

NAAMAN, THE LEPER

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 13, 1955 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

The Bible is a remarkable book in so many ways. One of its remarkable qualities is that it contains many stories of the ancient past which have real meaning for our age, too. I want to tell you one of these stories. It is found in chapter five of II Kings. "Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honorable, because by him Jehovah had given victory unto Syria: he was also a mighty man of valor."

In your mind's eye I hope you can go back to that ninth century B.C. I hope you can go from Palestine, north and east, around the "verdant crescent" which skirts the edge of the Arabian desert, until you come to that little pearl of a city known as Damascus. Damascus was an oasis in a place where an oasis was desperately needed. It is said that when Mohammed, the founder of Mohammedanism, came in a caravan over the southern hills and looked down for the first time into the valley and saw the city of Damascus, he immediately stopped, and, overwhelmed by the beauty of this oasis in the desert, said, "Man may have but one paradise and mine is the paradise in heaven." He turned away never to enter the city. Rather a strange reaction, but a remarkable tribute to the city of Damascus.

The Greatness of Naaman

In our story Naaman was a man who was second only to king Benhadad. He was captain of the hosts, and by his power Syria had become the dominant nation of the time. This man was not only a great man. He was also honorable, which means that his soldiers and servants had respect for him. Even more significant is the fact that the inspired record says that "by him Jehovah had given victory unto Syria." He was God-blessed, God-guided, and God-used, as well as great and honorable. Our text further says that he was "a mighty man of valor" which means that in his person he was courageous and strong. He was the kind of a man who would have been elected to head the Chamber of Commerce if he had lived in our day. He would have been president of some bank or governor of some state.

But I did not read to you the full sentence which opens our story. After the scriptures have said all of these wonderful things about Naaman there is a comma, not a period, and then five words, "but he was a leper." All that we have said now melts into nothingness. The fact that he was a great general, the fact that he was courageous, the fact that he was honorable, the fact that he was highly esteemed by his own king, and even the fact that God had lead him to accomplish great victories is completely hollow now, because he is soon doomed to die. He is a leper.

Perhaps you can realize the seriousness of his condition if you will imagine yourself going down for an annual physical check-up. The various tests are made, and after a while you come into the doctor's office for him to interpret his findings to you. His face is grave as he says, "I'm sorry to tell you, but I have found a rather bad heart condition. The blood pressure is also high. I think the best thing for you is to go immediately to the hospital." What would that do to your world? You have some things planned for tomorrow. It may be that you are going to represent your company at New Orleans or Atlanta. You have more distant plans, a vacation in the summer, building a new house next year, and other things. But suddenly the doctor examines you and says, "You are a sick man." What would it do to you? This description would be mild, I think, compared with the situation faced by this man of the long ago, for "he was a leper.". His whole world came abruptly to a halt. That is the beginning of one of the most interesting stories in the Old Testament.

A Little Slave Girl

The second sentence is no less interesting. "And the Syrians had gone out in bands, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maiden; and she waited on Naaman's wife." I have often wondered how old she was. She was young enough to be called a little maiden, she was old enough to be useful in the service of Naaman's wife. Probably she was in her teens. Even though only of high school age she played one of the most remarkable roles in this whole story. This little girl, who had been snatched from her home, who may even have witnessed the death of her parents, found herself in a very difficult but vital position. In a foreign land, she faced new people and heard a new language. Her reaction to Naaman's tragedy is amazingly Christian. Instead of hatred, instead of retaliation, instead of the feeling, "well, it is good enough for him," she has a feeling of concern. She has sympathy for this captain of the army that had made her a slave. In her there is something worthy of a great deal of admiration. There was no resentment, no hatred, but rather a desire to help. In her heart there was a yearning which grew out of her faith in God and her remembrance of Elisha the prophet. This has implications about the kind of a home she had had. This girl came from a home that believed in God. She had been taught about God and the memory lingered on.

The manner in which she helped is also remarkable. A slave girl would have no right to give advice to a general, so she tactfully prayed aloud, "Would that my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! then would he recover him of his leprosy." She said it to her mistress. Her mistress called a servant and the word was carried to the king. The king was about to lose his most valuable subject,

so of course he was interested. The next verse reads, "And the king of Syria said, Go now, and I will send a letter unto the king of Israel." In all of this there was a compliment to this little-girl. She may have been only a girl, she may have been a foreigner and a slave, yet she had so deported herself that when she spoke they listened. Not only did they listen, but they made plans for the journey. Naaman himself was willing to go. It is not easy to go a long way when one is ill. It is not easy even today when we can go in an ambulance or in a chartered plane. How much more difficult it must have been when he had to climb into a chariot and jolt across the plains and through the woods until finally he came into Samaria to a little insignificant town called Jezreel. What faith Naaman placed in the words of this little slave girl. What a compliment to her that he made the journey.

#### Ben-hadad and Jehoram

The king sent an official letter and a sizable gift. The record says that Naaman departed, "and he took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment." According to the best calculations this gift was worth about \$80,000, besides the ten changes of clothing involved. A gift of \$80,000 was not much when compared with the life and with the health of Naaman, captain of the host.

After a while Naaman drew up in front of the king's house, and presented the letter to king Jehoram. The letter read, "And now when this letter is come unto thee, behold, I have sent Naaman my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of the leprosy." Jehoram had heard nothing of this matter until he read the letter from Ben-hadad. He was immediately afraid, for he could not save a man from leprosy. He was afraid that maybe this was just a trick. "It came to pass that when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and he said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? but consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me."

#### Elisha, Prophet of God I

Word went out that the king had rent his clothes. It was then that Elisha stepped in and removed the misunderstanding. "It was so, when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel rent his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. What a contrast between the splendor of the Syrian general with his retinue of servants and the humble house of Elisha. Naaman expected the prophet to rush out and do some spectacular thing, but that was not God's way. "And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in the Jordan seven-times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." That is all, just go and wash in the Jordan and your flesh will be clean. George Adam Smith, in his very excellent book, "Historical Geography of the Holy Land" describes the Jordan in these words: Mostly silent and black in spite of its speed, but now and then breaking into praise and whitening into foam, the Jordan scours along, muddy between banks, careless of beauty, careless of life."

#### The Curse of Pride

To go down and bathe in the Jordan was too much for a man as important as Naaman, so "Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of Jehovah his God, and wave his hand over the place, and recover the leprosy." Naaman's pride welled up within him and all but destroyed his only chance of life. Pride so often has kept man back from the necessary humble obedience which saves. Many a man yet is not willing to wash in the Jordan. At this critical moment one of the most courageous servants in all history said to his master, "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? How much rather then, when he saith unto thee, Wash, and be clean." He was a wise and courageous servant, and Naaman proved his own greatness as he humbled himself and swallowed his pride. The next sentence in our story reads, "And he went down, and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the sayings of the man of God, and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

#### A New Man -- A New Devotion

You can guess what happened next. He hurried back from the Jordan to Jezreel. He did not look for the king. He looked for Elisha, but actually he was not thinking of the prophet but of God. He said, "Behold now, I know there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel: Now therefore I pray thee, take a present of thy servant." This was his speech of thanks and this was his gift. Be it said to the eternal credit of Elisha that he answered, "I will receive none." Naaman continued, "If not, yet, I pray thee, let there be given to thy servant ..." Notice that he no longer thinks of himself as a great Syrian general, but as "thy servant." "Let there be given to thy servant two mules burdens of earth; for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto Jehovah." Ancient religious superstition held that each country had its own god and that this god was bound to the earth of his own country. Naaman seemed to believe this. When he came he undervalued the waters of the Jordan; later he over valued the earth of Israel. But the essential fact was, that having confronted God and having been blessed of God he declared himself to be a worshipper of God.

He returned shortly to his land, but not before one final request, "In this thing Jehovah pardon thy servant: when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there: and he leaneth on my hand and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, Jehovah pardon thy servant in this thing." Many have interpreted this remark as a compromise. I think that he

was only saying, "I am going back into a pagan world where there may be things that look as if I were still worshipping Rimmon, but I want you to know that I want God to know that my heart belongs only to Jehovah." Evidently so it was understood by Elisha for he said, "Go in peace." Our part of the story closes with the words, "So he departed from him a little way."

### Conclusion

Why is this story significant to us? Because in our land there are many people who are lepers. I am not thinking of the leper colony in Louisiana. Rather I am thinking of the striking parallel between this story and the man who is plagued by the leprosy of sin. He is physically strong, intellectually keen, socially popular, yet he has no place for Christ, no place for the church, no place for the Bible in his life. The scripture says, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and men." These are the four sides of a man: wisdom, the intellect; stature, the body; in favor with man, the social; and finally the most important, in favor with God, the spiritual. If you are not a Christian you are like Naaman in the long ago. All his wonderful virtues were of no value, because he was a leper. The man who is not a Christian is spiritually a leper. Only by humbling himself before God and "washing in the Jordan" can the leprosy of sin be removed. As you submit to God's cleansing power, the blood of Christ, your sins are forgiven and you come forth from the waters of baptism to walk in newness of life. Will you come? Now is the time. Accept your Lord, let him cleanse you that you may be whole again.