



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Healing, the Fruit of Obedience” 2 Kings 5:1-19a

Each month when we gather, we take up another of the healing stories in God’s Word, and listen intently for what God would teach us that night about healing. If you’ve been with us for a while, you and I have learned a lot! Tonight, again, we have a healing story to consider, but this one, for a change, is from the Old Testament, from the Second Book of Kings. I invite you to find 2nd Kings, which is right after First Kings. First in the Bible are the Five Books of Moses (Genesis etc.), then Joshua, Judges and Ruth. Then come 1st and 2nd Samuel, then 1st and 2nd Kings. 2nd Kings 5 brings us to some of the stories of Elisha the prophet, and tonight we meet a foreign general who—despite his power, needed help. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TONIGHT as I read these words aloud. I’m reading from the New Revised Standard Version.
[text]

This was the Bible story our kids in Vacation Bible School focused on during their last day. Naaman is the military commander for the nation of Aram, and the Lord had just given Aram a victory over the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Now, right off the bat, this should get our attention. God is blessing Israel’s enemies? This raises a troublesome theme of why, which continues up and through the conquering of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria, and then later, the conquering of the Southern Kingdom of Judah by the nation of Babylon. Has God abandoned Israel—and later, Judah? Are they no longer His Chosen People? If we were in a Bible study, we could unpack this further, but we’ll just have to let it lay there tonight, for we want to focus on the healing events in this story.

I noticed, it’s the “little people” who provide the crucial knowledge that proves so helpful to Naaman—another theme we could trace in Scripture. A young girl had been captured as booty in the battle, and made the servant of the Aram general’s wife. The girl—a captive and a servant to a foreign army general’s wife—seems to have pity on her mistresses’ husband, and wishes that he were going to see the prophet Elisha, who lives in Samaria. Here is a captive Israelite who is offering something invaluable to this foreign commander who has beaten her people and taken her away. What generosity! And, also, what a God that cares for people beyond His “Chosen Ones”. That’s a big item, too—one that Jesus, himself, brought to mind in one of his arguments with the Pharisees. (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 4:27)

So the word gets to Naaman, and he gets not only permission from the King of Aram to take leave to seek out this prophet and healer, he also gets a letter of introduction and recommendation. Naaman also brings a lot of expensive gifts to give the prophet.

But since his king has sent him, and the King of Aram’s letter is for the King of Israel, Naaman must honor protocol and go to Israel’s king. Naaman presents his letter. When Israel’s king reads the letter, all the blood drains from his face. He understands the King of Aram expects him—the king of Israel—to cure Naaman, this general who has defeated Israel’s army in battle just recently. To Israel’s king, this sounds like diplomatic provocation; if the King of Israel does not cure Naaman, the King of Aram will have an excuse to invade Israel and depose

her King, at least. It's a trap, Israel's King believes, and there's no way out. So in desperate grief, he tears his clothes.

But word gets to Elisha about his King's grief, and Elisha sends word to refer Naaman to him for healing, and then "he will learn there is a prophet in Israel", as he says. (Elisha must have the spiritual gift of healing, as well as of prophecy.)

Naaman's entourage rolls up to Elisha's place—it must have been an impressive parade. Elisha sends one of his servants to greet and give his message to Naaman. Now, this is an insult. Naaman, who had just beaten the Israelite army in battle, has come all the way out to the boonies to find Elisha; he has brought gifts. And instead of coming to the door himself, and offering the universal Middle Eastern hospitality, Elisha sends *a servant*?! Naaman is ticked! It's like the old joke about the man who goes to his doctor and says, "Doc, it hurts when I do 'this'." His doctor looks at him and says, "So, don't do that anymore. That will be 95 dollars, please." Yeah, Elisha's indirect order Naaman judges to be about that simple, as if this general were some kind of fool.

It takes his own servants to help Naaman understand how easy it would be to "take this prescription". In effect, does Naaman want a magic show, or does he want to be healed?

So Naaman once again is able to receive advice from humble people around him. He obeys the word of the prophet, dips 7 times in the river, and emerges clean, cured, healthy, whole!

Naaman races back to the prophet's house to bestow on him all the gifts he has brought from Aram. But Elisha will have none of it. So Naaman does something even more profound. He asks to take two mule-loads of earth back home with him to Aram. He will make "a patch of Israel" in his back yard, as a way of demonstrating he is renouncing his worship of the god Rhimmon, the storm deity Hadad-Rimmon ("Hadad the Thunderer"), the patron god of the Arameans (Zech 12:11). Since people in that day fixed the location of every god to the soil of the nation that worshipped that god, Naaman wants to do it right.

Naaman says he will no longer serve Rhimmon—but then, he remembers there is going to be a big problem when he gets back home. As the King of Aram's "right hand man", (literally!), Naaman will have to support the King (who may have some physical problem), as the King goes to worship Rhimmon at The First Church of Rhimmon. It might be the end of Naaman's life, should his loyalty to the King—and the King's god—come into question. He asks Elisha for "forgiveness in advance". Elisha doesn't condemn him or condone this plan, but invites him to go in peace. Naaman was healed—not just of his leprosy, but also of his pagan false faith. From now on, he will be loyal to Yahweh, the God of Israel, "the only real God". This healing is more than Naaman imagined!

What is God saying to US through this account? First and second, expectations and pride can be problems. Naaman expected a personal show from the prophet himself, perhaps because that's how healers in his own country performed. Naaman expected—felt he had the right to expect—the prophet to meet his expectations, because after all, he was a man of "gravitas", as they say; he had just beaten Israel's army, for crying out loud! What is wrong with this Elisha guy?

If he had stayed with his expectations and pride, what would have been the outcome for Naaman? No healing. So . . . what expectations do we have about how God might heal us, or

others? . . . Do we hold on to those expectations until they become demands, and perhaps miss healing that has happened because it didn't match the pattern we were looking for? . . . Remember, Naaman got even more than he bargained for, because he could at last give up his expectations.

And what is the opposite of pride? Service to another, following another's agenda. It wouldn't have been enough for Naaman to have just cooled down and gone home, without rancor. No, Naaman had to actually DO what the prophet said. For us, too, obedience to God's Word brings fruit. We learn to hear God's voice in these [Bible] pages. As we serve the God who inspired these words, we find ourselves becoming like God in the power of the Holy Spirit—more loving, joyful, peaceful—you know, all the fruit of the Spirit Paul mentions in Galatians 5.

Or, not. Yes, expectations and pride can get in the way by blinding us to the truth, or blocking our obedience.

Third, do we overlook crucial input from “the hoi-polloi” (that's a Greek term, meaning “the ordinary crowd”)? Do we think we're “better” than the little people? Yes, this is pride again, but in another guise. Do we de-value people by how we don't look at them? Do we not really listen when some clerk is trying to talk to us? What message from God might we be missing?

Fourth, do we carry some superstition like Naaman's, concerning “Israelite soil”? Don't you know people who only worship God in a church building? It's not the location that is holy; it is the activity of the people that creates worship.

These are the lessons I hear from God for us tonight. May God continue to work in us, to work and enjoy Himself in our lives!

[Intro to Communion]

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on Friday evening, August 17, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]