

Two Miracles...Two Applications

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This morning, we're going to be in Second Kings, chapter 5, verses 5 through 14. I have a couple of things before we get started. First, I hope you were paying attention to the special music because that was my sermon! I feel like I could just say, "Congregation, dismissed." It's amazing how the Spirit works. Secondly, I have to point out I was not fired as the Pastoral Care Pastor! It just turns out that you don't want a police officer or a soldier in that role. So, would you stand if you're able, as we read from God's Word.

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, but he was a leper.

Now the Syrians, on one of their raids, had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "Would that my Lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria. He would cure him of leprosy."

So Naaman went in and told his Lord, "Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel," and the king of Syria said, "Go now and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten changes of clothing. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel which read: "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of leprosy."

And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God to kill and to make alive that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house and Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, "Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. 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?"

So he turned and went away in a rage, but his servants came near and said to him, "My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you. Will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, 'Wash and be clean'?" So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan according to the word of the man of God, and His flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean.

This is the word of the Lord and we are grateful for it. Please be seated.

Now, I love to read. I absolutely love it. If I could be doing anything, I would be reading. Somewhere in a cozy spot, I would be reading. We're going to talk a little bit about expectations this morning and so I want to tell you about my expectations this weekend. My wife and I went up to Tollgate to get away from the heat. It was supposed to be 10 degrees cooler, but it turns out that 103 degrees with no air conditioning is by far worse than 113 degrees with an air conditioner. But that wasn't the expectation I had. This is a cabin that my wife and I have gone to over the course of our entire marriage. I looked

forward to being able to sit on the deck and read. One of my favorite vacations: I was at the Cannery Inn in Astoria, Oregon, right on the water of the Columbia River as the shipping was coming and going. And I was reading the Horatio Hornblower series, a series of books about a fictional navy officer in the age of the Napoleonic Wars. You could reach out and touch the ships as you were reading this book. Another favorite: I was reading "On War" by von Clausewitz, another general during the Napoleonic era, from Prussia. I was in Germany with my wife. She was shopping and negotiating with the shopkeeper, and I was sitting on a street in Germany reading von Clausewitz. My favorite vacations! And so there I was, up on Tollgate with a toddler. Did you know the absolute worst thing you can do is be reading when all of a sudden it gets quiet? I have no idea how long it's been. I have no idea what she's gotten into. And that feeling of panic. But I love to read.

Recently I was reading a book called "Killing Christians," by C. S. Forrester. It's a collection of stories about Christians who live in portions of the world where just being a Christian, you risk your life. One of the stories was about a young lady who traveled for a living and while she was in the Western world she had met and received Jesus as her Lord and Savior. And, out of a conviction, she continued to travel back into those dangerous places for her business, in the hopes that she would have the opportunity to witness. Needless to say, she was afraid. On one of these trips, she was on her way to the airport. She had hailed a cab. She carried all of her belongings in one bag. She was afraid to put it in the trunk of the car for fear that she might have to move quickly. And on this morning, she got in the cab. It's taking her to the airport. She's this close to being free, back into the Western world. The Spirit of the Lord says, "Tell this man about Jesus. Tell the driver of the cab." Now she didn't hear it audibly, but there she was sitting in the back of this cab having an argument, essentially with herself, thinking, "He will kill me." So she worked out a plan. She got out of the cab when it pulled up to the airport. And when she handed the fare to the driver, she released the cash and said, "Jesus loves you," and then she turned to walk, hoping for the safety of the airport terminal. She heard the car put in park. She heard the door open behind her and so she dropped her bag and she took off running, running and running and running, but she couldn't outrun the driver of that cab. He tackled her to the ground, pinned her on her back, and on top of her he said, "What did you say?" She said, "Jesus loves you." And he rolled off of her in tears and explained that a man had been appearing to him in his dreams for months. Last night he just said, "Who are you?" And the man in his dreams said, "Your first fare will tell you who I am."

The passage we read today, there's two miracles in there. The first one is easy to find. It's the healing of the man named Naaman. And the second one is found in the story of the little girl. And it's this second miracle that we've got to pay attention to as believers because in this miracle is where we find our purpose, our significance and our meaning. Is anybody here this morning missing one of those? So let's take a look at these two people, Naaman and this little girl. Both of them had a problem, both of them had a need, and both of them experienced a miracle. Now, Naaman is one of my favorite characters in the Bible. He's easy for me to relate with. It's not unlike the centurion in the New Testament. He lives in a world that I am familiar with and he's a mighty man of valor. This is a term that is used of Gideon, it's used of Jephthah, it's used of David, it's used of Goliath, it's used of Jeroboam, just to name a few. But it's more than just courageous. It can mean: "mighty, worthy, champion, very able, seasoned in battle, and is applied generally in the masculine, i.e., a mighty man or a worthy man."

On the eve of the first elections in Iraq (and I know I told somebody that I wasn't going to put an army story in here, except here's one!) The first free election in Iraq, we were expecting trouble, and so the outgoing unit and the ingoing unit were overlapped so that we could put that election right here and have double the manpower that we would normally have. I was part of the incoming unit and the outgoing unit was taking the lead because they were the most familiar. And on the eve of that historical event, the commander sent out a letter to all of his soldiers and I wish I had time to read that letter to you. But as I read that letter, I knew that this man knew what we were doing, and was willing to take the risks necessary to accomplish what we were going to do. That is a man of valor; someone who knows what he's doing, and is willing to make the sacrifices necessary to get it done.

Naaman was the commanding general of the Aramean army during the reign of Ben-Hadad, the king. He was held in high honor by the king, so much so that the king had an interest in his healing. Bottom line, he was not just a man's man. He was a warrior's man who knew what he was doing on the battlefield. He could be said to have been the ideal warrior, except for one thing. He had leprosy. Leprosy included a variety of serious skin diseases ranging from ringworm to true leprosy, a progressively disfiguring disease. The Jewish rabbis regarded leprosy as humanly incurable. Only twice does the Old Testament record that God cleansed a leper: Aaron's sister, Miriam, and then Naaman here in the passage that we read. Hence, Jeroboam's reply to the situation. The king of Israel said, "Am I God to kill and to make alive that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? I can't do this!" And he suspects that it's a pretense for war. Syria is going to say, "You didn't cure our general, so here we come!" Now, in Israel, in accordance with the law, leprosy sentenced sufferers to a living death. Some would argue that the Levitical diagnosis of leprosy and the removal of the leper served the purpose of preventing the infected individual from infecting the rest of the community, not unlike our efforts today. But biblical leprosy is more than preventative, it's instructive and illustrative. Once a man was branded as a leper, he had to adopt the posture of a mourner by tearing his clothes, allowing his hair to become unkempt, covering his beard or mustache and crying, "Unclean," everywhere he went. He had to live outside the camp. His existence was nothing more than a living death. For the Israelite, it was even worse. The leper would be cut off from the spiritual fellowship with the covenant people of God. All hope of redemption was lost. Never was there a disease that so separated the victims from their fellows. Never has there been a condition that so illustrated the spiritual condition of humankind. We are universally unclean and separated from God.

Naaman's problem, then, is illustrative of our universal need for redemption. And it's telling that this man, this man's man, this warrior's man, has that problem, the problem that represents our unrighteousness before God. What that tells me is there isn't a person in here worthy enough to not have that problem. Every one of us is unrighteous before God. No one, not even Naaman, can be good enough. That's the bad news. The good news is that Elisha, Israel's prophet, was going to heal Naaman's leprosy. All Naaman had to do was wash in the Jordan seven times, but Naaman refused and he was angry. Why? Because the prophet didn't meet Naaman personally? Because the prophet didn't wave his hands over Naaman's leprosy? Because the prophet didn't call on the name of the Lord in the presence of Naaman? Because the Jordan was somehow less than the Abana and Parpar Rivers in Damascus? No, that's not the reason, but he was willing to give up cleansing for all those things. The reason though, is found in verse 11, and Naaman's response to the beginning three words: "Behold, I

thought..." It reminds me of the old joke of the guy when the floods are coming up from the Mississippi River and he says, "Lord, please help me!" And some guy drives up in a pickup and says, "Can I give you a lift?" "Nope, God's gonna help me." The waters rise. A guy comes along in a boat. "Do you need a lift?" "Nope, God's gonna help me." The waters rise even higher and a helicopter comes by. "Can I give you a lift?" "Nope, God's gonna help me." Finally, the waters overcome him. He drowns, goes to the Pearly Gates, and God says, "What?" The guy says, "Why didn't you save me?" God says, "I sent you a pickup truck, a boat and a helicopter." Our expectations get in the way of our response to God. And here that's exactly what was happening with Naaman. Naaman was saying, "That's not what I expected and so I'm not gonna take it." Naaman had his own expectations of how the prophet was to heal him. What the prophet offered did not match those expectations and so Naaman was angry.

Did you know that the cross is offensive to some? Jesus says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone and a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense. They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do." Friends, you guys didn't get to choose the day you were born. And if you're living obediently, you don't get to choose the moment when you die. We don't choose who we were born to. We don't choose where we were born. And yet, somehow, we think that we get to choose the mechanism of our redemption? The miracle of Naaman's cleansing points to the cleansing that we have all been offered through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Now that's miracle number one.

Let's take a look at the exact opposite now. Did you guys notice that the little girl is in there? When I've read this passage, I have missed that little girl, and yet, preparing for this sermon, that little girl was screaming at me, "Tell this story!" In the course of their occasional battles with Israel, Naaman's forces or perhaps some other forces of Syria would raid into Israel and, in one of these raids, this little girl was captured. Probably her parents were captured along with her. If they weren't captured, then they were at least separated from their daughter as their livelihood, all of their possessions, were either destroyed or taken. Probably if they weren't captured, too, they had to flee deeper into Israel. But I suspect that they were captured, too. And, as a result, that family was broken up and this girl was sold into slavery and ended up as the slave of Naaman's wife. Now, at this time, no leper had been cleansed in Elisha's day. Elisha had been used of God to produce pools of water in the midst of a drought, the Moabites had been given into Israel's hand, he caused one jar of oil to produce enough to fill every vessel that a woman could borrow from her neighbors, and he raised the son of a wealthy Shunammite woman. And, my favorite, he purified a poisonous stew. So, although Elisha hadn't cured leprosy, there was definitely some supernatural power going on and this little girl knew Elisha could cure Naaman's leprosy. But when we asked the question, "What was this little girl's problem?", there's a stark contrast between her and Naaman. Was her problem that she had been captured by the Syrians? Nope. Was it that she had been separated from her family? Nope. Was it even that she had been sold into slavery? Nope. Her concern was for her new mistress and the leprous condition of her husband, a non-Jewish, Gentile killer with leprosy.

I was up on the mountain today and I ran into some Harley-Davidson bikers. It was 103 degrees. They smelled horrible. The conversation I had with them was filled with filthy language. And yet their tabs on their vest testified that they had been saved by Jesus and they asked me how I was doing. This little girl was not thinking about any of those things, she was thinking about her master. Do you know that you cannot consider

yourself a servant until your master's problems are your problems? You can pretend right up until that moment, but until your master's problems are your problems, you are not a servant of that master. So, here's this little girl. What did she think? What were her expectations? She could have told her mistress, "One day the prophet of Israel will destroy Syria." She could have remained silent in the knowledge that her mistress was a filthy Gentile. She could have easily justified doing nothing, as it was not her place even to speak. No, she said, "I wish we were in Samaria where there's a prophet who could heal your husband." I wonder if she thought Naaman's wife would tell her husband about the prophet in Israel. Probably, husbands and wives talk. I wonder if she thought that Naaman would seek and be granted permission from the king of Syria to go to the prophet of Israel. Maybe. I wonder if she thought that by her words Naaman would be cured of leprosy. I wonder if she thought that she would set all of this in motion. I wonder how many people outside of Israel came to know that there was a prophet of God in Israel as a result of Naaman's testimony. I'm sure it never came up in any of Naaman's conversations! (Oh, that was supposed to be funny, you guys!) I wonder if this little girl would marvel that this story would be incorporated into the collective history of God's chosen people, pored over by scribes and Pharisees. I wonder if this little girl thought Israel's Messiah would use Naaman's story as proof that a prophet is not recognized in his own country. In Luke 4, Jesus says, "There were many lepers in Israel in the days of Elisha, but none of them were cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian." That was spoken from the lips of Israel's Messiah. I wonder how this little girl would react to the knowledge that Pastor Aaron would be preaching a sermon from this story thousands of years later.

Now, I struggled with the title of this sermon and I called it, as it went out earlier this week, "Two Miracles...Two Applications." But I really should have called it, "Two Miracles...One Application." Naaman's story is representation of where we stand or where we stood as sinners before God. The miracle is that God's healing of a Gentile leper is telling us that as Gentiles who are unclean and unrighteous, that cleansing is available to us, too. If you are here, or if you are in the sound of my voice, and you have not accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you are still dead in your transgressions. Your life is the equivalent of the life of a leper: he's not dead yet, but he's on his way. Don't wait because it doesn't make any sense. Don't wait because you thought God would save you another way.

The little girl's story is representative of those of us who now stand before God in His righteousness. Did you know our expectations get in our own way even here? The second miracle of God, of all time, is that He invites you to play a part in the redemption of His people. I am confident that if this girl had kept quiet, God would have found somebody else. But this girl heard God's prompting, and, as a result, found her purpose, found her meaning, found her value on a level that she could have never anticipated. For those of us who now find ourselves righteous before God, the Holy Spirit has been given to us. This last month, this last week, this last day, today, tomorrow, next week, next month, the Holy Spirit, as the messenger from the prophet like Elisha, who now sits at the right hand of God, Jesus, is speaking to you. He has given you something to do. And the question remains: Will you do that thing or will you say, "I can't do that. That's not for me!"? I wish you could have been with me when God said, "Aaron, you're going to preach." Here I am, trying to figure it out. I was in Balad, Iraq, when God said, "Aaron, you're going to lead the men's Bible study in the chapel." I wasn't reading my Bible. I wasn't spending time in prayer. In fact, I was hanging out with people who were having an opposite effect on me. And I argued with Him, "I'm not in a place where I can lead a

Bible study." But He said, "Do it!" Will you? And before you answer that, I have to tell one more story. And I can't believe it's an old movie, 1991. Billy Crystal, Jack Palance and Daniel Stern starred in a movie called "City Slickers." On the verge of a midlife crisis, the three characters decided to go on a real-life cattle drive in an effort to find themselves. Over the course of that cattle drive, the drive boss dies, the herd is scattered and a major storm swells the river. In the end, Billy Crystal's character comes away discovering that life is about one thing. And he leaves it right there, because the idea is that you have to decide what that one thing is. And they almost got it right.

Do you want to know where your purpose is? Do you want to know where your significance is? Do you want to know where the real meaning of your life is? It's in that one thing that the Holy Spirit is telling you to do. The exciting thing about it, you guys, is if you do the one thing, and you do the one thing, and you do the one thing, we're all moving in the same direction. It's astonishing to me how often this service comes together despite the seven different directions everybody that's putting it together is going. And yet the Spirit is involved and when it's all said and done, the special music actually sings the message that I have: Jesus has gone away, and until He returns He's got something for you to do. There's really only one application for both miracles. How often do we let our own expectations get in the way of hearing and sensing the Holy Spirit and missing our opportunity to participate in God's plan of redemption?