

Heroes of the Faith

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

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on August 15, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ As some of you might know, I'm a bit of a history buff in that I enjoy visiting historical sites and reading history books – particularly military history or biographies. Now I love reading about the great men and women of history because it always challenges me to reflect on how I've been stewarding this earthly life I've been given and what legacy I'm going to leave one day, after the Lord calls me home.
 - But there's a particular kind of biography I like. I'm not interested in the kind that only highlights the strengths of the historical figure. I don't want to read a puff piece. **I enjoy critical biographies that not only tell me why this person should be rightly considered great and accomplished – but also in what ways was he or she weak and flawed.** That makes them far more relatable. No matter how great and accomplished these historical figures were – no matter how impressive their legacy – it's important to remember that they too were mere mortals.
- ❖ For example, **Caesar Augustus**, the first emperor of the mighty Roman Empire, who left a lasting legacy on Western civilization – had a peculiar fear of thunder and lightning, that is, according to the historian Suetonius. Augustus was said to have been scarred for life after witnessing someone struck and killed by lightning a few feet away from him.
 - Or **Genghis Khan**, the fearsome Mongolian warlord, was reportedly afraid of dogs. **King Henry VIII** was more than likely a hypochondriac. **Thomas Jefferson** had a fear of public speaking. **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** not only hid his polio-induced paralysis from the American public but no one knew, until later biographies, that he was afraid of fire. At a young age he saw his aunt catch on fire in a lamp accident.
- ❖ **My point is that these individuals are considered some of the greatest and most accomplished men of world history – and yet all of them possessed, unbeknownst to their contemporaries, an alarming weakness.** They were deathly afraid of a thunderstorm, of fire, of dogs or germs or speaking in front of a crowd. They kept it under wraps and out of public knowledge, but they could not escape the reality that – no matter how great and accomplished they appear – they have a weakness. One that probably raises deep insecurities and could contribute to their downfall if they're not careful.
 - And it's not just the history books that tell that story. The headlines today remind us that great and accomplished leaders have fallen into disgrace because of a hidden weakness that eventually came to light. This happens in politics, in the entertainment industry, the corporate world, and even the church. **No matter how great and accomplished a person appears – there is always a weakness in them (either physically, mentally, or morally) that could ruin them if left unaddressed.**
- ❖ **And the point is that all of us have a weakness – regardless if you'd be consider great and accomplished in the eyes of the world.** The only difference is that the great and accomplished have the advantage of more easily covering up or drawing attention away from their weaknesses by flexing their great strengths. But in the end, we're all in the same boat. **We all have weaknesses that have the potential to expose us and ruin us.**

- ❖ This is where we're going in today's passage. **We're looking at the prophet Elisha and his dealings with a commander of the Syrian army, the great and accomplished Naaman.** Now I would argue that Naaman is the epitome of all that you and I are chasing after. Whether in your academic career or your professional career, you aspire to be someone like Naaman. A well-respected, highly accomplished individual with a successful career and access to people of even greater wealth and influence. If that doesn't already describe you, it's probably describing what many of you hope to one day be. We want to be like Naaman. **And yet I'd argue that you're already more like Naaman than you'd care to admit.**
 - In Elisha's encounter with Naaman, we're going to see four revealing facts about the great and accomplished in this world: (1) The great and accomplished are not as strong as they seem, (2) The great and accomplished are harder to cure than they realize, (3) The great and accomplished are simpler to cure than they can believe, and (4) Once cured, the great and accomplished are more devoted than ever before.

Not as Strong as They Seem

- ❖ The first thing we see in this morning's story is that **the great and accomplished are not as strong as they seem.** This is evident in the way that Naaman is introduced to us in v1. We're told that he's the commander of the army of the king of Syria. During this time period in Israel's history, they were divided into two kingdoms. Elisha was a prophet serving in the northern kingdom under the guidance of Elijah, whom we studied last week.
 - Now at the beginning of 2 Kings, Elijah is taken up into heaven by chariots of fire (2:1-12), and the task of prophesying the Word of the Lord to Israel and her kings now falls on Elisha. And it's a difficult task because the people and the king were 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.
- ❖ Let me 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.*" **Now, in the original language, that's all one sentence.** The author is essentially listing out all of Naaman's accomplishments, all his accolades, all the reasons why he's revered by all. 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 that everyone looks up to. *But if they only knew.* If they only knew what deep insecurities you have. If they only knew the debilitating weakness that cripples you; the desperate sickness that plagues you; the disheartening fears that grip you – then you would be exposed and you might lose it all. **No matter how put together our lives might look, 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 a big shot, but what kept him up at night was a little spot.** We’re told he has a spot somewhere on his body that showed signs of leprosy (v11).
 - Now **leprosy** is not an exact term. In the Bible, it was used to describe a 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, once it starts to show, leprosy leads to social exclusion and rejection.** It was believed to be contagious, so you were cast out by society, by even friends and family.

- ❖ So Naaman has this spot. This little thing. At this point, it must not have been obvious since he still holds his position in the king’s court. He’s still the top dog. But for how long? His wife knows. Some of his servants, including a little slave 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. Because there’s always something in your life to make you weak. And no one is exempt because that something could simply be your sin. **Maybe, right now, this sin struggle of yours only takes up 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 strong as we seem. We're all sicker than we suppose.

Harder to Cure Than They Realize

- ❖ So all of us are driven to seek for a cure. To seek an answer, a solution, a cure for our “spot”. That's what drove Naaman in the story. But what we come to find is that his initial idea of how to get well was distorted by an inflated view of himself. He thought he had the resources and ability to cure himself, but what he came to learn is what all the great and accomplished need to learn – namely, that **they are harder to cure than they realize.**

- ❖ As we mentioned earlier, Israel’s idolatry resulted in divine discipline. Where God incited nations against them. In v1, it says the LORD gave victory to Naaman in his exploits, which would've included attacks on Israel. In one such raid, we’re told he captured a little slave girl.
 - **As the story continues, this slave girl is around Naaman enough to realizes that her great and mighty master is actually sick and weak.** She knows what he needs is Yahweh, the God of Israel. So in v3 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.*” So his wife informs him, and he listens. He approaches his boss, the king of Syria, asking for permission to travel to Israel to meet with their king.
 - **Naaman brings with him an abundance of gifts.** Six thousand shekels of gold. Ten shekels was 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 – all for the king.

- ❖ Now notice what he's doing. Remember, the 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 an abundance of gifts? **Naaman is doing what any great and accomplished person would do when seeking a favor. He's going to the top.**
 - Naaman is thinking, "I'm an important person. Sure, I've got this spot. I'm sick. I 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 resides among the important, among the great and accomplished. And if I want his help, then I'll need to pay for it. I didn't get to the top being a freeloader. I've got to bring something. **And if we're asking God to heal such a great person like myself, then it's probably going to require a great gift.**"

- ❖ All of that makes sense to Naaman. It makes sense to the world. It's what people expect from religion. **Naaman is doing what all great and accomplished people assume they should do when they get religious. They try to negotiate with God.**
 - I'll do this and give up that. I'll keep these rules. I'll change in this way. But I want something in return. A cure. A blessing. Prayers answered. Sins forgiven. Salvation. **Whatever it is, I'm negotiating with God to get it.** That's how you approach religion. That's how Naaman approached the God of Israel. He tried to make a deal.
 - But it's not that easy. **You want God to bless you, to heal you, to save you – but you can't make a deal with him because you have nothing to bargain with.** He is the all-sufficient God who satisfy all of his needs within himself. He has no needs for you to supply. And even your righteous deeds are as filthy rags in his holy sight. **So you too have to come to the realization that you are harder to cure than you realize.** Negotiating with him won't work.

- ❖ **Now the king of Israel was a 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. Yes, in religion you can do that. But in biblical faith – when you're dealing with the God of the Bible – you just can't. He doesn't work that way.
 - And that's why in v7 the king of Israel essentially says, "This Syrian king is trying to pick a fight with me. He might be able to negotiate with his Syrian gods. As king, he might have leverage over his gods. But not in my case. Not with the LORD God."
 - No one holds any sway over Yahweh. **That's why the king is distraught. Not knowing what to do with Naaman's request and his expectations.** But Elisha hears about this, and he tells the king of Israel to send Naaman over.

Simpler to Cure Than They Believe

- ❖ Elisha has good news for Naaman. For while it's true that he's harder to cure than he realizes – because there's nothing he can give, sacrifice, or promise to turn God's hand. But there still is a cure available to him. But sometimes the cure is found in the simplest yet hardest thing to accept. That's the third revealing fact about the great and accomplished – **they are simpler to cure than they want to believe.**

- ❖ Let's return to the story. **When Naaman 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 seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.*" (v10)
 - Now Naaman is offended by that. **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 like, "Wash in a river? Anyone can do that! **I'm a mighty man of valor. Ask me to do something mighty.** Ask me to scale a mountain or defeat a monster. 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 myself? 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. For the one who is hard-working. Someone great and accomplished. That makes sense to religion.
 - 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. And that's why it's so offensive to great men. **Great men expect to be asked to do great things.**
- ❖ Which is why Naaman's lowly servants don't understand his hesitancy. 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, God's solution to our problems – his cure to our sickness – lies in the simplest yet hardest thing to accept.** 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.
- ❖ **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.** It sounds counterintuitive, but think about it. If God heals and saves in response to what we give him or what we do for him, then he's functioning as a boss. And his healing or salvation would be our wages. It's what we're due. Now as our boss, he's got a lot of authority and can tell me what to do. But there are limits. **In the end, in this business arrangement, I'm still in control.** If I conclude that God is asking too much of me and becoming unreasonable, I can always quit and walk away from this arrangement.
 - But if God heals or saves me by grace alone without a view to what I give him or do for him – if I'm completely in his debt – then he's not my boss whom I work for. He's my Master whom I serve. That's why it's hard to accept a free gift of grace. **Because if I accept, then there are no limits to what God can ask of me.** I'm totally in his debt. I've surrendered complete control. **Salvation by grace alone is the easiest solution – but do you see how it can be the hardest thing to accept?** Especially for people like us who pride ourselves in being so great and accomplished.

- ❖ **Christianity teaches that Naaman's leprosy illustrates a deeper condition plaguing him and all of mankind.** Including us. 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 we 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 (Mt 8:12). That's our tragic 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 Jesus. That's it. Trust him.
 - I know you're thinking, "*That's it? That's too easy. To accomplish so great a salvation, it has to be harder than that!*" And you're right. **A mighty feat has to be performed. A great work needs to be done. But don't you see? You can't do it. Jesus has to do it for you.** And the gospel says he did it. It is finished!
 - Jesus scaled a mountain for you. And on that mount, he slew a dragon. He defeated Death by his own death. He performed the mighty feat you expected. **And now he offers healing and salvation by free grace.**

- ❖ **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.** And slowly but surely, every aspect of your life is transformed to reflect his glory. Your entire life is dedicated to making him look great and to accomplish great things for him.

More Devoted Than Ever Before

- ❖ This is how you know if you've received his grace, if you've been healed by Jesus and transformed for the better. Here's the fourth revealing fact about the great and accomplished. **Once cured, they are more devoted than ever before.** Their life orientation is different.
 - Let's pick back up in v14. Naaman swallows his 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 v15, "*Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.*" That's a huge change for someone from a polytheistic, pagan background.
 - Then he offers that extravagant gift he brought to Elisha. 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. **The whole point of God saving you by free grace is that you don't have to pay him back.** The fact is you can't.

- ❖ **So Naaman has a powerful experience of the grace of God, and he comes away more devoted to the LORD than ever before.** 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 whenever he stands on the little plot of dirt that he's going to set up in his backyard.

- 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.** God now calls the shots over every aspect of life – including his work life. His new found faith is not something he reserves for the Sabbath. No, for seven days of the week, he takes his faith wherever he goes. And wherever he goes, the LORD is in control.

- ❖ So now that he's back home and back at his job – and now because he has experienced grace, because he has been healed – **Naaman now wrestles with how to do his job in a way that honors God and 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 and do it well. But now, more so than ever before, 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.

- ❖ **You have to understand that this is what happens when you’ve been changed by grace. You start wrestling with questions like this. Wondering how your faith is going to affect your job.** This is what you expect out of biblical faith. It's so different compared to religion.
 - In religion, you’re just negotiating with God. Okay, God, I’ll give you Sunday mornings and a weeknight for small group. But what I do at work is separate. That’s where I’ve got my own goals and agenda. And I’ll go about achieving them in my own way. **Because work is *my* realm of control, I’m not concerned with what honors God at work or what might compromise my faith.** In the workplace, I still reign. I call the shots.
 - **But in biblical faith, in Christianity, Jesus saved me freely by his grace.** I don’t give anything or do anything. I'm totally in his debt. So he reigns over all of me. Every realm, every aspect of me. **There’s no negotiating. Only submitting.** There’s only following hard after Jesus. Trying to honor him in my work, in my home, in my neighborhood, in my everything.

- ❖ So if you’re a Christian, you’ll be thinking like Naaman. Asking the same questions. **Trying to figure out how to pursue a career, to do excellent work, while at the same time honoring and worshipping Jesus – and not your work.**
 - What will that look like for you? **How will you pursue a career and be successful without turning work into an idol?** How are you going to work in medicine without making health an idol? How are you going to work in finance without worshipping money? How do you pursue a career in the sciences without worshipping knowledge or technology? How do you work in the arts without worshipping beauty? How do you function as a homemaker without worshipping your family?

- ❖ **Religious people who deal with mere religion don't ask these kinds of questions.** They don't feel the tension because religion and work are separate, compartmentalized aspects of their lives. But Christians who deal with biblical faith – who serve a Lord who reigns over all aspects of life – we have to work through these kinds of questions all the time.

- ❖ **As we've been preaching on these *Heroes of the Faith*, we've been warning against too quickly identifying yourself with the hero in the story.** Because, in reality, we more closely resemble the Israelites who are usually being delivered by the hero. Well, in today's story, we find ourselves, in like manner, identifying more with Naaman than with Elisha.
 - But the question I leave you with is this – which Naaman are you? **Which Naaman do you identify with in this story?** The one still trying to negotiate with God? Trying to get him on your side, to do you a favor – to cure you or save you?
 - Or the Naaman who humbles himself, who trusts God at his Word, who has received his free grace, who has washed and been cleansed, and who is now devoted to the LORD and trying in every way to honor and glorify him?
 - I pray you come away identifying with the latter. It's simple really. **All it takes is faith – trusting in the promises of God.** Believe and you will be saved.