

Naaman the Syrian

The Gospel as recorded through Luke recounts the words of our Master, speaking of the way in which in Old Testament times certain Gentiles experienced the salvation of God. One of the examples given was that of Naaman the Syrian:

“... and many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, **saving Naaman the Syrian**” (Luke 4:27).

In the healing and cleansing of Naaman the Syrian then, we have an illustration of the way in which Gentiles – through faith - could obtain more favour of Yahweh than even the Jews, God’s People. And this foreshadows the way in which due to the Jewish rejection of Christ, salvation would come to the Gentiles, even those who are not under the Law, being a law unto themselves (Rom. 2:14).

The passage which our Master was referring to is 2 Kings 5. There we read of Naaman:

“Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his Master, and honourable, because by him Yahweh had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man of valour ...” (2 Kings 5:1).

This man was “a mighty man of valour”. In the Hebrew, the word is *gibbor*, signifying a mighty warrior – a title of Messiah himself (Isa. 9:6). He was considered by his Master as being “a great man”, honourable. Yet despite his highly exalted station in life, the record goes on to say: “but he was a leper”. What a dramatic contrast we have here. Five small words, yet words which demonstrate that notwithstanding his status and elevated position, he was stricken with a terminal disease which demonstrated to all that he was a mere mortal. Though he had wrought great victories for his people, he was powerless to save himself.

The record goes on to describe how that amongst the captives from Israel, there was a little girl who served Naaman’s wife. Hearing of his affliction, she told her mistress: “would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! For he would recover him of his leprosy” (2 Kings 5:3).

Notice this: she was nothing but “a little girl”. Despite the greatness of Naaman, in order to be saved from certain death, he would have to humble himself to heed the words of a little girl – and a slave at that! It is written that:

“as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their Masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress: so our eyes wait upon Yahweh our God, until that he have mercy upon us” (Psa. 123:2).

Even so this little girl in ministering to her mistress also waited upon Yahweh her God, for mercy to be shown. She provided the word of salvation, in directing Naaman to go to Elisha for salvation, there being no other name under heaven whereby he could be saved.

The King of Assyria duly sent Naaman to the king of Israel bearing a letter with his request, assuming, it would appear, that Elisha ministered in the Royal court. The king of Israel's response is given:

"when the King of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover this man of his leprosy ...? (2 Kings 5:7)

Notice, the leader of Israel evidently did not even have the faith of a little girl! He assumed that the thing was impossible, and certainly did not believe Elisha could do it. Elisha, however, when he heard that the king had "rent his clothes" in distress sent the message: "let him now come to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel" (1 Kings 5:8).

The Name "Elisha" literally signifies: "El is Salvation", which compares with the name of Jesus which signifies "Yah shall save". Being a prophet foreshadowing that Greater Prophet, Elisha sets forth principles instructive for our learning. One of those principles, which we have already touched upon, is that it is not in the great things that Yahweh obtains pleasure, but the smaller things – seen in the little girl – to confound the wisdom of this world. This was a lesson that Naaman had to learn himself. He went forth to meet Elisha with his horse and chariot, and he thought "he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of Yahweh his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper" (2 Kings 5:11). Being a great man, he approached Yahweh's prophet like a great man would, and assumed that if Elijah were a true prophet, there would be some great display of power. But this was not to be so: Naaman had yet to learn the faith of a little girl.

"Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean" (2 Kings 5:10)

So we see that Elisha did not even grace Naaman with his presence. There was no pomp and ceremony, no display of mighty power, simply an instruction to wash himself in the water of the river of Jordan. So it was that "he turned and went away in a rage" (2 Kings 5:12).

Naaman's servants, however, besought him to reconsider, saying: "if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? How much rather then, when he saith to thee, wash and be clean" (2 Kings 5:13).

Here, we find instruction by example. In our day and circumstance, the calling of the Gospel that we share, does not require of us open and dramatic displays of power, or mighty deeds on our part. What we are required to do, is to wash ourselves in the waters of baptism, and be clean. Symbolically washing away our sins (Acts 22:16), we emerge from that water a saint – a holy one devoted to the service of our Redeemer.

Naaman eventually humbled himself to heed the urges of his servants and washed himself even as Elisha had commanded him. Then we read: "...his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, **and he was clean**" (2 Kings 5:14).

Adopting the faith of a little girl, Naaman emerged from his washing having the flesh of “a little child”. There was no man in Syria or any other nation that could bring about his healing – only Elisha, the prophet of Israel. And in order to receive salvation from Elisha, he had to humble himself. Even so Messiah taught: “except ye be converted, and **become as little children**, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven” (Mat. 18:3). There is no scope in Yahweh’s means of redemption for human pride. We must humble ourselves before him like Naaman did, and seek forgiveness and cleansing, receiving the “foolishness of preaching” (1 Cor. 1:21). Obeying the Gospel, we become baptised for the washing away of our sins, and an association of the death of our resurrected Master: “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, **and our bodies washed with pure water**” (Heb. 10:22). Truly it is that Yahweh “hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty” (1 Cor. 1:27).

There is another point that comes out very powerfully in this narrative. When he sent Naaman to the king of Israel, the king of Syria also sent “ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment” (2 Kings 5:5). The obvious assumption being, that giving gifts would ensure a favourable response. The principle he had to learn was that Divine Favours cannot be purchased. There is nothing material that Yahweh has need of that we can provide to obtain favour. As He spake: “If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof” (Psa. 50:12). There is nothing that Yahweh needs from us, rather the reverse is true: we must throw ourselves upon the mercy of God that he might provide for our needs, both spiritual and in the daily matters of this life.

Gehazi, Elisha’s servant also needed to learn a similar point: that men ought not seek after the material things of this life, as a reward for doing good. Once Naaman had been healed, the record recounts how he sought to reward Elisha by giving him a “blessing” “but he said, as Yahweh liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none. And he urged him to take it, but he refused” (2 Kings 5:16)

In this matter, Elisha shows the same spirit of other men of faith. Abraham spoke before the king of Sodom:

“I have lift up mine hand unto Yahweh the Most High God, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take anything that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abraham rich” (Gen. 14:22-23).

Again, Daniel spoke before the king of Babylon:

“let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation” (Dan. 5:17).

Paul asked the rhetorical question:

“did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you?” (2 Cor. 12:17)

And in the Law it was written:

“thou shalt take no gift: for the gift blindeth the heart of the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous” (Exo. 23:8).

Being strangers and sojourners, we do not seek this world’s goods: having food and raiment we are therewith content (1 Tim. 6:8). Gehazi however, saw nothing wrong in turning events around to his own advantage. Like the false prophet Balaam, who sought the things of this life, he went after Naaman, and made up a story to ask of him the riches that Elisha had refused. But Elisha knew:

“he went in and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, Whence comest thou, Gehazi? And he said, thy servant went no where” (2 Kings 5:25).

Notice that compounding his sin, Gehazi lied before a prophet of God. Elisha responded:

“Went not mine heart with thee, when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? It is a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards and vineyards, and sheep and oxen, and menservants and maidservants? The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow” (2 Kings 5:26-27).

The natural way of man is to seek after his own good, as Paul wrote:

“all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s” (Phil. 2:21).

But that is not the example of our Master, who “being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8). In Christ we have the example of giving all for the benefit of others:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9)”

In considering the example of Naaman then, we have a man set before us as a Great man, a mighty warrior (gibbor), yet who humbled himself to have the faith of a little girl to receive salvation from certain death at the hands of Eli-Sha (El saves). We also see a man who did not seek this world’s goods, but who was devoted to his ministry in the service of Yahweh. And in these things we also have a foreshadowing of our Master, who made himself of no reputation in order that we might be delivered from death. In him, we truly have a wonderful example of service, and disregard for worldly matters: let there therefore be found in us the Mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5), that when he comes, he might make us to become conformed to him in glorious immortality.

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