

Naaman the Syrian

11-1-20

"And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." Luke 4:27

Who was Naaman the Syrian? In II Kings 5 we read the account of the Syrian general Naaman, an honorable man held in high esteem by his people. Yet we are told that he was a leper. Leprosy was a terrible disease that might be described as being dead and alive at once. When someone was a leper they were ceremonially unclean, and not permitted to participate in society (Leviticus 13). In effect, it was a death sentence.

Yet one of Naaman's servants wanted to help, and suggested that he travel to Israel and seek the prophet of God, Elisha. He does so, only vexing the king of Israel. When he arrives at the house of Elisha, Elisha did not even come out, but instead told him to dip seven times in the Jordan river. We are told that Naaman was furious, and intended to leave. He had brought wealth and power to give as an offering to be healed, and was insulted that the solution was so very different than he expected.

Once more his servants came to his rescue, suggesting to him that if he had been prepared to do something great to be healed, doing something small was not such a problem. Naaman submits to the command, and is healed. He attempts to reward Elisha, who refuses to receive the gifts. He has one more request: to take dirt from Israel home with him, and to be forgiven for being in the presence of idolaters.

There is an important lesson in the story of Naaman. Consider it as this: a man who is both living and dead is offered hope by hearing. He seeks the prophet, only to be told what to do to be saved by a servant of the prophecy. He understands the water is not the key, and learns that obedience is the power of his healing. He is only cleansed at the moment of his obedience, and seeks to bring back to his home a part of the kingdom. Sound familiar? This is the story our cleansing too.

Romans 6 tells us about the cleansing work done at baptism. We too are dead and alive at once; we are dead in sin. We too believe because of what we hear (Romans 10:17), and we believe not because Jesus directly speaks to us, but because we hear the words of his servants. We understand that the power of our salvation is not the water, but obedience to the command (Romans 6:17). We too are cleansed at the moment of our obedience; we enter the water dead in sin, and we arise alive in Christ. From that time on we walk in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Naaman is important to know. First, he serves us as an example of how a righteous person obeys the word of God. Second, his cleansing is a shadow of our own.