

Heroes of the Faith

Elisha and the Leprous General (2 Kings 5:1-19a)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 30, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ I know a good number of you here are in the medical profession. So if it's your job to diagnosis a sickness and prescribe a treatment, you know full well that sometimes the simplest and most straightforward of solutions can be the hardest thing for the patient to do.
 - On one hand, it's so easy. You have respiratory problems? Then stop smoking. Your cholesterol level is through the roof? Give up red meat. Start exercising. It's simple. It's not a question of will it help. You know it will. The patient probably knows it will. Yet it's the hardest thing you could've asked them to do. You might as well have asked them to climb Everest, to swim the English Channel, or to circumnavigate the globe. **Sometimes the cure lies in the simplest yet hardest thing to do.**

- ❖ That's what we learn in today's passage. We're concluding a short summer series called *Heroes of the Faith*, and we're looking at the prophet Elisha and his dealings with a commander of the Syrian army, the great and accomplished Naaman.
 - Now don't get Elisha confused with Elijah who we looked at last week. The prophet Elijah comes first in Scripture, and he personally discipled Elisha. At the beginning of 2 Kings, we read that Elijah is taken up into heaven by chariots of fire (2 Kg. 2:1-12), and the task of prophesying the Word of the Lord to Israel and her kings now falls upon Elisha.
 - It's a difficult task because the people and the king were, for the most part, hard hearted and idolatrous. They served pagan gods. And that resulted in divine discipline where God would occasionally incite neighboring nations to raid and attack Israel.
 - Syria was one such nation. In chapter 5:1, it actually says the LORD gave victory to Naaman. That would've included his attacks on Israel. In one such raid, we're told he captured a little slave girl.

- ❖ That sets the stage for our story. **We're going to see how this great man – this mighty man of valor – is humbled into accepting the help and wisdom of a little girl and mere servants.** It's a role reversal. Which is something that happens all the time in Scripture. The first are beaten by the last. The wise are schooled by the foolish. The strong are shamed by the weak. I think that's the beauty of Scripture – it continually challenges our preconceived ideas of what's up and what's down. It's always flipping our categories. Here's just another example of that.
 - **Naaman is really the epitome of all that you and I are chasing.** I know I'm speaking to a congregation full of high achievers. You didn't get into that college or med school or law school without being a high achiever. You don't have that professional degree, that high-paying job, that nice office without being accomplished. And even if I have yet to describe you, I'm describing what you wish you had. **We all want to be like Naaman. And yet we're all more like Naaman than we might have imagined.**
 - Let me show you four things in our passage. We're going to see 1) What the great and accomplished are still plagued with. 2) What the great and accomplished assume about God and his cure. 3) How the great and accomplished can be made well. 4) How the great and accomplished are changed for the better.

What The Great and Accomplished Are Still Plagued With

- ❖ Let's see what the great and accomplished are still plagued with. Read v1, "*Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper.*"
 - In the original language this is all one sentence. Do you see what the author's doing? He's listing all of Naaman's accomplishments, all his accolades, all the reasons why he's revered by the king and all the people. He's the supreme commander. The most decorated officer. He's a warrior, a mighty man of valor . . . but he's a leper.
 - *What's the author's point?* His point is that you can make it to the top. You can have all the success in the world. You can be so accomplished and be that guy that everyone else wants to be – yet still be miserable. **You can be this great man. Yet there's something in your life that makes you feel so small. So weak. So scared.**

- ❖ You can be the top dog in your class or organization. One of the high achievers that everyone looks up to. And yet you know that one failed exam, one misdiagnosis, one bad investment, one poor decision can knock you down. One bad week in the market (like this past one) can wipe you out. **You may look like you're on top with everything in control, but you know how little control you really have. You just hide it well.**
 - Or maybe it's something internal. You're on top. You're considered great and accomplished. But only if they knew. Only if they knew what secret sin, what private obsession is in your closet, then you'd lose it all. We're seeing this in news reports about the Ashley Madison hack and other leaks of private sins, how it results in powerful people being brought low. **No matter how put together our lives can be, no one is immune from having it all fall apart.**

- ❖ That was Naaman's biggest fear. He's the great Naaman. **In Syria, he's the Man, and yet what keeps him up at night is a little spot.** We're told he has a spot somewhere on his body that showed signs of leprosy (cf. v11, he hopes Elisha will wave his hand over the place/spot and cure him).
 - Now leprosy is not an exact term. In the Bible, it was used to describe a wide variety of skin diseases. But from what we can gather, it usually relates to a scale-like growth or a blotching of the skin. In some cases, the leper loses feeling in the affected area. You can lose digits, toes, an ear, or nose. Naturally this leads to ostracism. Leprosy was believed to be contagious, so you were often cast out by society, by even your friends and family.

- ❖ Naaman has this spot. This little thing. At this point, it must not have been largely obvious since he still has his position in the king's court. He's still the top dog. *But for how long?* His wife obviously knows. Some of his servants, including this little Hebrew girl, know. **It won't be long until this spot spreads and eventually everyone will know.** And he'll no longer be known as the great and accomplished Naaman. He'll just be Naaman the leper. Naaman the outcast.
 - This is the point: It doesn't matter how successful you are. How accomplished you are. How great you are in the eyes of others. There's always something – a mistake, a character flaw, a private obsession, an addiction. **Maybe right now it's just a tiny spot in your life, but it can grow. It can get worse. And cause your life to fall apart.** We are *not* as in control as we'd like to think or as we'd like others to think.

What The Great and Accomplished Assume About God

- ❖ And that sense of uncertainty will often lead people to seek God. To seek an answer, a solution, a cure for their “spot”. That's what drove Naaman to God. Perhaps you had a similar experience.
 - **For some of you, it actually was your experience of dealing with an illness that led you to God.** When you got that diagnosis, it really shook you. It unsettled your put-together, accomplished life. You felt scared. You felt lost. And so you looked for God.
 - Now there will always be skeptics who point to that and say, “*See, people turn to religion when they're desperate. When they feel like their life is going to fall apart. Then they turn to God as a crutch to lean on. Religion is just a crutch.*”

- ❖ But my response to that is to always ask, “***What's wrong with a crutch? Why do we assume a crutch is something inferior?***” When you sprained your ankle or tore your ACL, that crutch you leaned was so important to you. It was a lifesaver. You couldn't have gotten by without it.
 - The only reason you'd ever sneer at a crutch or someone's need for a crutch is if you were fully convinced that you're not crippled in any way, that you are strong and able-bodied. Fully self-reliant and self-sufficient.
 - *But do you see what this passage is saying to you?* If you think that way, you're essentially like Naaman – strong, able, mighty, great – *before* he spotted a strange-looking spot on his body that he'd never seen before. You're in Naaman's shoes *before* he came to realize how crippled he really is and how much he needs God.
 - **But he wasn't going to find God until he recognized his wrongful assumptions about God.** And neither will you. This is the second thing to see: *What the great and accomplished assume about God and how he cures.*

- ❖ Let's continue with the story. The little slave girl realizes that her great and mighty master is actually crippled and desperate. She knows what he needs is Yahweh, her God, the God of Israel. So she tells her mistress, Naaman's wife, “*Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.*” (5:3) Naaman listens to his wife and approaches his boss, the king of Syria, asking for permission to travel to Israel to meet with their king.
 - In tow, Naaman brings an abundance of gifts. Six thousand shekels of gold. Ten shekels amounted to the annual wage of a common laborer in those days. Naaman has with him 600 times that amount plus ten talents of silver and ten changes of clothing!

- ❖ *Now what's he doing?* The little girl said it was the *prophet* in Samaria who could cure him, so why did Naaman go straight to the *king* in Samaria? And why did he bring such an abundance of gifts?
 - **Naaman is doing what any great and accomplished person would do when seeking God and God's favor. He's going to the top.** Naaman is thinking, “*I'm an important person. Yes, I've got this spot, this sickness. I do need a cure. But I'm still an important person. So I'll go to the king's palace where important people live. Because I assume that's where I'll find God. I assume he works with the important, the great, the accomplished. And if I want his help, I'll need to pay for it. There are no free rides in life. I didn't get to the top being a freeloader. No, I worked and clawed my way up. So I've got to bring something. And after all, if we're asking God to heal such a great person like myself, then it has to be a great gift.*”

- ❖ All of that makes perfect sense to the world. This is what you'd expect in religion. **Naaman is doing what all great and accomplished people assume they *can* do and *should* do when they get religious – they try to negotiate with God.**
 - I'll do this. I'll give up that. I'll keep these rules. I'll change my life in this way. But then, God, I want something in return. A cure. A blessing. An answered prayer. My sins forgiven. Eternal salvation. Whatever it is, I'm negotiating with God to get it. That's how we approach religion. That's how Naaman approached the God of Israel. He wanted to make a deal.
- ❖ **Now the king of Israel was a pretty bad king, but at least he knew better than to think the LORD God is the kind of god you can negotiate with.** As if you could pay the right price and have him in your debt owing you a favor. Yes, in religion you can do that. But in biblical faith – if you're dealing with the God of Israel (of all Creation!) – you just can't. He doesn't work that way.
 - And that's why in v7 the king says this king of Syria is trying to pick a fight. He might be able to negotiate with his Syrian gods. As king, he might have some leverage over them. But not me. Yes, I'm the king of Israel. But no man, no matter how great, holds sway over God.
 - So the king is distraught. He doesn't know what to do. But Elisha hears about Naaman's visit and request, and he tells the king to send him over to his house.

How The Great and Accomplished Can Be Made Well

- ❖ And now we see the third thing in our passage. *We see how the great and accomplished can be made well.* We see how God actually does work in our lives. How he does heal, how he answers prayer, how he saves. But it's not how you think. It's not how religion normally works. **It's going to take more deconstructing of certain expectations and assumptions about God.**
 - This is what Naaman has to go through. When he arrives at Elisha's house, he's annoyed that Elisha doesn't come out to greet him. He just sends a messenger to say, "*go and wash in the Jordan (River) seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.*" (5:10)
 - He's offended. He expected some grand gesture of healing. Look at v11, "*But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, 'Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.'*"
- ❖ In Naaman's mind, he's a great man who can do great things. He's thinking, "*Wash myself in a river? Come on, anyone can do that. I'm a mighty man of valor. Ask me to do something mighty. Ask me to scale a mountain or something. Hercules had his Twelve Labors. He had to slay the Nemean lion. Kill the many-headed hydra. But all you want me to do is wash? I'm offended.*"
- ❖ **But that's what biblical faith does. It offends our overinflated view of ourselves.** Now Religion won't. Religion agrees with you. Religion says if God's is going to bless someone or answer someone's prayer, then it'll be for the one who does great things for him. It'll be for the one who's hard-working and diligent and accomplished. That makes sense.
 - But biblical faith says, "*Go wash yourself in the Jordan.*" That's it? Any fool can do that. Any child can do that. Any weakling. Any immoral person. Anybody. **Great men expect to be asked to do great things.**

- ❖ And that's why his lowly, humble servants don't get it. They plead with him. *"Sir, did the prophet actually say just wash and be clean? Did he actually make such a simple, straightforward promise? Then what are you waiting for? Why won't you do it?"*
 - **It's because, like we said earlier, God's solution to our problems – his cure to our sickness – lies in the simplest yet hardest thing to do.** Naaman was offered a free healing – free salvation. It's so simple! But he wasn't ready for that. He was ready to pay a pretty penny, to perform a mighty feat. He wasn't ready for free grace. **He wasn't ready for a salvation by free grace through simple faith in God's straightforward promises.**

- ❖ **What this story is affirming is the fact that it's actually really hard to accept what God has to offer for free – by grace alone.** Think about it. Imagine if I were in dire financial need, and I employ your services to help me get out from under crushing debt. So we enter into a contractual agreement. I give you a lot of power over my life. If I want your services, then I'll have to play by your rules. You can tell me to cut back my spending or sell off these assets. **You have a lot of sway. But there are limits. In the end, I'm still in control.** If I think your austerity measures are too extreme, then I can walk away and find help somewhere else.
 - But let's tweak the scenario. Let's say you offer to fully pay off my debit and do it freely! It's a free gift. But free grace is hard to accept. **Because if I accept your grace, then there are no limits to what you can ask of me.** I'm totally in your debt. I've surrendered control.
 - *I know it's the easiest solution but do you see how it's the hardest thing to accept?* Especially for people like us who pride ourselves in being so great, so accomplished.

- ❖ **Christianity teaches that Naaman's leprosy actually illustrates a deeper condition plaguing him and plaguing all of mankind.** Including you and I. His condition led to the hardening and numbing of his skin. And would eventually result in him being cast out from the royal court.
 - But what's far worse and far scarier is what you could call **leprosy of the heart.** We're talking about your sin condition, which leads to the hardening and numbing of your soul. And eventually results in you being cast out of God's court into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 8:12). That's our diagnosis.

- ❖ But here's the good news: **At the heart of the Christian message is God's free grace.** To freely and fully heal your soul. All you have to do is trust in his Son Jesus. That's it. Just trust him.
 - I know you're thinking, *"That's all? That's too easy. To accomplish so great a salvation, it has to be harder than that!"* And you're right. But don't you see? You can't do it. Jesus has to do it for you. And he's done that!
 - Jesus scaled a mountain for you. And on that Mount, he slew a dragon. He defeated Death. He performed the mighty feat you were expecting. **And now he offers his gift to be received by free grace through simple faith in a straightforward promise.**

- ❖ **But remember, if you receive his grace, then there are no limits to what Jesus can ask of you.** You're eternally in his debt. He's completely in control. This is not like religion. You don't negotiate with Jesus. You don't enter into a contractual agreement with him. **No, in biblical faith Jesus get to call the shots in your life. He reigns supreme over every aspect of life.**

How The Great and Accomplished Are Changed For The Better

- ❖ This is really how you know if you've received this grace, if you've been healed by Jesus and changed for the better. Let me show you the fourth and final thing: *How the great and accomplished are changed for the better.*
 - Let's pick up in v14. Naaman swallows his great pride and washes seven times in the Jordan. And he comes out clean. Then he returns to Elisha and confesses his faith in God alone. Listen to what he says in v15, "*Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.*" That's a huge change for someone with a polytheistic, pagan background.
 - Then he offers to Elisha that extravagant gift he brought. But the prophet promptly refuses because he doesn't want Naaman to think that he even after the fact he can somehow pay back God for his grace. **The whole point of God saving you by grace is that you don't have to pay him back.** The fact is you simply can't.

- ❖ So Naaman has a powerful experience of the grace of God and it utterly transforms him. I think that's clearly seen in the request he makes of Elisha starting in v17. First, Naaman asks for two mule loads of dirt from Israel because from this day forth he vows to worship the LORD God alone.
 - And then he asks for a pardon in advance. Look at v18, "*In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter.*"

- ❖ Do you see what's happening? **Naaman realizes that, by receiving God's grace, he's surrendered control. Now God calls the shots.** Over every aspect of his life including his work. His new found faith is not something he reserves for the Sabbath. No, he takes his faith wherever he goes. And wherever he goes, the LORD is God and he's in control.
 - But notice he doesn't ask Elisha, "*Can I stay with you here in Israel and just go into full-time ministry? Can I be a full-time prophet like you?*" No, he wants to go back to Syria. Back to his secular job. But now because he's experienced grace, because he's been healed (in more ways than one), because he's been changed for the better – **now he wrestles with how to do his job in a way that honors God, that doesn't compromise his faith.**
 - His job requires him to occasionally take the king into the temple of a Syrian god. Perhaps the king was old and needed someone to lead him by the arm. **Well Naaman wants to do his job. But now, more so, he wants to honor God.**
 - So he asks Elisha if this will be okay, if the LORD will pardon him in this matter. And Elisha assures him that it's okay. Go in peace.

- ❖ **This is what happens when you've been changed by grace. You start thinking and wrestling with questions like this.** This is biblical faith. Again, it's so different from mere religion.
 - In religion, you're always negotiating with God. Okay God, I'll give you Sunday mornings and a weeknight for small group. But what I do at work or in the classroom is separate. That's where I've got my own goals, my own dreams, and I'll go about achieving them in my own way. **I'm not all that concerned with what honors God or what might compromise my faith because work is my realm.** In there, I still reign. I still call the shots.

- ❖ **But in biblical faith, in Christianity, Jesus saved me.** Jesus healed me. Jesus rescued me. Freely by grace. So he has all of me. He reigns over all of me. Every realm, every aspect of me. **There's no negotiating. There's only submitting.** There's only following hard after Jesus. Trying to honor him in my work, in my studies, in my everything.
 - If you're a Christian, you'll be thinking like Naaman. You'll be asking the same questions. Trying to figure out ways to pursue your career, to do excellent work, while all the while honoring and worshipping Jesus – and not your work.
 - *What is that going to look like for you?* How are you going to work in finance without worshipping money? How do you pursue a career in the sciences without worshipping knowledge? How do you work in the arts without worshipping beauty? How you be a homemaker without worshipping your family?

- ❖ **Religious people who deal with mere religion don't worry about these kinds of questions.** But Christians who deal with biblical faith are working through them all the time.
 - So which are you? Which Naaman do you identify with in this story? The one still trying to negotiate with God? To get him to do you a favor?
 - Or the Naaman who now trusts God at his Word, who has received his grace, who has been washed and cleansed, and who is trying in every way to honor and worship him?