

The Internal Sense Of The Word Part 3: The healing of Naaman the Leper

In this series of talks on the internal sense of the Word, I am turning now to the second book of Kings, chapter 5, and to the story there of the healing of Naaman the leper. It is an attractive story with some very human elements entering into it, easily remembered and one which, when examined in the light of its deeper, spiritual meaning, has much to teach us all.

"Now Naaman" we read, "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 of valour, but he was a leper." (2 Kings 5, 1). We do not suppose that he had a severe case of the disease because he seems to have lived at home and to have generally discharged his duties. Nevertheless it would get worse. "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. And she said unto her mistress, 'If only my master would approach the prophet of Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.'" (verses 2 & 3). She referred to Elisha who had already proved himself a man of remarkable powers and who was widely known. If only Naaman would go and see him.

Eventually he did go laden with presents and accompanied by a retinue of servants. He was, after all, a great man of Syria. But Elisha seems to have been singularly unimpressed, and his simple instructions (which, by the way, he sent by a messenger), infuriated Naaman who expected some frenzied and dramatic act; a spectacular miracle which all would have seen. "Go", said Elisha "and wash in (the river) Jordan seven times, and your flesh will become clean once more". To which Naaman retorted, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage."

Fortunately for Naaman, reason prevailed. His servants appealed to him, pointing out that if in fact Elisha had commanded him to do some great thing he would have done it. Why not then when he says, "Wash and be clean"? "Then he went down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God. And his flesh came again like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

It is, the very human elements in the story which, as much as anything, give it its special appeal. We understand Naaman's initial reaction, foolish though it can be seen to have been. But what is particularly important about it is what it teaches us and the fact that by means of it the Lord speaks of matters which concern us all.

Are you sick and in need of healing? Physically, maybe not. But what of your spiritual health? What of your relationship with the Lord and your attitude to your fellow man? Is this all that it should be? What of the things you think and of the desires you have? What of the loves you cherish? Are they always pure and unselfish? In all honesty, what would you say of the state of your mind and spirit? Always healthy? I would guess not. And if I'm right then the story is for you. For Naaman's leprosy represents a sickness of the spirit; a sickness induced by evils within and by a general unwillingness to whole heartedly live up to the truths we know and which we say we believe in.

The story is, however, a hopeful one, for it speaks of a cure. And this is what should interest us. Sick and in need of healing, spiritually, though we may be, healing and restoration can be had. But how, and in what way? Isn't this the question? To whom, also, should we go?

Though probably reluctantly, Naaman turned to Elisha, the prophet of Israel, who represents the Lord. Who is there, but the Lord, who can help us overcome our evils? Who can give us the spiritual health and vitality which is so often lacking and of whose absence, when we examine ourselves, we cannot but be aware? It was Elisha who helped Naaman and it is the Lord who helps us.

Nevertheless He doesn't do it all, anymore than Elisha did it all. Whilst it is important to go to the Lord and to confess before Him the diseased condition of much that is in our hearts and minds, there is still that part which we must do. There is a role which we must play and an effort which we ourselves must make. "Go" said Elisha "wash in Jordan seven times". Healing there can be, but there is this something which we must do.

And what we must do is go to the Word of God, for this is what is meant by the river Jordan, and apply what we find there to the cleansing of our lives. We must look at what is said in the Ten Commandments and reflect on the way they apply to us personally and in our own particular circumstances. We must openly face up to the implications of the teaching, "Thou shalt not kill", "Thou shalt not commit adultery", "Thou shalt not steal", and resolve to live up to them. For this is the only way we can become strong and healthy, spiritually. It is the only way the sickness of thought and desire such as descends upon us all at times can be effectively overcome. We must wash in the river Jordan seven times, as Naaman was instructed to do. We must go to the Divine Word and vigorously apply its healing truths to every department of our living.

It is in fact a simple and undramatic message which the Lord has for us and like Naaman we are at first inclined to despise it. In trying to overcome an evil, if it was a sacrifice which was asked for, we would make it. If it was some heroic deed required, we would do it. But the cleansing and healing of our spirit lies in the day to day affairs of ordinary life and in the application of the Lord's teaching to every detail of our living. Moreover, we tend to wonder about other cures. "What about the river of Damascus" cried Naaman, "Abana and Pharpar?" Indeed, what about them?

These rivers of Damascus represent the often attractive but at the same time basically ineffective alternatives which suggest themselves as cures for the human condition and where evil and disorder are concerned. Where, for example, our national ailments and sicknesses are concerned people tend to look to men to supply an answer and to provide a cure; some new policy or some new philosophy. If they are told that a cure is, in the long run, only to be had by every one of us ordering our lives according to the teaching of the Lord, this is too humdrum, too ordinary. They won't believe it. Like Naaman they are certain that there are better alternatives. And isn't this so with us? We tend to want to ignore the obvious and resist the instructions. The Lord tells us plainly what to do, and yet we grope for an easier alternative.

Elisha sought no gift from Naaman and would not have one when many were pressed upon him. The Lord, whom Elisha represents, is satisfied and well rewarded if we but carry out His instructions and come to enjoy the spiritual health and well being He ardently desires for us all.

In all of this, and as you may have noted, we have said nothing of the little maid who, in a very real way, played one of the most important roles in this impressive story. It was she, you remember, who first suggested that Naaman should go to see Elisha. "If only my master would approach the prophet of Samaria!" she said "He would cure him of his leprosy." (2 Kings 5:3). In fact, and as we think about it, without her there would have been no healing; no cure. She was the first mover. The little Hebrew maid.

It is a wonderful thing that in every person there is preserved some feeling, some affection for what is true and good, just and right, fair and decent. Hidden away, apparently insignificant, playing what seems to be only the minor role of a servant in the background, there are these higher, nobler, feelings and affections within us. These are what is represented by the little Hebrew maid. And these are what point the direction and suggest the way for healing to be obtained. It is, in its way, a picture of conscience and of childhood memories at work, speaking up in times when we are remorseful and groping for better ways of going about life.

Any physical infirmity, as we can see, frustrates and holds back the body's potential and its use to us. If we have a leg which hasn't formed properly we cannot run and walk and get about as we otherwise could and would like to do. And so it is with the human spirit. If there is sickness and deformity it cannot possibly function as it should, and as the Lord wills it to do. All evil brings on sickness and deformity of our spirit. Through evil we come to have twisted and malformed ways of looking at life and other people and at human relationships. But these are things which, mercifully and thankfully, can be cured.

The situation is not hopeless, even though at times it can seem to be. In coming to the Lord, as Naaman went to the prophet Elisha, and in faithfully following through the teaching and instruction the Lord gives us we can know and have the healing and wholeness of spirit with which He so earnestly wishes to bless us.

"So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the Word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." (2 Kings 5:14).

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