

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Gospel Messages on "Little things": A Little Maid - 2 Kings 5

Many years ago, before I started school, my mother used to take me shopping on a Friday afternoon. I never wanted to go but I had no choice in the matter. Often we visited a grocery shop called "*The Maypole*". Needless to say, this was long before the days of super markets or pre-packed goods. In the Maypole there was a counter assistant whose job I envied even in those far off days because, to my untutored mind, it seemed so full of skill and interest. This man and it was the same man every week, used to cut a piece of butter from a large slab and, using two pieces of wood, proceed to pat it into a cuboid shape. The dexterity and sleight of hand with which he performed this task filled my young mind with wonder. I vowed that when I grew up I, too, would be a butter pater in the Maypole. Alas, when I was old enough to apply for the job, not only had it been phased out but my ambitions had turned elsewhere!

I often think that many of us must have to trim our original ambitions, or at least we have to marry them to reality. Today's Bible story in 2 Kings 5 concerns a little girl who certainly had to alter her ambitions for adult life, for she was carried away as a slave when she was very young. The house in which she served, however, belonged to a man who certainly fulfilled his ambitions because he had risen as far as he could go in his chosen career. The man's name was Naaman and he was the leader of the Syrian army. 2 Kings 5:1 gives us a few biographical details. "Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the LORD had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper."

I like to imagine Naaman riding at the head of his all conquering army, taking it back into Syria to receive the cheers and praises of the crowd. He would know then that he had achieved his ambition for he was the chief and could go no further. He was at the top. Verse 1 also tells us that Naaman was no brute soldier because he is described as honourable. This is a remarkable statement because it suggests that God recognised the morality of Naaman and commended him for it. There is a further suggestion that, if awards for bravery were given in those days, then Naaman would have received one, for he was a mighty man in valour. Unfortunately, the sting, in verse 1 is in the tail for it also says of Naaman that he suffered from leprosy, a serious and incurable skin disease. One can imagine how this mighty soldier felt when he realised that he was a leper. His world crumbled for no one could help. Here he was, rich, powerful, and famous with rich and powerful friends at court, yet he had the sentence of death upon him. All his fame and fortune were worth nothing. I suppose the thought had crossed his mind that it was not fair that such a calamity had befallen him. It would certainly cross mine and I suppose many of you listening this morning would feel the same. He had worked his way through the ranks and, just when he could begin to enjoy the fruits of his labour, he found he was afflicted with such a deadly disease. It certainly wasn't fair, though if we are sensible and rational it doesn't take us long to realise that life does not always deal with us fairly. The wonder of the Christian life is that God gives us the grace to bear every problem that we meet. The apostle Paul told some Christians just that, as we can read in 2 Corinthians 12:9 where he writes, "And [the Lord] said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Such an attitude is easier to talk about than to display. We need the grace of God, which, as Paul suggests, is freely available to all who will but trust Him.

If there was any one in our scripture passage who could say with complete confidence that life was not fair, it is the youngster who is the subject of 2 Kings 5:2. "And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman's wife." Here was a young girl, alone in an alien land, enslaved for the rest of her life, yet seemingly she showed no bitterness. What an example for us all, whether believer or unbeliever! She had every right to feel aggrieved but she displayed a very positive attitude. In the midst of this important household was a little, unimportant slave girl; yet she was the means of bringing a message of hope to Naaman. I am convinced that this girl is an object lesson to every servant of the Lord. Far too many of us in the church want to make a name for ourselves, or at least to receive the recognition and applause of our peers. We are not content to be nobodies in order for the Saviour to be glorified. This slave girl was but a link in the chain that connected Naaman to the prophet in Israel, yet such an important and crucial link in the chain. The whole of this healing miracle was set in motion through the open and generous spirit of the little maid from the land of Israel. If you read the passage carefully you will notice from verse 3 that the message of the slave girl was for Naaman to go to the prophet in Samaria in order to be cured. How she knew that it was possible for a leper to be cured by Elisha is a mystery. Luke 4:27 tells us that no other lepers were cured by the prophet, only Naaman. It would seem she had enough faith in the Lord to believe that it would happen.

Verse 4 simply tells us that the message was passed on, up the chain of command, until it reached the king of Syria. Here the first of the errors occurred, for verse 5 begins, "And the king of Syria said, Go to, go, and I will send a letter unto the king of Israel." Please note the destination of the letter. It was sent to the king of Israel not to the prophet who lived in Samaria. Perhaps it was etiquette or diplomacy that caused the letter to be sent to the king of Israel but I would suggest that if we finish verse 5 it will provide us with an insight into a problem that still afflicts us today. "And [Naaman] departed, and took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment." We are still apt to think that money and influence with the rich and powerful is sufficient for every problem. I am well aware that money and resources can do much good in this world, but it is also true that money and influence cannot solve every problem of the human condition.

Naaman soon realised this when he witnessed the response of the king of Israel to the king of Syria's letter. The hapless king ripped his clothes in helpless rage. As far as he was concerned, no living person could cure a man of leprosy. Yet this was the task he had been set by the king of Syria. No bribes or payment of any kind could enable the king to cure the soldier of his dread disease. When it is a matter of our spiritual life and wellbeing, the case remains the same. Money can't buy us love is, I think, a line from one of the Beatles' songs. Such a statement is certainly true where the love of God is concerned because His love is poured out freely to all and can be experienced by any who will pause on the round-about of life and believe in the Lord Jesus. Fortunately for Naaman, another man heard about the king of Israel's action and sent a message to the palace which said, "Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come know to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." We can read those words in the verse 8 of our chapter. From them, we can see that this was where the little maid had told Naaman to go - not to the king of Israel but to the prophet.

What follows must have been amongst the most humiliating experiences of Naaman's adult life. Verses 9 and 10 state, "So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." Just imagine this great and powerful figure, this warrior of international repute, arriving at the door of the prophet, yet the prophet doesn't even bother to come and greet him. It wasn't how Naaman expected or hoped the cure would be effected. Verse 11 describes his response as angry, so angry indeed that he turned away in disgust. He had expected that Elisha would make a fuss of him and do something spectacular. In other words, he wanted to be cured in his own way. The act of becoming a Christian ought to involve us in the recognition that we are all essentially the same. We might be important or rich or influential in society or conversely we might have very little wealth, but have a tremendous sense of our own importance. When we become believers in Jesus, we do so only because of the grace of God. Romans 3:22-23 tell us how we can be made righteous before God: "Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."

When faced with such a statement, we can never expect preferential treatment in our dealings with God just because of our rank in society. Part of verse 11 gives a response which many of us make when faced with the challenge of Christ. "Behold I thought," says Naaman. This is an attitude which, if we are not careful, can lead us away from the pathway of faith. It is not that we leave our brains at the door of the church but Christianity contains truths which must be accepted by faith alone, and not understood by the intellect. Please forgive me for labouring this point, but there is a real danger for us of wanting a faith which contains no miracles or supernatural truth. A few years ago, a group of unorthodox Christians pushed invitations through all of the doors on the street where I live. They were advertising a series of religious meetings in a neutral hall in the town. The opening sentence of the invitation said something like, "Does your church ask you to believe things which you can't believe? If it does, come to our services and you will hear words which you can believe." I never attended any of the meetings but I am sure that whatever they were preaching, it was not New Testament Christianity. Can we really grasp the glorious truth of the mystery of God incarnate? It takes a miracle of grace for us to believe that. The human intellect alone will fail for we need the assistance of the Spirit of God. At the heart of Christianity lies truth which will never be fully understood. That is, the wondrous story of the love of God revealed in and through His only begotten Son who was called Jesus. Let us never reject the truth of Scripture and say as did Naaman "But I think..." The fact that God so loved the world is beyond the mind of man, but it remains true just the same. Fortunately for Naaman, he had servants who were aware of his need and managed to persuade him to try the cure that was suggested by the prophet Elisha. Turn to verse 13 and you can read the advice they gave to their master. "And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? How much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?" If only all of us had such faithful and sensible friends! Far too often, people give to us the words that we want to hear, and not those that best suit our circumstances.

From reading verse 14, we can see that Naaman followed the instructions of the prophet to the letter. No longer now wanting to replace Jordan for the rivers of Syria, he made the journey to its banks and bathed in it seven times as commanded. Often in Scripture, seven is used to depict perfection. That is certainly true in this account of the healing

of Naaman because verse 14 ends with his complete cure "...and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

I think that we must notice that this happened not only because he believed the words of the prophet, but he also obeyed them. We can make great claims about the supremacy of Scripture in all matters to do with faith, but they avail us nothing if we are not obedient to Scripture. We can't claim to be believers in the Lord Jesus if we ignore His commands! We are saved by grace through faith as Paul told the Christians at Ephesus, but we have to show our faith by our works. At least, that is what the apostle James wrote in his letter as we can read in James 2:17-18. Naaman demonstrated his confidence in the words of the prophet by going to bathe in the Jordan.

Quite often we finish the story there because it has a happy ending. We should notice however, how this event changed Naaman. In verse 15 we read, "And [Naaman] returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came, and stood before him: and he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant."

The miracle of healing had not only cured his body but it had changed his attitude and beliefs, for now Naaman was convinced that the true God was the LORD. In his gratitude, he tried to offer Elisha a reward but the prophet felt unable to accept it. What the prophet had done was by the power of God and not his own peculiar gift. Can we notice also from this verse the public way that Naaman declared his new found faith in Jehovah. He stood in front of all his countrymen to make his confession. I do not doubt that this would have been in the tabloids of his day when he returned to Syria.

As we come towards the end of our study of these events which were set in motion by the little maid who waited on Naaman's wife, we should notice 2 Kings 5:17-18. It is rather long but I think it demonstrates an important lesson for us. "And Naaman said, Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering or sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the LORD. In this thing the LORD pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon thy servant in this thing." Notice that Naaman wanted to take back to Syria four sacks of soil from the land of Israel. At least I presume there would be four sacks for the traditional way of loading a mule would be one sack on each side of the mule, making four sacks in total. You might be asking why did Naaman want to take soil back to his own land. It is possible that he thought that the God of Elisha was confined within the borders of Israel so that taking soil to Syria enabled him to provide a congenial dwelling place for a God that was a stranger in Naaman's homeland. Personally, I prefer to think, mainly on the strength of verse 18, that Naaman wanted the soil to remind him of the God who had cured him from his dread disease. When he returned to Syria, he would take up duties which required him to accompany the king into the temple of Rimmon.

He now knew that the Lord was the only true God, but even so the daily round caused him to go where this truth was denied. He wanted the pile of soil from the locality where he had been cured as a reminder or memorial of the time and place.

We as Christians have a precious memorial of the time and place of our redemption. This is sometimes called Holy Communion, or the breaking of bread, but whatever it is known as it involves bread and wine. The Lord Jesus gave to the church this memorial feast so that a witness could be maintained in the world which crucified Him. I would like to end by quoting His words regarding this last request. They are found in Luke 22:19-20. "And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." Christians have to earn a living like every other person. This means entering into commerce and other activities in the midst of an unbelieving world. Amidst this busy round, the Lord gives us the opportunity, on the first day of the week, to set aside time to remember Him. One aspect of this great memorial service is that it reminds us of the Person who died and rose again from amongst the dead that we, His people, might know the power of an endless life. May He help us, in the power of that life, to live for Him day by day. The story of the blessing of Naaman began with a little maid. We may feel that we can only make a little contribution, but under God, that contribution may result in great blessing for others.

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