

## “BUT I THOUGHT...”

The apostle Paul said that the things written aforetime were written for our learning (**Romans 15:4**). I can't think of a better example than the one we're going to study today. The story is about a powerful and famous man by the name of Naaman. The Bible introduces us to him by telling us that despite all of the impressive things about his life, he was a leper. Leprosy was an awful disease in that day and it was a sure death sentence for anyone who contracted it. But God would heal Naaman, but not before quite an episode took place.

**II Kings 5:9-11** “So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And 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. But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.”

Now, thinking is typically a good thing, but here's a case where thinking nearly cost a man his life. Let's see what we can learn from this story.

Naaman was a decorated captain over the Army of Syria. He had won many battles and, as you can imagine, his position brought him wealth, recognition, authority and a big ego. Naaman was accustomed to giving orders—not taking them, and that includes from God and His prophets. He was surely accompanied much of the time by an entourage of servants and soldiers and his life wanted for very little. One day though, everything changed. Something didn't look just right. Something appeared different on Naaman's body, maybe a quick glance in the mirror or a casual glance down at his hand or his arm, and he knew that something was wrong. A small sore or canker had come up on his skin and it looked suspicious enough to cause him to catch his breath. Sure enough, when the doctor looked at it, his suspicion was confirmed: he had leprosy.

That's how the Bible introduces us to Naaman. A man who lived a life of wealth, luxury, power and privilege, but the Bible utters the dreaded phrase that changed everything: “...but he was a leper.” (**II Kings 5:1**). Despite his great valor, despite all of the great things that could be said about him, he was a leper. That just cancels everything else out.

Leprosy is one of the most dreaded and grotesque diseases in the history of the world. It's a disease that attacks the flesh and literally rots it away. If the symptoms of leprosy showed up in a person, the priest was to decide if it was indeed leprosy or some other disease. Because of the need to control the spread of this incurable ailment, the law required that lepers be isolated from the rest of society. The leper was required to wear mourning clothes, to leave his hair in disorder and keep his beard covered and to go about crying, “Unclean! Unclean!” so that everyone would know what he was and avoid him. The result is that he would die a lonely and excruciating death. It was an awful way to suffer and die. In fact, there was no cure whatsoever for leprosy. If a man was healed, it was because of a miracle from God.

Leprosy is a *type* or *figure* in the Bible for another disease, one far more serious. That is the disease of sin. You know, sin afflicts the human heart and has the same characteristics as the disease of leprosy. It's an interesting comparison. Leprosy was an extremely contagious disease. The most casual contact could spread it from person to person. Of course, that's also how sin operates.

**Romans 5:12 "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."**

That verse simply tells us that sin got its start in the world and in the human family by Adam. He and Eve were the first to transgress that law of God, and everything changed the moment they did so. They polluted a perfect world. Their sin corrupted the earth. All of creation was tainted because of sin! As a result, even today, every human being is born into a world that is marred and ruined by sin. The Bible says that all of us have sinned (**Romans 3:23**). As we reach the age of accountability and we choose between that which is right and that which is wrong, we all become guilty sinners in the eyes of God, and there are a number of horrible consequences that result from that.

**James 1:15 "...and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."**

That's the final penalty of leprosy (physically) and sin (spiritually). You see, with leprosy, there was no surgery, no antibiotic or drug that could treat or cure leprosy. If God did not heal it, you would die an awful and excruciatingly painful death. That's also the fate of the sinner. That's what all of us deserve. Sin is not only the cause of the curse of physical death, but even worse, it is the cause of spiritual death. The Bible speaks of "*the second death*," and that simply means that the person who dies on his sins will be separated from God and be cast into hell eternally. That's a serious proposition. I ask you today, how do you look at sin? How do you look at your sin? Too many people look at sin—especially their own—very flippantly. They shrug and go on their way unconcerned about their severed relationship with God. I'm convinced that any person who looks at sin that way is NOT looking through the eyes of God. Sin is incredibly serious in the eyes of a holy God. People don't begin to understand what an awful thing it is to be lost!

**Ezekiel 33:13 "...but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it."**

**Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."**

**II Thessalonians 1:7-9 "...when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power."**

**Revelation 20:14 "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."**

Friend, you can't afford to ignore your sin any more than a leper could forget that he has leprosy. I can promise you that Naaman's life changed the very instant that he knew the dreaded diagnosis. He

couldn't push that out of his mind. He couldn't afford just to go on as though nothing was wrong. He knew that he was a dying man. The Bible tells us that he had a young Israelite girl living in his house who had been captured in one of his battles. He made her a servant to his wife. This little girl from Israel believed in the God of Israel and in the prophets of God. She had every confidence that if Naaman could just meet the prophet Elisha that God would heal him of his leprosy. So, she told him about Elisha, and he was excited about that. He jumped at the chance! Here was a man who was desperate for healing, and time, money, effort didn't matter. He was bound and determined to go see this miracleworker, Elisha.

To make a long story short, Naaman gets the King of Syria to write to the King of Israel to set up a meeting with this prophet, and when it's all said and done, Elisha hears about it and sends for him. I think it's at this point where we get our first true glimpse at what Naaman was really like. He begins to imagine, as would you or I, what was going to happen in this meeting with Elisha. He rehearses this in his mind. He may have been a leper, but he had not forgotten who he was in the eyes of the world. He was a very important man, and I can assure you that he expected the royal treatment.

**II Kings 5:5 "...And he departed, and took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment."**

What that tells us is that Naaman was intent on impressing the people of Israel. Despite his ugly leprosy, he was going to flash his money around, and whether or not his motive was to impress or was just out of desperation to find a cure, the fact is, he missed the point. I'm told that what Naaman took to Israel amounted to a lot of money. They say that those ten talents of silver would be worth about \$160,000 today. His six thousand pieces of gold would be worth about \$2,000,000, and those ten changes of clothes weren't for him, but rather were expensive garments considered an impressive gift. It would be like giving ten Armani suits to heads of state today. Naaman was determined to be cured, you see. But little did he know what was really in store. A great surprise awaited him.

That reminds me of how we as men and women let ourselves think of salvation today. A lot of us think that we can impress the Lord. "Oh, I do a lot of good deeds. I give a lot of money to charity and to the church." Have you ever heard someone talk like that? They may say, "I know that I don't assemble with the church like I should. I'm not really what you'd think of as a devout Christian, but I'm a good person and I do all of these good things. Surely that counts for something with God. He'll surely let me in." Well, it's important that we do good things. But the Lord isn't impressed with our show of goodness. If a man thinks that he can buy his way into the presence of the holy God in his sin, and that he can somehow win God over with all of his good deeds and his charity, he is in for a huge surprise. Our own righteousness amounts to nothing in the eyes of God. It's righteousness that comes from the gospel, a broken and contrite heart, a life dedicated to loving God and keeping His commandments that God is looking for. So, already Naaman's thinking is different from the man of God's. When Naaman offers Elisha these gifts, Elisha refuses them. You should know that you can't buy your way into the favor of God either.

Let's see what happens when Naaman arrives at Elisha's house.

**II Kings 5:9 “So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And 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.”**

Now, this is NOT what Naaman was expecting. He was not anticipating this. It was a shock to him. First of all, I think it's significant that Elisha sent a messenger to him! What's the deal with that? Naaman expected a personal encounter with this prophet of God. After all, he was an important man and it must've bruised his ego for the prophet to send a mere lowly messenger out to see him. Elisha didn't even go out and acknowledge the man! He just sends a messenger out to speak to him.

Similarly, I think a lot of people are disappointed with the way God speaks today. What I mean is, they seek salvation expecting some grand, abstract experience. They're looking for an *encounter* with God. You don't have to look very far to find folks who'll claim that God has personally spoken to them, or they've had some kind of dream or vision where the Lord granted to them forgiveness of their sins or some other blessing. But that's not how God reveals His salvation plan to men today. People want to have an experience like Saul on the Damascus road. What they forget is that Jesus told Saul in that encounter to go into the city and a man would come to him and tell him what he had to do to be saved. A lot of folks aren't satisfied with that. They want a religion that involves inner voices, fuzzy feelings, heavenly intuitions. But, you see, God's salvation is very simple. God's salvation is found in God's Word. The gospel is not in men today. The gospel is in the book that inspired men wrote.

**Romans 10:17 “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”**

If you would be saved, don't look to an experience. Look to the gospel! It is *“the power of God unto salvation...”* (Romans 1:16).

The second thing that I think disappointed Naaman was what the messenger told him to do. He was told to go down to the Jordan River and dip seven times in the water and he would be healed. There was nothing vague, convoluted or physically difficult about what Naaman was commanded to do. It was so simple that anyone could understand it: go down to the Jordan River, dip seven times under the water, and be cleansed. Can you believe that the Bible says that that made Naaman angry? He got mad when the messenger told him that. Now, that would sound strange, I suppose, to any of us were we in Naaman's position, but it makes him angry. Why? The reason is found in three little words here: *“Behold, I thought...”* Naaman thought he had this thing all figured out before he even got there.

**II Kings 5:11 “But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.”**

You see, he expected it to be a big ceremony of some kind, and the fact that he had to go and do something so humiliating, so humbling, made Naaman upset. Did you notice that what Naaman thought didn't involve any obedience or effort on his part? That stands out here. It was all about what *Elisha* was going to do to *him*. Men are no different today.

**Hebrews 5:8-9 “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;”**

Jesus is the author and provider of our salvation, but Paul says that it is conditioned upon our willingness to submit to Him in obedience.

My friend, the plan of salvation is no more difficult than God’s remedy for Naaman. God has simply required that sinners believe on Jesus Christ as the Son of God (**John 8:24**), He demands that we turn away from our sins in repentance (**Luke 13:3**), He expects us to confess Him before others (**Matthew 10:32**), and He commands us to be baptized in the likeness of His death, burial and resurrection for the remission of our sins (**Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3-6...**). In fact, in that transaction, we are made free from sin (**Romans 6:17**). There aren’t any plainer verses in the Bible found.

**Mark 16:16 “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”**

**Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”**

Yet, multiplied millions of people don’t believe that. Millions of people who profess that they believe in Jesus Christ will argue with the very plainest of Christ’s commandments and say that a sinner can be saved without it. In fact, I’ve had people get very angry, just like Naaman, over the fact that the Bible says they must be baptized in order to be saved.

Let me ask you something about that: Does getting mad at the truth change the truth? Suppose I step on the scales and they ask one of us to step off, and I reach down and pick up the scales and smash them against the wall. Do you suppose that my suit will fit any looser the next time that I put it on?

In the same way, fighting against the truth doesn’t change what the Bible says. One day, the scripture says that we will be judged by what the Bible told us to do.

**John 12:48 “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.”**

So, the Bible says that Naaman was angry. There was another misconception in his mind.

**II Kings 5:12 “Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.”**

Naaman is asking the same question that so many people ask today: what difference does it make? I mean, Naaman is thinking about a number of rivers that were perhaps cleaner, more convenient, more expedient...We’ve heard THAT word in religion before: “Oh, but this is much more expedient. The Bible may not specify it, but this is expedient.” Let me ask you this, and I want you to be honest with yourself: What if Naaman had gone down to the river Abana and waded out into the water and dipped seven

times? The way we typically reason things is that water is water, isn't it? Anywhere you go in the world, water is water. Isn't dipping the same in one river as it is the next? I mean, is it really that material what river I go to, as long as I perform the action, and dip seven times? So, what difference would it have made? What would Naaman have been if he had dipped in the river Abana? If he had chosen some other river in Israel and gone down very carefully, making sure that he dipped himself seven times, what would he have been? You and I both know what he would've been. He would've been a wet and angry leper.

Now, why can we see that in the case of Naaman, but we have such a hard time seeing it when it comes to God's will today? Does it make a difference what God says about salvation, or about the church, or about our worship? Won't one way do just as well as another? That's what people tell us today. My friend, it made a difference for Naaman, and it makes a difference today, too.

**John 4:23-24 "...when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."**

Take a look at what happened here to Naaman. The story is not over, thankfully. His servants were watching him throw this big fit, and they finally approach him with some common sense and reason.

**II Kings 5:13 "And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, 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?"**

In other words, if Elisha had told you what you wanted to hear, if this had all happened like you had imagined it in your mind, you would've gone away from here thinking he was the greatest preacher in the world. Isn't that how a lot of people measure preachers today? They love a preacher who will agree with them, pat them on the back, tell them everything's all right and validate their lifestyle. But they don't necessarily love the preacher that tells them what they need to do to be saved. They asked Naaman, if you would've accepted his word in one case, why won't you accept it now? Can't you see, Naaman, that this is just your pride getting in the way?

Well, that got through to Naaman. I think he stopped and realized what a predicament he was in, and he realized that he wasn't in any position to be giving orders to others. And neither are we. You see, our sins have left us to bow before the mercy of a righteous and holy God. Why fight against Him? Why shun His commandments? Why try to explain away His Word?

Friend, if you've not done so, won't you humble yourself and submit to God's will today? Be baptized for the remission of your sins. If you haven't done that, I hope you will, right away.