

Introduction:

- A. When Jesus was beginning his ministry he went to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He opened the Scripture scroll and he read the words of Isaiah:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

Then he said, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* Everyone was pleased as punch with his “gracious words.” That is, till he made it clear they were not prepared to receive God’s good news; that they wouldn’t be freed prisoners nor the blind recovering sight because *“no prophet is accepted in his hometown.”* Meaning that no prophet’s *God* is accepted either.

Then Jesus reminded them of a couple stories that never got much traction in Israel—one about the prophet Elijah providing food to a Gentile woman when all Israel was starving. And then this little gem: *“And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”*

- B. If we are to be agents of God’s grace to the people around us perhaps we should look at the curious story of Naaman the Syrian. Turn to **2 Kgs 5**. This story happened some 800 years before Christ. The ten northern tribes of Israel were far from God who allowed the armies of Aram (or Syria) to threaten and harass Israel. At the center of it all was God’s extraordinary prophet, Elisha. This is a masterpiece of

storytelling so let's listen and do a little reading between the lines.

<p>¹ Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, ...</p> <p><i>but he had leprosy.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Naaman got credit for Aram's victories over Israel even tho' God "had given" him that victory. But he didn't even know the LORD. • Commander of the army, great man, highly regarded, victor, valiant soldier... • Everything in his life turned on that. Leprosy then was different than what it is now. It was a skin disease that turned the skin white. A person quite literally looked like death warmed over. Whether or not it was fatal, it was social death. Not even Naaman would be welcomed in society much longer. This was an enemy too tough even for the greatest hero of Aram.
<p>² Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That's quite a coincidence, isn't it! • You see the irony in that, of course. An Israelite slave girl aiding and abetting the enemy—but innocently and mercifully. It suggests to me that Naaman was a man who had won her respect. • That young girl is also the missionary in this story.
<p>⁴ Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. ⁵ "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. ⁶ The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That is an extraordinary treasure, probably from the national treasury—a king's ransom in order to reclaim Naaman the general from the leprous cloak of death. • That's a really strange official document!

<p>⁷As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, “Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life?” Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So this entourage heads toward Samaria, the capital of Israel, some 600 miles away! • “<i>Am I God?</i>” Of course not, but the really alarming thing is that the king of Israel doesn’t even <i>know</i> God! Even though the enslaved Israelite servant girl knew Naaman needed to see God’s prophet Elisha evidently the king of Israel didn’t! • So now what??
<p>⁸When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: “Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.”</p> <p>⁹So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house.</p> <p>¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.”</p> <p>¹¹But Naaman went away angry and said, “I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?” So he turned and went off in a rage.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The real point is that if there is a prophet in Israel, there is the presence and word of the LORD God. You see the issue here: “<i>he will know</i>” that the LORD is in Israel even tho’ the Israel had abandoned the LORD. • This is like an ancient motorcade! All that treasure on mules, plus the servants, and the increasingly leprous Naaman at the head. They all draw up in front of Elisha’s modest house. Every neighbor was out gawking. This was the Aramean general who who had defeated them. And there was more treasure here than anyone had ever seen before! What does Elisha do? He doesn’t even come out. He sends his servant out with a message. • Naaman despised Israel. Even his country’s rivers were better than Israel’s! This was all too insulting!
<p>¹³Naaman’s servants went to him and said, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you</p>	<p>It was all pretty humbling. Leprosy was bad enough for a proud and</p>

<p>not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’!”</p> <p>¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.</p>	<p>valiant man but then to be dissed by a prophet of Israel, and then to be sent to the Jordan to dip 7 times, like a child playing. But he did it.</p>
<p>¹⁵ Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God.</p> <p>He stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This time Elisha came out to meet him. • That is a remarkable statement. It is the turning point of this whole story. It’s as if the sun just came out! This man was just <i>converted</i>. Everyone is standing around gape-jawed! As nationalistic as he was he came to believe in the God of Israel, and that he was the <i>only</i> God in all the world. You’d have been hard pressed to find anyone in Israel who believed what Naaman did!
<p>So please accept a gift from your servant.”¹⁶ The prophet answered, “As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.” And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.</p> <p>¹⁷ “If you will not,” said Naaman, “please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD.</p> <p>¹⁸ But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I have to bow there also—when I bow</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utterly free grace from God is hard to take. His debt of gratitude is so obvious that he <i>must</i> be able to give <i>something</i> in return. But that would taint the whole miracle. • If this was the God of Israel then he reasoned he needed to take some Israel home with him to stand on when he worshiped God. • He came with mules heavy with treasure that he couldn’t <i>give</i> away and went home with two mules burdened with the dirt of Israel, humming “We Are Standing on Holy Ground”! • Rimmon was the Thunderer. You see his problem. You see what we assume he <i>should</i> do. He <i>should</i> do what Daniel did—refuse to bow to

down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this.”

¹⁹ “Go in peace,” Elisha said

a false god. But he was between a rock and a hard place and he was brand new to faith in God. He knew it was wrong, so he asked for forgiveness.

- *Shalom*. “Go in peace” = Enjoy your Israelite earth and rest assured God will forgive you. All is well.

I. IF WE ARE EAGER TO BE GOD’S AGENTS OF GRACE WE MUST REALIZE JUST HOW FAR GOD WILL REACH TO CLEANSE A HEART (5:1-19)

This story is a wonderful encouragement to anyone who loves God and wants to see others come to know and love him. Let me draw some principles from that story:

- A. We never know who God will reach and cleanse. Don’t count anyone out—no matter how far they are from God. **The trail of God’s grace in this story is really incredible.** God loves to rescue people that seem beyond reach.
- B. Trouble in someone’s life may be as much a gift of God as triumph. The LORD had given Naaman victory in battle, a gift which had no good effect on Naaman’s heart. The LORD also gave Naaman the crushing defeat of leprosy which turned out to be far more wonderful than his victories in battle. *Illus.:* My friend Kent points to the brain tumor that brought him to his knees before Jesus at age 40 as the best thing that ever happened to him.
- C. Take the opportunity to point those in trouble to the LORD the way that young Israelite slave girl did. When someone you know is facing trouble recognize that God may be working. God may be shouting at them in their pain. Don’t rush in like an unscrupulous ambulance chaser but point them toward God’s grace. Offer to pray for them. Write a few verses down for them. Ask if they’d like to talk and

then *really listen*. Tell your own story of seeking God in trouble, even if it doesn't turn out with a miracle at the end. **We meet people all the time who are in spiritual transit.** There are some stores where if you ask, "*Can you point me to the door hinges,*" they'll say, "*Sure, come with me. I'll show you.*" Do that.

Illus.: Recently one of my neighbors strolled over and asked if I would pray about a medical condition she was terrified about. She apologized for bothering me with it! I did pray and I got the chance to pray with her. I even got the chance to sing for her, "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me." Later, when her bloodwork came back o.k. she texted me a thumbs up and I replied, "*Well, at church this is when we say, 'Praise God!'*"

- D. Only God's way works. Naaman was angry when Elisha didn't come out and pray and wave his hand. But Naaman wasn't in charge. It's like the hymn Tyler quoted for us a few weeks ago, "*God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.*"

The cleansing of Naaman's leprosy is, of course, a picture of the way God cleanses hearts that are ashen, like death warmed over. The means God required of Naaman—going to the Jordan and dipping under seven times—seems sort of... well, foolish. That was the point. Cleansing required a childlike humility from that proud man.

The NT tells us that the gospel seems foolish to those who are dying of sin. To repent and put your faith in Christ Jesus—to agree that you are a sinner and that Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection are your only hope of eternal life—well that's hard to swallow for proud people. In the end, it is as simple as, "*Wash and be cleansed.*"

Illus.: Years ago I started meeting with Dan. He was very smart—a scientist. He smoked like a chimney, drank too much, was prone to fighting, and was as arrogant as they come. We met many times in my office. He had questions, and he needed to slowly come to understand just what God had said and done. Gradually the Lord drew him to Christ. Finally, he surrendered. I’ve prayed with quite a few people who gave their lives to the Lord but in Dan’s case I was prompted to do something different. “Dan,” I said, “you are a proud man. I don’t want you to ever forget that you bowed before the Lord Jesus, so let’s get on our knees when we pray.” So that’s what Dan did when he gave his life to Christ, all 6’6” of him. Only a year or so later Dan’s heart gave out at age 36 but he went home to Christ, safe and sound.

- E. It is God’s miraculous cleansing that converts people to him. It took some small measure of faith for Naaman to finally obey Elisha’s instructions. But when he came up out of that water the seventh time, with his skin as healthy as a young boy’s—well, *that’s* when he became a believer in the Lord God. “*Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.*” **When it comes to conversion, God does all the heavy lifting.** We do our small part, like that servant girl, or even like Elisha, or the servants who urged Naaman to just try dipping in the Jordan. But it is God who cleanses and who changes someone’s heart to believe what everything in them once resisted.
- F. Naaman did three naïve things after his conversion.
1. He wanted to reward Elisha for the gift *God* gave him. We understand why but Elisha was just another servant in this story.

2. He loaded up all that Israelite dirt to be sure he could worship the LORD on holy ground when he got home.
3. He asked forgiveness ahead of time for going with the King to worship the false god, Rimmon.

Each of those was off-kilter, spiritually speaking, yet each of them also displayed Naaman's changed heart, and in the end Elisha simply said, "*Shalom. Go in peace.*" Elisha entrusted that spiritual rookie to the peace of God.

Well, I know that seems like a good stopping place but it isn't. Listen to the rest of the story: **vv.19b-27...**

- **V.20** – "*My master was too easy on Naamaan, this Aramean.*" There's the rub. Grace comes off as God being too easy, and in that Gehazi saw an opportunity to make a quick buck.
- II. NEVER DEFRAUD GOD OF THE GRACE HE OFFERS. NEVER DIMINISH THE *FREE* IN GOD'S GRACE. (5:19-27)**
- A. I suppose when Naaman got home and told his amazing story he said, innocently enough, "I was glad there was something I could do." And God was defrauded.
 - B. This story starts with a leper who didn't know he needed God's grace and it ends with a leper who defrauded a new convert of God's grace. The leprosy that passed to him was an outward indication of his death-warmed-over heart.
 - C. And that brings us back to those who heard Jesus there in Nazareth. They were in the presence of the Messiah who came to proclaim good news and freedom and recovery of sight but, like Gehazi, their hearts were leprous.
 - D. The message to Israel, both in 2 Kings and in Jesus' words in Nazareth, was that their worst enemy (Naaman) was more receptive to the Lord than they were. "*And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the*

prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

- E. This passage is a sober warning to pew-sitters, to those who love to hear Jesus’ “gracious words,” but who have no idea how leprous their hearts are. People, like those in Nazareth, who wanted Jesus to work miracles among them—except the miracle of cleansing their hearts and setting them free.