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## FROM LEPROSY TO THE LORD

2 Kings 5:1-19

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Children love stories. They learn early on how to enter into a story, to sort between the heroes and the villains, and to cheer for the good guys. They love playing the characters, especially the heroes. We always see more Black Panthers and Wonder Women than Voldemorts among Halloween trick-or-treaters. More than simply admiring the heroes, kids want to be them.

Adults need stories and heroes that we can emulate, but our world is complicated. The stories that worked for us as kids may not work for us anymore. The best stories for adults tend to be ones that somehow challenge the old tropes in surprising ways. Jesus told quite a few stories like this. Think, for example, of his Parable of the Good Samaritan. A man is mugged and three people pass by: a temple priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. For Jesus' original audience, sorting out heroes and villains was as easy as ABC. The priest and the Levite were the good guys, of course; the Samaritan was bad, as everybody knows. But there's a twist to this story, and by the time it's finished, the anticipated heroes were a disappointment, and the anticipated villain turned out to be the good neighbor. So, Jesus asks, "Which of these three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" *Gotcha.* "Go and do likewise."

Where did Jesus learn how to tell such stories? In the synagogue, where he grew up hearing the Old Testament. The Old Testament is full of stories whose characters draw us in and surprise us. And because it's God's Word, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to read and understand it, Old Testament stories can have a powerful impact on us, both adults and children. They can be just as life-changing as Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan.

Consider 2 Kings 5. At the outset there are clearly heroes and villains, and it's easy to sort between them. But by the end of the story, every character will have surprised us, many will have swapped places, and the most unlikely person of all will have gotten baptized and been born again. This story has one "gotcha" moment after another. For those who read with an open heart, 2 Kings 5 is a story that God will use for good in your life. As we take a look at this story, open your heart to what the Holy Spirit may be saying to you through God's holy word.

## A Surprising Complexity (2 Kings 5:1-8)

The playbill for 2 Kings 5:1-19 lists four main characters. There should be no difficulty in sorting between them:

<b>Naaman:</b>	Gentile general responsible for kidnapping and plundering Israel. <i>Anticipated role: Villain.</i>
<b>The little girl:</b>	Waif taken captive on one of Naaman's raids into Israel. <i>Anticipated role: Victim.</i>
<b>The King of Israel:</b>	Powerful leader of God's people in the northern kingdom. <i>Anticipated role: Hero.</i>
<b>Elisha:</b>	Unafraid to speak truth to power, nor to get his hands dirty in caring for others. (In 2 Kings 4 he lay himself out over a corpse and breathed new life into it.) <i>Anticipated role: Prophet</i>

Just as in Jesus' surprising story of the Good Samaritan, we are going to find a surprising complexity to the characters in 2 Kings 5 as well. Let's take a closer look.

**Consider Naaman.** In 2 Kings 5:1, he is the "commander of the army of the king of Aram."<sup>1</sup> Aram was where Abraham and his family started out in Genesis 12:1ff, before immigrating to the land of Canaan. Every year at Pentecost the Israelites were supposed to say, "My father was a wandering Aramean," as a way of remembering God's grace in calling them out of polytheistic paganism.

At this point in Israel's history, the Arameans had been their bitter enemies for centuries. Most recently in the story, the Arameans were the ones who killed Israel's King Ahab. Wounded and propped up in his chariot, Ahab slowly bled to death as he watched the Arameans swarming into his land (1 Kings 22:35).

Naaman was the highest ranking general in the Aramean army, which made him an arch-villain. He was probably the Ace of Spades in Israel's "most wanted deck." But reading on in v1, here's where things start to get complicated: Naaman "was a great man with his lord the king and in high favor, because by him the LORD [Yahweh] had given victory to Aram." Why was God helping Aram defeat Israel? Because Israel had rebelled against God. Under Ahab and Jezebel, Israel had so thoroughly rejected the LORD that he began giving them back over to the paganism they came out of in Aram.

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<sup>1</sup> Aram is unfortunately translated Syria in the ESV. The Hebrew reads Aram and not Syria.

In the biblical flood story, and in the ten plagues against Egypt, God withdrew his sustaining power from the created order, and the created order plunged into chaos. The sea overflowed the bounds that God had set for it in creation. The locusts and flies and frogs overflowed the boundaries God had established for them, and so on. These were stories of the reversal of progress, of the creation devolving back into the primordial state.

What happened in Israel in the years before the exile was similar. God withdrew his favor from Israel and awarded it to Aram, the pagan nation from which they had emerged. Then Israel slowly dissolved back into the sea of lost Gentiles. Just as Ahab slowly bled to death watching the Arameans win the battle, so also will the life slowly ebb out of Israel as their nation is reabsorbed back into paganism.

Thus, with God's judgment against Israel and his specific favor given to Naaman, it's much harder to categorize him. He was a villain from Israel's perspective, but not from God's.

One more thing complicates Naaman even further: "He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper" (5:1). Not, by the way, the neurological disease that carries the name of leprosy today, but a skin disease that left people looking like the walking dead. This was what made lepers ritually polluted, by the way; they looked like corpses, which was the most unclean thing of all.

So, from the outset, Naaman is surprisingly complex. His name is the masculine version of Naomi, meaning pleasant or handsome, yet he was disfigured with leprosy. The Lord had given him favor as a war hero, and also shame through a skin disease. So was he pleasant or bitter? Was he a villain, a hero, or a victim? It's hard to know what to do with Naaman.

**The little girl.** "The Arameans on one of their raids had carried off a *naarah qatanah* (קטנה נערה)," or little girl (2 Kings 5:2). A *naarah qatanah* "from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife." One might think of poor Cosette, suffering the excruciating wickedness of the Thénardiens in Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Or perhaps worse, as her Aramean captors might have subjected her to God knows what. Instead what we find is reminiscent of her ancestor Joseph, who cared for the welfare of his captors in Egypt (Genesis 39-40). This little girl did the same for her captors. She says to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet [Elisha] who is in Samaria! He would cure my lord of his leprosy." Though a victim of war and enslavement, this *naarah qatanah*, is no helpless waif. She's part of the LORD's advance team, a missionary evangelist to the Gentile ruling class. Her courageous testimony for the LORD makes her a real hero.<sup>2</sup>

**The King of Israel.** Was he a mighty hero? We're told in vv 4-5 that Naaman asked and was granted permission to go to Israel in search of healing. He took treasures with him, which was then and still is a customary part of international diplomacy, particularly in the middle east. And

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<sup>2</sup> Children often make the best evangelists, even when their home life isn't perfect. The *naarah qatanah* is a case in point.

off Naaman went to see the King of Israel and his prophet. With Naaman came an entourage on horses and in chariots, carrying about 750 lbs of silver, and about 140 lbs of gold, ten of the very best Aramean suits, and a letter of introduction from the Aramean King: "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy." (2 Kings 5:6)

We expect the King of Israel to respond with courage and valor. It was his duty to hand-copy the Torah so that he could meditate on God's word every day (Deut 17:18-20). It was also his duty to lead God's people in being a light to the Gentiles. Thus, the king should have welcomed this opportunity to serve the LORD. Instead, the King did what we have come to expect of Western leaders today—he made the whole thing about himself. He went into hysterics, tearing his own clothes, and asking (v7): "Am I God, to kill and to make alive?" His media strategy up to this point likely had been all about convincing everyone of his god-like greatness. But when Naaman and his entourage arrived, the King cried foul, playing the victim of a diplomatic crisis contrived to entrap him. Instead of seeing this moment as a divine opportunity, our "mighty hero" fainted.

**Elisha the Prophet.** If anyone was going to stay true to character, it was Elisha. Dismissing the King's hysterics, Elisha took charge (v 8): "Why have you torn your clothes? Send him to me, that he may know there's a prophet in Israel." Thankfully Elisha was willing to be a light to the Gentiles.

Now we have met the four main characters: The General, the *Naarah qatanah*, the King, and the Prophet. The **surprising complexity** of this story is that none save Elisha have stayed true to form. It's disorienting in a good way: if we open our hearts and enter in to the story, God will use it to shape us into the people he's calling us to be.

So how do we enter in? We can start by asking, "Do I see something of myself in any of these characters?" Or, for the kids at heart, which of these characters would you most like to be on Halloween? Personally, I see a little of myself in **Naaman**, the outsider who's both villain and victim, yet with the Lord on his side he has hero potential. There's a sense that he's both designed for dignity, and also urgently in need of God's healing and restoration. I also feel a kinship with the **Naarah qatanah**, living in hostile territory and trying to make the best of it by loving them in the name of the LORD. She's the true hero in this story. Also, I'm ashamed to say that I'm sometimes like the **King**, whose self-absorption keeps him from seeing what the Lord is doing right before his eyes. His blind narcissism is emblematic of our age. Finally, I admire Elisha because he welcomes the opportunity to serve God according to his gifting.

The surprising complexity of this story is that these characters are complicated—just like us. And now that we see it (hopefully), we're open and ready for the gotchas of this story. The first one of these is found in vv 9-12.

## A Surprising Exclusivity (2 Kings 5:9-12)

Unless you recently moved here from a very different culture, you know the rules prohibiting religious exclusivity. Embedded deep within you, these rules tell you that religious exclusivity is the only mortal sin. They say that there are many ways up the mountain to god/enlightenment. According to these rules, all faith is subjective, so we mustn't be dogmatic about our particular way. You take your path up, I'll take mine, and one way or another we'll all find the top together. In fact, because our perspectives are limited and we can't see all the paths up the mountain, we mustn't be certain about anything—except for the rule that prohibits exclusivity.

Most of us have known these rules for so long that it's next to impossible to see them for what they are: a worldview.<sup>3</sup> They are a belief system imposed on reality in order to make sense of it. The funny thing about worldviews is that all are dogmatic and exclusive, even the ones that prioritize tolerance and inclusion. It's simply how belief systems work.

Our age is pretty smug about having a modern and inclusive worldview. But in fact it's neither new nor inclusive. It's really merely a sophisticated variation of ancient polytheism.

The ancient Egyptians, for example, believed that there were many gods, and one of the most foolish things you could do would be to put all your hopes on only one of them. They practiced an inclusivity with the pantheon, yet it wasn't truly inclusive because it excluded the God of Israel, of course. When the Lord delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, his first commandment to them was to adopt an alternative exclusivity: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:3). Unlike the Egyptians, the Israelites couldn't hedge their bets by appeasing many gods. They had to dedicate themselves to just one.

The Israelites were monotheists in a polytheistic world, or at least they were supposed to be. At the pinnacle of the united kingdom, wise king Solomon became a fool. In hopes of establishing an inclusive empire, Solomon built temples on Mt. Zion for many other so-called gods. In the next generation, the nation broke in two. Then both pieces began the slow descent into exile, as their exclusive loyalty to the LORD dissolved into the exclusive polytheism of the surrounding nations.

By the time that Naaman and his army began pillaging Israel, the nation had been immersed in polytheism for more than a century. When Naaman returned to Israel in search of healing, he very likely expected a warm welcome from his fellow polytheist, the King of Israel. Instead, the King felt threatened and he threw a tantrum. He liked being king of the mountain, and he was terrified of losing control.

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<sup>3</sup> "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." (Colossians 2:8)

Naaman went on to see the prophet recommended by his *naarah qatanah*. But when (v9) he and his entourage pulled up in their chariots to Elisha's makeshift temple, Elisha neither came out to meet him nor invited him in. Naaman's ghastly skin disease was an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible condition, an unclean heart.

The holy God of Israel is exclusive. No one may enter into his presence without being washed clean. Instead of inviting Naaman in, Elisha sent a messenger out to him saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean" (5:10). It was a relatively simple task for a great man such as this. Yet it was no small thing! To do it would involve Naaman's humbling himself before the Lord. This is what the Bible elsewhere describes as repentance. It's one of the key differences between Christianity and polytheism.

Naaman was furious with Elisha's response, and so he left. And as he went away, his words (vv 11-12) betrayed his polytheistic worldview. He said, "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 leprosy. Are not Abana and Parpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?"

See, Naaman was thinking like a polytheist, i.e. someone having no exclusive relationship with any particular god, just transactional exchanges with many gods as needed. Naaman wanted to "do a deal" with the Israelite god, an offering in exchange for healing. Then he wanted to go back home to the same old life, not with many gods on many thrones ruling over him, but with Naaman on the throne, making deals with many gods. He couldn't imagine anything special about Israel's rivers or Israel's God. He just wanted to do the dealing and get the healing.

God, on the other hand, wanted so much more from Naaman. He wanted Naaman's full allegiance within a covenant of love and respect. In short, God wanted Naaman's heart.

Becoming a Christian means stepping down from the throne of your life and handing the controls over to someone who will do a much better job. It means recognizing that there is only one way up that mountain, and you cannot make the journey on your own. Only through the death and resurrection of Jesus may we ascend with a clean heart and enter into the LORD's presence. There is a cross high atop that mountain that points the way.

As long as you believe that there are many ways up that mountain, and exclusivity is the only mortal sin, you remain on the throne. And that's every bit as exclusive as choosing to make Jesus your King instead. You may say that there are many ways up that mountain, but as long as you're king of the mountain it's all on you. That's why ancient polytheism and modern secularism are so similar. Both are about remaining king of the mountain.

So here's the first gotcha of 2 Kings 5, revealing a surprising exclusivity. The choice before Naaman and before us all is not between exclusivity and inclusivity, but rather which exclusivity? The one that keeps me on the throne, or the one that enthrones the Lord?

Beyond Naaman's choice are two paths, represented by two of the other characters in the story. On the one hand there's the King of Israel. He thinks he's free atop the mountain, but his death-grip on the throne of his own life has in fact landed him in a deep hole, blind to what God is doing, rotting in a prison of his own making. On the other hand there's the *naarah qatanah*, who appears to be down at the bottom as Naaman's slave, yet the LORD has lifted her up to a place of great honor as his evangelist to the Aramean ruling class. She may be an exclusive monotheist, but she's a lot more loving and tolerant than the King of Israel.

If you had to choose between the two, which would you rather be? The enslaved monarch or the servant who is strangely free? Which of these two will Naaman choose to be? The choice he makes leads to another surprise in vv 13-19.

### **A Surprising Inclusivity (2 Kings 5:13-19)**

Naaman's angry departure from Elisha's place would have been the end of his story had it not been for Naaman's servants. They approached Naaman and said, "My father, it is a *great word* the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Hasn't he told you to wash and be clean?" (5:13). Naaman was a *great man* (5:1), so he expects that healing will be served to him on a silver platter. Instead, he has been instructed by a *great word*, which is the way of the God of the Bible. Instead of the maddening uncertainty of polytheism, God's Word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, making clear the way that leads to life. God's great word involves doing what appears to be a small thing, but is in fact a great thing: Naaman must be baptized.<sup>4</sup>

We have no way of knowing who was among Naaman's servants who came along with him to see Elisha. Was the *naarah qatanah* among them? Probably not. But perhaps there was another Israelite captive or someone who had heard the testimony of the *naarah qatanah*. In any case, Naaman had to decide whether to humble himself and again take counsel from his servants.

With the servants' help, Naaman chose to do this little great word that Elisha had given him to do. "He went down," (v 14) which of course is literally what one does when journeying from the hills of Samaria down to the Jordan River at or below sea level. At the same time, "he went down" is also spiritually accurate, as this great man chose to die to himself and obey God's greater word, going down, down, down to bow before the LORD.

Naaman probably had his doubts, just as CS Lewis and countless other reluctant converts have had through the centuries. What matters is that Naaman did it. Then having done it, there was a clear, immediate benefit. When he came up out of the water, "his flesh was restored like the

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<sup>4</sup> Baptism always involves both water and the word. It's not just the water that washes, but also the word of God. Eph 5:26.

flesh of a *naar qatan* (נַעַר קָטָן),” a little boy. Gotcha! Naaman became a *naar qatan*, a little boy, just like the *naarah qatanah*, the little girl who had told him about the LORD.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus said that unless you become like little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18). All baptism is infant baptism, because as Jesus said you must be born again to see God’s kingdom (John 3). Because he humbled himself before the LORD, the LORD removed the curse of death from Naaman and restored him to new life. As a result, “he was clean” (v 14). Not only was his leprosy washed away, but so was his rebellion against God.

Now Naaman knew the truth about the LORD. So he returned to Elisha’s place, and on this visit he was permitted access because he was clean. He “came and stood before Elisha” (v 15). Why was Naaman allowed to do this? Because he had been baptized and washed clean. If there’s any doubt about his conversion, consider his profession of faith: “Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel” (v 15).

So yes, Christianity is exclusive, just like every other worldview, including the modern and seemingly tolerant one. But here’s the second surprise in this story: Christianity has a surprising inclusivity. Who can be washed clean and enter in to a loving relationship with God? Not only Jews but also Gentiles. Not only the apparently healthy but also the lepers. Not only little girls who were taken captive by villains, but also the villains too, even the Ace of Spades. Villains, victims, heroes, even complicated characters like you and me can be saved. There’s a surprising inclusivity to this holy, righteous, and exclusive God of Israel. He will literally take anybody, as long as you go down, down, down and let him wash you clean.

## Naaman’s Trajectory and Ours

Now that Naaman had become a *naar qatan*, it was time for him to go out and serve the LORD, just like the *naarah qatanah* who evangelized him. He knew that this would involve going back home and back to work among the Arameans, back “with an alien people clutching their gods.”<sup>6</sup> So Naaman asked Elisha’s permission to carry back some of Israel, foreshadowing not only the coming disaster of the exile, but also Pentecost and the gospel to the ends of the earth. Back in Aram, the *naar qatan* and the *naarah qatanah* would be forerunners of the age to come, as they established an embassy of God’s kingdom on foreign soil.

What about you? If you haven’t yet given your life to the LORD, you face the same choice as Naaman. Do you want to end up like the King of Israel, excluded from relationship with the living God because of an exclusive commitment to tolerance? Will you cling to the throne of

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<sup>5</sup> The two Hebrew expressions, *naar qatan* and *naarah qatanah*, are respectively masculine and feminine, meaning “little child.”

<sup>6</sup> TS Eliot, “The Journey of the Magi”

your own life even if it kills you? Or will you go down to the water and trust in the Lord to wash you clean? There is a surprising inclusivity to God's kingdom. If you come to him, he will not exclude you.

If you have been baptized, don't wait for Halloween to dress up like the *naarah qatanah*. You can become like her right now. She was a surprising ambassador of God's kingdom who loved her neighbors in spite of how they treated her. In so doing, this loyal servant of the LORD raised up loyal servants of the LORD. Her captor became God's captive and servant and a living sacrifice to him. Open your heart to the Spirit's leading, and see how God will use you as his ambassador to the nations.