



THE CHURCH OF THE  
RESURRECTION  
WASHINGTON, DC

**From the Lord to Leprosy**  
**2 Kings 5:15-27**

**Introduction**

To be a Christian is to enter upon a journey. It is to commence a pilgrimage. It's a movement of the self toward the destination of the living God.

Last week we saw the story of a man travelling toward the Lord. He was a pagan general from the kingdom of Aram to the north of Israel. He was powerful, rich, and famous. But he was afflicted with a chronic skin disease, an outward sign of the fact that he was cut off from the LORD. And through the witness of an Israelite—a “little girl” he had taken captive, he heard that there was a God in Israel—who could heal. This was the beginning of his pilgrimage, his conversion.

Naaman did what any rich and powerful person who wants something does. He took with him an entourage and 750 lbs of silver and 150 lbs of gold. He leveraged his position and his wealth to ask for a favor from the king of Israel. But he found this didn't work. The king of Israel was faithless and feckless. And just as he was ready either to attack Israel in spite, or head back home dejected—he got a message from Elisha. “Come to me.” When Naaman arrived at the prophet's house, Elisha wasn't swayed by the retinue or the revenue. He didn't even come outside. He told Naaman through a messenger to go wash in the Jordan and be healed. Naaman was incensed by this snub. Yet, in his desperation he submitted to the word of the prophet. He humbled himself and was baptized. He became like a “little child” in humble demeanor, and literally through the healing of his skin. He entered the kingdom of heaven.

Today our reading picked up in v. 15. Naaman makes a confession of faith: “Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.” He also offers himself and all that is his to Elisha the representative of God: “accept now from your servant a present from your servant.” But Elisha refuses the gift because he wants to make sure this man's faith is oriented toward the LORD. Naaman gets it, and he makes two requests before he goes. He says—please give me enough dirt from the promised land so that I can build an altar to the LORD in my country, and pardon me in advance because I will have to go along, as part of my job, to attend worship services at a pagan temple of a false god. In v. 19 Elisha grants these requests and says: “Go in peace.”

This was the story of Naaman's conversion, his entrance into a journey that moved from unbelief to faith, from Leprosy to the Lord.

The Naaman account could stand alone. But it doesn't. Instead, it slides into this mirror-image story of apostasy. It is completed by an account of how Gehazi, Elisha's assistant, finds himself on a journey away from God—a journey from faith to unbelief, from the Lord to Leprosy.

This mirror-image story is important for us to hear, because, well, apostasy happens. There is no possibility of stasis. We are either on the journey of Naaman, toward the Lord, or we are journeying away from the Lord.

And so, this Gehazi story in 2 Kings 5:19-27 shows us an archetypal example of how a person can move away from the living God, and it serves as an instructive warning for us as we seek to continue to make progress in our pilgrimage.

I want to get into the passage with you, but first let's pray.

[Prayer]

### **Move #1: The apostasy originates in disordered desires**

Here's the first stage--and it's about desire, disordered desire.

Apostasy begins with the nourishing of disordered desires. Apostasy comes not from merely having disordered desires but cherishing them. Apostasy originates in disordered desires.

Look at v. 20: "Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, 'See, my master has spared this Naaman the Syrian, in not accepting from his hand what he brought. As the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him.'" Now, who is Gehazi talking to here? He's talking to himself! He's ruminating on something he wants, and he's talking himself into why he's entitled to have it. And it isn't hard for him to do. After all, it wouldn't have been wrong for Elisha as a representative of the God of Israel to accept this offering as a tribute from a pagan. And besides, the land of Israel is in a famine and the sons of the prophets could really use the resources. Plus, we're talking about "this Naaman the Syrian"—this avowed enemy of Israel. And so, before you know it, Gehazi baptized his desire as something holy. He says: "As the LORD lives" I will chase down this object of my desire!

It's important to see what is wrong with the desire Gehazi nourishes. Look at what Elisha asks him in v. 26. He says: "*Was it a time* to accept money and garments, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male servants and female servants?" It's a weird question because Gehazi only received money and garments, not these other things. But Elisha includes all these other things, because they are scriptural signs of the covenant blessings of God. By invoking this full catalogue of covenant blessings, Elisha recognizes that there isn't anything inherently wrong with the objects of Gehazi's desires. But his question is: "Was it a time...?" The implication is that there is a proper time, but this is not it. This is the time of judgment on Israel, not the time of flourishing in the land. This is the time to wait patiently on the Lord, not to seize things oneself. The desires for the blessings have to be subordinated to worship of and dependence on God, but Gehazi has got that all backwards. He doesn't know it, but his desires are disordered—untimely.

Now, if you're at all self-reflective, this story about Gehazi should cause a bit of trepidation in you. What if the desires, which I am fully convinced are good and holy, are actually disordered, and I don't even know it? Well, there's a way to figure this out.

The way you can figure this out is pretty simple, and it's right here in this story. Look again at what Gehazi says: "As the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him." Gehazi is convinced that it all depends on him—"I will run after him". He is not sent by the LORD after this blessing. It is not coming to him as a gift from God. He is anxious and angry and entitled, and he has to leave the path and the place to which he has been called to go get it himself. In the same way, when we are wanting something, and it makes us anxious and requires us to go out of the path of prayer and faithfulness to the word of God and Christian community—when we come to believe that it all depends on us and we have to seize it ourselves or it will never happen, then we can know it is a disordered, or untimely, desire. And if we cherish that desire and embrace it, we are entering into dangerous territory. The blessings God has for us come as gifts within the wider context of walking with him; they are not things we have to chase after in our own strength, outside the presence and will of God.

What are the objects of your desire? What captures your imagination and dominates your daydreams? What are the things you're tempted to leave the path of faithfulness to obtain?

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### **Move #2: Apostasy is actualized through deception**

That's the first stage of apostasy. Here's the second stage—it's deception.

Apostasy is actualized through deception. It happens as we hide the truth from others and, ultimately, from ourselves. Apostasy divides our very self in two.

What Gehazi does is shot through with deception and secrecy. In v. 22 he deceives Naaman and says that he has been sent from Elisha to get just a couple of portions for someone else. In v. 24, when he is on his way back, he stashes his booty; he has to keep it a secret. In v. 25 Elisha asks him where he has been, and he lies to his master and says: "Your servant has been nowhere." From start to finish, this is about how a disordered desire operates through deception and secrecy. To pursue his disordered desire Gehazi cannot be truthful with anyone else. But also, Gehazi's deceives himself. When Naaman first sees him in vv. 21-22, he asks him "Is all well?", Gehazi says: "all is well". He doesn't even realize what is wrong. He thinks he can live two lives; he thinks he can serve two masters; he thinks he can handle keeping this secret. But he can't. It eventually comes out.

Now, Gehazi's secret comes out in a moment of divine revelation through Elisha. And such a moment awaits all of us. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:5 that when the Lord returns, "he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness". But we should also know that if we're pursuing disordered desires in secret, it's going to take its effect here and now, too.

Recently some psychologists from Columbia and Stanford published important new research into the effect of harboring secrets. What they showed is that people who maintain secrets about things of personal importance end up with a plaguing sense of fatigue. Here's why they say this is: it's because keeping a secret creates this motivational conflict within you. On the one hand, you want to keep the secret to avoid the social costs of the information coming out. On the other hand, you desperately want to connect with others in a real way. And they note that this fatiguing conflict within the self explains why so many studies over the past few decades have shown that living with secrets lead to depression, anxiety, low relationship quality, and poor health symptomology. And this research is just confirming what the Bible tells us over and over again: a divided life is impossible—and we deceive ourselves if we think that our disordered desires, pursued in secret, will not ultimately shatter us. We will find ourselves unable to connect with God, with others, and therefore with ourselves.

The antidote to this destructive power of deception and secrecy is *confession*. We do a version of this at the beginning of every service. We confess not because God needs to know what disordered desires we harbor or what secrets we keep. We confess as an act of reintegrating our divided selves in the presence of God. In the process, we experience forgiveness—not a change of God's love toward us, but the bringing of our real self into the light of his purifying love. And for many things in our lives, this private confession to God is sufficient. However, when a hidden desire or secret sinful habit is metastasizing and dividing our hearts and minds, we need to confess to God in the presence of other people. James 5:16 says: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." See, having to name the thing out loud to someone who will neither give you license to sin nor condemn you for it, is liberating. It exposes to you the delusional nature of the desire or habit you're cherishing. It forces you to reckon with the outcomes you trick yourself into thinking you can avoid.

Look. All of us have things we need to confess—fantasies we are ruminating over, addictions we are developing, actions that have caused a plaguing guilt, subtle but profound re-orderings of our aims and motivations. We must have a Christian friend or two with whom we can be totally honest about what's going on. If you don't have someone, find someone. Come to a pastor. If you have someone, but you aren't availing yourself of this remedy—what are you waiting for? Don't be like Gehazi who, when his friend Elisha asks him where he has been, insists on living in the darkness.

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### **Move #3: Apostasy's outcome is spiritual death**

That's the second stage—deception. Here's the third stage, the outcome: death.

The outcome of apostasy is death. It results in disconnection from God and the things of God. It makes our lives barren—it ends in death.

This whole story of Gehazi is a perfect illustration of what James 1:14-15 describes. Those verses read: "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire."

Disordered desire. Continuing: “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin.” Actualization, or conception, through deception and secrecy. Continuing: “and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” Death. That is the sentence that is pronounced over Gehazi in v. 27. Elisha says: “Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever.” And then Gehazi goes out from the presence of the prophet, marked with the curse. And we only hear from Gehazi one other time in the whole book, and it’s in chapter 8. He’s just hanging out in the court of the King of Israel, talking about the good old days. He’s dead, cut off from the work of God that he should have been a part of. He’s gone from the Lord to leprosy. This story is a warning to all of us—nourishing our disordered desires and living a double life, can ultimately result in death—spiritually now and for eternity. It’s frightening.

But here’s the difference between Gehazi and us: the final sentence has not yet been pronounced! If you’re here today, you cannot see yourself in Gehazi—not with any finality. Why? Because we see Christ, a much greater Gehazi, went from the Lord to leprosy on our behalf. We see him who knew no sin but became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. We see one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet without sin, bearing in himself our sin and sicknesses. And in this, he has become our great and merciful high priest, who made a once-for-all sacrifice for us, and to whom we can come with all of our weaknesses, and sins, and guilt—and find healing from the death that would otherwise destroy us.

Maybe you’ve been slipping away, nourishing disordered desires, pursuing sin in secret, and experiencing a deadness in your life. You’ve been on a journey from the Lord to leprosy. You’re travelling down that road. Well, on that journey, here comes Christ—he’s the One who triumphed over all those things and bore all your infirmities, and he’s raised from the dead and headed in the opposite direction—ascending to the Father, and he says: “Come with me. Stop being like Gehazi and be like Naaman. Recognize your true desperation. Confess your sins to me. Follow me and be renewed again like a little child.”

He says: the outcome of apostasy is death. It is disconnection from God. It will make your life barren. But you don’t have to go that way any longer.

## **Conclusion**

So, there you have it—two journey stories: one of conversion, and one of apostasy. There’s no possibility of stasis. You’re either moving toward life in the Lord in confession and worship, or you’re moving away from the Lord through disordered desires, deception and secrecy, resulting in deadness. Which journey are you on?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

