

Elisha: The Healing of Naaman

2 Kings 5:1-19

Introduction

The prophet we are going to discuss today is Elisha. As I think about Elisha, I'm reminded of a scene from a movie. In the Batman trilogy, one of the movies is called "The Dark Knight Rises". In this movie there is a very memorable scene in which Gordon, the police commissioner of Gotham City, gave Bruce, the boy who would become Batman, his coat to comfort him after the death of his parents.

Batman says, "A hero can be anyone. Even a man doing something as simple and reassuring as putting a coat around a young boy's shoulders to let him know that the world hasn't ended." It was then that Gordon realized that Bruce Wayne, the boy on whom he had once put a coat, was the one who had become Batman.

The prophet we are going to talk about today, Elisha, was the successor to the prophet Elijah, whom we studied last week. When Elijah found out that Elisha was sent from God, he hung his mantle on him and made him his successor. The mantle symbolized that he was the leader of the group of prophets, and that authority and power had been given to him by God.

What kind of prophet was Elisha? Let's see how God's grace worked through Elisha's ministry. The scripture we are going to read is the most memorable story in Elisha's life, the healing of Naaman, the Commander of the Aramaean army.

2 Kings 5:1-19

¹ Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper.

² Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife.

³ She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord, "Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel."

⁵ And the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing.

⁶ And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

⁷ And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me."

⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel."

⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house.

¹⁰ And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."

¹¹ But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, "Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.

¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage.

¹³ But his servants came near and said to him, "My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?"

¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant."

¹⁶ But he said, "As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will receive none." And he urged him to take it, but he refused.

¹⁷ Then Naaman said, "If not, please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD.

¹⁸ In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter."

¹⁹ He said to him, "Go in peace."

First, let's look at how the prophet Elisha reveals the great grace of God. Second, from the healing of Naaman, let's look at how God's grace reshapes our own hearts. And thirdly, we will see how God's grace remakes our values and way of life. (1) God's grace, (2) a change of heart, and (3) a transformation in the way we live.

1. God's Grace

How much do you know about the prophet Elisha? He was a prophet active in the 9th century B.C. He was the successor of Elijah. While Elijah passionately worked to expose and eliminate idolatry among the people, Elisha was a prophet who carried on the work of God's grace in the midst of the smoldering idolatry.

If you look at the life of Elisha in 2 Kings chapters 2-13, you will see that there were indeed many miracles performed through him. If I were allowed to describe them in one word, I would say that Elisha was a prophet of God's grace.

When Elisha heard that the water in a certain town was bad and causing miscarriages, he made the water better so that miscarriages and diseases would not occur (2 Kings 3:19-22). When one of the prophet's companions died, leaving a debt as well as a starving wife and children, Elisha helped them by having them fill empty jars with oil and selling it to pay off the debt (4:1-7). He helped childless couples to have children, and brought them back to life when they were sick and dying (4:8-37). At other times, he fed the multitudes with a few loaves of bread (4:42-44),

extending God's grace just as Jesus fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fish. As a prophet of grace, this would be Elisha at his best!

Furthermore, Elisha's work of grace went beyond Israel. It extended to the enemy nation of Aram (present-day Syria). Naaman, the Commander of the Aramaean army, was healed from his leprosy by Elisha (2 Kings. 5). Also, when Aram invaded Israel, Elisha miraculously rescued Israel from the enemy guerrilla forces (plunderers). As a result, Aram's guerrilla forces were no longer able to invade Israel (2 Kings. 6:8-23).

According to the Bible passage we read today, the healing of Naaman, the Commander of the enemy army, especially proves the magnitude and richness of God's grace. In other words, God's grace is not limited to the Jews even in the Old Testament. It extends beyond nations and ethnic groups. Moreover, as Jesus later said, God's grace overcomes hostility and even hatred to bring salvation. Wouldn't you agree that the Bible resoundingly proclaims the victory of God's grace?

According to the law of the time, if you are attacked and hurt, it was natural to take revenge against your enemy with hostility, as it says, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Elisha would have been right and even obligated to put an end to Naaman's life. Nonetheless, Elisha responded with love, and he shared God's grace.

Today, we, too, have a very strong tendency to justify ourselves, defend our hostility and hatred, and say that if something is done to us, we should do it back, and that our enemies should be knocked down. But the Bible shows us that the way to victory over hostility and hatred is through God's grace of forgiveness and healing.

Mitsuo Fuchida, a captain in the Imperial Japanese Navy and the Commander of the Pearl Harbor attack team, became a Christian after meeting a missionary named Jacob Deshazer after the war. In fact, Deshazer was one of the first pilots to bomb the Japanese mainland. He hated Japan and regarded it as an enemy. However, after reading the Bible in a POW camp, Deshazer became a Christian. After the war, he returned to Japan to evangelize the Japanese. Fuchida was led to read the Bible by a pamphlet Jacob gave him. He read Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Through these words of Jesus, Fuchida was converted and became an evangelist. Mitsuo Fuchida and Jacob Deshazer evangelized together in Japan and the United States.

I want every person to know the breadth and depth of God's grace! We tend to diminish God's grace by our own intellect and experience, or by the cultural trends around us. Open your mind and your eyes to the grace of God and the victory of Christ's love.

2. A Change of Heart

The story of Commander Naaman's healing vividly illustrates the change in his heart as well as the abundance of God's grace, as we have just seen. Naaman had attained the high rank and power of Commander-in-Chief of the national army. He was an honorable man who was trusted and respected by the king of Aram. He was a so-called success story. But ironically, he was stricken with a disease called leprosy, which even the best doctor could not heal.

Leprosy is a certain skin condition found in the Bible that has no exact match to any modern disease. Previously, all Bible translations used the word "leprosy," but as Bible studies progressed, it became clear that leprosy did not fully explain it. Therefore, some translations now simply use the word "skin disease." Incidentally, the [Japanese] New Revised Version uses the Hebrew word as it is and calls it "tzara'at," as does the English 'Complete Jewish Bible'.

In any case, Naaman had attained high status, power, and success, but he was tormented by illness. His state of mind was one of pride and contentment, but because of his leprosy, he was prone to depression, self-loathing and anxiety. He was very unstable, swinging like a pendulum, going up and down like a roller coaster. He likely thought that God had abandoned him.

Naaman's pride and arrogance may be seen in the fact that he rode on a horse and chariot, even though he was going to Elisha to be healed of his illness. He also didn't like that he was told to wash in the Jordan River. He brought up the rivers of his own homeland and declared that the Abana and Pharpar rivers were superior to all the rivers in Israel.

The pride and satisfaction of gaining power and success caused anger in Naaman's heart. This is why he dismissed Elisha's proposal. We usually think that achieving success and high status is a good thing and essential to happiness. But that's too simplistic a view.

Successful minds are often puffed up with pride and get angry at the slightest criticism or at something they don't like. Then, like Naaman, they may fail to make the right decision, fail to accept a good suggestion, or they become isolated.

Do you recall the story in the Gospels about the rich young ruler who came to Jesus asking how he could be saved? He was very rich, had kept the law since childhood, and was envied by everyone. But, he had no joy in his soul and no sense of being blessed by God. So, Jesus encouraged this rich young man to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow him. But the young man could not respond with obedience. Naaman could not follow the easy instructions and this rich young man could not follow the hard instructions!

In other words, for a heart filled with success and pride, whether a thing is difficult or easy, if you don't like it, you won't listen and obey. We end up losing God's grace because of our stubborn hearts. However, in Naaman's case, he had a servant who gave him advice. The rich young man did not have such a wise companion to advise him.

5:13, 14. ¹³ But his servants came near and said to him, 'My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, 'Wash, and be clean ?'' ¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

The reason why the prophet Elisha told Naaman to wash his body seven times in the Jordan River was so that his heart could be transformed, so that his stubbornness

and self-indulgence caused by success and power could be softened, and he would humble himself before the true God.

Another purpose for Elisha's instructions was so that Naaman would believe and accept the words of God spoken by the prophets. This change of heart is based on two things: repentance and faith.

3. Life Transformation

Now, with a changed heart, Naaman accepted the grace of God and began to live a completely different life.

5:15. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant."

Naaman confessed his faith in the One who healed his body. He repented of his arrogance and anger, was grateful to be healed, and brought Elisha a gift. However, Elisha never accepted the gift. He was adamant in his refusal. Why? The reason was to avoid any misunderstanding that God's grace can be bought with money or gifts. It was to make it clear that God's grace cannot be traded for our hard-earned success, achievements, status, or power.

To begin with, Naaman visited the king of Israel first, seeking healing. He brought the letter of intent from the king of Aram, along with gifts. This is because all the religions they knew teach that if you are recognized for having given money, having done a religious act, or having moral behavior, you will receive God's grace and blessing.

However, the God of the Bible is different. Look at the frustration of the king of Israel in verse 7. He knows that he can't tell God to give him grace in big or small ways. We can't move the true, living God according to our convenience or for our own circumstances.

Naaman understood the principle of God's grace when he immersed himself in the Jordan River seven times and found that the leprosy was completely healed. God does not give salvation based on our success, our efforts, our accomplishments, our status, or what we have earned through our own effort. God works grace and favor when we change our minds, repent, and trust Him with a heart that believes in His promises. So Naaman says again:

5:17. . . . from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD.

This confession by Naaman is the same thing that Jesus taught as the first commandment, which is to love God.

Mark 12:29, 30. ²⁹The most important [commandment] is, "Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

Naaman's heart and way of life were changed to love the Lord. He made up his mind to put the Lord God first and live his life offering worship to Him alone. However, he knew he would have to go with the king of Aram to support him when he entered the temple of Rimmon to offer worship, as described in verse 18. Naaman speaks honestly about this because he doesn't want it to appear that he is kneeling and assuming a posture of worship to this god.

For those of us who live in a pagan society, we can identify with this. As Christians, we are supposed to worship the Lord alone, but there are times when obstacles hinder us from doing so. For example, how should we deal with Buddhist funerals, Shinto weddings, religious ceremonies at work, visiting graves, and dealing with Buddhist altars in the home?

Brothers and sisters, the principle is already clear: to put the Lord God first in your life and avoid idolatry. We do need to show love to those with whom we come into contact, just as Naaman showed love to the king of Aram. In doing so, we must remember the gospel of Jesus' sacrifice of his life on the cross to bring God's grace and accomplish salvation.

There is a remarkable character in the healing episode of Commander Naaman. It is the young Jewish captive who introduced the prophet Elisha. This young girl who served Naaman's wife reminds us of Jesus' sacrifice.

5:3. She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

She was forcibly taken from her home, and from her homeland. This unknown girl, enslaved, seemed to have been sacrificed for the salvation of Commander Naaman. Without her, Naaman had no choice but to die. However, Naaman was saved because this girl was captured and made a slave.