

There's a Fountain Free: The Story of Naaman

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Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." (2 Kings 5. 1–3, NRSV)

In the fifth chapter of 2 Kings we meet a man named Naaman. He is the commander of the army for the king of Aram, and his life is filled with great achievements, promotions, wealth and power. The scripture calls Naaman a "mighty man of valor." The scripture is then quick to add one important fact: Naaman has leprosy. We learn in that short phrase that despite Naaman's impressive accomplishments, his unparalleled success, his great power, that he has a chronic, debilitating disease that is wreaking havoc on his body. In just one verse we hear Naaman's story, and we can relate to him.

Naaman is someone who knows what he can control—and he can control a lot in his world. He's a very powerful man with a lot of resources. But he is painfully aware of what he cannot control. We relate to that. There is a lot we can control. We can control our lives with education, with physical strength, and with money—but we know that there are certain things money can't buy. There are certain things that hard work cannot accomplish. Naaman is a great and powerful man, but he has a problem that he is unable to solve, and we certainly have every indication that he has tried and been unsuccessful.

In the next verse we meet another person. The second person we meet in 2 Kings chapter 5 is a girl. We don't know her name but we quickly learn some important things about her. She's a Hebrew servant girl. She had been captured and taken as a slave when Naaman's army attacked Israel, and now she lives in his home as his wife's servant.

If you compare and contrast Naaman with this girl, their differences are significant. He has great power and prestige in the society; she has nothing—no social power and very little access to resources. But scripture tells us that this girl with no power, no status, no name even in our record, reaches out toward this powerful man with a faithful compassion that is striking and poignant. She tells her mistress, "If only your husband could meet the prophet who is in Samaria, he would be healed of his leprosy" (v. 3). She believes in Yahweh, the God of Israel, and that he is a God who heals.

Do you know what it's like to be sick? To seek healing in place after place, doctor after doctor, treatment after treatment, only to be disappointed over and over again? Some of us know what it's like, because that's been our story. Or it is your story still today. Some of us know because we've walked the road of illness with someone we love, desperately hoping that our loved one will find healing, and having our hearts broken as

hopes are dashed again and again. There is a point at which you will do anything to be healed. We try alternative medicine and clinical trials and anti-inflammatory diets and search the Internet for answers, looking for anything that might work.

I think this is where Naaman is. He's tried everything and he's willing to try anything to get rid of this horrible disease. So he listens to the servant girl from Israel.

So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." (2 Kings 5.4–8)

Naaman goes to his boss, the king, and tells him what the girl has said, and what happens next is fascinating. The scripture paints a picture of two powerful men talking to each other about the one thing neither of them have power over. Neither of them have any power over Naaman's leprosy. And this disease, if it continues to progress, will eventually make him completely useless to either of them.

When Naaman tells the king about the prophet of God, what is the king's response? "I'll get you in the door." The king promises to get Naaman an appointment with this prophet of God. Isn't this how our world works? We look for our connections, we get our letters of recommendation, we hold out our resumes, and we say, "Pay attention to me. I'm important. Look at who I am. Look at what I've done. Look at who my friends are. I'm worth something and you should notice me." This is how the world works.

So the king writes a letter of recommendation for Naaman to bring to the king of Israel and Naaman sets off with his letter of recommendation. But not only his letter of recommendation—he also takes servants, and horses, and chariots, and 750 pounds of silver, and 150 pounds of gold, and ten sets of clothes! Then Naaman and his entourage set off to meet the king of Israel.

Initially the king of Israel is insulted. He says (v. 7), "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?" He assumes that the king of Aram must have political motives. There's something fishy going on here because I can't heal anyone of leprosy!

But the prophet Elisha hears what's going on and says (v. 8), "Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman, and his horses, and his chariots, and his gold, and his silver, and his impressive resume, and his letter of recommendation—and his incurable disease—go to Elisha's house.

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. (2 Kings 5.9–12)

What happened was astonishing! Naaman left the king of Israel and went to Elisha's house, and Elisha didn't even come to the door. How could this be? Didn't he know that this is a great man? Did he have any idea how important Naaman is? And he didn't even come to the door? Rather he sent a messenger to the door saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."

Well, Naaman thinks this is ridiculous! Now he's the one that's insulted. He came for a miraculous healing. "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the disease!"

Who does this Hebrew prophet think he is, that he doesn't even come to the door to greet me! Furthermore, Naaman thinks Elisha's instructions are a big joke designed to make him look foolish. Dip in the Jordan River seven times? What in the world is he talking about? That's not going to do anything—it's just water! Anyone can do that!!! You don't even have to know how to swim to immerse yourself in the Jordan River!!! We have rivers at home and they are a lot nicer than this measly little Jordan River. Are you kidding me? And so he gets ready to leave.

What was he thinking, following the advice of that Hebrew servant girl? What a fool he was to listen to her! He's not going to make a fool of himself. He's a great man. He's a mighty man of valor. He will not wash, seven times, in the Jordan River. He's already humbled himself way beyond his comfort level by asking for help. He's going to save his last shred of dignity and go home now! He's not desperate! Or is he?

But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused (2 Kings 5.13–16).

Just before he gathers his entourage to go home, his servants intervene. If Elisha had given Naaman an impressive healing challenge in which he would have to cross the desert, climb a mountain, retrieve the golden ring from the mouth of a sleeping bear and return it unscathed, he would have been up for the challenge. Of course. So why not dip in the Jordan? It's so simple. Why not give it a try?

What does Naaman really want? Think about the inner dynamics of what's going on here. Naaman desperately wants to buy his cure. He wants to earn his healing. He doesn't want to owe anyone anything. Naaman is a great man. He wants to hold on to his greatness. To his pride. To his dignity.

But Jesus said, *If you want to be truly great, become humble, like a little child.*

That's Naaman's greatest fear—humility. He cannot humble himself and receive healing as a gift. He's almost more afraid of losing his power, losing his status, losing his position in the world, than he is of his leprosy. Almost.

But his servants get his attention. He remembers his illness. He remembers his desperate need. He remembers that all of his money, all of his power, all of his accomplishments, mean nothing if his body is going to be eaten alive by leprosy.

So he does the hardest thing he can imagine. He takes off his robe and begins the long walk down to the bank of the Jordan River, and he dips seven times in the Jordan River, just as the prophet instructed. And the scripture tells us that "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a baby, and he was clean."

Naaman was made new. He was given new life. He returns to Elisha and believes in Yahweh, the God of Israel. "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel!" He knows he's been healed. He has been given life, by a God he's just met.

But he can't let go of his overwhelming desire to pay. He doesn't want to be in debt to anyone. So he tries again. He asks Elisha, "What do you want? I'll give you anything!" What do you want—Laker tickets, a Ferrari? I've got friends—I can get you something really good! There's got to be something! You name it and I can give it to you! There has got to be a way that I can pay for this!

But Elisha answers, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" Because healing, true healing, only comes as a gift from a loving and gracious God. Naaman's deepest need, my deepest need, your

deepest need, cannot be bought, cannot be earned. Our souls' deepest needs can only be met through the grace of God. Naaman leaves, goes back to his homeland, healed and owing his life to Yahweh, the God who healed him.

So I ask, what's in your entourage? Where are the areas of your life where you have lined up your resume, and your letters of recommendation, and your silver, and your gold, and your horses and your chariots, and you're relying on human wisdom and worldly currency, hoping to buy your way to peace, to healing, to salvation. You cannot buy what your soul really needs. You cannot earn the healing for which your soul desperately longs.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." So we humble ourselves before the throne of grace, we humble ourselves in the healing waters of baptism, and we say, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; / Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; / Vile, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die."¹

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