

THE BAPTISM OF NAAMAN

2 Kings chapter five gives us the historical account of Naaman, captain of the army of Aram, a region of modern-day Syria. The time would be approximately 845 B.C., roughly 100 years after the time of Solomon, during the reign of Joram in Israel and Ben-Hadad II in Aram. As a backdrop it is important to note that Aram and Israel were not friendly, and Aram had been and would continue to be a thorn in Israel's side for many years to come. This dated back to the days of David and would continue until their demise during the Assyrian conquest of 732 B.C.

We will take a quick moment to note that in Israel the protégé' of the prophet Elijah, Elisha had been doing incredible things in the name of the Lord. (I encourage you to dive into the books of Kings and get a glimpse into the life of Israel and Judah as they live through kings that lead them into demise and captivity while showing that allegiance with God is necessary over allegiance with man). Up to the point of Naaman, Elisha had performed many miracles including parting the Jordan, flood ditches to confuse the Moabites, multiplied the poor widows' oil, and resurrected Shunammite's son just to name a few. I, however, would like to focus on the recipient from 2 Kings 5, a pagan about to be baptized.

In a time when tribes of Chaldean derivatives known as Arameans controlled land from Babylon to the Mediterranean, a gentleman by the name of Naaman had made a name for himself as a leader and a warrior. With his help and guidance these tribes controlled the Syrian desert to include the trade routes that would control the flow of products in the region. This would affect routes to Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and modern-day Jordan, giving power and influence to the region. The region of Aram was a polytheistic society and according to inscriptions discovered in 1979, among the gods that were worshipped in this area were Hadad, the storm god, as well as Reshep, Sin, and El. Inscriptions have been found labeling Hadad the "inspector of waters of heaven and earth", as well as "the one who pours richness and dispenses pastureland and moist fields to all countries". Matriculating from a polytheistic land such as this would mean that Naaman was likely a worshipper of the gods of his fellow countrymen. I surmise that he would walk into the temple, bang the gong, make his sacrifice, and wait for whichever god he was praying to, to make its decision on whether or not he was worthy of supplication.

At some point in his life Naaman had developed leprosy. We do not know if this was a lifelong issue or one that had slowly developed over time. This would lead him to pray to the gods for healing that never came and considering he was a man of self-importance this likely stung a bit. We are told that by him God had given great victory to Aram, leading us to two questions. One, why would God deliver victory to the Arameans, a thorn in the side of His people? Two, did God stricken him with leprosy? Meaning, was his real problem leprosy or did God use this to lead Naaman to the promised land? Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that "the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick", maybe this is what needed to be healed

and leprosy was the means. We will dive deeper into these two questions later in the paper but first back to Naaman.

Now, it is important to note that the Arameans were not a solid unit, meaning they were not an autonomous nation, they were a group of tribes that controlled the Syrian desert and could come together as one when it was necessary to fight opposing lands. So, at some point, Naaman's tribe had infiltrated Israel and, in the process, taken captive a young girl (likely many captives but this is the story of one man, and we are told that he had a slave girl from Israel (5:2). We are not given her name, but she apparently held her master in high esteem because she recommended that Naaman visit a prophet in her native Israel that she believed could heal his leprosy. Without hesitation he visited his king to get permission to venture into Israel, permission was granted and Naaman was given a letter to let the king of Israel know that he came in peace and a church load of money to pay for healing, ten talents of silver and 6,000 shekels of gold to be exact. Going from the going rate for gold and silver that would be approximately \$4,250,000.00 today, showing just how desperate he was to be healed.

So, on his journey to Israel, he presents the king with that letter and the king is immediately troubled as he cannot provide healing and apparently is not familiar with God's prophet who has been in the business of performing miraculous works for quite some time. He thinks this is a ploy to get soldiers into his land and begins to mourn by tearing his clothes. How is it that a slave girl in a neighboring territory is privier to God's prophet than the king who resides in the prophets' land? Nonetheless, Elisha the prophet catches wind of the incident and sends for Naaman, having him come visit him at his home of Abel-Meholah near the Jordan River. If we look back in time, we see the significance of this area as it was where Gideon assembled the original 300 in Judges chapter 7, was one of Solomons administrative districts from 1 Kings 4 and was also the home of King Sauls son-in-law Adriel.

As Naaman arrives at the door of Elisha, he is met by a messenger of the prophet who informs him to wash himself in the Jordan seven times. It is curious why the prophet sent a messenger to meet Naaman at the door rather than going himself. After all, there was apparently an incredibly important person outside with a royal caravan of horses, chariots, and servants and Naaman was likely used to being elevated amongst the people who would do his bidding. As I mentioned earlier with a reference to Jeremiah 17, the heart is deceitful and sick, and it is possible that Naaman needed to feel humbled. It may also be that Elisha didn't want Naaman getting the impression that he was the healer. As Jesus healed lepers in Mat. 8, Mark 1, and Luke 5, we know that only God can heal, so this was likely a way to keep Naaman from placing esteem upon Elisha.

What happens next is slightly unexpected, as Naaman acts furious at the idea of washing himself in the Jordan. He merely anticipated the prophet coming out, saying "you are healed" and going about his way. Instead, he is told to cleanse himself in the waters of Israel. He isn't so concerned with the idea of doing it seven times but more with the idea of using the Jordan. This is where his pride kicks in, as he is apparently a patriotic individual with hometown pride.

He has perfectly good bodies of water at home that he believes would do the trick. Why should he have to go all the way to Israel for that? As he is about to leave, a servant begins to plead with him that this really is a pretty simple thing to do so why not give it a go? He does and is immediately healed as if he had never had the affliction in the first place. Scripture says his flesh was "like that of a little child and he was clean". Matthew 18:3 says, "truly I say to you, unless you are converted, and become like a little child you will not see the Kingdom of Heaven". I firmly believe that there was not merely a restoration of his flesh but of his spirit as well. The innermost being of this man was changed when he witnessed the glory of God. He makes his proclamation to Elisha afterwards, acknowledging that there is no other God but the God of Israel and desperately wants to pay Elisha for his services. But, because Elisha isn't the Catholic church, he doesn't require payment, for many reasons, most of all, Elisha didn't do anything, God did. Also, as we learned from Abraham in Genesis 14, why would Elisha want to take tribute with the thought of Naaman saying "I made you rich". Not that Naaman would necessarily do that but, no one owed anyone anything and the glory was God's.

So, in exchange Naaman asks permission to load up two mules load of soil so that he may take it back to his land and worship on God's land. At this point, Naaman saw Israel as holy land, as Yahweh's portion. We have other examples of this in Ex. 3:1-5 when Moses was called to God by the burning bush, Deut. 32:8-9 when got allotted land to His people (the Lord's portion is His people), and Josh. 5:15 when the Lord's commander commanded Joshua to remove his sandals near Jericho because he was standing on holy ground. Notice that the three examples are three different locations, the Lord's presence is holy, recognition of His doing and being, not so much his creation (land). Naaman insisted on spending his days worshiping Yahweh because he had been cleansed of a leprosy of the soul, a prideful arrogance that Paul mentions in Rom. 3:10. He recognized that as a sinful man in need of a delivering God, he could worship no other. As a matter of fact, he immediately repented because when he returned home, he would be required to enter the temple of the god his king worshipped. So, he asked for a pardon that he may not be held accountable for those actions, but he may not have had to deal with the situation at all. We are not told what comes of Naaman after he returns home, but his king may have witnessed what the Lord did, tore down the temple and worshipped Yahweh as well. That is merely just wishful thinking but highly unlikely as we witness the ways of the Amorite during the Neo-Assyrian war and alliance with the Chaldeans. We are told throughout history by the prophets Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, and Nehemiah just how much of a nuisance they are. As a matter of fact, later in time we are told of the struggles of the Israelite marrying Ammonite women taking away their Jewish lineage.

At the end of the day, what we have is one pagan man from a foreign land receiving healing from God. He did not have to be a Hebrew and he did not have to be from Israel to receive God's grace. He merely had to trust and obey. The Arameans would eventually be laid to waste as a bitter and evil people, but this tells us that individual obedience and sanctification is possible through the works of the Lord. It also tells us that God is a healer, sometimes affliction comes so that we may rely upon Him for healing and sometimes it comes because we

are a fallen people in a sinful world. Either way, it is our duty to reach out to Him for healing and understanding that may not heal our affliction but lead to peace of mind and understanding that He is in our lives, and we may be a light for those around us who are dealing with similar circumstances. Naaman had faith and was willing to travel a long distance and give up a fortune for healing. He got more than he bargained for and found a new life that led to the praise and worship of our Creator. Are we willing to go out of our way and disturb our comfort zone to reach out to Yahweh for the healing of our soul? I pray that we are, eternity is at stake.