

WPC
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God Works for Free
2 Kings 5:1-16

Many people aren't familiar with this Old Testament story of Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram (also known as Syria). So I'd like to share with you a retelling of this story written by Robert Jacks, a former speech professor at Princeton Seminary:

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...

Naaman was a great man.

You'd go to the theatre house, and there on Movietone News would be General Naaman, riding on horseback, leading his troops home from victory, being cheered on by the adoring throng:

"Look, here he comes! Hooray for Naaman!"

You'd pick up a copy of Time magazine, and there on the cover would be General Naaman, MAN OF THE YEAR!

Naaman was...he was it!!

Naaman was...he was hot!!

Naaman was...the man of the hour!!

Naaman was a great, really great, super great, mega-great man!

But what most people didn't notice – didn't really notice – was...in all those photos, in all his appearances, General Naaman wore a white silk scarf around his neck.

And what most people didn't know – and would have been shocked to know – was...that scarf was a cover-up: It was a cover-up for a spot – that every day grew bigger and bigger. A splotch – that every day grew worse and worse.

Naaman was a great man...a mighty man of valor...but he was a leper.

Now for years, the Syrians and the Israelites had been at odds. Big odds, like war, and rampage. And on one of their raids, the Syrians had brought back (among other slaves) a little Israelite woman who became maidservant to – Mrs. Naaman.

And, being part of the household, of course she knew – she knew about Naaman's leprosy. So one evening, just before one of those big parties, she was laying out Mrs. Naaman's chinchilla wrap, and she said, very discreetly, to her mistress, "Y'know, mum, if only Mr. Naaman could

go see the prophet in Samaria...This prophet of Yahweh could cure Milord of his...his...problem!”

So the next morning, over sausages and pancakes with maple syrup, Mrs. Naaman told Mr. Naaman what the little maid had told her.

Next thing, Naaman was off to see his king. And before you knew it, Naaman was on his way. Not to see a prophet, mind you – wouldn't want some church and state scandal! With a letter in hand from the king of Syria, Naaman was on his way to see the king of Israel.

Naaman was, of course, a great man. And this great man would travel in style. Real style.

Naaman rode off with horses and chariots and ten talents of silver, 6000 shekels of gold, and a wardrobe that would put Tommy Hilfiger and Geoffrey Beene to shame.

Ten talents of silver and 6000 shekels of gold – in those days – added up to \$80,000 – not counting the three-piece suits. And furthermore, today it would total more than \$970,000. But Naaman...well, Naaman was worth it! He was a great man!!

So Naaman brought the letter to the King of Israel, who got quite upset (the letter failed to mention the “prophet in Samaria”, causing the king of Israel to think the king of Syria was up to his old tricks and was probably

wanting to start another war and run off with a bunch more little Israelite maidens.)

And the king of Israel made such a royal ruckus...everyone in town heard about it, including the prophet Elisha, the man of God, who sent word to the king, "Send Naaman to me!"

So off went Naaman. Bags of gold and sacks of silver in his chariots, off to see the prophet, the wonderful prophet of God.

Off to Elisha's house he went. Jumped from his chariot, ran to the front door, knocked three times, and guess who came out? It wasn't Elisha. It was one of Elisha's servants!! And he said, simply, to Naaman – General Naaman, mind you, the great man, the mighty man of valor – he said, simply, to Naaman, "Go wash in the Jordan and you'll be healed."

Imagine! Imagine!!

Great Naaman with great expectations came for the great cure, and ...What happened??? ...no hoopla, no trumpets, no dancing girls, and no...no prophet – just a simple servant, who said, simply, "Go. Wash!"

How would you feel? Honest: how would you feel?

I think I know how I'd feel!

I'd feel: Disappointed...Ticked off...Cheated...Snubbed.

And for Naaman, it was "ALL OF THE ABOVE."

“I thought he would surely come out to me and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place – and cure me! I could have stayed home and washed in one of the rivers of Damascus instead of this...river Jordan!”

And Naaman turned on his Gucci heels and stormed off in a rage.

Still a great man.

Still...unclean.

Until one of his servants came to him and said, “Master, just do it!”

(Robert Jacks, Just Say The WORD!, 176-182)

We’ve recently celebrated Independence Day. In speaking about the 4th of July, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “One of the most peculiar things about America is that we have so much freedom and are still so unwell. As a nation we are strong, but we are not particularly healthy. Our families, our schools, our cities, and our political systems are all showing signs of disease. Beefed up on steroids of wealth and power, we look pretty good from the outside, but the truth is that inside we are feeling a little shaky.” (Taylor, Home By Another Way, 156-7)

That description fits Naaman, as well. He's a great man; he's a powerful man; he's a successful man; but he's showing signs of disease. He's willing to try anything to get well, even if it means going to see a prophet in Israel. He gets directions to Elisha's house and goes there. Then he lines up all his horses and chariots in the front yard and waits for this prophet to come out. In the meantime, he thinks about what he would say: "Sir, I am General Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram. You may have heard of me - I have heard quite a bit about you. I come not only with high hopes, but also quite a lot of money. I am prepared to pay anything you ask for your services."

While Naaman was still rehearsing his speech, the door to Elisha's house opens and a messenger comes out and tells Naaman, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." Naaman is furious. He first makes an egocentric objection in v. 11: "The prophet should have come out to *me* (the pronoun is emphasized in Hebrew) and performed the sort of hocus-pocus I expect." (Richard Nelson) He had fully expected Elisha himself to come out to him and cure him in a grand way. Instead, he was being sent away by a messenger, to go splash in the Jordan River like a four-year-old boy! Who did Elisha think he was dealing

with? This was General Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, with nine hundred pounds of gold and silver in his luggage!

It was too much for him. “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” Then he turned and went away in a rage.

If he had given you something hard to do, you would have done it, his servants reasoned with him. So he gave you something simple instead. So?

Taylor notes, “It was the beginning of Naaman’s cure. He was completely emptied out. His royal connections had gotten him nowhere. His reputation had gotten him nowhere. His bags of money had gotten him nowhere. Elisha would not even come out of the house to meet him, and now he had been given this supremely stupid thing to do – to strip down in front of all his men and take the world’s longest bath in a river that barely came up to his knees.” (Taylor, 160-61)

But because he really, really wanted to get well, and because he had no other options, he did it.

Later on he tried to pay Elisha, but Elisha wouldn’t hear of it. Your money’s no good here, he told Naaman. You can’t buy God - God works for free. So it was generous grace but a cheap cure. All Naaman had to do was follow directions. All he had to do was empty himself and accept the fact

that his position and money could get him what he needed. “All he had to do was strip himself down until his hurt flesh was exposed for everyone to see and go play in the water like a little boy. Then God did for him what military victories and kings and bags of money could never do. God restored his flesh. God created him all over again, and he was made new.” (Taylor, 160-61)

We live in a great country, the only remaining superpower. I love America. I loved growing up here and living here and raising my family here. However, I believe that sometimes our power and wealth can convince us that we can do more than we actually can. Maybe the next time we say prayers for this great nation of ours, we’ll remember that great, leprous man Naaman, who was basically told: Your greatness, your reputation, your silver, your gold – Naaman, they don’t matter!! **THEY DON’T MATTER ONE BIT!!!** (Jacks, 182). Naaman discovered that “wealth and power turned out to be useless to him in his search for health,” and that he “was ready to trade it all in when God surprised him with a cheap cure that made him truly free.” (Taylor, 161) May it also be so with us.

Amen.