

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Rescue and Redemption

Lesson Four

Healing and Judgment

Focal Text

2 Kings 5

Background

2 Kings 5

Main Idea

God healed an offended warrior and punished a deceitful servant.

Question to Explore

How can pride prevent us from experiencing God's rescue and redemption?

Quick Read

A general from the Syrian army came to Elisha and received a miraculous healing from leprosy. When Elisha refused to accept payment, a servant asked Naaman for it and received punishment.

Introduction

One well-known story illustrates the danger of pride. The story goes that a certain pond had two ducks and a frog. They were all the best of friends. When summer came, and the pond dried up, they had to move. The ducks could easily fly to another place, but what would come of the frog? It was decided that they could put a stick in the bill of each duck and the frog could hang on with his mouth shut tightly on the stick. So that is what they did.

As they were flying, a farmer looked up and saw them flying overhead and said, "Well, isn't that a clever idea! I wonder who thought of it?" The frog said, "I did . . ." I'm sure

Page 1 of 8

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there was a loud “Splat!” afterwards. As the proverb warns “Pride goes before a fall” (cf. Proverbs 16:18).¹ In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin said that there is not any of our natural passions “so hard to subdue as pride,” adding, “Beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.”²

When Naaman, the commander of the Aramean army, became ill with the skin disease commonly referred to as leprosy, he was told where he could find help from his debilitating disease. He must have been shocked and humiliated to learn that he would have to seek help from the prophet Elisha. The problem was that this prophet lived in the neighboring, rival country of Israel. Simply put, if he had any hope of being healed, he would have to put his pride aside.

Initially, Naaman does so and travels to Israel. However, when he finally arrives at the home of Elisha, he is greeted, instead, by the prophet’s servant bearing the prophet’s instruction for him to wash in the Jordan River to be healed. The great commander bristles at as such a simple instruction—expecting some other method for his healing.

The scene forms a dramatic moment in the story—Naaman hesitates. He, in fact, flat out rejects Elisha’s command. Wallowing in his own national pride, he boasts about the greatness of his nation’s rivers; Aram had rivers of much greater size than Israel, whose Jordan River paled in comparison to “Abana” and “Pharpar.”

So now everything hinges on Naaman’s willingness to humble himself. Will he be willing to follow Elisha’s instruction and put his pride aside? This dramatic moment illustrates how pride can prevent us from experiencing God’s rescue in our lives. As the old saying goes, “God pickles the proud and preserves the foolish.” Fortunately for Naaman, upon the further urging of his servants, he relents and is washed in the Jordan River and is miraculously healed.

Commentary

Although Bible translations (e.g., NRSV) translate the word *Aram* as “Syria,” in fact Syria describes a larger area with changing geographical boundaries during this historical period. Therefore, it is best to understand the nation of Aram as the kingdom of Damascus, geographically identified in the lower portion of Syria. Damascus was a prominent place on the major international trade routes from Africa to Mesopotamia. The city itself sat on an important waterway called the Barada River. Aram became more powerful when Israel and Judah divided, but would lose its identity when the Assyrians absorbed it into their empire under Tigleth-pileser III in 733 BC.³

5:1. We are told that Naaman was the commander of the army for the King of Aram (i.e., Ben-Hadad II). The name “Ben-Hadad” refers to three kings⁴ including: the one

mentioned in 2 Kings 8:7–15 (by the name known to the Assyrians as Adad-idri or also pronounced “Hadadezer”),⁵ another is that of an Aramean king.

Naaman is called a “great man” (or “highly regarded”) which in Hebrew refers to the favorable favor displayed by facial expression (cf. Job 22:8).⁶ Although this “valiant” man was highly favored, he had a debilitating skin disease commonly referred to as “leprosy.” The term “leprosy” was used to describe a variety of skin diseases (see Leviticus 13-14), and might also be rendered “lesion” or simply “scaly skin.”⁷

When most people hear of leprosy they think of the condition which is today known as “Hansen’s Disease” (where the skin and body parts fall off). However, we are not given specific information about the nature of Naaman’s malady to know which variety of skin disease he had. Israelites regarded a person with a skin disease as ritually unclean, and specifically “leprosy” was believed to be a divine judgment (Numbers 12:1–15; 2 Samuel 3:28–29; 2 Kings 15:5).⁸ Neighboring nations at the time expelled those infected with skin diseases from their communities.⁹

5:2-3. Raiders from Aram had captured a girl from Israel who served Naaman’s wife. The girl knew of the prophet’s ability to help Naaman—and even where he could be located in Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. Notice the irony that the *little* girl rescues the *great* man.

5:4-6. After receiving permission from the king of Aram, Naaman wrote a letter to the king of Israel and then journeyed to Israel carrying a veritable treasury of wealth, including “ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing.” The wealth Naaman brought with him was extravagant. The term “talent” was an ancient measure of weight, perhaps originating from the load a man could carry—estimated at around seventy pounds. A talent was equivalent to about three thousand shekels (Exodus 38:25–26). Since the text refers to a larger amount of silver compared to the gold, it probably indicates how much greater gold was valued than silver. Six thousand shekels of gold was the combined annual wages of six hundred common laborers.¹⁰

5:7-8. When the king of Israel received the letter from the king of Aram, his reaction was visceral—he tore his robe. The tearing of robes could be either an indication of sorrow or an expression of consternation (cf. 2 Kings 22:11–13), but here it was distress, stemming from the king of Aram’s request for Naaman’s healing. The delegation that had come to Israel’s king was asking for something only God could provide. In fact, the healing of leprosy was sometimes regarded as equivalent to raising someone from the dead. Thus, Israel’s king responds harshly, believing this request is more of an act of aggression, saying, “See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!” Sadly, the reaction of Israel’s king revealed the state of his spiritual condition. A foreign power trusted God to work through Elisha—displaying more faith than Israel’s own king.

5:9-10. Although the text does not tell us that the king of Israel followed Elisha's instructions, it is clear that he eventually acquiesces to the prophet's demand—perhaps because of his fear that if he does not, Aram will make war against Israel. Naaman goes to Elisha's house (amid horses and chariots—showing the urgency of his response and the severity of his need), but Elisha does not personally greet the commander. Instead, he sends a servant to tell him to wash himself in the Jordan River (specifically “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan”) and he will be cleansed.

The prophet Elisha is referred to here as “the man of God,” a title which designates a true prophet or messenger of God in the Book of Kings (1 Kings 12:22; 13:21; 17:18; 2 Kings 4:9).¹¹ He, of course, is the mantle bearer (and successor) to the great prophet Elijah—both of whom concentrated their ministry in the northern part of the kingdom of Israel during a period when Israel's kings did not follow the way of the Lord.

5:11-12. Naaman's response to Elisha's messenger was striking: he went away angry. Nothing had lived up to Naaman's expectations; he thought the prophet should appear in person and perform a specific ritual—waving his arms over the spot and calling upon the name of his God. Moreover, he balks at the notion of washing in the Jordan—a river which pales in comparison to the rivers of Damascus (viz. Abana and Pharpar). The Abana River starts in the mountains, twenty-three miles northwest of Damascus. It then flows through Damascus, until it runs into a lake, about eighteen miles to the east of the city. The reference to the river called Pharpar may be “Nahr el-Awaj,” a river that starts at Mount Hermon and runs into Damascus.¹²

Clearly, Naaman believed he could “purchase” his healing, as though God's favor was for sale. When his experience did not match his expectations, he interpreted the refusal of the gift as a lack of respect. In fact, Naaman does not just leave, but we are told he “turned and went off in a rage.”

5:13-14. Once again, the story highlights the greatness of a servant over the power of a king or commander, when Naaman's own servant offers the wisdom and counsel that leads to his redemption. The servant suggests that just because the request was not what Naaman expected, it should not be ignored. So, Naaman follows Elisha's instructions (and his servant's advice), and his flesh was “restored” and “became clean like that of a young boy.”

When Naaman's servant addresses him, he calls him “father,” which in the Old Testament was a Hebrew term sometimes applied to a leader (1 Sam. 10:12; 2 Kings 2:12; 6:21; 13:14).

5:15-16. Naaman was healed and he returned to Elisha to bring him a “gift,” acknowledging that “there is no God in all the world except in Israel.” However, Elisha refused to take the gift, despite Naaman's insistence. Elisha would not take money (or credit) for what God had done.

5:17-18. When Elisha refuses to take the gift, Naaman announces that he will worship Elisha's God and requests "as much earth as a pair of mules can carry." The request for this amount of earth was for the purpose of making burnt offerings and sacrifices to Yahweh. The earth would have been used in the construction of an altar (see for example, Exod. 20:24–25). This may be a mud-brick altar built from clay—taken from "the Lord's own land."¹³

Naaman also seeks Elisha's pardon. As part of his duties, Naaman would accompany his master when his master worshiped in the temple of the Aramean god, Rimmon. As part of the worship ceremony, Naaman would bow before the idol as his master leaned on his arm. Naaman asks Elisha to forgive for this action.

Figuring out who, precisely, this god Rimmon was, is a matter of debate. "Hadad" normally referred to a storm god also known as "Baal" in the Bible, but the reference here may match that of Zechariah's prophecy (Zech. 12:11), which refers to a cult in the Jezreel valley (near the city of Megiddo). Since in ancient Akkadian *ramman* meant "to roar" (i.e., the storm god), it could also be translated "Hadad the thunderer."¹⁴ Some made fun of his name, changing it to "Hadad the pomegranate."¹⁵

5:19-21. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, saw the prophet refuse the gifts from Naaman. He believed his master had been "too easy on Naaman, this Aramean." So, he devised a plan to get something for himself. With antipathy toward the Arameans, he greedily and hurriedly went after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running toward him, he got out of his chariot to see if everything was okay.

5:22-24. Gehazi devised a clever lie to explain why his master was now wanting something from Naaman. Putting words into Elisha's mouth, Gehazi asked for "a talent of silver and two sets of clothing," claiming they would be used for two young prophets who just recently arrived in need of assistance. Naaman gladly met the requests, placing the items into separate bags. Two servants had to carry the bags which Gehazi hid in his house. He then sent the men away. Thus, Gehazi not only lied to Naaman, but he kept the wealth for himself.

5:25. As a servant of Elisha, Gehazi appeared before his master who promptly asked him the question, "Where have you been?" Gehazi lied again, suggesting he had not been anywhere. As the old saying goes, "One lie begets another." First, Gehazi lied to Naaman, and now to his master. One cannot help but think of the other old saying, "Oh what a wicked web we weave, when at first we practice to deceive."

5:26-27. Elisha responds to Gehazi, "Was not my spirit with you?" The word "spirit" is literally the word "heart." In other words, Elisha knows what Gehazi did, even though he was physically absent, he was present in heart (i.e., Elisha was a true and powerfully discerning prophet). Again, Elisha asks Gehazi a question, but this time it was rhetorical in nature, and revealing of the fact that Elisha knows what Gehazi has done. By taking

money and clothes from Naaman, Gehazi has done a terrible thing, but he now has done something even worse, something immoral. Naaman's conversion should not result in Gehazi's personal profit.

It was the power and compassion of God that provided Naaman's healing. Gehazi's actions corrupted this good deed. Therefore, his punishment would be grave. Elisha announces that the very leprosy of Naaman would now be upon Gehazi. And worse, it will befall his descendants forever, as a powerful reminder of how one's actions have can lingering effects.

Conclusion

The story of Naaman's miraculous healing is juxtaposed with the story of Gehazi's greed and judgment. On one hand, there is a wealthy foreigner who worships his pagan god and wreaks havoc on the nation of Israel, on the other hand there is a poor servant of "the man of God" who wishes to profit from this man's great wealth. Through the course of these events Naaman is revealed to be a person whom God is in the process of bringing to himself. By the end of the story Naaman is ready and willing to worship Israel's God—while at the same time, the servant of the prophet is willing to lie, steal, and enrich himself from the sickness of this newly converted man. Ironically, the leprosy of Naaman (which was removed), would befall Gehazi as divine judgment for his greed.

Several issues are illustrated in this story. The first is the issue of Naaman's pride, but second is the issue of Gehazi's greed and selfishness. Naaman had to let go of his pride and travel to his rival's nation in search of help (even asking for help from a rival king). Naaman's humility would further be tested upon his encounter with Elisha (although he, in fact, only initially spoke to the foreign prophet's servant). Naaman had to wash himself in the Jordan River, a body of water which paled in comparison to the grandeur of the rivers in his homeland. Naaman is healed once he follows Elisha's instructions. Had he refused he would have missed out on God's rescue.

This story reminds us of some simple truths. First, we must not let pride from keep us from experiencing God's rescue and redemption in our lives. Charles H. Spurgeon once put it like this, "Be not proud of race, face, place, or grace." Had Naaman allowed the pride of "race" (he was an Aramean not an Israelite), or "face" (he had to humble himself several times), or "place" (he was the commander of the mighty army), he would have missed out on God's rescue. However, the story also reminds us that God's rescue is not for sale. Just as Elisha refused to accept payment for the healing, we should realize we cannot buy God.

James Tillis, known by the nickname "Quick," is a former world heavyweight boxing champion. He is also called "The Fighting Cowboy." As a proud cowboy from Oklahoma, he once described coming to the city of Chicago, back in the early 1980s, for a fighting competition. He was being chauffeured around Chicago when he saw the Sears Tower and had the driver stop so he could take a picture. He got out of the car and put

down one of his bags and took the picture. He, then stood there and yelled in his best booming voice, “Chicago, I’m here to conquer you, BA-BY!” But when he looked down his bag was gone. The city he had come to conquer had already conquered him!

What is true of the great boxer is always true of us—perhaps a little humility would suit us better.¹⁶

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¹ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Garland: Bible Communications, 1979), 1100.

² Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Dover, 96), 75.

³ John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 132.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), 2 Ki 5:1.

⁷ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 2 Ki 5:1.

⁸ Walton, 134.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Barry et al., 2 Ki 1:9.

¹² Walton, 135.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Quick Tillis and J. Engleman Price, *Thinkin Big: The Story of James Quick Tillis, the Fightin' Cowboy* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2000), 54