

2 Kings 5:1-19

- The secret of evangelism -

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Context and background

- ❖ The name Elisha means 'God is salvation'. All that is known to us about Elisha's background can be found in 1 Kings 19:16, 19-21. His ministry probably extended through the reigns of Ahab, Ahaziah, Jehoram, Jehu, Jehoahaz and Jehoash, a period of more than 50 years. Compared to the ministry of Elijah, these historical narratives do not betray the same tension between Yahweh and Baal worship. It seems to be that his prophethood bears more relation to the tradition of Samuel to whom peasants and kings alike turn for help.¹
- ❖ The name Rimmon means 'thunderer' and it is a title of the storm-god Hadad (compare Hadad-rimmon). This god was worshipped in Damascus. The temple was probably on the site in Damascus occupied by the later Roman temple of Zeus, whose emblem, like Rimmon's, was a thunderbolt.²
- ❖ Geographical information:
 - In this story, there are three rivers mentioned, the river Jordan, the Abana and the Pharpar, rivers of Damascus (2 Kings 5:12). The river Jordan originates from the Hermon (Lebanon) to the west and then flows to the south into the Sea of Galilee and towards the Dead Sea. The other two rivers originated also from the Hermon (Pharpar) and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains and flow towards Damascus and the eastern desert. All three

¹ Smith, B. L. (1996). Elisha. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (p. 313). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² Wiseman, D. J. (1996). Rimmon. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard & J. I. Packer (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (p. 1021). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

contain the same sort of water, so there is no difference in healing capacity. But these two rivers probably lent Damascus some of its grandeur, where the river Joran just flowed through a bushy valley.

Form and structure

- ❖ 2 Kings 5:1-19 is a magnificent piece of historical storytelling. It is rooted in history, but the story does not give any historical dates and even historical names are sparse. Only Naaman and Elisha and rivers and countries are named. We don't even know the names of the kings of Damascus and Israel.
- ❖ The story has seven different scenes:
 1. 1 Kings 5:1: Introduction of Naaman.
 2. 1 Kings 5:2-3: Naaman and the girl from Israel.
 3. 1 Kings 5:4-6: Naaman and the letter of the king of Damascus.
 4. 1 Kings 5:7: Naaman visits the king of Israel.
 5. 1 Kings 5:8-12: Naaman and the prophet Elisha.
 6. 1 Kings 5:13-14: Naaman at the river Jordan, his cleansing of leprosy.
 7. 1 Kings 5:15-19: Naaman and the prophet Elisha revisited.
- ❖ Vs 18. Is an inclusio (see exposition):
 - “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 bow there also—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon,
 - **may the LORD forgive your servant for this.**”

Technical notes

- ❖ Vs. 1: Leprosy, but better more generally “skin disease”. It should NOT be brought into relation with all the laws concerning leprosy as found in Leviticus 13-14. Naaman did not live under Israelite law.
- ❖ Vs. 6: “With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.” The official part of the letter contained all kinds of epithets and titles of the sender, the king of Aram and of the addressee, the king of Israel. These are used to strengthen the political interest and to arouse a benevolent (good) mood, so that the king of Israel will grant the king of Aram the official request, which is only mentioned: “so that you may cure him of his leprosy.”

Exposition

Verse 1

- ❖ Naaman is introduced as a commander, and highly regarded by the king of Aram, because:
 - “because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram.” Although Naaman did not belong to the people of Israel and did not worship the LORD, the LORD was acting in and through him.
- ❖ Then disaster occurred to him: “but he had leprosy.” His career ended. There was no healing in Damascus. No doctors, no gods could heal him. Naaman is desperate; so is the king of Aram apparently, as he sends Naaman to Israel, his foe (vs. 4-6).

Verse 2-3

- ❖ “Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife.” This is not a case of war between the king of Aram and the king of Israel (compare 2 Kings 6:8-7:20). It is a case of kidnapping children to sell them on the marketplace as slaves.
 - This girl has lost her freedom, her family, her country, but not her **faith and love** for her mistress and master. She has a great faith when she says: “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” Her faith is exemplified by two things:
 - The prophet won’t refuse Naaman, because he is an Aramean and not a worshipper of the God of Israel.
 - The prophet will heal him!And as the story unfolds, this faith will be justified.
 - And the girl was there because of the LORD!

Verse 4-6

- ❖ The King of Aram is relieved when he hears the news of a possible healing of Naaman. He sends a letter to the king of Israel, carried by Naaman (see technical information). But why is he asking the king of Israel to heal Naaman, while the girl spoke of the prophet? One might suggest that he needed to ask the king permission for Naaman to visit the prophet, otherwise he would have had a political problem. Or the case may be that he acted according to his own religious worldview, seeing the king as the representative of the gods, praying and offering to the gods and acting on behalf of the gods.
- ❖ Part of his religious worldview is “DO ut DES” (Latin). I give you a present (DO) and you (my god) will give me your blessing (DES). This is the reason why he is sending so many precious gifts.

Verse 7

- ❖ The visit of Naaman to the king of Israel is a very disappointing one. The king answers with distrust: “See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!” He is desperate: “Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life?” This exclamation shows that the illness of Naaman is really serious. Remember here the story of the young boy, brought back to life by God through his servant Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-36).
 - What is not mentioned is the emotional reaction of Naaman. Try to imagine.

Verse 8-12

- ❖ Now Elisha comes into the story. He says: “Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.” This is important in two ways:
 - First it is in line with what the girl had told Naaman and his wife: “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria!”
 - It is also an implicit rebuke of the king of Israel. “*Have you forgotten that there is a prophet in Israe? Naaman will know. How about you?*” Even the girl at Naaman’s house still knew about the prophet.
- ❖ Naaman arrives at Elisha’s house with all his chariots, but he is not received. Only the servant comes out of the house with a commandment and promise. A commander of the king of Aram who has just visited the king of Israel is not invited by the prophet, but gets only a word by a messenger. Why?
 - Is it that the LORD wants to show Naaman that it is not by his wealth, nor his position, nor his gifts, but only through faithful obedience that He will heal him?
- ❖ Now the emotional reaction of Naaman is told. He is angry, even worse - he is outraged.
 - He wanted to see the prophet himself coming out to meet him.
 - He wanted the prophet to cure him by calling on the name of the Lord his God and by waving his hand over the spot.
 - This outrage is expressed when he says: “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?” Perhaps not better, but the water is at least of the same quality. He feels humiliated and now he humiliates the prophet and Israel.
 - He says implicitly: “*I would have been better off if I had stayed home.*”

Verse 13-14

- ❖ Now the servants come into the picture. They love their master: “My father.” Compare this with the words of the girl: “If only my master.” It is the same love for people in distress. They think practically, but note they too could have been outraged. So their advice is: “if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’” But the choice is Naaman’s.
- ❖ There is something else. Naaman should not have tried this at home in the rivers of Damascus first, and then come back for a second time to the river Jordan if it didn’t work out. He wouldn’t been cleansed. So he dipped himself in the river Jordan.

- ❖ **“As the man of God had told him**, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.” The words **“as the man of God had told him”** receive some emphasis. They could have been omitted in the story, because the cleansing itself would have made it clear enough that Naaman had done what the man of God had told him.

Verse 15-19

- ❖ Naaman returns to Elisha. Now he is welcomed by the prophet himself. “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. so please accept a gift from your servant.”
 - This is profession of faith which is very unique. He declares that all the gods of Aram are no gods at all.
 - But he still thinks in terms of “DO ut DES.” Therefore he wants Elisha to accept a gift on behalf of the God of Israel. And he is putting himself into the position of a servant. He is humbling himself.
- ❖ Elisha is refusing the gift. He doesn’t say why, only that he serves the LORD. He wants Naaman to discover for himself what he needs to do.
 - The following request is very important. Naaman wants to give his life to the LORD. He asks for some soil, to create a piece of Israel at his house, so he can bring his offerings to the God of Israel.
 - **He discovers: it is not by “DO ut DES”, but by grace!**
- ❖ At the same time, he foresees a major problem. He knows that now he has been cleansed and healed, and due to his high position, that his king will take him to the temple of Rimmon to bow down in front of the image of this god. He knows that, while the king is leaning on his arm, he needs to bow down also. How can he reconcile this with his profession of faith in the LORD? He could resign as a commander. He could emigrate to Israel. Both are not viable options. What then?
 - Forgiveness. He asks twice for forgiveness, before he will find himself in this difficult position! The inclusio (see FORM and STRUCTURE) underscores this cry for forgiveness of Naaman.
- ❖ Hear the answer of Elisha: “Go in peace.” **This is grace in action.** He doesn’t offer practical solutions for the ethical and religious problem Naaman is facing. He offers underserved grace in the name of the LORD.
 - Why? Because the LORD knows the heart.
 - The name Elisha ‘God is salvation’ is a true name.

Application

- Caveat. Don’t try to fill in the names of the kings, we don’t know. Their names aren’t considered important by the writer of 2 Kings 5:1-19.

- Caveat. This story is not about healing, although healing occurs, but about faith and obedience; it is about grace.
- Important. The LORD was acting in and through Naaman (vs. 1), although he did worship the LORD. This will help us to look at the history of the world, but also at personal lives. For instance, the LORD was acting in the lives of people who came to faith in Christ several years later and thereby changing world history.
 - World history: King Cyrus of Persia, 1 Chron. 36:22-23 (a.o.); Emperor Augustus, Lk. 2.1
 - Personal lives: the Ethiopian, Acts 8:26-40; Lydia, Acts 16:13-15.
- Jesus took Naaman as an example of faith (Lk. 4:27). And as we look at all the other people acting in this story:
 - The girl mentioned in vs. 2-3 had great faith in God and love for people. Both are very important examples for the church and Christians in missionary situations.
- Many people believe according to the DO ut DES. I give you my prayers, offerings, obedience, so that you will give me your blessing, healing, eternal life. Christians might also act according to this religious scheme, and trust in grace.
- Finally Naaman comes to faith in the LORD God. But note that he had to come from afar. He worshipped other gods. He had a different religious worldview (DO ut DES). He was desperately longing for healing. He needs to learn about faith, obedience and most importantly about grace, the LORD's grace.
- The LORD uses emotions which we often find troublesome: desperation (and hope),
- Vs. 14 is very important for the understanding of the character of faith. **You don't have to do a great thing.** Furthermore: **"as the man of God had told him"** reminds us of the words of Jesus Christ: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Mt. 7:24).
- Believe and accept the undeserved grace that the LORD gives to this new convert, this man who wants to profess his faith under circumstances which are not very favorable.
- One could ask the question: who is the most important person in this story? Of course, the LORD is acting in all situations.
 - Is not the king of Israel desperate?
 - The king of Aram tried to help Naaman.
 - His servants convinced Naaman to do what the prophet had said.
 - There is the man of God, representing God, speaking words of grace.
 - Finally, the girl. She lost everything, her freedom, her family, her country, but not her faith and her love for this man and his wife.
 - This is the secret of all evangelism, missionary work and being a church: faith and love for people.

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