

Not What We Imagined

2 Kings 5:1-14

¹ Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵ And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶ He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Humanity's struggle with suffering is grueling. It taxes us when we learn of pain and suffering in the world, it exhausts us to witness the suffering of another, and it is acute when we suffer personally. And when we suffer over an extended period of time, relief becomes our sole desire. In 2 Kings 5, we learn about a strong Syrian man's suffering from leprosy. General Naaman was afflicted with the eruptive skin disease to such a point that he solicited his master, the king of Aram, to help him travel abroad for healing. Understandably, when we experience continual suffering, we will try every possible remedy that might bring comfort.

Ideally, we would like to control when and in what ways relief comes, yet true healing lies in God's providence and not in our schemes.

While the presence of suffering in the world is beyond question, *miraculous* healings are unsettling. Nevertheless, the healing power of God through "the prophet who *was* in Samaria" (v. 3) is the topic of this passage. One fundamental reason we are disturbed about miraculous, or extraordinary healings is that they diverge from what we believe is normative. In the modern world, we *know* that for every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction (from Newton's Third Law). Comprehensible and repeatable cause-and-effect cures are the norm. Where we can examine, recognize, analyze, and define, we can control. And when it comes to human suffering, control is exactly what we want. In this scripture, General Naaman's world was all about command and control. But human command and control are opposing to providence, and Naaman almost missed, twice, the healing power of God. The near misses came when Naaman traveled to the king of Israel to purchase the healing, rather than to the prophet (v. 6), and again when he turned and stormed away in rage, declaring: "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" (v. 12). Naaman's expectation of his healing journey vastly differed from God's providential care. His experience was unlike what he had imagined. And we are not unlike Naaman.

Karl Barth, the Swiss Reformed theologian, challenges our view about how the world works providentially. First, Barth distinguishes God's providence in two spheres—*providentia generalis* (general history, or what we believe ought, should, and does take place) and *providentia specialis* (the particular activities of God in the history of the covenant and salvation, which includes but is not limited to healings). Through general history we believe the rational, predictable, and observable is the norm. "In fact, the general with its recognizable laws has been

treated as if it were the norm, and the particular (this particular) as if it were only a single application, or from a different angle, a single infringement of the norm." But Barth argues that, from a biblical perspective, we have it backwards: *providentia specialis* is "the centre" and *providentia generalis* is "the circumference." In other words, God's active care is "the controlling original," and our understanding of the world is really "the subservient copy" the particular works of God are normative for the general. Therefore, with this reversal of what is normal, what constitutes the center and the circumference in the healing of Naaman?

The center is constituted by God's particular care to a non-Israelite through the wise but anonymous voices of the lowly and the simple act of a healing wash. First, God's providential care is not limited to the chosen people. Even the enemies of Israel receive *providentia specialis*, for the Arameans had "taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel" who served Naaman's wife (v. 2). Powerfully, through providence, this young girl witnessed to the center. "If only my Lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" (v. 3).

The circumference of the narrative is constituted by the complexities of human authority, politics, money, and perceived remedies. After Naaman learned of the Samarian prophet, he did not set out to find Elisha, but rather moved to the political power base, the kings. The straightforward, wise words of the young girl were ignored in his attention to the perceived normative. You see, he had imagined how his healing would take place, and to whom he should make his petition. Then, adding to the confusion was Naaman's powerful display of his entourage (v. 5); for Naaman, the center was all but obscured, as it was for the king of Israel, who tore his clothes, and swore, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a

quarrel with me" (v. 7). When viewed from a general history, the king's assessment makes reasonable sense; from the center, though, it is dismaying.

Yet the center is always near, no matter how far out we draw the circumference. Hence, Elisha told the king to let Naaman "come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel" (v. 8). God's providence broke forth, returned, and came again. So Naaman, with entourage in tow, went to Elisha to receive personally his healing. But contrary to expectation, contrary to what he had imagined, he was greeted rather by an unnamed messenger who gave him simple instructions for healing. But for Naaman, this was not how it was done. A proper healing would have the prophet personally attend to him, call upon the name of the Lord "his" God, wave his hand over the spot, and cure him (v. 11). That is how he had imagined it would all taking place! But the center is not located with kings, wealth, protocols, and well-known rivers. God's particular providence came by the suggestion of a young slave girl, the words of a lowly prophet, the encouragement of servants, and the complete washing in the Jordan. We would like to be in control but, fortunately for Naaman and all of us, God's providence constitutes the center of life, wholeness and, ultimately, all healing. **David Forney**

God continues to deal with us in ways we cannot imagine. God continues to use unlikely people, sharing the good news of God's love and grace to change lives. God continues to tell us to go and wash...in the waters of baptism to take away our sins and have a personal relationship with Him. God continues to tell us if we would have peace in the world it must begin with us seeing one another as friend rather than enemy. God continues to provide healing of our souls, our minds and our bodies...but very seldom in the ways that you and I would imagine!

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