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Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

Naaman was a warrior, a great warrior. He was a commander, a general in the army of the king of Aram (modern-day Syria). King Ben-Hadad, the Syrian king had rewarded Naaman for his many military conquests; Naaman lived a lavish lifestyle. He is described in this scripture as a very great man with many accomplishments and much wealth. Even the ordering of the Hebrew words is changed from their ordinary positions to help the reader understand how powerful and wealthy this general was.

General Naaman had it all, if it could be bought or taken and it was desirable, the General had it. He also had something else. He had leprosy. Probably not the leprosy we equivocate with Hanson's disease, but more likely a psoriasis-type skin disease. The General's life would be perfect...if he was not afflicted with leprosy. He hears through slave girl that he captured on a raid into Israel, of a healer that could cure him of his leprosy.

Naaman goes to his king saying that he would like to go visit this Hebrew healer so that he might be cured of his leprosy. King Ben-Hadad not only assents but also sends a letter and tremendous gifts to the King of Israel. Clearly, he thinks very highly of his general, for the gifts totaled something like \$1 million to King Jehoram of Israel.

It is worth pointing out that ARAM is not a Jewish country. There are three warring kingdoms in the time of Elisha:

- Israel (Northern Kingdom, with its capital in Samaria)
- Judah (the Southern Kingdom, with its capital in Jerusalem)
- and Syria (with its capital in Damascus). Syria is aka Aram.

The Syrians worship other gods (they are not Jewish) and are routinely at war with the Israelites (and Judeans), King Ben-Hadad of Aram/Syria and King Jehoram of Israel were enemies. There was a constant struggle between the Syrian armies and those of Israel – sometimes more severe and sometimes things would quiet down a bit. The story today takes place during one of the quieter times in the relationship between the two countries.

Still, when King Jehoram of Israel receives the letter and gifts from the King of Aram, he tears his clothes in dismay. The Israelite king thinks that this is provocation by the Syrian king so that he can have an excuse for a war. King Jehoram is a somewhat powerful king, but his power will not help him with leprosy. He has as much power over leprosy as you and I have over gravity.

The king of Israel is terrified. He knows he is not capable of such healing, but does not wish to offend the powerful king of Aram; he wants to keep the fragile peace between the two enemies. He tears his clothes in mourning for the calamity that is sure to descend upon him and his nation. He expects a massive army to arrive and defeat the Israelite army. He knows he cannot heal Naaman...and he knows that he is unable to withstand the Syrian army. He thinks that King Ben-Hadad is using this for an excuse to send in the troops. The king of Israel sees this as a political problem.

Elisha hears of the king's distress and sends word to the king. "Let him (that is Naaman) come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance to Elisha's house (v 8-9)." Now I want you to picture this scene.

General Naaman is wealthy, famous and powerful. He has brought a treasure trove of gifts so that he might be healed. He is a fierce warrior and a top commander in the army of Syria; he is credited (with God's help) of orchestrating the earlier defeat of the Hebrews. Finally, he has quick and immediate access to the king.

This is a man who is used to getting his way.
This is man who, when he finds something he wants, buys it or takes it.
This is a man of great consequence.

He rolls up to Elisha's house with his fabulous entourage of chariots and horses and servants. I think that he expects Elisha to come out to greet him and show him respect; he wanted Elisha to know and to see how awesome and fearsome he was. It was a tremendous occasion.

I am reminded of a time when my mother came close to the Vice President. For many years, my mother was responsible for commencement at Wheaton College. One year the commencement speaker was vice president George Bush. I remember her talking about what a tremendous occasion this was. Weeks before his visit a Secret Service advance team began to prepare for his arrival. The names of all the staff, faculty, students and guests had to be submitted and approved for admission into Edmond Chapel. Once approved, a special badge was issued allowing the wearer entrance only through certain doors.

The Advance Team demanded that the College cut down a grand, old tree because they were concerned that it offered good concealment for a sniper. Early commencement morning, the entire chapel building was cleared and then searched by humans and dogs. Once cleared, no one could enter the chapel without approval. My mom remembers how the guards at the door would compare the badge picture with her face and then look through a long computerized list of names before allowing her in. It made her life so much more difficult as she went to and from her office making final preparations for the ceremony.

Of course, he was important.
Of course, he was late.
Of course, everyone waited.

Finally, the vice president arrived in a long line of police cars, motorcycles, limousines and other security vehicles while a helicopter hovered overhead. Commencement could finally begin. It was indeed a grand occasion.

I think that Naaman's visit would have been heralded in much the same way. Maybe without some of the 21st century technology, but certainly with the same desire to protect and honor him at all costs. In my mind, Elisha has endured all these weeks of preparation and has become rather grouchy.

Of course, he knew who was coming.

Of course, he knew how grand Naaman thought he was.

Of course, it was hard to miss the long line of chariots and soldiers and horses.

I suspect that Naaman, like the Vice President, was also late.

In my mind, I picture Elisha sitting in the back of the house at his desk when the servant comes in saying that Naaman has arrived. Of course, Elisha had to know that. Think about it, wave after wave of horses, chariots and soldiers had just pulled up to the house. Of course, Elisha would hear the rattle and clank of their approach. Elisha did not need his servant to tell him who had arrived.

I picture a cranky Elisha who has suffered through these days and weeks of preparation for Naaman's arrival saying to his servant, "Go and tell him that he is to wash in the Jordan. I have an oracle to finish."

With that, he turns back to his work, leaving his servant to deliver the message.

What a put-down.

What a snub.

What disrespect.

No wonder Naaman leaves the prophet's house muttering that other rivers are cleaner. I suspect the Naaman was also muttering curses upon Elisha under his breath. I will not be surprised if he began thinking about how his next raid into Israel would conveniently end up at Elisha's house. He would show him!

I think that Naaman had his healing all planned out in his head. I think that he expected Elisha to come out, bow deeply to the great and powerful and wealthy man who was honoring him with his presence. Then he would be overwhelmed the magnitude of the tremendous gifts he brought. Naaman would show him that he was not only great and powerful, but also wealthy.

I think Naaman expected Elisha to spend time fawning and expressing his great gratitude for this opportunity to cure one so grand...one so important. Think about what a great step forward this could be in improving the relationship between the two warring nations. I also think that Naaman expected grand show of his miracle.

If I were Naaman, I would like to be taken high up on a mountain where prayers would be offered with rituals and fire. It would be Naaman's part in the curing ceremony to slay a great

beast; this was something that could only be accomplished by one who was such great a warrior. Truly the one who could accomplish this feat would be worthy of such healing. After Naaman laid out the beast before Elisha, God would respond with great balls of fire that would engulf Naaman, but not singe him. His men, indeed all of those in surrounding Israel, would see these great fireballs falling from the heavens. As the fires burned away, so would the leprosy. As the flames died out, Naaman could look at new and fresh skin – free of leprosy. THAT would be a healing worthy of one so great and grand.

Instead, Naaman gets word from Elisha – without ever seeing him – to go and wash seven times in the dirty Jordan River. What a letdown.

After some convincing by his servants, Naaman does go and wash in the Jordan River and he is cured of his leprosy. He returns to Elisha – this time he meets Elisha – confesses his faith in God. “There is no God in all the earth except in Israel... (v 15b),” he says. Naaman is a changed man. Naaman realizes that it is not the waters of the Jordan River that have made him clean...it is God’s grace. I think that he also realizes that this grace is not for sale...it is a gift.

Elisha sends him on his way, accepting no gifts, telling him to “Go in peace (v 19).”

So why am I beginning this OUTSIDERS AND OUTCASTS series with this story about Naaman. Quite simply because he was an outsider and an outcast.

Naaman was an enemy...not just any enemy but an enemy general that led his troops in defeat of the people of Israel. When Jesus reminds the religious leaders of his day of this story, it infuriates them (Lk 4). They cannot explain nor can they understand why an enemy general would be healed and made whole while other good and holy (in other words, good Jews) were not.

Naaman commanded the army of one of Israel’s most persistent and brutal enemies...yet, God chose to heal him while apparently neglecting Israelites also in need of healing.

The Israelites had ritual in which someone healed of leprosy was purified. It is a detailed ritual involving animal sacrifices, shaving of body hair, sprinkling of blood and oil, and the immersion of the person in water. At certain points in the purification ritual, blood and then oil is placed on the right ear, the thumb of the right hand, and the big toe of the right foot of the person to be purified.

Once complete, that newly healed person was welcomed back into the life of the community.

Naaman returns to Elisha a new man...not only does he no longer have leprosy, but he also recognizes God’s gift of healing to him.

Naaman could have been cured and still denied the existence of God; he did not. Naaman could have experienced the grace of God and said to Elisha, “Thanks for the cure. Now I return to Syria.”

But he did not. He recognized God's action in his life and responded with a confession of faith. Note that he did not confess his faith **before** he was cured; he was cured and **then** confessed his faith. God's action in Naaman's life depended upon God, not Naaman.

Thanks be to God for the grace God shows to the those that I would never imagine...even those I don't like.

Amen.