

Overcoming Pride

Lesson Text: 2 Kings 5:1-15 **Devotional Reading:** Mark 7:1-5, 14-23. **Background Scripture:** 2 Kings 5.

TIME: between 852 and 848 B.C. **PLACES:** Syria; Samaria; Jordan River; Samaria

2 Kings 5:1-15

Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

² Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

⁴ Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. ⁵ "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. ⁶ The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

⁷ As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

⁸ When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. 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."

¹¹ But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

¹³ Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" ¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

¹⁵ Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant."

TODAY'S AIM

- **Facts:** to show the circumstances of Naaman's condition and his pride.
- **Principle:** to explain that pride gets in the way of God's solutions for us.
- **Application:** to exhort students to adopt a humble attitude toward God as they seek answers from Him.

INTRODUCTION

Sinful pride grows out of a self-centered attitude and often leads to exaggeration and deception in attempts to mislead others. None of this pleases God.

Proverbs 21:4 says, "*Haughty eyes and a proud heart—the unplowed field of the wicked—produce sin.*" Proverbs 6:16-19 lists seven things the Lord hates, and the first thing on the list is a proud look. Proverbs 16:18 states, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*" This is certainly something we should

consider.

People often have referred to the 1960s as the "Me Generation." But that label could be attached to every generation of humanity, for pride knows no limits or restrictions of time or geographical boundaries. In our lesson today, we will see pride manifest itself in the thinking of Naaman, a Syrian military commander afflicted with leprosy. His pride almost resulted in his rejection of the only remedy for his condition.

Some of Naaman's servants, however, had the courage to speak up and call attention to the folly of his behavior. To Naaman's credit, he was willing to swallow his pride and obey the Lord's word as conveyed through His prophet.

LESSON BACKGROUND

The story of Naaman occurred during the ministry of the prophet Elisha. At this point in the history of God's people, the twelve tribes had been divided into two separate nations for a little less than a hundred years. Elisha's ministry was primarily to the northern kingdom (usually referred to as Israel), where Baal worship had made serious inroads because of the influence of King Ahab and his pagan wife Jezebel.

Just to the northeast of Israel was the nation of Syria, or Aram. King Ben-hadad I was ruling Syria, while Jehoram ruled in Israel.

Syrian's Plight (2 Kings 5:1-5)

Four phrases at the beginning of this chapter describe the importance of the man Naaman. First, he was the captain of the army of Syria. This means he was the highest ranking officer, the supreme commander of the king's military force and directly accountable to the king himself.

Second, Naaman was "*a great man*." He was esteemed as a prominent person in the nation and enjoyed a high social standing among the people. Third, he was highly regarded by his master. He was lifted high in the eyes of the king. He was such a capable military leader that the king regarded him as one of the most valuable members of his administration.

It is significant that the reason Naaman was highly regarded by the king was the way God had used him. This is another reminder of the fact that the Lord has control over all the nations of the world, Isaiah put this in perspective: "*Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing*." (Isa. 40:17). Finally, Naaman was "*He was a valiant soldier*" (2 Kings 5:1). This refers to his courage and the forceful strength with which he handled himself.

1. What important position did Naaman hold, and what does each description indicate about him (2 Kings 5:1)?

All these magnificent truths were tempered by the fact that Naaman had leprosy. There was no cure for leprosy. It was a disease that ranged anywhere from white spots on the skin to running, open sores and in some forms resulted in the gradual loss of fingers and toes and other parts of the body. At its worst, it gradually rotted away the body until the person died.

In Israel he would have been separated from other people, but in Syria and other nations this was not practiced. He therefore continued his military leadership. It was on a military raid into Israel that a young girl was captured and given to Naaman's wife as a servant (v. 2).

2. What marred the exalted position and reputation that Naaman enjoyed?

Apparently Naaman and his wife were kind to this young girl, for in the time of her master's distress, she became concerned for his welfare. Perhaps it was one of those momentary thoughts put into words, or perhaps she had been thinking about it for a while. In any event, one day she said to her mistress, "*If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.*" She was referring to Elisha, whom she had heard of before her captivity.

Perhaps we can allow our imaginations to put together a conversation between Naaman and his wife that evening. "Honey, you will not believe what my little servant girl said to me today." "Really? What was that?" "She said she wished you could be with the prophet who lives in Samaria, because he could heal you of your leprosy." "Oh, come now. Some things just are not possible!" "No, she was very serious. The girl is convinced that if only you could consult the prophet (Elisha) that is in Samaria, he would recover (cure) you of your leprosy. Maybe you should think about it." Perhaps Naaman had trouble sleeping that night. Could such a thing happen?

The next morning Naaman told the king what the young girl had said. What was Naaman's attitude when he reported to the king? Was he merely passing on information? Was he hoping to be given permission to travel to Samaria? He must have had a measure of hope in his heart, and the person who could do something about it was his master, the king.

3. What seemingly insignificant person suddenly became significant to Naaman and his king (vs. 3,4)?

The little girl in this story is a prime example of sharing one's faith. She could not provide the healing Naaman needed, but she could point him to the one who could.

Often in the church we are told to "go and tell" the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Sometimes we may not be able to teach someone who is searching or to provide all the answers to a lost neighbor or friend. But we can point them in the right direction. Instead of "go and tell," evangelism sometimes is summed up in the words "come and see" (cf. John 1:46). All of us can invite someone to come to church where they can meet the One who can cleanse, heal, and forgive.

4. People face many needs in life. The ultimate answer to life's most pressing needs are found in God. How can you be used to point people to the God who gives help?

The phrase "*By all means, go*" conveys a sense of urgency, as if to say, "Indeed, or by all means, go!" In speaking these words, the king of Syria indicates his concern for Naaman's health. The king, too, respects this "*valiant soldier*" (v. 1) and values his skill on the battlefield.

The king's attitude was probably similar to that of people today who are willing to try any treatment for a life-threatening illness in the hope that something might work. He made all the necessary preparations, therefore, to send Naaman to Samaria, Israel's capital.

We must remember that all this was happening because of something said by a young slave girl who was convinced that Elisha had supernatural power to heal Naaman. By this time in his ministry, Elisha had performed a number of miracles. Apparently, word about him had spread. He had, for example, cured a large pot of stew that had poisonous gourds in it (2 Kings 4:38-44). Prior to that he had raised a young boy back to life (vs. 32-37) and had increased a widow's last small amount of oil, making it possible for her to get out of debt (vs. 1-7).

Based on this young girl's testimony, the king himself sent Naaman on his way to Samaria to be healed. Naaman took a generous gift for the healer. It included ten talents of silver (estimated by some as being equivalent to 750 pounds), six thousand shekels of gold (approximately 150 pounds), and ten changes of clothes.*

It was a gift fit for a king, for Ben-hadad was sending his letter to the king of Israel rather than to the prophet. In the letter he expressed the expectation that the king would heal Naaman (5:6).

This was, of course, the wrong person, and it caused the king of Israel to panic (v. 7). Somehow Elisha heard of Naaman's arrival and sent word for him to be sent to his house instead (v. 8).

**In the ancient Near East, it is common to provide some kind of payment whenever certain services are requested of a prophet. This is characteristic of pagan prophets more than it is of the Lord's prophets, as illustrated by Elisha's later refusal to accept any such offer from Naaman (2 Kings 5:15, 16). But Naaman, coming from a pagan background, believes that such a payment is part of the "protocol" when dealing with a prophet.*

5. What did the Syrian king do after hearing Naaman's report (v. 5)?

Prophet's Proposal (2 Kings 5:9,10)

Naaman had traveled in a chariot pulled by horses, probably an impressive vehicle worthy of his position and stature. Soon he arrived at Elisha's front door, and surely Naaman's heart was filled with anticipation and excitement. As he waited outside, Elisha sent a messenger with some instructions for him. The instructions were simple and were accompanied by a specific promise. Naaman was to go wash in the Jordan River, putting himself under the water seven times. After doing so his flesh would be fully healed.

The fact that Elisha simply sent a messenger out to Naaman reveals that he was not overly awed by the presence of Naaman. Here was the second most powerful man of Syria at his door, but he did not even bother to go out personally to greet him. The man wanted to be healed, and Elisha had a simple means by which that could be accomplished. The important thing was to get the word to him so that he could follow through and be healed.

6. What did Elisha instruct Naaman to do (vs. 9,10)?

Naaman's Pride (vs. 11, 12)

This is where the pride of Naaman becomes obvious. Upon receiving the message from Elisha, he became very angry and gave two reasons for his reaction. First, he expected some type of ceremony worthy of a man of his stature. How dare that prophet send a mere servant with a message instead of coming out himself and calling ceremoniously on his God! He should have waved his hands over the leprosy and performed a miraculous healing himself. Instead, he had sent a messenger!

Is it not amazing to observe the attitudes of self-importance on the part of many who are idolized by the masses? One particularly sad trend these days is the idolizing of young entertainers who are not able to handle the attention maturely. We hear repeatedly of their ruin due to the fame and fortune that comes their way. Many of them could and should be role models for those who follow their careers, but instead we read of their turn to lives of promiscuity, extravagance, and abnormal expectations of attention.

Those of us who know the Lord should remember that *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows"* (James 1:17). When we are unusually blessed, we must recognize that God is the cause and that we do not deserve any credit for ourselves. We must keep a balanced perspective even when He does see fit to give us fame and fortune.

The second reason for Naaman's anger was the fact that he had been told to wash in the Jordan River. It was not nearly as clean and clear as the rivers in his homeland. It was an insult to be told he should use that river for his cleansing. He deserved much better! Did not this prophet, Elisha, realize who he was?

7. How did Naaman respond, and what were his reasons for doing so (vs. 11,12)?

Satan is a master at using pride to thwart the purpose of God in the lives of Christians. Pride in possessions causes some to think they should automatically be in positions of authority and control in the church. Pride in a good knowledge of the Bible can cause a Christian to look down on and question the faith of a fellow Christian who has not reached that same level of knowledge.

Pride in position can cause a church leader to "lord it over" others in the church and become authoritarian and even abusive. Pride keeps Christians from serving in some of the so-called "menial" tasks such as assisting in work projects, going into the inner city, or taking part in a short-term mission trip. In each case, pride has caused one to look out for self first.

8. Pride apparently caused Naaman to balk at the suggestion of dipping in the Jordan River. How does pride keep us from following God's will today?

Servants' Counsel and Naaman's Compliance (vs. 13,14)

Thankfully, Naaman had servants with him who could view the situation more objectively than he could. They approached him and addressed him tenderly and respectfully, referring to him as their "father." They pointed out to him that if he had been asked to do some great, demanding deed, his healing would have been worth whatever effort that would take. Why not, then, try something that was such a simple act of obedience?

We must give Naaman credit for at least being teachable. He listened to his subordinates and acted on their recommendation. One of the marks of pride is an unwillingness to listen to the ideas of others when they are different from our own. Sometimes other people actually do have good ideas, and maybe even better ones than ours!

Having put aside his pride, Naaman went down into the Jordan River and dunked himself under the water seven times, just as Elisha had said he should. God then honored his humble spirit and completely and instantly healed him of his leprosy (v. 14). Naaman might well have felt a tinge of shame after hearing his servants' reasonable argument, but now he certainly must have had a totally different spirit. Not only did God cleanse him of his disease, but He also restored his skin to the freshness and purity of a little child's.

It is not certain whether there was a special significance to washing seven times. Seven is a number of completion or perfection in the Bible, and some consider it to be a symbolic number of the covenant God had with Israel. What is important is to see that God gave specific instructions that had to be followed completely if healing was going to take place. This is a good reminder to us that we must not pick and choose which parts of God's Word we are going to obey to the exclusion of other parts. Rather, we must obey completely.

9. How did Naaman become convinced he should do what Elisha had said, and what was the result (vs. 13, 14)?

Naaman's Confession (v. 15)

The once-proud Naaman was now deeply grateful to the prophet who had not even bothered to come out to address him. This time, however, Elisha was present. It was probably the Spirit of God who had directed Elisha to remain out of sight the first time, because God was dealing with Naaman about his pride. God knew how to get Naaman to reveal his attitudes to himself, and the Lord then gave him the grace to change them. It all resulted in a miraculous healing and led to a man with a wholly different perspective about himself. Naaman is a different man—both on the outside and on the inside.

The inward change in Naaman is reflected in his words to the man of God, Elisha: "*Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.*" We noted in last week's lesson that Ruth made a kind of "Good Confession" in her declaration of commitment to Naomi's God (Ruth 1:16). Naaman now makes a similar statement.

Notice that Naaman is not merely adding the God of Israel to the list of gods that he already worships. Rather, he is acknowledging that *"there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel."* Earlier, Naaman had referred to the Lord as Elisha's God (v. 11). Now he is affirming, like Ruth, that "your God is my God."

10. What happened after Naaman saw he had been completely cleansed (v. 15)?

CONCLUSION

In our lesson this week we have learned that God often does not work the way we want Him to or when we expect Him to. Sometimes God's answers are very close to us, and all it takes is simple obedience to bring them to pass in our lives. In order to obey, we have to shed our pride and accept God's plans for us even when they do not make sense. Ultimately, He always has the best for us.

PRAYER

Father, we confess how often pride has kept us from a closer walk with You. Break down our self-made walls this day in Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down,