

II Kings 5:1-15
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Hampton Baptist
Charles R. Smith

"Finding God in the Ordinary"

Barry Luppin was just twenty-six when a rare nerve disease sent him into the world of silence. Unable to pursue the law career he had planned, he drifted aimlessly for eight years, remembering beautiful music and the voices of loved ones, and bemoaning his deafness. Then he determined to "put his chin up and fight." He learned to read lips and went into the auto leasing business. The business prospered into a multi-million-dollar enterprise. Barry didn't let his handicap keep him from normal work. When a customer called, his secretary picked up an extension phone. She heard the caller and mouthed the words silently to Barry, who sat nearby. He replied in normal speech. Callers were never told that Barry was stone deaf. "If you have a physical handicap, you can run into a corner and hide," said Barry. "Or you can just try harder than the next man and make a success of yourself." (James C. Hefley, Life Changes, Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1984, pp. 88-89.)

Naaman, the main character in our Old Testament Lesson, *also* had made a good name for himself. He was the chief commander of an army. He was respected by the king and regarded in high esteem by his countrymen because of the battles he had fought and won. The people of the country of Aram, also known as Syria, admired Naaman because of what he had done. He was a great public servant, but something plagued him. He had leprosy, and that dreaded disease prohibited him from ever being fully recognized as a good man. Despite his military accomplishments, the disease tendered him socially unacceptable. Also, lepers were considered *unclean*, and thus isolated from *holy* events.

It was common during Old Testament times that if an illness or predicament was not explainable medically or scientifically, then the person was somewhat ostracized from the mainstream of society . . . no matter the person's track record. Naaman had served his country well, but he still lacked personal contact with people; he still lacked fulfillment. His leprosy was certainly a curse.

In our passage, a servant girl offered a suggestion to Naaman's wife. The servant girl was an Israelite, and she was aware of the great prophet Elisha. She also knew that this great man of God could help Naaman. She suggested that Naaman go and allow Elisha to help him. She said, "If only my master would see the prophet . . ." The effort could be life-changing.

"If only . . ." is a phrase that sometimes haunts *us* as well. "If only we would eat right and exercise, we would be healthier." "If only we listened to our children, and made quality time to spend with them, they would be ok." "If only we would follow God's leadership, then we would have no worries." "If only we would have faith, we could move mountains."

"If only . . ." are statements that curse *past* behavior and undermine *future* activity. We are reminded of our faults with the statement of "If only . . ." and if we don't act, we place pressure on ourselves about the future with "if only . . ." Naaman chose to get busy when hearing the "if only" statement.

Naaman considered the option so greatly, that he went to his King and told him what the servant girl had said. This was an act of faith. Here was a person of no reputation, the foreign servant girl, offering advice to a man of impeccable credentials, and the respected military leader shared this hope of healing with his boss, the king of the land. To complicate matters, Syria was at war with Israel on a regular basis. And even during this time of peace, the relationship between the two lands was strained. Yet Naaman was desperate; he was willing to risk reputation even with the one who issued him his paycheck in order that he might find healing. He wanted to be well.

Sometimes, I think we are like Naaman; we'll try *anything* to make us feel better. We go on crazy diets, buy exercise equipment, listen to unheralded sources. If someone has the cure for what might be

ailing us, whether it is snugly fitting clothes or lack of time to do what is deemed important, we are willing to try the remedy.

The Syrian king evidently *liked* Naaman; he may have also viewed Naaman's well-being as an investment. If his chief military leader was "up to snuff," then their chances of military success were certainly greater. A sports team is going to endeavor to keep its most valuable player happy and healthy. Naaman's king even volunteered to write a letter to the King of Israel explaining Naaman's presence in the kingdom; the letter served somewhat like a passport. So with his king's blessing, Naaman went to unfamiliar territory on a quest to find healing.

But Naaman did not travel lightly. With him, he carried roughly \$75,000 and ten changes of clothes. Whether Naaman thought that Elisha was a high-priced doctor or that Elisha would be impressed with the amount of money, we don't know. One can assume that Naaman was uncertain of what the prophet would ask of him.

Not knowing where to find the prophet and also making sure that the king knew why he was in the country of Israel, Naaman went to the Israelite King first. He delivered the letter from his own king which read, "With this letter, I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

Oops! There seems to have been a mix-up in communication. Naaman was seeking healing from the *prophet*, not the king. Because of the strained relations between the two countries, the Israelite king became angry. He said, "Who do I look like? God? Can I perform miracles? Who does he think he is? Why does he send someone with an incurable disease to me and then asks me if I can heal him? Does he want to start trouble, because if he wants to start it, then I'm sure the one who can finish it. Is he making fun of me? He better not be, because if he is, I'll . . ."

Word of the letter got out into the kingdom, and Elisha, the prophet, sent a note to the king. "Shake it off. No big deal. Send the fellow out to me, and I'll take care of him." So Naaman gathered up his horses and chariots and went to the home of the prophet.

Elisha was expecting him; evidently the man's reputation had preceded him also. Elisha must have been well aware that Naaman was a well-respected man in his own country. He also knew that Naaman was accustomed to the pretentious. He arrived with his horses and chariots to the home of the prophet, but Elisha did not *even* address him personally. Instead, Elisha had his servant give Naaman a directive to wash seven times in the Jordan River.

Naaman was outraged! He was a commander who demanded and deserved respect, yet he had traveled *all* this way and gone to *all* this trouble and had to interact with an enemy king and for what? He didn't even get to see the prophet face-to-face; he was given a piddly suggestion to wash in the Jordan, and the message was delivered by a servant. The gall of this prophet was unreal! Didn't he know who Naaman was? Didn't he know his reputation? Naaman was *insulted* to have taken such effort and then the prophet did not even have the *decency* to *shake* his hand, *say* hello, or even *show* his face. Naaman was also appalled to have received such a *simple* remedy. Naaman had brought wealth, prestige, and even his own king's blessing, but now he was being sent to the Jordan River which was *dirty* and *muddy*. And for this dignified leader, the icing on the cake was that the foreign prophet wanted him to wash not once, but *seven* times. How ridiculous! How could muddy water remove scaly leprous sores from his skin?

Naaman was angry and disappointed too. He said, "Given the prophet's reputation, I thought he would come to me, call on his God, and then wave his magic wand over my body." Naaman expected immediate results. He wanted the magic cure, the instantaneous remedy.

Naaman's focus then turned to the *water*, as if the *water* had the magical power. He declared that the water in *his* homeland was much cleaner than the muddy water of the Jordan River. And then he stormed away.

Naaman had faith in what his wife's servant had stated about this prophet in Israel. His faith was great enough to risk his reputation even to his own king. Yet when the faith process was *not* what he

expected, he wanted to bail out. When the answer was *not* what he wanted to hear, he refused to participate.

If we pause to think about it, dipping seven times in a muddy river *is* an odd request. Why not wash *just* once? I think the continual dipping is a process of faith. To be faithful, one has to *continue* to believe even when there is no *reason* to believe. To be faithful, one has to *continue* to trust God and sometimes even attempt the unbelievable.

But like Naaman, we want a quick fix. If we are sick, we want immediate healing. BOOM! We want to be knocked over with a feather; we want the spectacular to happen to us. And even spiritually, many of us are lazy. We don't like the idea of *working* to improve our walk with God. We prefer the *easy* way out. We expect instant results. When we turn on a light switch, we expect to see light automatically. When we get sick, we want a minimal recovery time. We expect to be back to normal in no-time, because we live in a *convenient* society. Naaman wanted to be healed, but he thought his healing would have a *designer* label; he thought it would be a *special* event.

Faith isn't *immediate*; it takes time. Our faith grows as a seed. Not many plants will grow without sunshine or water. Our *walk* with God also has to have attention in order for it to flourish. We need to spend time with God; we need to read our Bibles, pray, stay in tune with God and try to live our lives like Jesus did. We need to worship and fellowship with other Christians, and allow God to speak through them to us.

Again it was the unlikely words of a servant that prompted Naaman to change. It took the comment of Naaman's servants to cause him to consider the prophet's option of washing in the Jordan seven times. The servants asked him, "If the prophet had asked you to do the *unthinkable*, something *spectacular*, would you have considered it? Is it the *action* itself or the motivation *behind* the action?" For Naaman, it should not have mattered if Elisha told him to wash in the Jordan seven times or to seek the wing of a fly and the tail feather of a hawk. The healing was going to come because of Naaman's faith.

Naaman wanted the remedy to be *unusual*. For us, it is harder to have faith in the *ordinary* times, the day-to-day routine of our lives. But we serve a God of the in-betweens also.

I confess: I often look for God in the beginnings and the endings, in the starts and in the finishes. I tend to seek God in the valleys and peaks, the highs and lows more so than the "in-betweens." Cognitively, I know that God is with me in all situations, whether grandiose or mundane. But unfortunately, it's the *in-between* times when I do not give God enough credit. We look for God in the *huge* events of our lives, but it was God who got us out of bed this morning. God's grace allows our hearts to beat and our lungs to fill with air which God created. Regrettably, for many of us, it is not until our health has *failed* that we remember and are thankful.

Washing in the Jordan River was not glamorous. There was nothing magical about that water; it was *ordinary*. But after a suggestion from one of his servants, Naaman finally consented to *look* for God in the ordinary. And that is where Naaman found God . . . in the ordinary.

Ordinary is not a four-letter word; yet most of what we expect from faith and faith institutions, like churches, is the *extraordinary*. We can become like Naaman, *addicts* to the spectacular.

Naaman's servant named his problem, "If the prophet had asked you to do some *great* thing, you would have done it." But the ordinariness of faithful living is not the attractive. Most of faithful living can be found standing waist deep in the muddy river of life.

Can God be found in the routine, in the in-betweens, in the ordinary? There is an endless quest for God in *only* searching for the spectacular. My prayer is that like Naaman, we all may find God in the ordinary.