

## "SEVEN DUCKS IN A MUDDY RIVER"

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**Text for the Sermon: II Kings 5:1-19**

**Naaman, a faithless commander and chief of the armies of Syria.**

The scene opens in the foreign country of Syria, north and east of Israel. Syria was a powerful enemy of Israel and this story takes place during a brief period of peace or cease-fire. We are in Damascus, the great and beautiful capital city of Syria. Here we meet the principle character.

Naaman was a five star general, a Patton, a MacArthur, a Schwartzkoph; the commander and chief of all the military forces of Syria. He was second only to King Ben Hadad II. We are told that he was a mighty man of valor; a great man held in high regard. He was the king's right hand man and chief counsel.

He was also a man of great wealth. He had a palace in the nicest suburb of Damascus, with a three-chariot garage, stables, servants and all the rest.

Having said all this about the man, the last five words of verse 1 change everything, **"but, he was a leper."** The impact of those words is like saying he had AIDS.

Naaman was as great as the world could make him and yet there wasn't a soul in Damascus, even the poorest outcast, that would trade skin with him to gain everything else he had.

Naaman is a Scriptural picture of the human condition, of you and me. No matter how great or talented, gifted or exceptional, successful, or put together or intelligent, there is a **"but"** in our life. All of us have our leprosy, our calamity, our crisis, our personal brokenness, most of all our spiritual leprosy, that four-letter word that only has three letters - SIN.

Our leprosy is personal and national.

**A Little Slave Girl.**

The solution in our story comes, as God often does, from the least expected places - a little servant girl, a slave against her wishes in the palace of Naaman. As Joseph was to

Pharaoh, and Esther was to King Xerxes, and Daniel was to Nebuchadnezzar, so this little girl is a witness to the God of Israel. What a compliment to her home and upbringing.

I imagine at first Naaman's wife didn't believe her. "What! A man in Israel who can cure my husband? Child, you must be dreaming. Did you ever hear of anyone being cured of leprosy?"

"Well, no, but he has cured people with worse things and he raised a boy from the dead. He can certainly heal your husband."

Elisha's reputation as a miracle worker was widespread. So since there were no good dermatologists in Syria, Naaman gives it a whirl.

### **Naaman, the manipulating politician.**

Like all politicians, he thinks **all problems are political problems** and all solutions are political solutions and he makes the mistake of all politicians, he turns to another politician to solve the problem. The king sends a letter with him for the king in Israel.

And like all of who have money, he also thinks that all problems can be fixed with money. All solutions are ultimately financial solutions. Like any of us going on a trip, his last stop is the First National Bank of Damascus where he withdraws a little cash from the ATM. Well, a lot of cash. Nine hundred pounds of gold and silver. He intends to take a lavish, extravagant gift.

This kind of thinking is still true today. The problem in Syria today must have a political solution. The problem in Miami or Louisiana or Milwaukee must have a political solution. Some more laws, some more legislation, some more restrictions, some more tax dollars and we will be all ok. It's an idol we worship and bow down to. But that's a lie.

The solution for our national crises and insecurity are not gun control and metal detectors and more border guards. It is the power of the gospel to bring salvation, to change hard hearts and mend broken lives. Our hope and help is in the name of the Lord and nowhere else.

The solution to centuries of ethnic and religious and racial tension and strife in our world is the blood sacrifice of Jesus and the Church's proclamation of reconciliation to God and each other through Jesus.

There is no political solution to our political problems. Our problem is not that we are divided politically. Our problem is our national conscience is so seared as to no longer

see our spiritual bankruptcy. Nothing will save us except repentance, and a reformation of our hearts and lives.

I have said before that every commercial on TV has a lie and an idol hidden in it, and I would extend that to every political ad or speech. Don't put your hope in any candidate or their promises. They cannot make our lives better or more meaningful or more secure.

Our national motto is "In God we trust." The most crucial need of our day is to be on our knees before the almighty God. He is our only trust.

But, with the letter in hand, Naaman heads out of town with a huge entourage and lots of money.

### **Joram, The King of Israel**

When Joram, the King of Israel, read the letter (vs. 6), it was upsetting to say the least. He tore his clothes. When kings tear their clothes you can bet it's bad news and bad news usually comes to kings in the form of war and news of the threat of war travels fast.

The King of Israel assumed that the King of Syria was deliberately asking him to do something impossible so that when he failed the King of Syria would have an excuse to attack.

It's a **sad reflection on the king of Israel** that of all the people in this story he was the one to show the least faith and the least obedience to the will of God. People with power often think they are the only ones in control and able to do what is needed and if they can't fix they think there is no fix. People in power forget to humble themselves before the only powerful God.

### **Naaman, the proud leper.**

Elisha comes to the rescue and calls for Naaman to come to his place. When Naaman, the commander and chief of all the Syrian forces with his huge entourage, arrives at what is certainly the very humble dwelling of Elisha, he is met by a servant who tells him, "Wash yourself seven times in the Jordan and you will be cleansed."

So much for diplomatic protocol. This bad form, bad manners. It would be a little like Obama sending a White House page boy to greet Putin or the Queen of England sending a lowly courtier to meet the Pope.

Naaman goes off angry. "In a word, Naaman wanted to be treated as a great man who happened to be a leper. Instead Elisha treated him as a leper who happened to be a great man."

This is the **offense of the gospel**. The gospel of Jesus Christ is utterly indifferent to distinctions among people. The great leveling effect of the gospel is that all are sinners, we are all leprous in need of cleansing. This is why it is not uncommon for the wise and powerful and well-bred to look with contempt on divine wisdom which appears absurd.

According to Naaman, what Elisha says is worthless because it is absurd. After all, if it was a bath he needed he could have washed at home. The rivers of Damascus make the Jordan look like a dirty drainage ditch. He was used to the magic of his religion. He expected some hocus-pocus and abracadabra.

What is really crazy is that Naaman's servants are right, if Elisha had said take **cod liver oil** three times a day for a year, or give me all your money and hop back to Damascus on one leg, he might have said OK. He would feel like he had done something.

This is **another offense of the gospel**. We want to contribute to the effort, we want to play a part, exert some effort. We don't like feeling weak, powerless, impotent.

Naaman completely forgets that it is the result of the miracle that he is after and not how it is achieved. "I thought." We think we know how God should do things. God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are not hard.

The Word of God comes as a simple command and a promise. Elisha does nothing but tell him the simple Word of God, the Gospel of Jesus.

Wash and you will be cleansed.

Repent and you will be forgiven.

Believe and you will be saved.

Well, anger is not always a bad thing. Often after we cool down we can listen to reason and it's to Naaman's credit that, for the second time in this story, he listens to his servants. A wise man listens to simple truth no matter how modest the source.

I hope every one of you knows the blessing of having someone who can be free and honest with you, one who encourages you toward wholeness. Listen to those who speak the truth in love.

This great man submits to his servants, he surrenders to his slaves.

This is the **beginning of his healing, the death of his pride**. The acknowledgement of his need and his willingness to die to self and live by faith in God's ways. His healing started coming to him as he walked to the river and went down into the waters. The

water wasn't special or magic. He just surrendered himself into the hands of God. He let go of his pride, his anger, his power, his political solutions, his dependence on his own resources.

We are all on the same page. Our healing will be in the name of the Lord. When we pray we are going down to the river of dependence and surrender, looking to God for spiritual solutions to our problems. We will be doing that in a special way *next Sunday evening* as we take time to pray.

In prayer we die to pride and appearances. Our healing begins in our honest confession of our sin and failures, our acknowledgement that we are not righteous.

### **Naaman, the Faithful Convert.**

So Naaman goes and I imagine with each duck he had to be encouraged to continue. But on the seventh wash—wow. Skin smooth as a baby's bottom. He could have done a Palmolive soap commercial.

What a blessing is in store for those who yield to the will of God and are obedient to His Word. **Seven ducks in a muddy river** and his anger and pride are washed down the dirty Jordan along with his leprosy. God keeps His promises.

Then like the one leper who returned to thank Jesus, Naaman jumped in his chariot and raced back to Elisha's place.

He makes a tremendous confession of his new faith, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel." He is a changed man. He is converted, renewed, a mighty work has been done. He is a poster child of the power of God to change and renew people and situations.

Notice how deep this healing runs. Not only is his body healed, but his heart is transformed as well. His heart is full of gratitude, he wants to give a gift, make an offering. He isn't the hardened general we saw before, but in his own words, a humble servant.

His mind and heart are filled with truth and grace now. The gift he has received is totally free. He wants to only worship the one True God. He realizes that what he had in Syria was a worthless religion, what he now has is a relationship with a real, personal God.

The man who didn't want to wash in Israel's dirty river, now wants to take some of Israel's dirt back to Syria, some holy ground for a place to worship his God. The fruit of conversion is worship.

## **Implications and conclusion.**

We have seen from Scripture how God changed the man Naaman and this one incident from his life is recorded that we might learn from it.

It can only begin of course when we recognize that there is a problem, but even that is not enough. We begin to change when the true solution presents itself.

God set about to change the world when He offered Jesus as the solution. Jesus came to change the world and He is changing it one person at a time.

So we begin by knowing ourselves and what our leprosy is. Is it indifference, or selfishness or pride or stubbornness? Is it love of the things of this life or dependency on them? There is something in every life present here today; some leprosy that needs God's cure.

Knowing that there is a problem and a solution we must respond and, in fact, in one way or another we all do.

For some the response is anger. We resist or take offense like Naaman, and he almost missed God's blessing. Have you ever noticed that often we are the obstacle to our own healing, to our own regaining of spiritual health and vitality? Our pride stubbornly refuses to give into God or submit to someone else's wise counsel.

But, give in we must. We must surrender and submit, to obey and allow ourselves to be washed clean of our human expectations and leprosy, cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Die to yourself, to your dependence on your resources, to your hope in some political future. Die to your proud resistance to the godly counsel God has placed in your life through parents, teachers, pastors, elders, friends. Your healing and hope is in God and the Gospel of His Son.

Spiritual healing and wholeness is the work of God. God accomplishes His work often through small things and small people. When we receive the miracle of a clear testimony of the truth of God, let our response always be clear faithfulness to the leading of God.

Listen to God's Word, don't resist Him. Live in such faithfulness and obedience to Him that our lives are a testimony that "there is no God in all the world except the God of Israel," the God of the Church of Jesus Christ.