

# On Servant Girls, Humbled Generals, a Helpful Prophet and a Few Smart Servants

2 Kings 5: 1-14

February 7, 2021

Here's a story for all about a servant girl, a humbled general, a helpful, if no non-sense, prophet and a few smart servants. God works in surprising ways.

## I

It begins with Naaman, the general of the enemy Syrian nation. If you stand in high elevations in Israel you can look over the border and see Syria. The enemy nation was close! Naaman is described as a “man of valor” and the king’s right-hand man. He had recently led the Syrian troops to victory in battle. The writer of the book of kings attributes the victory to God, but in the Old Testament the logic of the Hebrew belief in radical monotheism attributed everything that happened to God. Sometimes our theology gives God a bad reputation.

But Naaman the heroic general has leprosy. A problem. Generals with leprosy do not long remain generals. Who wants to be led in battle by a general with leprosy? Big time bad luck. The king, as we shall see, had a big investment in his general getting well.

We do not know how long Naaman kept it hidden, but he could not keep it hidden at home—which is where the Hebrew slave girl comes in.

## II

She had been captured in a raid across the border and taken back to Syria to be a slave girl, maid servant to Naaman's wife.

The young girl had been privy to what Naaman had been trying to hide. How would you have responded to your captor's affliction? Gotten down on your knees and thanked God for justice? Said a little "Praise the Lord"; secretly gloated?

She grew up in a culture that like every culture had its bigotries and fears, and hatred for the nation's enemies. The best of her

Hebrew religion taught otherwise, but it was there. Like the song from *South Pacific*

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,

You've got to be taught from year to year.

It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear,

You've got to be carefully taught.

There are all kinds of ways we are so taught.

But this Hebrew girl did not respond to her culture's teaching.

She had gone to Vacation Bible School. She had learned of the expansive love of God for all people. The character of her God was *hesed*, steadfast love, and compassion.

It's like the song some of us might have sung in our Vacation Bible Schools:

Jesus loves the little children,

All the little children of the world.

Red and Yellow, Black and White,

They are precious in His sight,

Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Seditious little song. And some of us grew up believing it!

So the servant girl went to her mistress and said, “If only my master were with the prophet in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy.” Sometimes our children lead the way.

Naaman’s wife told her husband who went directly to the king. It was his last sliver of hope. The king wasted no time. He sent Naaman to the King of Israel with a royal letter and a camel’s load of silver, gold and fine clothing.

When the King of Israel read the royal letter, he broke out in a cold sweat. The letter read: “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.”

The king freaked out and tore his robes. He immediately saw the request as a pre-text for war: “He knows I cannot heal this man. He’s setting me up. It’s a trick.”

How often we jump to the wrong conclusion about others. There’s got to be an ulterior motive. Everything is reduced to the political level, that is, as a power play. We expect the worst of others’ motives while rarely questioning our own. This generally does not go well.

### III

Enter the prophet Elisha. He had gotten word about Naaman’s leprosy and the King of Israel’s panicked response. He sent word to his king: “Why are you in such a frenzy? Send him to me that he will know there is a prophet in Israel, is a prophet who can heal.”

So Naaman traveled with his entourage on horse and chariot to Elisha’s house. Elisha heard the clatter as they arrived, but did not go out to greet him. No bowing and scraping before this powerful and

important man sent by the King of Syria himself. That may have been the first insult Naaman felt.

Instead, Elisha sent his servant out with a short message: “Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan river, and you will be healed.”

Naaman was not happy. He, a great general, had come from Syria with the King’s own letter. Elisha, he thought, would come out of his house, bow before his eminence, wave his arms, say some magical words and he would be healed. But this insolent prophet wouldn’t even come out of his house but sent his servant with this ridiculous command. *Go wash seven times in the Jordan.*

He had what we’d call in the South a “fit”. “Dip seven time in the Jordan, that Jewish sewer! I’d just as soon take a bath in a septic tank. There are clean beautiful rivers in Damascus. I could have stayed home and washed myself there!” He then wheeled to leave. The command from the prophet violated his sense of dignity, and it defied his rationality.

## V

Enter his servants. They stage an intervention on his behalf. It is a marvel that they would feel the freedom and have the courage to confront their master. That may speak well of how Naaman had treated them through the years.

The servants knew him well. They said:

Father, master, if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? Why not rather wash yourself in the Jordan and be clean?

Yes, they knew he would do something big, dramatic, heroic, something to match his heroic estimate of himself. But this little thing, on command of an insolent prophet? No thanks.

Sometimes that's like us: We would do some great thing for God, but the little daily common things, they don't matter so much. They don't fit our inflated sense of ourselves. Jesus once said, If you're faithful in the little things you will be faithful in the big things.

The words of his servants, however, struck right to his heart. He had been given what A.A. calls “The gift of desperation.” Humbled, he had been given the grace of humility. He went, dipped seven times in the Jordan, and his flesh, the text says, “was restored like the flesh of a little child.”

He had entered into partnership with the Divine. In Jesus’ healing ministry people came to him with their need and any measure of faith. All you need is the faith the size of a mustard seed, he said. Faith as acknowledgment of your need, faith as going to see him, faith as asking for help.

In the mystery novels by Louise Penny, the main character is Inspector Gamache. He says to those in his command that there are four statements that lead to wisdom. The four are:

I was wrong

I am sorry

I don’t know



and

I need help

The last is sometimes the hardest.

Naaman is healed. He returns to Elisha to thank him—that itself a mark of healing—and offered him the treasures he had brought with him. But Elisha said no: “As the Lord lives whom I serve, I will receive nothing!” Pressed again, Elisha still said no. Here’s the second miracle of the story: A preacher refusing money!

Then Elisha sent Naaman the enemy general forth in blessing and peace: “Go in peace”, he said, as the general left for home.

## VI

With whom have you identified in this story? (You can’t pick God!) The slave girl, Naaman, Naaman’s wife, the King of Israel? Elisha? Naaman’s servants? This story touches many surfaces of our lives. Where has it touched yours?

I start here: the heroes of the story are the servants! The servant girl, Naaman's servants. That's the way of the kingdom of God, Jesus said, it's where servants are heroes.

The healing miracle began in the miracle of compassion in the Hebrew girl's heart, a compassion wide and deep enough to care for the health of her captor, and to show God's love to an enemy nation.

There's a wideness in God's mercy

like the wideness of the sea;

There's a kindness in his justice

which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader

than the measure of our mind;

and the heart of the Eternal

is most wonderfully kind.

In Jesus' inaugural hometown sermon he told the story of Elisha's healing of an enemy general as a way of saying that the kingdom of

God was coming to all, not just to Israel. The congregation was not altogether pleased. Some tried to throw him off a cliff. Sometimes the wide mercy feels like a threat.

But let me, as I end, turn to the second turning point in the story: the general's willingness to obey the command of the prophet. Obedience is practically an obsolete word today. Certainly in society; even in the church. With some good reason. Obedience to authority was the defense of the Nazi leaders at the Nuremburg trials. It didn't work. Blind obedience to authority is not a good thing and sometimes a bad thing.

In church we have been told to be obedient to the Will of God for our lives. But talk of the Will of God is sometimes cloaked in mystery; it is some hidden thing we have to find.

But God's will has been made plain as day: Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God. Love your neighbor as yourself, even when your neighbor turns out to be your enemy.

Mark Twain once quipped: “It’s not the parts of the Bible I don’t understand that give me trouble but the parts of the Bible I *do* understand!”

I see your obedience every day at Grace Baptist Church, your daily acts of compassion, your passion for justice and care for those often overlooked. Your desire to increase in the love of God and neighbor, the ways you support our mission and ministry because you believe in it. Some of you try to do this without ever getting caught. But I see it and it inspires me. And God sees it. As you walk the way of God, I hope you feel God’s pleasure.

I love this story because I see you in so much of it. In all the ways we are trying to be God’s people.