

2 Kings 5:1-15

3/17/2024

Money, power, accomplishment, respect, love, honor. Most people, if they are lucky, get one or two of these things. Some people have plenty of money, but in pursuit of wealth they lose friends, ruin relationships, and gain enemies. Some people are loved, but not respected or feared. Some people accomplish great things and are extremely talented, but no one notices their genius. Yet, Naaman had all these things at once. Naaman was a general for the army of Aram in about 850 BC, 850 years before Jesus was on Earth. Aram was Israel's neighbor to the North- modern day Syria, and they were not friends. They were bitter, mortal enemies, partially due to Naaman. Naaman was an A-list celebrity- not only in his country of Aram, but in the entire ancient world- and for good reason. He was a valiant warrior, not simply a brutish oaf that was good with a sword- he certainly was an imposing, skilled fighter, but he was a student of war. He was an expert. And his leadership, innovation, ingenuity, and ability to think ahead his enemies won him many battles, or so he thought. As it turns out, the LORD had actually been watching over him, guiding all of human history up to this point- and Naaman had no idea, and neither did anyone else. Regardless, he was an international celebrity, a larger than life figure, a hero. Small problem: He had leprosy.

Actually, it wasn't a small problem. It was a big problem. Leprosy was a skin disease that would first rot the skin, then rot the tips of fingers and toes until they fell off, then rot the gums until they no longer could hold teeth, and they fell out, then eventually the nose, eyes, and ears would rot and then the brain would rot and the person cursed with leprosy would have died one of the slowest, most painful, most humiliating deaths known in the ancient world. It was also socially and emotionally painful- lepers were outcasts. They were untouchables- literally. No one would go near them. They would have to live in isolation until they died. Sure, Naaman has everything a man could ever want, but it's useless. He has leprosy. It just so happened that in his house, serving his wife, was a servant girl from Israel, and she says, "I know someone who can heal him. There's a prophet in Israel. He can save him." Imagine how desperate Naaman would have to be to go to the nation where he has won countless battles as a leper and say, "I need your help." The king of Aram, his lord but also his friend, sends him with a letter to the king of Israel, likely Jehoram, and offers gold, silver, and sets of clothes, likely valuing millions of dollars. Why does he do that? Naaman and the king of Aram assume that if there's a prophet so powerful in Israel, then of course the king of Israel would honor him by having him in his palace and give him a seat at his table. This prophet must be a celebrity- like Naaman! Not so. Unlike other nations, the prophets are not paid off by the king. In Israel, the prophets often will confront everybody, even the King, with their sins and call them to repent and worship God alone. The kings, including Jehoram, didn't like that. Even though Israel was God's chosen nation, they and their kings often rejected God and the prophets that he sent them. So Jehoram hears that the king of Aram sends his greatest general to be healed of leprosy and he is furious- he tears his clothes and figures that the king of Aram can't be serious- only God can do something like that, he must be trying to create a reason to attack and start another war!

Elisha, however, the student of Elijah, the most famous prophet in Israel's history, hears about this and says, "Knock it off. Send him to me. He, and all of Aram are going to know that there is a prophet in Israel." In other words, what he's saying is, "They will know that I serve the true God and put their faith in him, unlike you." So Naaman and his whole entourage with horses and soldiers and chariots and millions of dollars show up on Elisha's porch, and Elisha doesn't even give him the time of day. Naaman is a big deal everywhere in the Ancient World, but not to Elisha. Elisha sends his servant with simple instructions: dip yourself in the Jordan River seven times, and you will be clean. And Naaman is *furiosus, disgusted, insulted, and enraged*. Why? Several reasons. Firstly, Elisha doesn't actually come to greet him. "Doesn't he know who I am? I'm a big deal! I'm a celebrity! I'm not just some guy! I'm General Naaman!" Naaman thought that Elisha would show him the honor of calling on his god and waving his hand and healing him himself. But instead he says, "Go and dip." Secondly, and this is really the thing that's bothering him: *It's too easy*. Any idiot can do that! He's Naaman! He's killed people twice his size before! He's defeated armies that no one thought he could defeat! He's accomplished what few have ever dreamed of! And Elisha insults his intelligence, his morality, his strength, his pride with instructions that are so easy and simple. He could do this at home- and the rivers in Aram are much cleaner- why did he have to come all the way here to dip in a river? Anyone could do that, and Naaman's not just anyone.

Naaman's servants must have deeply loved and respected him. You can hear the pleading in their voice, "My father (a term of respect), if he were to ask some great thing, ask for a great amount of money, give you the task of climbing a giant mountain, hunting a great animal or slaying a great enemy or performing a great sacrifice, wouldn't you have done it? You were ready to do that! How much more should you be willing to just wash yourself in a river? You're blinded by your pride. This is the only hope of you being healed. Just trust him." So he did. And he was healed... and not just his skin. He becomes a believer. It would be one thing to say, "You're God is powerful!" But says, "There is no god except this one." That's faith. He's a Christian- every moment of his life up to now has been guided by God purposefully so that Naaman would come to know him and be truly healed. Do you see that? Naaman had everything, but God allows him to have leprosy to show him that he is not in control and needs *something* that he doesn't have. He likely tried everything that money could buy, but God didn't allow it to work- he needed to be so desperate that he would go to his enemy country to find help. And Elisha very purposefully did not give him the honor of greeting him- because Naaman needed to be humbled- to know that all people are equally poor and desperate before God. And Elisha didn't directly heal him, because Naaman needed to know that God doesn't need a prophet- he's all powerful. And Naaman needed to learn that what God desires is not money, not accomplishment, not religious ritual, but faith- the one thing Naaman wasn't willing to give. Naaman was enraged because God required him to admit that he couldn't earn God's blessing, and that if God were to give it, it would be only because God is gracious and good, and Naaman would have to trust him.

Yet, Naaman had a point. How could it be that easy? How could God ask so little? Because 850 years later, Jesus would come down to Earth and live the perfect life that a holy God demands from people,

and as we see in John, his sacrifice would bring people from all over to him. Because of Jesus' death on the cross, it doesn't matter what you've done, where you've come from, how long you've rejected God, or how good you are, how moral and obedient you are. We are saved by faith. The way to "earn" God's favor and blessing is by realizing and embracing that you can't earn it. Which, as we see in Naaman, is the greatest paradox. Salvation in Jesus is so easy- just believe, just trust, just admit that you can't save yourself, it's so easy, that it's impossibly hard and almost no one, including many Christians, really ever embrace it. It's so simple- just believe, just trust, that it's incomprehensible. It's beautiful and powerful, yet infuriating and humbling. We are saved not by what we have done, but by what Jesus has done: just believe. It's for everyone: Even Naaman, even you.

One application point I'd like to make is this: Who's the human hero of this story? It's not really Naaman. Elisha? Maybe. Naaman's servants? Perhaps. I think the unsung hero here is the servant girl. She was captured from her home, her family, her parents- who were likely dead and brought into the house of her enemies to serve them. And not only did she never forget who her Lord was, she loved her masters so much that instead inwardly saying, "serves you right" when Naaman got leprosy, she pointed him to Elisha, and really God, and God used her to save Naaman and likely his household. Throughout these past weeks, we've talked about how God uses our sufferings to bless us, and we see that clearly here with Naaman. But one thing we also see is this: God uses your sufferings to bless others- not just you. He used this little girl's traumatic, horrible experiences to bring others into his family forever. No one understands this better than Jesus himself, where this ultimately happened- the seed must burst in order for the plant to grow and feed others. In order for the world to be blessed and people to be saved, Jesus had to suffer, and through his horrible suffering, we were saved. This is how God works! He uses suffering to save- not just the one suffering, but also others!

And God still works like that. Maewynn Succat was an English pastor in the 500's AD. He grew up the son of devout Christian parents who taught him the Christian faith, but he wasn't a believer. When he was 17, he was kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland, at that time a savage place where Christianity was wholly rejected. The Irish Druids were pagans, whose religion involved witchcraft and human sacrifice. Throughout his time as a slave, Maewynn Succat remembered the Word of God that he learned and memorized throughout his childhood, and began to pray and recite the words that he learned, and God created faith in his heart. After escaping from slavery, he went back to England and studied to be a Christian pastor, and he received a vision of the people of Ireland begging him to come back and teach them about Jesus. So he did, and because he knew the language and the culture, he was well-equipped to show them how beautiful the message of the Gospel is, and thousands were saved, and eventually Christianity became the main religion in Ireland- all because God allowed this one man to suffer for a time, and then use him to save thousands. Maewynn Succat is more popularly known as St. Patrick, and because he understood the cross: that Jesus gave his life for him, he was empowered to give his life to others and be overjoyed that God used his suffering to save thousands, and more after he died. God blesses and saves through suffering. He uses our suffering to bless and save us, and those around us. That's how God works. Amen.