

Notes on Naaman.

2 Kings 5.

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Evangelists of all kinds have ever delighted to expatiate upon this striking story of grace. There is not therefore a more familiar incident in all the range of Scripture. It would, however, be a great mistake to conclude on this account that we have learned all the lessons it was intended to convey: indeed, the danger is ever to be avoided of supposing that we fully comprehend any portion of the word of God. The expression of a divine and an infinite mind, we shall never on this side of eternity be able to sound its depths, or to scale its heights: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." (1 Cor. 12: 12.) Bearing this in mind, we offer without hesitancy a few notes upon some of the points of this most interesting narrative.

Touching Naaman himself, it is evident that he is a type of man at his best estate; or, to speak more exactly, he is presented first according to the estimate of man, and then according to that of God. Three personal particulars are emphasized. He was a "great man;" he was also a successful man, "honourable, because by him the Lord had given deliverance unto Syria." And he enjoyed a good repute from his own personal qualities — "He was also a mighty man of valour." (v. 1.) These three things in combination give a perfect human picture, and would make their possessor the object of admiration or envy in any worldly circle. Naaman in the eyes of his fellows would have attained the summit of human ambition. The world had nothing left to give to this valiant, successful, and rewarded soldier. He ought therefore, if it were possible, to have been a supremely happy man.

But looking at Naaman from God's point of view, judging him according to God's estimate, what is the result? It is summed up in one word — he is a *leper*. Ah, how sad the contrast between God's thoughts and man's! The one whom men admire, caress, and envy, is pronounced by God to be a poor leper: "For there is no difference: all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3: 22, 23.) The leprosy is the type of the evil in the flesh, which has broken out, and covered the whole man with the pollution and guilt of sin. Naaman thus, as seen of God, is nothing but a poor guilty sinner; and just because he is such, he is the fitting object of God's sovereign grace and mercy.

It is evident, it may be remarked in passing, that we have in the whole narrative a foreshadowing of this dispensation. One sentence, indeed, in the first verse reveals it. It says that the Lord had been working by Naaman on behalf of Syria — Syria, the open enemy of the people of God. This shows the awful condition into which Israel had fallen, and doubtless prefigures the times of the Gentiles. This fact gives a special character to the dealings of God with Naaman as recorded in this chapter.

First, then, we have man as a sinner, and thereon we have the messenger with the glad tidings of salvation. Two remarks may be made upon the second point. First, the messenger of blessing to Naaman. It was a little maid, brought away captive from the land of Israel, and she waited on Naaman's wife. She was therefore, as to her position, humble, and if not despised, yet of no account in the esteem of the world. Thus it ever is in the day of grace. The preacher of the gospel, if he occupy his true place, must ever be lowly and mean in the presence of the pride of man. An apostle could say, "We are made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things unto this day." (1 Cor. 4: 13.) That she was of the chosen people may well prefigure Israel's mission to the Gentiles in a future day. Then, secondly, there is the message. If but simple and brief, it is yet the announcement made by our Lord to the woman of Samaria. The little maid says, "Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy." (v. 3.) The Lord said, "Salvation is of the Jews." (John 4: 22.) The message is one and the same. Nay, it is even Paul's also; for he speaks of the "gospel of God, concerning His Son, who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh," etc. (Rom. 1: 1-4.)

The message was not in vain. Naaman went in and told his lord; and from this point we have traced out the path of a soul from darkness to light. The first effect of the gospel he had heard was seen in his desire to possess the proffered blessing. It met his need in that it held out to him the promise of being cured of his leprosy. But immediately, as is the case with numberless souls, he falls into the error of supposing that he could earn, or purchase, the coveted blessing. Grace is never understood by the natural man. Naaman prepares himself with a letter from the king, ten talents of silver, six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment. Surely, with the influence of a king at his back, and with so much money, he will be successful in his quest. Ah! do we not all remember when we acted on the same principle, only to find ourselves in a worse plight than ever.

The next mistake he makes is in applying to the king of Israel. The king, as the responsible head of God's people, ought to have been the channel of blessing. That he was not, only reveals the nation's state; and that the king did not know where blessing is to be found, showed his own apostate condition. But neither the state of the nation nor the ignorance of the king can prevent the outflow of grace to this poor Gentile. God will glorify Himself in spite, yea, in the midst, of His people's failure.

When Elisha, the man of God, "heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? Let him (Naaman) come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." (v. 8) Elisha in his ministry is a type, in one aspect, of the power of Christ in resurrection. Anointed to be prophet in the room of Elijah (1 Kings 19: 16), the mantle of Elijah, with a "double portion of his spirit," fell upon him from his master, when ascending to heaven in a chariot of fire. (2 Kings 2: 9-11.) He therefore in his ministry became the sole channel of blessing to those whose hearts grace might open in the midst of idolatrous Israel.

In response to the message of the prophet, "Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of Elisha." The leper is bent upon obtaining the blessing; but it is evident that he is not yet in a condition to receive it. Horses and chariots are ever in Scripture the symbols of pomp and pride. Naaman therefore will have to go down, down much lower, ere he

can be healed. He has learned that the influence of the king was of no avail, and now he must be taught that his own rank and grandeur are obstacles rather than aids; for there is no respect of persons with God. But since he has come to the door of Elisha, whatever the state of his soul, the message of salvation cannot be withheld. He was a seeking soul, and such are never repelled. "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." The prophet could not go out to Naaman; for that would have been to falsify their respective positions; but he sends out to him this gracious announcement of the means of healing and cure.

Mark the effect. "Naaman was wroth." And why? First, because Elisha had not treated him with greater personal consideration. Sitting outside in his chariot, he thought that the prophet would have come out to him, and then and there called upon the name of the Lord his God, and moved his hand up and down (see margin) over the place, and recovered the leper. (v. 11.) Naaman as the leper would have Elisha to cure him as his servant. Ah, no! The sinner must take the place of the suppliant — yea, as having nothing and deserving nothing — before he can be a recipient of grace. Besides, who was Naaman, to dictate to the prophet the method in which he should proceed? It is ever the same; the sinner expects to be saved in *his* way.

But Naaman is offended in another respect. Why should he be required to go to the Jordan? Abana, Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, his own country, were far "better than all the waters of Israel" in his estimation; might he not wash in them and be clean? These rivers represent the sources of earth, and thus teach us that Naaman was willing to be cured in a human rather than in a divine way. In other words, like many a poor sinner since, he would be reformed rather than be born again. How many fall into this snare! They will accept the necessity of a moral change, but not of the new birth; for the first makes everything of man, while the last makes everything of God. So Naaman will not be healed on such terms, and he "went away in a rage." (v. 12.)

His servants now step upon the scene. Who they were we know not; but whoever they were, they had divine intelligence. "My father," say they, "if the prophet had bidden thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash and be clean?" (v. 13.) These words — words which need to be used again and again wherever the gospel is preached — were carried home with power. The strong, proud man is now humbled, and he "went down and dipped himself in Jordan seven times, according to the saying of the man of God." (v. 14.) Jordan signifies death; and the meaning of Naaman's act is simply this, that he bowed under the just judgment of God against man's sin; he accepted death as the expression of God's righteous judgment upon the sinner; and in that he dipped himself seven times, we are taught that he did it without reserve — perfectly, if you will — acknowledging to the full God's claims upon him, and bowing before the sentence of death which He had passed upon the sinner. It was the submission of the sinner to the rights of a holy God. As a consequence — for it will be remembered that Elisha acts in the power of Christ in resurrection, *and therefore in the efficacy of His death before God* — grace flows out without let or hindrance. Naaman's flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. He was born again through the water of the Word (which brings death to all that we are as men in the flesh) and by the power of the Holy Ghost. God had met and blessed Naaman in the exercise of His sovereign grace (see Luke 4: 27); for the moment Naaman dipped himself under the water of death, God was free to act according to His own heart of love and compassion.

There follow several distinct evidences of the change which Naaman had undergone. A brief indication of these will suffice. First, "he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came and stood before him." (v. 15.) Formerly, as we have noticed, he remained at the door of the prophet; now the horses and chariot have disappeared, and he stands before Elisha. In other words, he took a low place — for to stand in the presence of another is, in the East, to take the place of a servant. The humility of Naaman thus revealed the change. Secondly, he confessed with his mouth. Having believed with his heart, he now confessed with his mouth the God of Israel. Thirdly, he desired to express his gratitude to Elisha, though the prophet could not, without falsifying grace, receive the blessing at Naaman's hands. Fourthly, he purposes — whatever his ignorance — to be a worshipper; or rather, he is constrained by the sense of what he has received to say that henceforth he would only sacrifice unto the Lord. Lastly, he has an exercised heart. The worship of the true God and of idols cannot co-exist. Naaman at once feels this, that the knowledge and worship of the true God must of necessity exclude all recognition of false gods. Hence he speaks to Elisha of his difficulty in regard to his attendance upon his master in the house of Rimmon. That which makes everything manifest is light; and the true character of the worship of Rimmon thus stands now revealed to Naaman's soul. What can he do? He must go with his master: so much would be his duty. He therefore seeks to pacify his conscience, to soothe his exercised soul, by saying, "The Lord pardon thy servant in this thing." It has occasioned surprise to many that the reply of Elisha should be, "Go in peace." But not for one moment must it be supposed that this contains an implied sanction upon Naaman's entering the house of Rimmon. By no means. The prophet with divine wisdom — which we would do well to imitate — refuses to anticipate the difficulty. He saw that Naaman was exercised; and he knew that if Naaman felt the difficulty before he left his presence, he would feel it much more by the time he arrived in Syria. This answer meant, "Depart in peace; He who has so graciously met you will still be with you, and will give you grace and strength when the need arises." In other words, he committed and commended him to the Lord; and we may be quite sure that Naaman never entered the house of Rimmon.

The incident closes with the sad and lamentable conduct of Gehazi. With a heart untouched by the exhibition of God's grace and power towards this stranger, he only thought how he might use him to his own selfish ends. Covetous, he by deceit and falsehood obtained what he sought, without concern that by his wicked conduct he might be confusing Naaman's conceptions of grace, and thus be dishonouring the God of Israel. His sinful act might make the Syrian think, that after all the gift of God could be paid for, if not purchased. Hence the severity of the punishment which fell upon him. "The leprosy, therefore, of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever." E. D.