

## **Naaman Gets His Groove Back**

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Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-14

When your parents give you a name that means pleasantness, there is usually one of two things going on:

1. They hope this baby will turn out to be a pleasant child.
2. This baby has already brought pleasantness into their lives.

Naaman, which means pleasantness, brought joy into his parents' lives. He was the ultimate dream child. He slept through the night, he walked and talked before any other child, and he ate his vegetables. Naaman was handsome, smart, and strong. Of course, he lettered in every sport and was the captain of his high school football team. He married the homecoming queen. Voted most likely to succeed, he did exactly that! Naaman joined the army and rose to general in record time. He became rich and was the king's number one golfing buddy.

Naaman had everything you can get in this world—wealth, prestige, power.

But in every great story is a “problem.” And in this story that problem is leprosy.

Now, there are various kinds of conditions that can look like leprosy. While that may be true, it really does not matter, because once it becomes known, you are on the list. Naaman's wife began to hear about parties they were not invited to attend. Friends stopped dropping by. The king suddenly developed a back sprain and did not want to golf. People started avoiding Naaman, well, like the plague. He was now known by his disease—Naaman the Leper.

Naaman was a fighter. He tried every cure known: special ointments, crazy diets, and various rituals with the gods of Aram. He spent his deductible and was well on the way to maxing out his benefits. His wealth, prestige, and power could not cure him.

In the household was a young girl from Israel who was a maid to Naaman's wife, the former homecoming queen. Earlier in her life this young girl had probably been as happy as Naaman had been. I am guessing that she lived in a village near the Aram/Israel border. Probably one day near harvest time, an Aramian raiding-party struck the village, taking anything of value they could, including people who looked like prime candidates for good prices in the slave market. One day she is stringing beans with her mother on the porch, and the next she is locked in a room in Damascus to be sold as a slave.

The girl is bought by Naaman, who gives her to his wife, no doubt to smooth over some argument they have had. She becomes her personal maid. A conversation happens, a most unlikely one in which an enslaved girl from Israel tells a powerful Aram woman how to find a cure for her husband's leprosy.

What could possibly be this girl's motivation? Does she think she can secure her freedom? Is she hoping for better treatment? Did she not understand that the God of Israel was not the religion of Aram?

Let me suggest that her motivation is her conviction. A conviction rooted in her faith in God despite everything that has happened to her. A conviction that has shaped this girl so clearly, that no situation can remold her into something else. A conviction that moves her to care about Naaman's distress.

This little un-named girl is God's entry into this story. History did not record her name. We don't know if life ever got better for her. We only know that she spoke.

Here are our first takeaways from this story:

1. Don't ever underestimate what your little voice of faith can do. How many times has your day been changed by a single word said or unsaid? The life story of individuals can be impacted by the gift of a few words. We don't have to preach like Paul and Silas. We just have to be willing to speak out of our own faith and its story.
2. Learn to listen to the small voice of God in your own life. This young girl heard God in a strange land, in a strange house, and in strained circumstance. God does speak on mountaintops and at sunrises on the beach. But God also speaks while we are driving our car, riding up the elevator, and standing in line at the grocery store. Unlike our cell phones, God is never out of our network. But we need to learn to listen and not practice selective deafness, like we do with our family.

Naaman accepts the advice! He is committed enough to go ask his ole golf buddy, the king, for permission. You can imagine the scene. Somebody whispers to the king that Naaman wants to see him. The king can't find a good way to say no, so he lets him come in to the throne room. Naaman approaches the king, but gets the word about no touching. Then Naaman tells the king about the servant girl's advice. The king thinks this is all a big joke and starts laughing so hard he almost falls off the throne. But then he realizes Naaman is serious, so he does that thing where you try to cover up your awkward laugh with a cough. Then the two men come up with a real macho plan.

The king will write a letter to the king of Israel, who is his subordinate on the king food chain. Naaman will take a big gift. Naaman could have gone the military route, but instead chooses to dazzle the king of Israel with silver and gold. There is a certain irony in this, since the silver and gold probably was taken from the king of Israel in the first place. The garments mentioned in verse 5 were almost identical to the ones taken from the king after his last trip to the Men's Warehouse.

Naaman shows up at the king of Israel's palace with all of his bling-bling and the letter. The letter actually reads, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy" (v. 6). But the king of Israel reads between the lines, so his understanding of the letter was, "Know that I the king of Aram, who has already beaten you in battle many times; I expect you to cure my bud Naaman, or else!" The king of Israel reacts by throwing a royal hissy fit. He tears his clothes and cries out at the injustice of the king of Aram's expectations: "'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me'" (v. 7).

Here is take-away number two: You need to know your job description as a person of faith. Yes, we are God's hands in the world, but we are not God. We should cut ourselves some slack sometimes and focus on all of those spiritual gifts we have received in Christ. Those gifts enable us to do some miraculous things. But we don't have to be God; that job is taken. A sign in my favorite coffee shop says, "Be yourself, everybody else is already taken."

Elisha hears all the commotion about the king of Israel tearing his clothes and generally making a first class ass of himself. He sends word commanding the king to send Naaman to him.

Naaman travels in style to the old prophet's house. He has his horses and chariots and all of his entourage of people and servants. This is despite the fact that all this started because of some little servant girl. Naaman needs the entire ensemble because, evidently, he is packing his ego.

Elisha peeps out the front window and sees his driveway is full of wealth, power, and inflated sense of self. He writes out an illegible prescription on a pad and has *his* people give it to Naaman. The prescription is for Naaman to wash himself seven times in the Jordan. At this Naaman throws a fit because this is just plain silly. Everybody knows the Jordan River is just a muddy gully compared to the great rivers of Aram.

Now we are at take-away number three: As a Christian, you better be prepared to do the silly thing when asked.

The world says acquire all the money you can; God says give the silly stuff away.  
The world says get to the top of the mountain; God says wash feet.  
The world says maintain your dignity at all cost; God says be my fools for Christ sake.  
The world says grab all the power you can; God says serve the poor, the widow, the stranger.

God's ways really are different from our ways. So different, that you and I may look extremely silly trying to swim upstream against the tide of most human endeavor. But the silly may just be what is going to make our lives have meaning.

Elisha knew that Naaman's biggest challenge was his pleasantness, not his unpleasant leprosy. Unless he was willing to submit to the silly sacred task God asked of him, he was going to miss the cure of his life. Once again, it is the voices of unnamed servants who risk Naaman's wrath and save him: "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" (v. 13).

"So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (v. 14).

Fred Craddock tells a story about his call to ministry. He was a young man at a meeting where many missionaries were telling their stories. Great tales of danger and courage were told. Martyrs were remembered and praised. Craddock made a decision that he was going to give his life to ministry. He saw down the road how his life would be a great story one day. He would be a martyr for the Lord. People would visit his grave and women would gently weep. He thought he would write one big check of his life for the Lord. But that is not what happened. God asked him to write a check for ten cents here and twenty- five cents there. He is still writing checks.

Our lives of faith are often a series of tiny Christ-like acts. Our small voice sharing the good news, our understanding of our faith job description, and our willingness to be seen as silly are used by God to move the world toward the kingdom. It all seems like an inefficient way to go about it. But then, it got us, didn't it?

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