

## 2 KINGS 5:1-14 Psalm 30 Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Naaman's Story written by Sarah Ashton

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen

When I write a sermon, I have a method that I follow. Firstly, I think and pray on the title that John has given me and then I read the passages and start to work out the direction I am going to go and how I will introduce the topic. This time no ideas had come to me, so I was re-reading the passages when I was interrupted and when I went back to my Bible, I mistakenly opened it at Isaiah 30 rather than Psalm 30 and I started reading. The first line fitted with the theme of the story in 2 Kings, so I carried on, but then I thought 'how would the pointing work in this Psalm?' (I have learnt something whilst singing with the choir). I then realised I was in the wrong book, but that my introduction had been provided.

Isaiah 30 starts 'Woe to the obstinate children, declares the Lord, to those who carry out plans that are not mine'. For me, this sums up the story of Naaman; for he nearly was that obstinate child who went his own way and if he had done so, he would not have known God's care, love and healing. Let's explore Naaman's story.

Naaman is a powerful commander in the army of the king of Aram, which is Syria. He has won an important victory in a battle; however for all his wealth and authority he knows that his life is limited because he has leprosy. Today, leprosy is a manageable condition, but in those days it was cruel and fatal. The disease starts with small red spots covering the body and then nerve endings begin to die. Extremities such as fingers, toes, ears and nose then literally drop off as they lose connection with the nervous system. It is an ugly, deforming condition and lepers were often outcasts.

Even though he was a senior figure, Naaman was prepared to listen to anything that might help his condition. A captured girl from Israel was serving his wife (the Aramean army had regular border skirmishes with Israel) and she had the courage to suggest to Naaman's wife that the prophet in Samaria could cure the leprosy. His wife informed him of this and Naaman went to the king for permission to travel.

The king writes a letter to cover Naaman's travels in Israel and to request his healing. Naaman travels with a huge amount of gold and silver as the price for his healing. Neither man has realised that the servant girl was not referring to King Joram of Israel, but to a man of God, Elisha, who is in Samaria. Neither Naaman nor his master realise that you cannot buy God's blessing or favour by giving huge amounts of money, a deeper commitment is required by God.

Joram is disturbed on reading the letter that Naaman brings and tears his clothes. He asks 'Am I God?'; he feels this is a trick by the neighbouring king. He is worried that it will lead to a quarrel because he knows he cannot heal Naaman. Joram is only thinking in earthly terms and doesn't turn to God so when Elisha hears about it, he chides him for this and for failing to refer the matter to him. Joram then sends Naaman and his entourage to Elisha in Samaria.

Naaman is disappointed that Elisha does not come out to greet him and only sends a messenger out to tell him to wash himself in the River Jordan seven times. This is because the healing is to come from the power of the God of Israel, not from the prophet himself. Ritual washings were common in eastern rites and immersing himself seven times was for completeness. The number seven was associated with completeness. Naaman is not impressed by this at all. Here he is, a very important and wealthy warrior being addressed by a servant, as the prophet has not deigned to see him, and then, to add insult to injury he is told to wash in the muddiest river there is. We can just imagine him stomping off shouting about how the rivers of Damascus are cleaner and better.

Naaman may have been important, but he also respected his servants and they were not afraid to approach him and make a suggestion. In v13 the servant calls Naaman 'father' before saying if the prophet had asked you to do a difficult thing, would you not have done it? So why not wash and be cleaned in the river? This clearly makes Naaman think and he goes to the Jordan and immerses himself seven times. The Hebrew word used here is *tabal* which literally means to plunge or immerse an object or person. It is particularly used when describing purification.

To Naaman's amazement his skin was purified, it became clean like that of a boy. His leprosy was gone and maybe some battle scars had cleared to. Obeying the prophet of God had led to a miracle. Jesus referred to this healing when telling the Jewish people that non-Jews, Gentiles, could believe in God and be accepted by him too. It is in Luke 4 (v27) 'And there were many in Israel with leprosy at the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed - only Naaman the Syrian'

So what can we learn from this story? I think there are seven "take-aways".

Firstly, it doesn't matter how powerful we think we are, we are all vulnerable; we are human beings and only God is all powerful.

Secondly, our physical health is important and we should be taking care of the body which God has given us.

Thirdly, pride will make us miss our opportunity of blessing from God. Naaman almost left without washing in the River Jordan; if he had left, he would not have experienced God's power and healing. He almost walked away from his chance of new life because he felt disrespected. In Proverbs it says 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall'. Pride manifests itself in many ways; for example in thinking that a task is beneath us or that we are better than others. In Roman's 12 (v3) Paul wrote ' For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.'

Fourthly, God does not always work as we expect Him to! God has a way of challenging us that stretches us to change, so that in following him our boundaries are pushed and enlarged. When we ask God for something, we should be open for the response as we never know the direction God will come from or where He will take us. This is backed up in Isaiah 55 (v8-9) 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'

Fifthly, humility can be a life saver. By listening to his servants, Naaman's life was spared; both his wife's serving girl and those with him on the journey helped him to be cleansed.

Sixthly, God demands complete obedience. Naaman had to totally submerge himself in the dirty River Jordan seven times; a task that was most distasteful to him, but his complete obedience and submission to God brought its reward.

Seventh, God works with our faith even when it is imperfect. Before his healing, Naaman didn't have faith and some of his actions as the passage continues show that he still didn't understand God, but God had helped him because he showed obedience and faith. God meets us where we are. Our Gospel reading today shows how the faith of the seventy two was rewarded by the deeds they could do in God's name, with the power of Spirit.

As for Psalm 30 I will end with a verse from it

I will exalt you O Lord, for you lifted me out of the depth, and did not let my enemies gloat over me.

O lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.