



Catalog No. 1733

2 Kings 5

10th Message

John Hanneman

March 27, 211

WHAT EXTENT GRACE?

SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Our offertory song, *The Precious Blood*,¹ poses a stark dichotomy. On the one hand, I know how deeply sin has saturated my life. On the other hand, I know that I am completely cleansed in the atoning work of Christ.

*And who am I that I should know
This treasure of such worth
My Savior's pure atoning blood
Shed for the wrath I'd earned
For sin has stained my every deed
My every word and thought
What wondrous love that makes me one
Your priceless blood has bought*

How far does this grace extend? Does it extend to my neighbor who never trims his trees? Does it extend to a guy I work with that drives me crazy or my in-laws that can't stand me? Does it extend to the serial killer on death row? How about Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi? The short answer is yes. The long answer is the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5.

The major part of the Elisha narrative appears in chapters 2-8 of 2 Kings, consisting of a series of stories, some short and some long. Most of the Elisha stories feature miracles and healings that prefigure the ministry of Jesus in the gospels. Some scholars contend that this material is laid out in such a fashion that the story of Naaman lies in the center of the narrative. The fact that some of the material appears to not be chronological would support this claim. Regardless, the story of Naaman is my favorite story in the Elisha narrative.

A Great Man

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, but he had leprosy. (2 Kings 5:1 TNIV)

In one verse we learn all we need to know about Naaman. He was an Aramean and was in fact the commander of the army. Aram, just to the north of Israel, was the biggest military threat to Israel during this time, an enemy that Israel had fought against for years. Conflict with Aram is featured in 1 Kings 20 and 22, 2 Kings 6 and 7.

The God of Israel had been with Naaman in his battles with Israel and through him given victory or "salvation." This might be a reference to the battle described in 1 Kings 22 in which king Ahab was killed. Since Israel and her kings continued to worship Baal rather than Yahweh, God used an enemy as a rod of discipline and judgment. This is a clear indication and example that God controls the affairs of all nations and uses them for his purposes.

Four words or phrases describe Naaman. First, he was a great man, literally "a great man before his master (or lord)." The Shunammite

woman we talked about last week was described as a great woman (4:8). Now we have a great man. Similarly, the gospels often juxtapose stories of men and women. Second, Naaman was highly regarded due to his military prowess. Third, he was a valiant warrior, a description given to Jephthah (Judges 11:1), Boaz (Ruth 2:1), and David (1 Sam. 16:18). I have a picture in mind of Maximus Decimus Meridius in the movie *Gladiator*.

But fourth, Naaman was a leper. The word "leper" stands like a thud at the end of the sentence. Despite all Naaman's acclaim, power, and fortune he has a disease. This was probably not Hansen's Disease that causes limbs to rot and fall off. It was probably a skin condition like psoriasis. But according to the Law this disease rendered a person ritually unclean (Lev. 13-14) and was often the sign of God's judgment (Num. 12:1-5; 2 Sam. 3:28-29; 2 Kings 15:5). Naaman was a great man with a great problem. Naaman was a non-Israelite and thus he was outside the camp of God's people. His condition was an added barrier to keep him from being in God's presence. Naaman's leprosy is a symbol of the sin that infects every person born into this world.

A Little Girl

Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." (2 Kings 5:2-5a)

Next we read about a little girl who serves, literally "is before," Naaman's wife. Naaman is a great man before his master and the girl is a little girl before her mistress. The little girl is a contrast to the great man. She had been taken captive by a band of Aramean raiders. Even though she is in enemy territory she is well aware of the prophet Elisha, and suggests to her mistress that Elisha could heal him of his disease. Naaman asks permission of his master and is given the green light, complete with a letter of recommendation. In the Elisha narrative, the little people, such as servants, are key figures who point people to the man of God.

What do we make of this little girl? She has been taken from her home and forced to serve her enemy. We wonder if her parents are still alive. We assume that she is homesick and where she does not want to be. And yet she is willing to serve the Lord and point people, even her enemy, to the man of God. Are we willing to have this same attitude and live with the same purpose?

We tend to look for the perfect job, the perfect place to live, the perfect family to marry into, the perfect friends, and the perfect church. Our whole perspective is geared towards getting the life that will fulfill and satisfy us. It doesn't work that way. God plants us where he wants us to be for his purposes, not our own. He even

scatters us through unpleasant events. This applies to our job, our family, our neighborhood, and even the state or country in which we live. Our circumstances are our circumstances because God has chosen them for us. There is our life, and there is “not an option.” We might feel like we are in enemy territory but that is where God wants to use us. Therefore, we are to live in the present and focus on where we are, not where we aren’t.

The little girl poses a serious challenge to our safe Christian huddles that isolate us from the world. Who’s going to tell people about the Jesus who can take away their disease? How is the gospel going to spread unless we are faithful witnesses, even in places where we do not want to be? Are we raising our children to be insulated from the world or to have a passion to save the world?

The King of Israel’s Reaction

So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. 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.”

As 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!” (2 Kings 5:5b-7)

Naaman went to Israel, probably to Samaria, with some thank you gifts and a letter. The gifts were a large fortune—750 pounds of silver and 150 pounds of gold. In today’s economy this would be worth close to four million dollars. Omri had bought the whole city of Samaria with just two talents of silver (1 Kings 16:24). Also, one would have to assume that the ten changes of clothes were not from Salvation Army. Naaman was a great man willing to pay a great price for a great healing.

Naaman also carried a letter of introduction from the king of Aram, probably Ben-hadad, to the king of Israel, probably Jehoram. We might note that the king’s names are not mentioned because they are not important. The letter asked for help in curing Naaman of his leprosy. The king of Aram probably assumed that the prophet would be at court with the king.

Jehoram has a hostile reaction to the letter. First, he tears his clothes; something one would do in times of great trouble or tragedy. Second, he knows that God can kill and make alive (Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6, Hos. 6:1-2) but he does not want to turn to Yahweh as his God. He is a symbol of unbelieving Israel. Third, he thinks that Ben-hadad is trying to pick a fight, to start a quarrel. Jehoram reads the letter in light of all the conflict he has had with Ben-hadad. The thought of turning to Elisha is not even entertained, but he gets involved nonetheless.

Elisha Sends for Naaman

When 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.” So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house. Elisha 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.” (2 Kings 5:8-10)

The nameless king is powerless and befuddled, but Elisha is not. He wants Naaman to know that there is not only a prophet in Israel, but also to know the God of Israel. Naaman arrives at Elisha’s house with an entourage of horses and chariots. He is a great man with a great entourage. As we saw last week, important conversations happen at the doorway, matters of life and death (1 Kings 17:10, 19:13, 22:10; 2 Kings 2:15, 7:3, 10:8). As we also saw last week, Elisha does not make a personal appearance, but speaks through an intermediary. He gives instructions that will lead to Naaman’s restoration and purification. These instructions involve washing seven times in the Jordan River. Seven corresponds to the number of days prescribed for quarantine for those with skin diseases (Lev. 13-14). It also reminds us of the boy in chapter 4 who sneezed seven times when he was raised from the dead. The word “wash” refers to ritual cleansing (Lev. 14:8-9).

Naaman’s Anger

But 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. Are 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. (2 Kings 5:11-12)

Naaman was furious and left in a rage. “Who does this prophet of Israel think he is dealing with?” Naaman expected Elisha to come out to him and stand before him because he is a great man. He expected Elisha to call on his God and wave his hands over him in the kind of magic show used with the gods he worshipped back home. He was appalled at washing in the muddy Jordan River. If all he had to do to be clean was to wash in a river, he could have stayed at home and washed in the clear waters of the Abanah and Pharpar, rivers that were fed by the mountains of Lebanon. Going away in a huff frames verses 11 and 12.

Sometimes we respond to God in the same way as Naaman. We expect God to jump through our hoops and meet our expectations. We get angry when God doesn’t answer our prayers the way we want or drops something difficult in our laps. We refuse to do what he asks because it seems so preposterous. But God will not be manipulated or swayed through our tantrums. He exposes our pride and selfishness. He breaks our stubborn will and humbles us. Naaman thinks it is ridiculous and beneath him to go in the Jordan. This is exactly why people reject the gospel. They think it is ludicrous and irrational to believe that a man who died on a cross 2000 years ago can bring restoration and healing. God says, “Do it my way or stay a leper.” We face choices every day to accept or reject God’s way.

Naaman Healed

Naaman’s servants went to him and said, “My father, 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!’” 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. (2 Kings 5:13-14)

Once again we see that a humble servant has great influence. He diffuses Naaman’s anger. What the servant says is difficult to translate. But the idea seems to be that if Elisha had asked Naaman to perform some great, difficult feat, Naaman would have done it.

Great men do great things, like climb mountains or capture cities. The servant suggests that to wash and be clean is a small task that is a great thing.

Naaman humbles himself by going down to the Jordan, a distance of perhaps forty miles since there was no direct route. He immerses himself in the Jordan seven times in obedience to the word of the man of God. The word for “dipped” is used of the hyssop dipped in blood and put on the door frame when the Israelites were spared death on the eve of the Exodus (Ex. 12:22). Also as part of the ceremony for readmission into community for a person with an infectious skin disease, the officiant would dip his finger into blood (Lev. 14:6) or oil (14:16).

Naaman’s flesh is restored like the flesh of a little boy. The word “little boy” is the masculine counterpart to the word for “little girl.” In other words, the great man had to become like the little girl who served his wife. He had to become a child to enter the kingdom of heaven. Unless we become like little children we cannot receive salvation.

Elisha Refuses Naaman’s Gift

Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant.”

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. (2 Kings 5:15–16)

Naaman returns to Elisha’s house and “stands before” him and makes his confession of faith. No longer will he worship the gods of Aram, but will worship Yahweh, the God of Israel. He also attempts to give a gift for the prophet’s services. But Elisha refuses the gift. Why? Elisha refuses the gift for the same reason that he doesn’t go with Naaman to the Jordan. He wants Naaman to know that God’s grace and salvation are totally free. He wants him to know that salvation is not man’s doing, but God’s doing.

“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.” (2 Kings 5:17)

Elisha will not accept any gift, but Naaman has a request. He wants to take a load of dirt from Israel back to his home, so that he can build an altar to the Lord such as Moses was commanded to do by God on Sinai (Ex. 20:24). Naaman wants a physical place where he can worship Yahweh, the God of Israel. Note how Naaman’s whole attitude has changed. The great man has become a servant (mentioned five times) to the man of God. But Naaman has a concern.

Naaman’s Concern

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

“Go in peace,” Elisha said. (2 Kings 5:18–19)

Naaman’s sensitive conscience is evidence of his conversion. Since Naaman was a servant of the king of Aram, he would have

to accompany him as part of his job when the king went into the house of Rimmon to worship. Rimmon is another name for Hadad, the god of storm and thunder. Naaman won’t worship Rimmon but he has to go into the house of Rimmon. The “house of Rimmon” is mentioned twice and verse 18 is framed by a request for forgiveness. Elisha tells Naaman that it is not a problem; go in peace.

Naaman does not have to become a Jew and stay in Israel. He can enter back into his pagan world and serve his king. In the same way, when we become Christians we don’t have to isolate ourselves from the world and change everything we do. If an unsaved churchgoer becomes a Christian it might be God’s plan to continue going to the same church and be a witness for Jesus. We don’t have to quit our job and go into full-time ministry. Rather our work can become our ministry. We continue to serve along side others, build relationships, and take part in work activities. Jesus said this to people he healed. Rather than inviting them to come with him and the disciples, Jesus urged them to go back to where they lived and be a faithful witness for him.

Gehazi’s Greed

After Naaman had traveled some distance, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said to himself, “My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him.”

So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running toward him, he got down from the chariot to meet him. “Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Everything is all right,” Gehazi answered. “My master sent me to say, ‘Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.’” (2 Kings 5:20–22)

In contrast to Elisha who only wants God’s approval, Gehazi wants to profit from Naaman’s healing. And so he follows after Naaman and spins a lie about two visitors who have come to Elisha. Gehazi’s request is not excessive. He does not want to arouse suspicion. But it will set him up nicely for the rest of his life.

“By all means, take two talents,” said Naaman. He urged Gehazi to accept them, and then tied up the two talents of silver in two bags, with two sets of clothing. He gave them to two of his servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. When Gehazi came to the hill, he took the things from the servants and put them away in the house. He sent the men away and they left. (2 Kings 5:23–24)

Naaman gives Gehazi more than his request and sends some servants to help him carry the silver and garments. The hill probably refers to the acropolis above Samaria. The word “take” occurs nine times in verses 15–26. Gehazi wants to take rather than give. Elisha would take nothing for his ministry of grace. But Gehazi has a different point of view, and it will cost him dearly.

When he went in and stood before his master, Elisha asked him, “Where have you been, Gehazi?” “Your servant didn’t go anywhere,” Gehazi answered.

But Elisha said to him, “Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money or to accept clothes—or olive groves and vineyards, or flocks and herds, or male and female slaves? Naaman’s leprosy

will cling to you and to your descendants forever.” Then Gehazi went from Elisha’s presence and his skin was leprous—it had become as white as snow. (2 Kings 5:25–27)

Now it is Gehazi’s turn to stand before Elisha. Elisha knows everything that Gehazi has done. He expands his acquisitions to include olive groves and vineyards, flocks and herds, male and female servants. Perhaps this is what Gehazi intends to acquire with the silver he has received. All of us have to stand before someone and, in the end, all of us have to stand before God.

The judgment is severe. The leprosy of Naaman will cling to Gehazi and his descendants forever. The story began with Naaman outside the camp and Gehazi inside the camp. Now they change places. Naaman is inside while Gehazi is outside. Why is the judgment so severe? Because Gehazi’s greed distorts the truth about God’s free grace that Elisha had tried so hard to teach Naaman.

Greed is a deadly sin. And it is even worse when people seek to profit from the gospel. Sadly, we all have heard of religious leaders who distort the truth of the gospel just to make a buck. Perhaps Gehazi prefigures the ruin that came upon Judas, and gives us a picture of what can happen to any of us.

When Jesus told the parable about the rich fool, he said, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). Paul wrote to Timothy,

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Timothy 6:9–10)

David Roper comments: “Jesus does not condemn materialism because it deprives the poor but because it deprives us; we lose our ability to make moral judgments, and like Gehazi we descend into ruin and destruction.”²

Paul teaches us one better—we are to be “rich in good deeds” (1 Tim. 6:18).

The story of Naaman is a beautiful story of salvation and restoration, water and word, baptism and new life. And just like we saw in our story last week, the sign points to a spiritual reality that is universal. We are born with an incurable disease called sin. Like lepers, we are outside the camp. We are unclean and unfit for the kingdom of God. But when any person is willing to humble himself or herself, become like a little child and accept God’s way of salvation through Jesus they are cleansed, restored, forgiven, made new. There is so much we could talk about in the story, but let me leave you with two thoughts.

First, Naaman gives us a picture of what God has done for us personally, freely loved and completely forgiven. We can talk about being forgiven, but a picture can be worth a thousand words. Maybe you are like me. You believe that God has forgiven you for all your sin. But you have a hard time forgiving yourself. You are harder on yourself than God is. You beat yourself up, continually thinking you should have done better, you should have known better, you should have been better. All of that is rooted in pride, the kind of pride we see in Naaman’s reaction to a simple word from Elisha. In Naaman we hear God’s invitation to not “should” on yourself. God is inviting you to live a forgiven and cleansed life.

Second, Naaman is a picture of God’s grace to the world. The extent of his mercy is unlimited. Aram was an enemy of Israel. But Israel had turned away from God and so God sent his message to the world. Jesus refers to Naaman in Luke’s gospel: “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” (Luke 4:27). Jesus experienced the same hardness of heart in his day as Elisha had, and so his grace went out to the Gentiles, to all the nations. And so we are sent into the world to tell people about Jesus and his priceless but free grace, even our enemies. We aren’t selling anything. We don’t have to package the message in a pill that is easy to swallow. We are simply servants, like the little girl in our story, pointing people to Jesus.

Years ago I led a bible study at a prison in the valley. After the meeting I was talking with one of the inmates and asked him how he had come to faith. He told me that he was sitting in his cell one day and noticed a paper stuck in a crack in the wall. He pulled out the paper. It was a sermon from Peninsula Bible Church. He read the message and accepted Christ. God’s grace can reach everywhere and reach anyone. If you have never come to believe in Jesus, by all means do it today. Naaman can be your story.

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:38–39)

Now may the God who cleanses and purifies us through the precious blood of Jesus be with us today and forever.

1. Gagnon, Peter, “The Precious Blood.” *Valley of Vision*. Sovereign Grace Worship (ASCAP), 2005.

2. Roper, David, *Seasoned with Salt*, (Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, 2004), 93.