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2 Kings 5:1-5, 9-14

### **When You Really Need a Miracle**

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Naaman was the powerful commander of the Syrian army. Even the Bible calls him “a great man.” The king loved him, and the people loved him. Every time he returned from another successful campaign, they threw a ticker-tape parade. He was always on the cover of magazines, and in the *Style* section of the newspapers. He was in great demand on the speaking circuit. He went to all of the right parties, his children went to all the right schools, and he had made all the right career choices. Yes, Naaman was a great man, but then he got leprosy.

Leprosy was the most dreaded disease of his day. It was no respecter of persons and would infect most anyone. It was indeed an ugly thing to watch as it slowly ate away a person’s body, beginning with the fingers and toes. People only talked about it in whispered voices as if it was the “L” word. “Have you heard about Naaman? ... He has *leprosy*.”

It just doesn’t matter that you have been very successful. You are still as vulnerable as any other human. It doesn’t matter that you have raised your children in a Christian home because they can still get hurt out there. And it doesn’t matter that you have been very careful. A drunk driver can take your life away quickly, or a terrible disease can eat it away slowly. You may have built a life that is great, but you are walking around in a world that does not think you are too special to hurt. So what are you going to do when the hurt finds you, and you discover people are whispering about you as if you have leprosy?

The only person who knew what to do was not Naaman the Great, but a young girl he had taken captive from Israel to be the servant for his wife. Out of compassion for the very man who kidnapped her from her home, she tells him about a prophet back in Israel who can cure people of their diseases. We know that Naaman was a proud man, so my guess is that at first he discounted this advice. I can just hear him say, “It’s just the foolish, old folk stories of a backward people. Don’t you think I’ve been to the best doctors in Syria? What does Israel have that we don’t have?” It was a good point. This would be like us heading out to Haiti to find a cure for our cancer. But then one day he took a hard look at those fingers that were already turning a deathly pale white and thought, “Well, why not listen to the servant girl? What can it hurt?” So, he packs up his chariots and some of his men, and off he rides to Israel.

When you know that there is something very wrong in your life, and you lose all the little distractions of life like fame and success, you are willing to try anything. You will even come here—to the place where the power of God is rumored to be found.

When Naaman and all his soldiers park their chariots in front of the home of the Hebrew prophet Elisha, the great commander is expecting that the prophet will come out and bow like everyone else. He assumes Elisha will at least listen to his story, take a medical history, and then maybe lay his hands on him, go into some sort of a trance, say a few magical words, and take care of this problem. But that is not what happened. Instead, Elisha sent a messenger outside to meet the mighty commander. He didn't even receive him. He just sent out some directions to do a very ordinary thing.

The messenger comes out from the prophet's humble house, sees this great man of power surrounded by so many other powerful men and their huge horses. Then he gives the message: "Uh, the prophet of God says you should go down to the Jordan River and wash yourself in it seven times."

Naaman is furious! He gets back into his chariot and races away saying, and this is an exact quote, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the leprosy." Isn't that telling? "I thought that *for me*" he would show a little respect. Naaman still doesn't get it. He still thinks he is special and cannot see how his disease has made him human again. He's probably never been so insulted. He is dismayed by these instructions to wash seven times in the muddy Jordan River. "We have beautiful rivers in Syria. Could I not wash in them and be clean? I'm not about to humiliate myself by washing in this mudhole seven times."

Then one of his own servants said, "Look, if the old guy had asked you to do something really difficult, you would have done it. Just do what he says. There is nothing to lose—except your pride." Again, in this text, we discover that it is the lowly servant who understands about real power. Like the servant of Naaman's wife, this powerless man also can see that real power belongs to God. It is always the servants in the story who are making a difference. Maybe that's because they don't have so much success blocking their vision of God.

"If he had asked you to do something difficult, you would have done it, wouldn't you?" Of course we would! We are good at doing difficult things. That is how we have built our careers and reputations and raised families. If it is a hard task, then you're the person for the job. But nothing is more difficult than faith, which calls you to believe the message that salvation belongs to God. And as the story illustrates, that's all that we have —just a message. There is nothing magic going on here any more than there was at Elisha's house.

So many times someone will come to see me and begin to tell the story about their broken bodies, broken hearts, or children with broken spirits. Since I love these people, I wish, oh how I wish, I had some magic for them. I want to be able to wave my arm over the hurt and make it go away. But I am like Elisha's boy. All I have is a message: your life is special, not because you've worked so hard, but because you belong to God. However, that doesn't mean you cannot get hurt. We are never more than ordinary.

When I lived in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood, I used to run along a route that took me past a cemetery. I was always struck by the irony of this. There I was doing what I could to get as

healthy as possible, running past the grave markers that reminded me how my story was inevitably going to end. But the more I have come to terms with being ordinary, the more I have learned to enjoy it. I'm not sure why that is. But I think it has something to do with now being able to enjoy how extraordinary God is. "We have this treasure in clay pots," the Apostle Paul claims, "that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." This means not only are we not more than ordinary, but we also are not less than ordinary. Like all clay pots, we contain the extraordinary treasure of God at work. Maybe that is the point of our brokenness—to remind us that we are not gods. It is the only way, really, to come to know and enjoy God.

My guess is that, as the servants tried to talk Naaman into humbling himself as an ordinary man, he took another look at those white fingers, got another glimpse of his humanity, and decided to turn the chariot around and go to the Jordan River.

Can't you just imagine this scene on the banks of that river? Naaman the Great takes off his shiny armor and slowly makes his way down into the muddy water. He dips down once, and comes up sputtering brown water. The other soldiers are trying hard not to laugh. Maybe he even cursed as he went down a second time. By the third time, he's ready to forget the whole thing, but he sees his servant holding up seven fingers. So down he goes again and again. After the seventh time, we're told that he emerged with the skin of young boy. Little boys are not great. No, but they are cherished.

I am fascinated by this command to wash seven times in the water. Time after time, the great commander is humbled by doing the right thing. All of our lives are spent somewhere between the first and seventh time doing the right, ordinary thing that the message of the Bible tells us. We confess sin and accept forgiveness of Jesus Christ; we worship and have daily devotions; we give our money and our time to God; we are the servant to our families and our jobs; we engage in the mission of the church. Nothing too spectacular there. But at the end when we cross the river and give up this life on earth, we see that along the way we have been healed of our diseased hearts.

The point of the story, however, isn't even to get to the place of healing. The point is to see that life isn't something that you fix on your own. It was given to you by the grace of God, and it will be restored only by the grace of God. Those who believe that will find joy in simply doing the ordinary things they know to be right. And anyone who has found joy in being ordinary is already healed.

*Benediction: Free us, O God. Break us apart if you have to, but free us at long last to find the joy that comes only from living each day in the mystery of your extraordinary grace for our ordinary lives.*  
**Amen.**