

## A Sermon for DaySpring

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*Namaan's Healing*

2 Kings 5

July 6, 2025

A Season of Justice and Peace

In our season of Justice and Peace, we have been walking with Elijah the prophet of Israel. Elijah's life bore witness to his name, "The Lord is my God." Relentlessly promoting faithfulness to the God of Israel, his words and actions brought him into conflict with the followers of the god Baal: the kings, queens, and power brokers who soaked in injustice and callousness to the poor and vulnerable.

Through Elijah, the biblical narrative is making plain how God's ways are in stark contrast to the ways of Baal with real world consequences. Elijah was the first of the prophets, who generation after generation insisted on the importance of worshipping God and God alone and ordering their lives by that worship. What had given as the first commandment—"You shall have no other gods before me"--Elijah embodied in name and action. He was the first of these prophets. He wasn't the last.

The story of Elijah wouldn't be complete without Elisha, his successor. This is true for any great leader or any critical movement. It can never be a one person show. The challenges of this world, Baal's world, are too insipient for one person, one generation, or one moment. If you're in, you gotta be in for the long haul, and you have to hand over the mantle to the next generation.

In 2 Kings 2, Elisha takes the mantle of Elijah and soon demonstrates a kind of power that exceeds even that of his mentor. Elijah demonstrates power over nature and over politics. He shows mercy in the lives of people around him. He helps a widow discover a miracle of oil to stave off indebtedness; he purifies a pot of poisonous stew; he brings back to life a young man who had died. Foreshadowing the miracles and ministry of Jesus, Elisha was this larger-than-life figure, almost god-like, while courageously and compassionately ministering in the name of the Lord of Israel, but he never confused himself with God. He was *almost* larger than life.

So much so that the word about Elisha spread to a most unlikely place, to Damascus, where resided Naaman, the Syrian. Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Syria who had the upper hand on Israel and was always tormenting them. Naaman was a great man with his master and in high favor because he had been victorious. The Bible says the Lord gave him victory, a Lord he did not yet know but soon would. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper.

Various attempts are made to equate the ancient variety of skin diseases called leprosy with modern ailments, but they miss the social and religious force of ancient leprosy. Leprosy, while a medical skin condition, was even more a social condition.

You become less than human. You're unclean. You're a danger and a threat. Put in some modern context, you can't drink from non-leprous water fountains. You can't eat at non-leprous diners. Maybe there's a balcony at the movies for lepers. You can't buy a home in certain neighborhoods. You're an outcast, an outsider, even at church. No matter how high your station in life, as a leper you're less than the non-leprous community. The social station for lepers certainly has a modern expression. I know very well a white church that in the early 1960s decided that if a black skinned person walked in, they would simply stand up, walk out, lock the doors, and shut down the church. This, they believed, was actually a peaceful option. We're not really that long in history from the leprosy of racism.

But let us ask the question: who's really in need of healing in that scenario? Who in that situation actually, really has the disease? It took western white culture a long time, too long to accept it's the white culture, the religion, the structures of society infected with an unclean disease that needed to change, and that change was hard. It still is. But it's possible. It's possible, and it's needed. If the lives of Elijah and Elisha and Jesus, mean anything, they mean that everything about us is submitted to God in worship and obedience in love to the God who is worthy of our worship and our lives. We desire anything in us that needs to be changed to be totally changed, and we're willing to submit ourselves to God for this transformation. Theology calls this sanctification. The ancient tradition calls it theosis. We become holy; we become like God. This is possible, we're assured, but it seems awfully far away. We first just need to start where we are.

Namaan was in Damascus, a long way from God. There, a little girl told Naamaan about a prophet back in Israel who could work wonders and heal his disease. The matrix of social issues is wildly different now than then, yet at its heart, in this story, here is Elisha, the man of God receiving a stranger to God and Israel and offering to him full, wonderful, mysterious healing down at the river. This is a story about transforming grace and healing given freely.

I think at our best, we'd like to read ourselves into this story as an Elisha, faithfully offering God's mercy to the Naamans of the world--to foreigners, enemies, the sick, and broken. Sometimes we are, I suppose. We have the opportunity, over and over, to be his successor and follow his ways to participate and extend God's grace for people in need. Jesus did all the time. We might think of Matthew 25, where he invites us into this life with him. Many of Jesus' miracles and words of healing closely echo Elisha's. We'd like to be the people who do the same in the echo of Elisha and in the name of Jesus. It's a high and holy work—to heal bodies and families and communities—and find healing in the process. What you do for the least of these, you do for me. Sometimes in our neighborliness and national politics we grab hold of those moments. Sometimes we reject the, and whether as neighbors or as

a nation's policies curse the bodies, families, communities that otherwise could have been blessed in beloved community.

We'd like to read ourselves in as Elisha. Like the disciples, we want to be heroes of God's story, but we're probably more like Namaan: we come to God in need of healing of all that is within us, praying someone shows us grace. And even more in the story, Namaan, the general of Syria had been an oppressor of Israel. Namaan, the leper came back to Israel, in hope for healing from the very same people he'd oppressed, knowing he could find it nowhere else. It's quite a story.

Namaan comes for healing to the man of God. Thanks be to God for those like Elisha who receive the Naamans in with grace and mercy, after all he's done to them. This is grace—grace that takes us to the healing waters, if we are humble enough to go. In a prefigurement of baptism, Namaan is told go to the Jordan River, wash 7 times, and you will be healed. And He is not impressed. "That's it?" he says. He complains loudly of this insult, "I've come all this way to this two-bit, so-called prophet of this backwater place Israel." He was angry, and despondent. "I knew this wouldn't work. At the very least, I thought he'd come out to me and stand and call on the name of God and wave his hand around and cure me. I'm going home. If I wanted to bathe, the rivers back home are much better." Namaan, ol' Namaan, always makes it about Namaan who has to be the star of a show about Namaan. But this isn't about Namaan, it's about God, whose mercy keeps extending outward and drawing strangers and enemies inward, drawing those who resist God and oppress God's people to the altar, to the Temple, to the foot of the cross.

All through scripture, Gentiles like Namaan were made part of God's redemption story. At each major junction of Israel's history, a Gentile appears to take part in the covenant history of God and God's people. Abraham encounters the Gentile priest and king, Melchizedek; the masses that leave Egypt in the Exodus consisted of Hebrews and some Egyptians (Ex 12.38); Rahab, the Canaanite converts during the conquest of Jericho; Ruth, the Moabite converts during the period of the judges. David has contact with a number of Gentiles who share faith in the Lord. During the exile, a number of Gentile kings acknowledge the Lord as a powerful God. From the beginning and all the way through, God intends for all the families of the earth to be blessed by Abraham's seed. This promise is brought to fullness in the new covenant in Jesus Christ, when all are made one: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women. (indebted to Peter Leithart, 1-2 Kings, 192)

We are not heroes of this story; we are recipients of the story. Before we are Elisha, doling out God's grace, we are Namaan: wounded, broken, full of a past of wrongdoing and opposition to the way of God, we come full of pomp and pride and Baal and in the end, all we are given, is all we need, is all we have, is grace and the path that grace leads. If we dare to step in and dare to trust. Namaan faced this dilemma. Do I stay where I am and keep my pride and power and disease, or do I follow the path and immerse myself in the way of the child, of the prophet, of the weak and insignificant and the defeated? Is my salvation

actually going to be in a god I thought I had defeated and a way I had denied? This is the challenge Elisha put in front of him.

It's the challenge Jesus put in front of us all. Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest for your souls. Come to me. To *me*. This is no small thing. To come to Jesus is to come to a one who is childlike in a very serious, adult world; childlike in his trust in God and his way of life. He is the way of the poor that confounds the logic of the rich. He is the way of the vulnerable that confuses the way of the secure. It is a strange way, really, a strange way of being in a world of Herods and Pilates and crosses. It is also the way of healing of our souls and communities. To come to him very often is to come by directly confronting our sin, which is heavy-laden. Sin that willful, sin that is inherited, sin in our blind spots. That's how the yoke becomes easy and the burden light.

The way to him is the way in him, is a transformation of grace. Baptism is the sign of this trust. Baptism marks out a new community of worshippers in which the distinction between Jew and Gentile is utterly dissolved. So is the distinction of sinner and redeemed. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are received freely by his grace. Through baptism, we have died and been buried with Christ so that we can walk in new life. Baptism is the sign of salvation in Christ.

At his immersion in the water, Namaan didn't become an Elisha, but he became like a child, and there's no telling from there how his life changed and changed the people around him. The way this story is told, you can't miss this: Namaan—the mighty general who was also sick-- was led to the man of salvation by a child who told him where to find him. In the end, he becomes as a child. At his dipping in the waters, Namaan who was led on this path by a little girl, was made like a little boy. Spiritual healing rarely makes people greater and more powerful; it always makes people more childlike.

The gospel calls out, “Dear Namaans of the world, come home, come to a home you didn't yet know was your home. No matter how long the journey may be, come to your true spiritual home and be healed for your salvation and for of those in your life who will be blessed by you.

May the spirit of Namaan's redemption and of Elijah's strength and Elisha's hospitality and Jesus Christ's love be with us and within us all. Amen.