worshipped in that way. Elisha said, "Go in peace."

Leprosy of the Soul

In the bible, leprosy is, in addition to being a real disease of the skin, also a metaphor that represents in general the reality that all of us have been made unclean just by living in the world of human things.

We all live in the world of poverty; the economic system that feeds us also fails to feed others. We all live in the world of injustice; the power system that takes care of us also fails to take care of others. We all live in the world of environmental destruction; the ecosystem that builds our buildings and warms them and fuels our cars and planes, comes at a great destructive price.

We all live in the world of personal sin, where we are led to seek pleasure and security and wealth as the highest goods, though the scriptures consistently teach that these things are bankrupt, and lead to emptiness.

We are all afflicted with a leprosy of the soul; some in such a destructive way that it threatens their very lives and those of others; others in ways that seem less serious on the surface, but deeper down still threaten the inner life.

What to do? "Wash and be cleansed," is what this story teaches, even if one must make a fool of oneself to do it. "Wash and be clean." It is different than, "take medicine and be healed," or "take diet and exercise and be strengthened," or "pray and be comforted, guided, and transformed."

The world soils. God's grace cleanses. That cleansing is surely one of the meanings of our baptism, yet we must repeatedly tend to it, just as Naaman was asked to wash seven times, a number that stands for completeness.

To be cleansed means that we are not removed from the filth of the world, but cleansed as we remain in it, soiled a little each day, cleansed a little each day. It is better to be washed clean than to never have been dirty, better to have lived and suffered, and failed, than to have never lived at all, better to be forgiven than vindicated.

It is the difference between a life burdened with the command to never be dirty, a burden which never goes away, and a life in which one is set free from that by the power to cleanse, of God's unending mercy and love.

[Back](#)[Home](#)