

You'll have heard of the story "The Prince and the Pauper" written by American author Mark Twain, where 2 identical-looking boys happen to end up playing with each other; but one turns out to be a prince, heir to the throne, while the **other** is a poor boy, the son of a drunkard. You know how the story goes – they decide to swap places for a while – the prince becomes poor and the poor boy becomes rich and privileged.

We're going to read a great story this evening which tells of a similar event. We're going to see two people whose lives are transformed in opposite ways. Of course, the **effect** of this will cause us to compare and contrast the two men involved, but we'll also see the common denominator in God being at work in **both**, which means that unlike "The Prince and the Pauper" they don't return to their natural roles, there's no turning back.

Let's read 2 Kings chapter 5. [page 373 blue Bibles] As we read this story, we see the grace of God, but also the **disgrace** of man.

Isn't this a wonderful story, showing God at work in individual lives, using individual people to influence **others**. God's people are a family brought together by God, but each must come **individually**, and the Bible is full of accounts of individuals meeting with God and coming into a **relationship** with him. That's what God **wants**, and I pray that God will impress these things on our hearts as we look at this story tonight.

Verse 1 gives us the background to this story. The events recorded here happened about 850 years before Jesus was born. Aram was a neighbour nation of Israel, and is geographically where present day Syria is, and I'm sure you've heard of its main city of Damascus. The king of Aram mentioned here was Ben Hadad, and the king of Israel was Jehoram. These are **real** historical people, in real historical **places**, the people actually lived, the places actually existed, so we can trust that these are real historical events.

Naaman himself was a thoroughly all-round great man: 'great man' here means 'very important' – the king could rely **totally** on him; he was a brave soldier, high-ranked in the Aramean army; he was highly regarded. A thoroughly great man. We're led to regard him highly too, because he won a **victory** for his people.

But hang about a minute! Have you noticed something a little **odd** here?

Is Naaman an Israelite? No. Is he one of **God's** people? No, he's an Aramean, a **foreigner**. So what's going on here? The Lord had given victory to **Aram** through him. You may **still** be thinking, 'Yes – so God gave Naaman's people the victory, and ..?' Well, if Aram gained the **victory**, this means that Israel must have been **defeated**. How can the God of Israel give their opponents victory **over** them? Why is God fighting **against** them?

There are two things going on here. Firstly we have to see that whenever the Israelites take their eyes **off** God, go their **own** way, try to do things in their **own** strength and don't rely on **God**, at these times they suffer discipline or judgement from God. Throughout the Bible we find the message that God wants people to go **his** way, because at the end of the day he is our **Creator**, he knows what's best for us, he knows the right way to go, and the sooner we realise that the better it is for us. So there's the aspect of discipline and judgement at work here.

But secondly we come back to what we were talking about this **morning** – that *'all things work together for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.'* Romans 8:28. God knows best. He knows what he's doing – **trust** him – he's **God**. We may not understand at the time why he does things the way he does, but if we are his **people** we can trust that ultimately everything will turn out for our good.

So the first thing I want us to see is that **God is in control** of this whole situation, from the national level – the Arameans and the Israelites, right down to the individual characters involved, Naaman, the servant girl and Elisha.

The defeat of God's people also included the capture of this young girl, we're told in verse 2. How **awful**. God allows the kidnap of this young girl and she's taken off into a foreign country at the hand of maybe cruel soldiers. How **terrible**! God gave victory to Aram. God allowed the capture of innocent young women – that **can't** be right, can it? How could he **allow** such a thing?!

But just **think**. What if that young girl **hadn't** been there with Naaman's wife? Naaman wouldn't have been healed, he'd have died a slow and painful death. He and his family wouldn't have heard about the God who **heals**; they wouldn't have found the one and only true God. Who knows how many others were influenced by this young girl being in Aram? Who knows how many were influenced by Naaman and his family through her? We don't know. But not one of them would have known the love of God **without** the Lord giving victory to Aram and allowing her to be taken captive.

God is sovereign. He is Lord. Not just of his **own** people. He is God and so is Lord of every situation. You may not understand what God is doing – but he is Lord and in control. That’s why the new Christians in the first century church made such progress in spreading the gospel of Jesus through Asia and into Europe, because they recognised that Jesus is Lord of every person, nation and situation. You may think you’re just an insignificant person. Never think that. God is Lord and has a purpose.

We’re not even told that young girl’s **name**, but through her telling about her God, she influenced at least one man’s life, and even **one** is important to God – the Bible tells us that all **heaven** rejoices when someone turns to God - but **hundreds** might have come to God through her faithful witness. God uses her in the situation he’s put her in. He can do the same for **you**. **You** can influence the life of another – there are no coincidences – God has his hand on you – he knows your situation – he wants to use **you**. He **can** use you. In God’s kingdom **everybody** is important. Believe it.

As soon as we realise that God is in control here, we’re not surprised that Naaman **takes** the servant girl’s advice to go to Israel to look for healing from his leprosy, we’re not surprised when the king **allows** him to go to Israel. But at **that** time, although there was a truce between the two peoples, they would have treated each other with a great deal of suspicion. And this is what we find when Naaman turns up at the king of Israel’s palace in verse 7 – he suspects that the king of Aram is trying to pick a **fight** with him, looking for an excuse to attack them again.

Notice the contrast between the girl’s faith in God, an Israelite on foreign land, contrast that with the **lack** of faith of the king of Israel. She believes there is a God who heals, he doesn’t.

God is in control. **Elisha** hears about it and sends for Naaman in verse 8.

Now Elisha was a prophet. This means that he was a man used by God to speak **about** God and bring his message of deliverance for his **people** but also of **judgement** to those who neglected and disobeyed God. In this section of 2 Kings, from chapter 2 onwards, we see God using Elisha to let the people know that the God of Israel was the one and only true God, supported by some miraculous events, including the healing of Naaman here. He is Naaman’s only hope – the servant girl recognised this.

The word for the disease referred to in this story – leprosy – was a term used for a number of skin diseases of that time, and was feared as much as perhaps cancer or AIDs today. Some forms were contagious, some led to death.

So, Elisha sends for Naaman. He says in the second half of verse 8, *‘Have the man come to me and he will **know** that there is a prophet in Israel.’* Naaman is going to find God in Israel, but not in the way **he** thinks – God will graciously heal him. **God heals him through grace**, the second thing I want us to see.

So picture the scene: we have Naaman – the proud champion of the Aramean army, he’s led them to famous victories; he’s highly regarded by the king of Aram, so much so that he sends Naaman with truck loads of wealth and rich clothing to **pay** for his healing; and he comes with his soldiers and horses and chariots and rides up to Elisha’s house. Here’s a man who’s used to mixing with **royalty**, he’s used to people **bowing** to him, looking up to him as a **hero**, he’d be up on a pedestal if there was one **big** enough! You can imagine him riding up with pomp and ceremony and a fanfare. Here’s Naaman, Aramean victor. Surely God will heal him because he’s a jolly good chap, and he’s got lots of money to pay for it.

He’s expecting a fitting response for a man of such calibre as he is. He sits on his horse, probably, while one of his servants knocks on Elisha’s door. What response does he get? Verse 10, *‘Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.’*

*‘Elisha sent a messenger.’* How dare he? Doesn’t he know who this man **is**? Doesn’t he know who it is who’s come calling at his door? This is the man who led an army against God’s people and **won**. And he doesn’t even answer the knock at the door. Naaman is the nearest thing to royalty without **being** royalty. And Elisha sends his messenger? He doesn’t even come to the door himself. How does Naaman **feel**? Enraged. Humiliated. Totally snubbed. Is this the best that Israel can **do**?

And verses 11 and 12 describe his anger that Elisha didn’t come out and call on God to heal him miraculously there and then. Is this the best that Elisha could do – tell him to go and wash in the dirty old river Jordan? He turns and goes away angry.

How do **we** come to God? Do we come with all our preconceived ideas? Do we come puffed up with pride? Do we think ‘God will certainly do such and such for me, because I’m such a great person – how could God **refuse** me? Look at what I’ve **done** – look at what I **am** – surely God has to listen to **me**.’

Using a quote from Proverbs in the Old Testament, James, brother of Jesus, and Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, both write in their letters in the New Testament, '*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*' James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5. We can't approach God with pride in who we are and what we've done. Because the Bible tells us that we '*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*' Rom 3:23. We have no grounds for approaching God at **any** time with an attitude of pride. God doesn't accept the **proud** heart, he accepts the humble heart, accepting that there is nothing in us that warrants God's goodness. The attitude of our heart needs to be **humility**.

And as Naaman approaches that door of Elisha's house, he is full of **pride** and self-importance. Such a great a man feels he deserves and even **demand**s a response from God. **No**-one deserves and certainly no-one can demand a response from God. Who does such a person think they are, to think they **deserve** a miracle from God?

What preconceptions do **we** have and try to force on God? Naaman was expecting Elisha to come out of his house and call God to heal him miraculously, maybe in a flash of lightning, **certainly** in a powerful way to be clear to everyone there that Naaman had been touched by God. Do **we** come to God like that? Do we want God to work in miraculous ways, in powerful ways, showing that he's worked mightily in **us**?

Naaman goes away angry because Elisha hasn't even **spoken** to him, God **hasn't** miraculously healed him, and he's been told to go and wash in a muddy river! He goes away unhealed, uncleansed, refusing to go God's way – it wasn't **flashy** enough for him, it wasn't big enough for such an important man as him.

But remember our first point – God is in control, and he has his hand on Naaman. He worked through the servant girl to bring him here. God's not going to let him go. Also remember the second half of the quote I gave earlier, '*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*' And in verse 13, his servants speak to him, and say basically, 'If Elisha had told you to do a **big** thing, you'd have **done** it – so why not do this **small** thing?' And so God is asking Naaman to get off his high horse and obey him humbly, and wash in the Jordan.

You see, God's hand wasn't on Naaman because he was a mighty soldier, it wasn't on him because he was a great man, he didn't deserve God's healing, he couldn't earn God's healing power, God '*gives grace to the humble.*' It was God's **grace** that brought Naaman healing – God's love, undeserved love, grace. God graciously healed him. God gives grace to the humble.

We can't come to God with hearts full of pride, we have to come humbly before him. We can't **demand** great signs and wonders, God will deal with us as **he** sees fit, in grace and mercy. God said, *'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.'* Exodus 33:19. God heals, God delivers, God saves in **grace**.

And this is illustrated in Elisha not accepting payment from Naaman for his healing. Naaman offers him payment in verse 15, but Elisha won't take it. God's healing of Naaman is **free**. It's not earned. God heals in grace. Undeserved and free.

Let's see the message here – God wants to heal us from our worst illness, our worst disease, the cancer of **sin** in our lives. The disease which is **killing** us. The disease which is rampant in this world. It corrupts our lives and sets us against **God**. It stops us enjoying the health and life-giving relationship with God. God says 'Turn to me and be saved. Turn from your wicked way and believe that I am God.' It doesn't have to be a miraculous bolt of lightning experience. It doesn't have to be a big thing. Come to God in humility, and in his grace he will deliver you. Don't turn away from him again. God **wants** to save, he **wants** to heal. Accept his work of grace.

Naaman says in verse 15, *'Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.'* He put aside his pride, he obeyed God and washes in the river. God in his grace restored his flesh and it became clean like that of a young boy. God wants to make us **new**. Let's make sure **we** know his grace too. Do you know anything of that rejuvenation, regeneration even, making us new? By grace you have been saved – it's by the grace of God alone that anyone can be delivered.

But the story isn't finished here. The rest of this chapter tells us of Elisha's servant Gehazi, and we read of his disgrace – we've seen the grace of God, now we see the **disgrace** of Gehazi. And this section carries a warning for those who try to go against God in seeking gain for themselves.

You see, when Elisha says, *'Go in peace,'* to Naaman in verse 19, Naaman goes away knowing that God can't be bought, his healing can't be bought, God acts in grace. But Gehazi's actions of running after him and asking for some payment could have done damage to Naaman's understanding of the gracious God he'd just come to know.

Gehazi gets greedy; he thinks 'Naaman's only an Aramean, not one of our people, and he's rich, he won't miss a bit of silver; why **shouldn't** I benefit from this?'

Blinded by greed, blinded by his love of money and possessions, Gehazi sees an opportunity to **gain** from this situation and hopes to be able to cover it up somehow.

So he runs after Naaman, and makes up a story to convince him to give him some silver and clothing. But see how his greed leads to his deception **snowballing** and growing with more and more deception. He lies to Naaman, he deceives the two servants who brought the silver and clothing to his house. He tries to deceive Elisha in verse 24, telling him he hadn't been anywhere. And of course, he deceives himself that everything will be OK, he won't be found out. How **could** he think that God wouldn't find him out and bring him to account?

As we've already said, God is in control, he's sovereign, he's Lord and so **nothing** will be allowed to obscure the effects of his grace. What Gehazi did could have made Naaman think that Elisha's God was just like the other 'gods', who you had to pay for favours. God would **not** let that happen.

So punishment will inevitably come to Gehazi – and this is his disgrace, that he is inflicted with the disease that Naaman has just been cleansed of. Gehazi becomes ill and he will now know the darkness and banishment that came to those that suffered from this awful disease in those days.

But we have to see the spiritual message and warning for all of us here: we cannot serve two masters – Jesus said, *'You cannot serve both God and Money.'* Matt 6:24. For Gehazi treasures and possessions became his god, they became an idol to him. They became the reason for his living, and he went against God.

And we have to listen to this warning, because there are so many things in modern-day living that could become an idol and keep us **from** God. It can be the pursuit of money and possessions, like Gehazi, but **anything** has the potential to become our idol, if it takes the place of God in our lives. Our home, our family, our loved ones, our hobbies, our television, our food, our drink. And the list goes on. For each of us it may be something different.

Be careful. Look at your motivations. Be honest. Is anything else in the place of God in your life? See the message of Gehazi – see the message of the Bible – listen to the message of God. God needs to be at the **centre** of your life. He's **God**. He's Lord. Anything that attempts to **displace** him will end in judgement. It may not be physical illness, but it will certainly have long-lasting consequences. The path away from God doesn't lead to **deliverance** – it leads to **judgement**, it leads to separation from God.

God asks us to accept his grace. God loves us and he sent his Son to die for us, all he asks of **us** is to turn to him away from our ways, believe in him, **trust** him for deliverance from all that would destroy us. Why refuse?

Gehazi made the wrong choice, he chose wealth rather than God. Naaman chose to **humble** himself before God, to leave his old ways **behind** and worship the one and only God. Which way will **you** choose? There are eternal consequences to your choice – think hard, think long. Why **do** we cling to things which will rob us of an eternal relationship with the God who made us? He's willing to lead us literally to heaven. How **foolish** we are to reject him.

This story has a lot to teach us about our relationship with God, the God of grace – let's be determined to experience **this** rather than go the way that only ends in disgrace. There are **great** things in store for those who love and serve the Lord, the God who healed Naaman. Let's be determined not to miss **any** of his blessings.