

NAAMAN, THE SYRIAN

II Kings 5:1-19

This most interesting narrative, which is so full of human interest and moral instruction and which is so rich in gospel suggestion, carries us across the Mediterranean Sea to Syria in Asia. In those days Syria had mighty monarchs who conquered other nations and oppressed them. At that time Benhadad was reigning in Damascus, the capital city. Israel trembled before him because he was a decided and fierce enemy of God's nation. He was proud, haughty, pitiless, and remorseless tyrant who trusted in the strength of his arms, his treasures, and the help of his idols. Of all his numerous possessions there was, perhaps, none more precious than his faithful servant and friend, Naaman. Among the figures in the Old Testament very few are more interesting than Naaman who possessed practically every requisite to worldly success.

I. Naaman's Characteristics.

1. He was prominent.

Naaman did not belong to the ranks of the humble citizens but was the commander-in-chief of all the Syrian army. Next to the king, he was the most prominent and important man in Syria. Having risen to the highest rank in the army, he took a very active part in national affairs and justified the confidence reposed in him.

2. He was popular.

His position as "captain of the host of the king of Syria" involved a high rank, a large income, a vast patronage, and a place in the thoughts of his people next to that of their king. He had a splendid reputation among his neighbors and many friends. He shared the approval and favors of King Benhadad. Because of his great services to his country, he enjoyed to an unusual degree the confidence and favor of his monarch who lavished upon him the great honors and rich gifts which kings confer upon their favorites. He was also the idol of his army and the pride of his people. He could obtain any favor that he desired or advance any whom he cared to promote.

3. He was honorable.

Naaman attracts attention and evokes admiration because he was an exemplary husband, a useful public servant, and a brave and faithful leader of the army.

4. He was successful.

As a soldier he was courteous, energetic, courageous, and victorious. Under his leadership the armies of Syria marched against the enemies of their country and defeated them. Naaman was an instrument of deliverance to his nation and was acknowledged by all as the political and military saviour of his country, "because by him the Lord had given deliverance unto Syria." He was one of the most successful generals of his day, and his name was a terror to multiplied thousands and the glory of many more. As commander-in-chief he saw real service, won his spurs in active warfare, and led his troops to victory. Crowned with laurels and enriched with spoils, he was greeted on his return from battle with the triumphant shouts of a joyful and grateful populace.

5. He was valiant.

"He was also a mighty man in valour." This statement reveals the foundation of much of his greatness. It implies the possession of wisdom, forethought, ingenuity, decision, versatility, and all the other excellent qualities which are blended in a great general. He was cautious and wise as well as brave and energetic.

6. He was proud.

It is not at all surprising that Naaman was proud. As far as external prosperity went, the illustrious Naaman had practically everything one could desire. He was high in rank, great in honor, rich in worldly goods, and successful in war; he was the favorite of his king, the idol of his army, and the pride of his people. From a worldly point of view, Naaman was a great man.

II. Naaman's Condition.

Although Naaman was prominent, popular, honorable, successful, valiant, and proud, he was the victim of a terrible disease -- leprosy. He had so many things that one might desire; but what of that, when he was what he was -- a leper? His condition illustrates the fact that there is always something to modify the happiness of every human life and something to mar the most brilliant success. In every life there is some good thing withheld or some sad thing added. All of us might be happy but for something; our plans might be successful, but for something.

Leprosy was the most fearful, dreaded, and despised disease known to the people of the East. It was a terrible disease -- hereditary, painful, contagious, loathsome, separating, incurable by man, and fatal. In all these respects it resembles sin. The leprosy of sin tarnishes every worldly honor, blights the loveliest scene, dims the brightest prospects and moderates every joy.

III. Naaman's Cure.

In the course of their many border raids in the towns and villages of Israel, the Syrian troops had seized and carried off, as part of their booty, a little Hebrew girl whom Naaman appropriated and presented to his wife as a servant. In the position of attendant on the wife of Naaman, she did her work admirably. Although she was in a heathen land and surrounded by the pomp and show of idolatry, she steadfastly clung to the religion of her fathers and kept her heart set on the ways of God. She was strong in her simple faith in the God of Israel. Forced away from her family, home, and friends, with grief enough to break her heart, she did not forget her God nor the good which He had done through His prophet.

She soon discovered that something was wrong in Naaman's household, as neither Naaman nor his wife were cheerful. She wondered what was wrong and at last was informed that Naaman was a leper. Having become attached to him, she was touched by his misfortunes. Had she been like some people, she would have rejoiced that he was a leper. If the feeling of retaliation had influenced her, she would have watched with malicious pleasure the progress of his disease. One day while her mistress and she engaged in a chat about domestic affairs, Naaman's health was mentioned. With all the fulness of a sympathizing heart, and the tear of kindly devotion trembling in her eye, she thought of God's prophet in Samaria. She remembered what wondrous works of healing he had done, and she concluded that he would do the same for Naaman if his help was only sought. While she never knew of Elisha healing a leper, she believed that God could do this also through him. Simply, affectionately, and with the greatest assurance she ventured to say to her mistress, "Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy." There was a note of sincerity and conviction in her statement that deeply touched her mistress and gave her a ray of hope for her doomed husband. Convinced that there was a possibility of healing, Naaman's wife conveyed this message to him. Unexpectedly it opened to the diseased and despairing hero a door of hope and gave him a new guiding star in his midnight of darkness.

How willing our friends are to prescribe for us and how quick we are to accept their most extraordinary suggestions! Since none of the eminent doctors in Damascus or Syria could help him, Naaman was willing to try almost anything to get rid of his leprosy. Naaman knew nothing of the means Elisha had at his disposal for the treatment of leprosy, but he wanted to give him a trial. However, he considered it his duty to inform Benhadad of his intention and receive the royal sanction. Born and bred a politician, and knowing the value of influence, he went to his sovereign and told him of his hopes and asked for a letter of introduction. Knowing little or nothing about miracles but much about how things are done otherwise, all they deemed necessary was for Naaman, properly accredited, to present himself before the king of Israel, and he would either effect the cure himself or have the prophet to perform the necessary miracle.

Benhadad's letter was short and to the point. The facts were clearly stated and his wishes fully declared. This letter placed the king of Israel in an embarrassing position. After reading the letter with extreme astonishment, the king of Israel rent his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? Wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me." Since there was no reference in the letter to the prophet of whom the maid had spoken, the king thought it was just a pretext for the resumption of war. When the tidings of the king's perplexity reached Elisha, with a fine sense of confidence in himself and in his power, Elisha requested the king to send Naaman to him.

With a letter in his hand to command the cure, at least fifty thousand dollars in his pockets to pay for it, and a splendid and glittering retinue accompanying him, Naaman turned from the royal palace and approached the door of the prophet's humble abode.

Naaman made his pilgrimage to Samaria, a distance of one hundred and fifty miles, with a mind full of the most detailed preconceptions. He thought that Elisha would feel very much flattered that he should come and call upon him. He expected the prophet to come out to him, very humble and very subservient. He thought that Elisha would make much of him, since he had and could give so much. He wanted to be treated like a great man who happened to be a leper. He expected that his pomp and his gold would win him deference and homage and that he would be healed by solemn word, act, and touch. But the process of healing was different from what Naaman expected.

Elisha knew what was best for this mighty man of valour; he must be emptied of his pride before God could help him. Instead of going out to meet him in recognition of his rank, in the position he occupied in the nation from which he came, Elisha sent an humble messenger to him, saying: "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again unto thee, and thou shalt be clean." His directions were plain and specific. Could anything be more explicit? Elisha treated him as though he were an ordinary commonplace leper. He made no allowance whatever for his native pride. Because the prophet's counsel did not fit in with Naaman's prejudices and his sense of his own importance, he was wroth at Elisha and turned away in a rage. Flattered and carressed and feared and waited on, he had seemed to himself more than man; now for the first time a fellow-man cast aside his splendor and fame as though they were trifles. He was sadly disappointed and disgusted by the matter-of-fact way in which Elisha received him. It was a severe blow to him to be asked to bathe his stately though leprous limbs in the turbid waters of the Jordan rather than in the clear limpid rivers of his native Damascus.

He wanted to be treated like a great man who happened to be a leper, but Elisha treated him like a leper who happened to be a great man. His suffering unpitied, his pomp unnoticed, his gold despised, he was turned away like a beggar from the door, with the added insult of what he considered a trivial message. With his pride and vanity wounded, and turning away infuriated, he expressed his feeling of disappointment and contempt. His servants attempted to stay his wrath and get him to consider the advisability of at least testing the prophet's words. Their gentle persuasion prevailed. At the bank of the Jordan he laid aside his armor, put off his outer garment, stepped down into the

river, dipped himself seven times, and his flesh became again like the flesh of a little child. The cure was instantaneous. It is in the act of obedience that the divine blessing always comes. The cure was wrought when faith was translated into obedience.

IV. Naaman's Conduct.

He came up out of the Jordan, leprosy gone, anger gone, pride gone, went back to the prophet to express his appreciation, to acknowledge the supremacy of Jehovah and his determination henceforth to worship him, to offer gifts and to seek further instruction. A little while before he had sneered at the waters of Israel; but now the soil of the land was sacred to him, and he wanted an altar of it in his Syrian home. He was anxious to show his gratitude to the prophet and to honor him. He requests him to receive a token of his thankfulness. His cure evoked gratitude, annihilated an old prejudice, and inspired worship.

1. God does not take any stock of your station in life.
Spiritual condition -- sinner, lost, unforgiven.
2. God does not hold a man's past life against him.
"Though your sins be as scarlet."
"If we confess our sins."
Mel Trotter.