

Naaman's Healing

Odd how we expect God to think and act like us. Consider the story of Naaman, supreme commander of the armies of Aram (Syria), who enjoyed the complete trust of his king and had defeated the army of Israel, among others. But Naaman faced a considerable enemy he could not defeat: he had



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leprosy. The Hebrew word for leprosy was used for many different skin conditions, including vitiligo, psoriasis and skin cancer. We know from other biblical stories that “leprosy” was feared and often regarded as a sign of God’s displeasure. In Israel lepers were isolated from human contact and worship.

Military raids against Israel had brought a captive Jewish girl into the household of Naaman as his wife’s servant (2 Kings 5:2). In that closed setting the servant girl learned of the general’s disease and told her mistress about a prophet among the Jews who could heal her master. The story suggests that even among Naaman’s slaves there must have been concern as well as respect for the general and his wife.

Naaman sought his king’s permission to return to the land of their enemy to seek healing. The king of Aram sent the king of Israel a diplomatic request, which probably caused quite a stir. Was this some kind of plot or threat? But Elisha sent word to his king to “Let (Naaman) come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel as the servant girl had reported” (v. 8). So Naaman arrived at the humble prophet’s home, accompanied by soldiers, servants and lavish gifts. Common rules of diplomacy required political permission, gifts between rival governments and respect for national religions. Naaman did everything by the book and expected the same from neighboring countries.

What a shock when the great general, with his troops and servants show up at the prophet’s humble home and Elisha sends his servant out to relay what seem to be humiliating instructions. Did Elisha not know how powerful Naaman was? Is this some kind of belittling snub? Wash in the dirty Jordan River seven times! But Naaman must get beyond his pride and his expectation that others shall serve him.

Once again the great general hears the appeals of his servants as they suggest that Elisha’s directions are simple, and – if the task had been challenging – Naaman would have agreed. Why not heed the prophet’s words? The general follows his servants’ advice, immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, and “his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean” (v. 14). No great healing ritual, elaborate sacrifices or spells pronounced by a holy man, but instead, obedience to a prophet’s words and belief in God.

Then the powerful general, enemy of Israel, assumes the position of a servant and returns to the home of Elisha with lavish gifts and declares, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except Israel” (v. 15). The Hebrew word used in verse 15 for present means “blessing,” indicating Naaman’s understanding that his healing is truly a miracle from God through the prophet. Elisha refused any of the general’s lavish gifts. There is a second detail that tells us Naaman has experienced God. The general asks permission to take “two mule loads of earth” home, where he will no longer offer burnt offerings or sacrifices to any God except the Lord” (v. 17). In that day gods were closely attached to the physical lands of a people and the ground on which a temple or altar was built became sacred. Naaman is so grateful to God that he wants to maintain a connection, through sacred ground, where he experienced God’s blessing. In his own limited

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understanding Naaman wanted God forever near.

How does this strange ancient story inform our faith today? We are familiar with stories of missionaries who have overcome pagan religions and superstitions around the world, sharing Christ through friendship, education, medicine, agriculture, water well drilling and building projects. God works through individuals who go to foreign lands or stay at home building relationships. Wherever you find yourself – at school, on a baseball team, at work, sharing in a neighborhood project – there are those who need God’s love. Your actions and words can make a difference. Missions is not confined to preaching, but includes building relationships, earning trust and living out what it means to follow Christ. Consider the Jewish girl who was taken as a slave to Naaman’s wife and became God’s witness to a powerful enemy general.

You never know when or where God can use you to share his love and grace. Through the years God has placed people in my pathway: a little girl devastated by her broken home; an older man who thought it was too late for faith; a high school student who gave up on church; a high priest of Satan who thought God was a nobody; an international student who saw religion as irrelevant to modern man. All around us are those who can experience God’s love if we are willing to be the presence of Christ in our day.

Naaman was looking for healing of a skin disease, but he found so much more simply because a young girl cared and a prophet pointed the way to God.

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