

Seven Ducks In A Muddy River

Scripture: II Kings 5:1-14

Introduction

1 - 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 from Aram had gone out and 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 any of 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.

The events in today's text took place in ancient Israel when Elisha was God's prophet somewhere around 600 B.C. You may remember from our Walk Through The Bible conference that these were the days when the promised land was divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. It was a time of political and moral decline and because of this, the people of God were oppressed by their enemies, particularly Syria. Joram was king in Israel at this time. He was the son of the wicked King Ahab. And...Elisha had succeeded Elijah as God's prophet. Now, in listening to a good story it sometimes helps to close our eyes and let the story teller sort of "draw" the story in our imagination. So this morning, close your eyes and try to picture the following events in your mind's eye. Take yourself back thousands of years to these days when ELISHA, the prophet of God, walked the earth. Our story opens up in DAMASCUS---the capitol of the nation of Syria. And this is a special day! For today there is a PARADE! Now, in this period of history, there was of course no TV - and very little entertainment - so a parade was a very BIG DEAL! Everyone came out to see them. And this day is no exception. The whole town is out excitedly lining the streets. You can almost feel the anticipation in the air as the parade begins. All of Damascus is decorated for the event-especially the parade route-there are flowers and flags everywhere. Vendors are selling fruits and sweet meats. Children are giggling with excitement and LISTEN! It's starting! Down the cobbled streets of Damascus comes the victorious SYRIAN ARMY in full parade dress! There are chariots and archers and

siege towers and infantrymen and cavalry. And it looks so very impressive! All the soldiers are wearing their equivalent of dress blues! Every shield shines! Every sword and spear sparkle! The troops have obviously spent hours polishing them! Even the horses look sharp for, their tails and manes are braided with colorful ribbons. The army carries with it booty from its victories-chests filled with gold and jewels. And as they pass the king's booth, every soldier salutes in unison. Now, at the head of this impressive column of military might, on a snow white stallion is the man of the hour....The GENERAL who has once again led his army to victory. The Bible describes him in this way: His name is NAAMAN.

He is general of the armies of the King of Syria. He is a favorite-a close friend-with his nation's ruler, King Benhadad. In fact Naaman was a very popular man. Every one liked him! You would too if you had known him. Shining in the sun are the medals NAAMAN has won on the field of battle throughout his career as a man of great courage. Can you picture him as he rides astride that magnificent white steed in the uniform of a general? Notice that, thrown carelessly across his chest and draped over his arms, is a brightly colored sash-just a bit of decoration to brighten his uniform. But you know, wait a minute, take a second look at that sash.

Yes! It is just as I thought! That sash is not carelessly thrown over his uniform. NO! It is tucked in and very carefully wrapped around one of his arms and one of his hands. It is almost as if he is trying to HIDE the arm and hand. Have you got the picture? Okay. You can open your eyes now. We don't want anyone drifting off! Well, the truth is, Naaman WAS hiding something-he was concealing a TERRIBLE fact from the public and maybe even from himself! The scripture says NAAMAN WAS a great and mighty man-BUT-he was a leper! The most feared disease of the ancient world had afflicted him. And because of this terrible truth, Naaman's whole career had come to mean nothing. His fame, his fortune didn't really matter anymore, because of this horrible disease, this curse of leprosy.

It might help us to understand Naaman's predicament by pausing at this point and refreshing our understanding of this ailment. LEPROSY begins with a tiny insignificant blemish that is hardly noticeable. Yet, this bit of evidence shows that there is a disease so devastating that it will consume the whole body, ending in a horrible, slow, humiliating death. The extremities-fingers and toes, ears, nose fall away-the face becomes enlarged. In Naaman's' day it was a horrible way to die.

Today we refer to LEPROSY as Hansen's Disease or HD for short. And doctors now know that the cause of HD's destruction is really very simple. You see HD doesn't in itself cause the extremities to rot and fall away. No, it simply destroys the nerves that cause healthy people to feel pain. The destruction of body tissue comes when wounds are not treated (because the person feels no pain) and they grow infected and rot and fall away. Many lepers go blind because they never have the sensation of discomfort to cause them to blink and wash foreign objects from their eyes. Today we have medication to treat leprosy. In the vast majority of the cases it can be arrested in the early stages. But in NAAMAN'S day....in NAAMAN'S day....to get leprosy was to die. So do you see how NAAMAN must have felt? Thanks to this illness, his achievements in life, his popularity with the people and the king, didn't really matter any more.

Sermon

Now, one prerequisite for a story to be truly GREAT is that it has to have lessons. It has to be able to teach us something about life and this story more than fills this requirement. There is much we can learn from this chapter of Naaman's life and the first is this:

1. In a very real sense all people are in the same predicament as NAAMAN.

Think about it. What made Naaman's life suddenly become futile? What made his vast achievements suddenly seem worthless? DEATH did! Suddenly his life was about to be over and since hearses don't pull U-Haul trailers-the things you gain in this life don't mean much.

King Solomon may have been the first to realize this. He discovered that, thanks to death, there is nothing in this life that lasts. Listen to his words from ECCLESIASTES: "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and reservoirs. I owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done, and what I had toiled

to achieve, everything was meaningless, SO I HATED LIFE, because the work that is done under the sun is meaningless...a chasing after the wind. Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs." You see, since DEATH ends life, then the achievements of life tend to lose their meaning when we realize that death is approaching. Maybe that is why we fear death so intensely. A pastor once told of visiting a very seriously ill man in a local hospital. The sick man said that his doctors told him that he was "pre-terminal" which evidently isn't quite terminal-yet.

The pastor thought, "Can't that really be said about everyone? Aren't we all "pre-terminal?" Well, we are! Because of our sin all of us are under a curse. We all face a sentence of death. I hope you are getting my drift here-all of us are under a curse just as much as NAAMAN was. Listen to Galatians 3:10 : "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse for it is written,

'CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT CONTINUE TO DO EVERYTHING WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW.'" In other words, everyone who cannot be perfect---sinless in thought word or deed---is under a curse-and that includes everyone! As Romans 3:23 and 6:23 say, "ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." and "The wages of sin....the curse of sin....is death." So think of it this way: Write the obituary of your life. List the achievements and honors won. They may fill an entire column of the WASHINGTON POST. But since the last line of the obituary must say, "This person was a sinner" and because the consequence of sin is death, all those earthly achievements mean nothing. We are all afflicted-cursed-by sin. We are all in a very real sense infected with a "disease." So, there can be no honors won, no money gained, no position earned that can make up for this horrible post script to life: we are sinners. The only thing that gives life real meaning is a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Only in this relationship can we find a cure for sin's curse, victory over death itself. Well, back to our story. Naaman, although he was a great man was a leper and because of that his life suddenly means nothing. In verse 2, the scene shifts from the streets of Damascus to the intimacy of Naaman's home. On a previous military conquest, the marauding band of Syrians had captured a Hebrew girl and she had been given to Naaman's wife as a household servant. I think this young girl and Mrs. Naaman had grown close. Their conversation might have sounded like this: Mrs. Naaman says, "My husband is a good man. He has received many honors. The king loves

him dearly. We have everything in life that we could want and more but....(And then tears begin to stream down her face)...but you know he is a leper. I would give anything if something could be done because life doesn't mean anything to us anymore." Then the servant girl from Israel replies, "Mrs. Naaman, back home we worship Jehovah, the TRUE God. And I wish that my master, Naaman could go there. There is a prophet in Samaria named ELISHA. He would heal him of his leprosy-I know he would! The God I worship has that kind of power. So, Mrs. Naaman excitedly tells her husband. And for once in a long time Naaman has hope. He goes to his close friend, King Benhadad and says, "Ben (they were very close) Ben, do you know anything about the king of Samaria? I believe his name is Joram."

King Benhadad replies, "Well, sure I do, Naaman. I met him last month at the King Convention in Joppa." And Naaman tells his friend, the king, of this prophet, ELISHA, whom they say can cure leprosy and of his desire to go there and be cured. Benhadad says in essence, "No problem, Naaman! I will write a letter to this King Joram and tell him to have you cured!" The scripture says that Naaman takes this letter and, along with it gifts: ten pounds of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold and ten changes of raiment or ten new outfits: ten new Ralph Lauren suits from Nordstroms or ten new complete outfits from THE GAP. All of these were gifts-presents for King Joram. Apart from the clothes the value of these gifts exceeded \$100,000. So Naaman's gift-laden caravan travels south, past the snow-covered peak of MT HERMON, and through the valley of Jezreel and to the hill of Samaria to the fortress city where Joram, KING OF ISRAEL lives in an ivory palace. This mighty man of valor, GENERAL NAAMAN walks into the very presence of King Joram and presents his credentials from his King Benhadad. Joram reads the letter. It probably read something like this: Dear King Joram, This is my General Naaman. He has leprosy. I want you to cure him. Very truly yours, King Benhadad of Syria. Now, how does Joram respond? Well, verse 7 infers that he is terrified!

And in those days if you were terrified, you tore your clothes to shreds (which is why clothes made such an appropriate gift at times like this). And Joram ripped away! He goes aside to his servant so that NAAMAN cannot hear and as he rips he says, "What am I to do?! This King....this hotshot....sends me a leper to heal? Who does he think I am? Am I God to kill and make alive? I can't do this! (RIP RIP RIP)

Oh-wait a minute....I get it! This King Benhadad is a shrewd one! He is still mad about our army defeating his back in 1 Kings chapter 20! He is trying to pick a quarrel. He wants some excuse to bring his armies against me!" Well the Bible says that Elisha heard of the king's distress and so he sent word to King Joram not to worry-to quit tearing his T-shirt. In verse 8 He says, "Send Naaman to me. Let him come to me and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel. He will find that there is a living God." So, off goes NAAMAN to find the house of ELISHA, following the directions given to him by King Joram. I can picture in my mind's eye NAAMAN leading his entourage through the narrow streets thinking, "This fellow I am going to see....what's his name? Elisha? Well, he surely doesn't live in the best part of town. He must not be anybody-I can't even find his place." But finally, several low income areas later, they arrive in front of Elisha's humble abode. Now picture this scene. Naaman is perched proudly atop his white stallion and with his nose held high in the air, and he says. "Servants! Knock on the door and tell this ELISHA that I am here-NAAMAN, GENERAL OF THE ARMIES OF SYRIA-I am here to be healed!"

So, Elisha's servant hurries inside with the message. Naaman waits for this prophet of the God of Israel, ELISHA, to come running out, bowing and groveling to greet him and invite him in, paying him the proper respect due to a man of his stature. But instead, to NAAMAN'S surprise, the servant returns with another message: "General Naaman, sir, Elisha said for me to tell you to go wash seven times in the Jordan river and you will be made whole."

Now think about it. The instructions from Elisha to Naaman were plain, simple, very direct, no way to misunderstand them. Go dip yourself (or duck yourself) seven times in the Jordan river on your way home and you will be healed. And this part of the story contains a second truth, another life lesson for us.

2. You see, in the same way that ELISHA's cure for NAAMAN's leprosy was simple....God's cure for our sin is simple.

It is not hard to become a Christian. There is no complex mathematical, philosophical, or psychological process that you have to go through to in order to be healed of the curse of sin.

To become a Christian, all you have to do is follow the guidance of Romans 10:9 : "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your hearts that

God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." Confess....believe...be saved! Simple...much like Elisha said to Naaman...Go....dip....be cured! EASY TO UNDERSTAND! So direct-so basic-that a child can understand and respond. Even people who have never heard the Gospel can grasp its truth and come to a personal relationship with GOD. The film, AMISTAD, tells the true story of a shipload of African men and women who, while on the way to be sold into slavery, overpower their abductors and take control of the ship. They are re-captured and taken to America for trial. Former President John Quincy Adams becomes their defense lawyer. One of the defendants is understandably bitter about his abduction. Hate seethes out of his very being but one day he is given a copy of the Bible by abolitionists who come every day to pray at the window of his cell. The Bible is of course in English and so this man cannot read it. But by simply looking at the pictures of Jesus' birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection-this illiterate man decides to give his life to God. He experiences rebirth and his bitterness disappears. He becomes a loving gentle, Christlike person who very clearly reflects the humility of our Lord, Who "...was oppressed and afflicted, yet did not open His mouth..." (Isaiah 53:7) One of my favorite scenes in the movie is when, shortly after his conversion experience, this man is walking to the courtroom and he looks to his left and sees above the houses the tops of three ship's masts and their cross beams that look just like the illustration he has just seen of the crosses on Calvary. And he smiles, remembering Jesus' death on his behalf. I share this to point out that God made it so simple for us to become Christians that you don't even have to be able to read in order to understand and respond to Jesus' death on our behalf. It is easy to become a Christian and receive eternal life.

Well, what was NAAMAN'S response to HIS simple cure? Verse 11 records that he responded with anger! His ears could scarcely believe what he had just heard. I can imagine he was thinking, "Where is this prophet? BUSY??? He did not even come out to meet me! He sent some measly servant to tell me to dip seven times in the muddy Jordan?! So in great rage Naaman wheeled that horse up and does a "Lone Ranger" imitation and then careens back down that street thinking, "Wait until Benhadad hears about this! He will avenge this insult!"

Late one night Dr. Leo Winters, the highly-acclaimed Chicago surgeon, was awakened by the phone. A young boy had been tragically mangled in a late-night

accident. And the wounds were such that Dr. Winters' hands were possibly the only ones in the city or maybe even the whole region skilled enough to save the boy. The quickest route to the hospital happened to be through a rough area of the city, but with time such a critical factor, the doctor felt it was worth the risk. He almost made it through the neighborhood...almost....then, at a stop light, his door was jerked open by a man in a grey hat and a dirty flannel shirt. "I've got to have your car!" the man screamed, pulling him from his seat. Dr. Winters tried to explain the gravity of the situation, but the man was not listening. He sped off in Winters' car. The doctor wandered for over 45 minutes before finding a phone. When he finally got a taxi and made it to the hospital, over an hour had passed.

He burst through the doors and into the nurses station but the nurse on duty only shook her head. It was too late. The little boy had passed away 30 minutes earlier. "His dad got here before he died." The nurse told him. "Please go and see him in the chapel. He is awfully confused. He could not understand why you never came." Without explaining Dr. Winters walked hurriedly down the hall and quietly entered the chapel. At the front knelt the huddled form of a weeping father, in a GREY HAT and a DIRTY FLANNEL SHIRT....he was the same man who had stolen the doctor's car. And, in so doing, he had tragically pushed from his life the only one who could help his son. Well, Naaman was about to make the same mistake. In riding off in a rage he was about to push from his life the only one who could cure him of leprosy. Now, let's try to deepen our understanding of what just happened by considering two questions:

a. First of all, why do you think Naaman was so angry?

Well, one reason was because his pride had been injured. He didn't like the way ELISHA treated him. He thought "I am a great man. I shouldn't be treated that way." Naaman wanted to be treated as a great man who just happened to have leprosy. But Elisha treated him as a leper who just happened to be a great man. But Naaman was also angry with the cure itself. Verse 12 infers that he thought, "The Jordan? That bug-infested, muddy, slow-moving river???? It just runs from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. It is slow, filthy, sluggish. Why back home in Syria, we have beautiful clear mountain streams-the Abana and the Pharpar. If it is dunking that cures me, why can't I go there?" Naaman was mad because he thought he had a better way to be cured than was offered by Elisha. And you know, there is a lot of this same attitude going around today! More and more

people say that Jesus is NOT the only way to God....and that to believe this is to be an intolerant, narrow-minded, spiritual bigot. You see, we live in a world where there seems to be endless options in virtually every arena of life. And people expect there to be options in the religious arena as well. But there aren't! Jesus wasn't kidding when He said, "I am THE way and THE truth and THE life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." As Peter said in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men where by we can be saved." The hymn text for "NOTHING BUT THE BLOOD" must have been inspired by the healing of a leper like Naaman for it draws this parallel between ours and Naaman's situation so very clearly. Remember it's words? "What can wash away my sin? What can make me WHOLE again? NOTHING----NOTHING---but the blood of Jesus!" Okay-second question:

b. Why do you think Elisha treated Naaman that way?

I mean why not go out and pay him a little respect? Well, I think acted like this because he wanted Naaman to learn about the power of the TRUE GOD. He wanted this man to learn that the cure he would receive was not in anything ELISHA would do. The cure came from the LIVING GOD. You see, Elisha knew how Naaman would expect to be cured. The SYRIAN MAGICIANS would have worked all manner of mumbo jumbo to cure his leprosy. So Elisha wanted to teach Naaman that God's cure is not a result of man's achievements. And today-salvation is based on the same principle. We are not cured of our sin by anything we do or accomplish. We are cured by our faith in God's achievement on the cross. I also think Elisha wanted to give NAAMAN an experience of faith. Think of it...you are infected with a deadly disease and are told to cure yourself by immersing in a filthy germ laden river. It doesn't make any sense...and usually faith doesn't either. As Philip Yancey says, "Faith is believing something in advance that will only make sense in reverse."

Well, Naaman would have died of leprosy if it were not for some loving servants who had the guts to stand up to their master and question his actions. Verse 13 says that they stopped Naaman and said in essence, "Wait a minute, General Naaman. Cool off and think for a second or two. If this ELISHA had asked you to do a difficult thing, you would have done it, wouldn't you? If he had asked you to crawl on your knees the 150 miles back to Damascus in penance, you would have done it. If God had asked you to hide in a cave on Mt. Hermon for three years

eating nothing but grasshoppers and wild honey and pray eight hours a day you would do that General, wouldn't you? But instead of asking you to do something difficult, he has asked just a simple thing....go dip seven times in the Jordan River. It's even on your way home! Don't you think it is reasonable...he asks such a simple thing....why not give it a try?"

And then Naaman demonstrates one reason people admired him so. He cooled off and showed good judgement and said, "Yes." So, he rode to the banks of the Jordan River on that magnificent stallion. He looked down at the slow-moving muddy water and shook his head probably thinking,

"I can't understand it but this prophet of God said to do it so I will." Now, let's look closely at what happened next...and note three things:

- Naaman got down off his horse.
Now remember, Naaman was a general. When other soldiers walked....he rode! But he got down off his horse. And you know that is the first step to God. We have to humble ourselves. We have to get down off our "high horse"and admit in all humility that we are a sinners like everyone else on this planet. We must get down on that level ground before the cross....and admit our sin-because IT'S NOT ANYTHING WE ARE THAT GRANTS US SALVATION.
- The next thing that happened was NAAMAN took off his medal-laden uniform.
And when we come to God, for the cure for our sin, we must lay aside all our credits and achievements, all our virtues and righteousness-everything that we say makes us good and admit that none of it is even close to being good enough. As Isaiah 64:6 says even "...our RIGHTEOUS deeds are like filthy rags." So we come to the God-with nothing in our hands because-IT'S NOT ANY THING WE DO THAT GRANTS US SALVATION.
- And then...Naaman walked into the water in obedience.
He ducked under once-nothing happened. He ducked a second time-nothing happened. A third time. A fourth time...still nothing. A fifth time- "Maybe this was not such a good idea!" A sixth time----still nothing. A seventh time...and this time...when Naaman came up the Bible says his flesh was restored and his skin became clean and soft like that of a baby. Do you know how clean babies smell? Well, Naaman was the only person in history to get to smell like

that as an adult! Naaman lost his pride and then he lost his leprosy! Isn't that great!?

Invitation

Now, I wonder? Is it possible that there are some of you here this morning that have not been cured yet? You are still suffering from this curse of sin, this "disease" that ends life and makes it's achievements futile. If so, then listen. Don't make the mistake NAAMAN almost made! Don't push away the only cure there is. In humility right now. Admit your sin to God. Ask Jesus to forgive you and to be your Lord. Remember, it's not who you are, it's not what you do; it is simple faith in what Jesus has done that you are cured!