

Baptism Sunday: Naaman's Healing

SPEAKER Matt Ryniker

DATE Sunday, June 11, 2023

PASSAGES 2 Kings 5:1-19; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3-4; Ephesians 2:8-9

MESSAGE Begins at 1:01:00 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Naaman had rank, gold, a national reputation, and a disease that none of it could touch. What finally healed him was a small, unglamorous, faintly humiliating act of obedience in a river he thought was beneath him. Six people were baptized at Hope that morning in tap water in a bucket, and Matt wanted the room to see that the two things are the same thing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Israel is not the home team. God is. We read the Old Testament badly when we cheer for a nation instead of for God's reputation — which is why a Syrian general gets a miracle in the middle of Israel's story.
- ◆ Every advantage Naaman had was real, and none of it reached the thing that was actually killing him. Power and privilege do not extend to the one place you most need help.
- ◆ You cannot buy a work of the Spirit. The healing was free, and Elisha refused payment even when it was pressed on him.
- ◆ Twice in this story the most powerful man in the room takes direction from someone far beneath him in rank — a captive servant girl, then his own servants. That is the shape of the whole account.
- ◆ Naaman was not offended by a hard command. He was offended by an easy one, given without ceremony. That is usually where we get stuck too.
- ◆ Baptism is not a bath and it does not wash anything off the body. It is an appeal to God for a clean conscience — an admission of need, made in public, by people who live like kings.

- ◆ Nothing about the water is impressive on purpose. The name being lifted up is not the name of the person going under.

► 1:00:46

Matt said he had wanted to bring one of his favorite stories to Baptism Sunday — not because there is a baptism in it, because there isn't, but because of something it shows about God's nature and character. He read most of 2 Kings 5 aloud and left the last verses for people to finish at home.

1. A great man with an incurable disease

► 1:02:09

“Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper.”

2 KINGS 5:1 ↗

► 1:03:33

Matt slowed down on every clause. “Commander” is sometimes rendered *prince* — this is not a lieutenant, this is a five-star general serving a kingdom that was bigger and stronger than Israel and frightening to it. He is not merely powerful, he is famous, and famous specifically for a victory the text says the Lord gave through him. He is honored by his own people. And he has a skin disease with no cure, of the kind that made people not want to touch him. Matt sat in the strangeness of that pairing: the respect and admiration of a nation, and isolation, and probably embarrassment, in the same man.

2. The people nobody was listening to

► 1:04:10

The next thing that happens is a captive (2 Kings 5:2–4). A little girl carried off from Israel on one of these very raids, now serving in Naaman's household, tells her mistress she wishes her master could see the prophet in Samaria. Matt refused to smooth that over. Is she too young to be bitter? Hard to believe. Maybe she just has a soft heart; maybe she has come to like the family she serves. Whatever the reason, she is rooting for him — and so, by this point in the story, are we.

Then comes the detail Matt said he likes on its own merits: Naaman goes in and tells the king of Syria what the girl from Israel said. Two of the most powerful men alive, repeating a servant girl's suggestion to each other.

3. An army parked outside a prophet's house

► 1:05:18

Naaman leaves with ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing — not, Matt noted, something picked off a rack at Ross, more likely presented in a decorated box — and a letter for the king of Israel (2 Kings 5:5–7). He asked the room to picture the logistics. You do not take an Uber when you are an assassinatable man carrying tons of precious metal past highway robbers. There is an entourage, armed men, servants, probably an announcer, possibly music. It is loud.

► 1:06:46

All of which arrives unannounced at the door of a king who reads a letter demanding he cure leprosy, and tears his clothes: “Am I God, to kill and to make alive?” Matt thought the panic was entirely reasonable. He is being handed an impossible task by a delegation with sharp pointy swords, from the nation whose raids stole that servant girl. In his head, he fails, they get angry, and they burn his palace. It reads to him like a provocation.

► 1:08:17

Elisha hears about the torn clothes and sends word: let him come to me, that he may know there is a prophet in Israel (2 Kings 5:8–9). So the whole brigade relocates — horses, chariots, banners, gold catching the light — and stands outside a house Matt guessed was not a sprawling manor with a nice deck and a keyhole garden, but the sort of place you would expect out in the boonies. Every neighbor within earshot came out to see what the noise was.

4. A chore, and a rage

► 1:09:30

Elisha does not come out. Matt lingered here, because the text lingers here. The prophet knows they are there — nobody could miss the clanking of swords and the marching — and he is not watching anything or texting anyone. He is just inside, being coy, and he sends a messenger.

“Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.” But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, “Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper... Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?”

2 KINGS 5:10–12 ↗

► 1:11:05

Matt read the offense two ways and said both are probably in there. It sounded dismissive — you rate your rivers over ours? do you not care that I am a leper? And it sounded stupid — do you think I just need a bath? I understand the difference between dirt and a skin condition. What Naaman came for was ceremony. A prophet in a prophet outfit, coming out, calling on the name of the Lord, waving his hands, maybe shaking a stick, possibly dancing in a circle. “He got a chore,” Matt said, “and a dumb one, it seems.” Or, in Naaman’s voice: I came all the way over here, you do not even come out, you do not hocus pocus me.

Some of that is just what it is like to be important. As Matt put it: when you travel to another country for healing, you go to the king. “I don’t go to the bed and breakfast on the side of the road. I go straight to the palace.”

5. “Just do it. Just try it.”

► 1:12:39

He is leaving in a rage, and the story is failing, and then his servants catch up with him. Matt switched translations here on purpose, saying the ESV renders it woodenly and the NIV carries the emphasis better.

“My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’”

2 KINGS 5:13 ↗ (NIV)

► 1:13:05

“I think the effect is just: do it,” Matt said. “You’re already here. What are you going to lose? Just try it.” And he pointed out this is the second time in one chapter that Naaman takes direction from someone

far below him in rank — first a captured servant girl through his wife, now his own servants, asking him to go humiliate himself in front of everybody.

► 1:13:37

“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 ↗

Not restored to his pre-leprosy skin — restored like a child's. No wrinkles, no scars, no sunburn, none of the bumps and bruises a life accumulates. Matt did not know how old Naaman was, but the skin did not come back leathery and old; it came back like a little kid's. He called it more than he bargained for. And then the part he kept coming back to: it was free.

6. What he went home with

► 1:14:41

Naaman goes back with his whole company — Matt wondered aloud how far Elisha's house was from the river, since the trip had to be made twice, and figured the neighbors were out again: he came, he left, he is back, what is all this now — and stands in front of Elisha and says there is no God in all the earth but in Israel (2 Kings 5:15–19). Then he offers the treasure, and Matt stopped to untangle the pronouns for the room — it is just two men and a lot of “he,” the five-star general pressing gold on the prophet, the prophet turning it down.

“As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will receive none.” And he urged him to take it, but he refused.

2 KINGS 5:15–16 ↗

► 1:15:19

Then the two odd requests. Two mule loads of Israelite dirt to take home — Matt said not to get stuck on it; the man likely thought in terms of regional gods and wanted to stand on the Lord's ground when he prayed, under the Lord's authority and not the local one. And a request for pardon in advance: when his master leans on his arm in the house of Rimmon and bows, he will have to bend too, and he is genuinely worried the Lord will take offense. Elisha's answer is three words: go in peace.

► 1:16:42

Here the message paused. The kids who had gone out earlier — “that massive exodus,” Matt called it — were walked back in a group at a time while he waited. He used the gap to needle the volunteers: “This was a good day to sign up to be a Sunday school teacher, if you like light burdens and easy quick lessons.” They had not even finished handing out the snack. He also said out loud why the sermon was running short: he wanted plenty of time for everything that was coming after it.

7. Three things worth taking home

► 1:17:53

First — and Matt said this was the first point, not the most important one — Naaman is a beloved leader of a foreign power, and the Lord had given Syria victories through him. We get stuck reading Israel as the home team, happy when they win and sad when they lose; he sang a snatch of the old rooting-for-the-home-team line and admitted it was a really ancient baseball reference. “God is the home team,” Matt said. “When he lifts up and builds, we celebrate. When he tears down, we still celebrate, because he gets what he wants. It’s God’s reputation, not Israel’s, that we’re supposed to be rooting for.”

► 1:19:14

Second, all that power and wealth and favor, and he was still diseased and still stuck. No doctor could touch it, and he did not even know there was a prophet until a servant girl told him.

► 1:20:00

Matt brought that straight into the room. We live in an odd time of enormous privilege — he said he sometimes walks around his middle-class house thinking how the kings of old would have loved it here, the climate control alone. We touch a device and things appear at the door. You can buy a tan, a different hair color, a chin tuck, a tummy tuck, a younger face; he had just learned you can pay to add two or three inches to your femur and be taller. And still — “even though we live like we’re gods,” he said — we have to be confronted with our limitations exactly the way Naaman was. Money could not buy him the one thing he wanted.

► 1:21:04

“You cannot buy a work of the Spirit.” You cannot buy into the Holy Spirit; you cannot purchase forgiveness. It has to come in a way that may well feel humbling, even humiliating — the same way Naaman had to humble himself and wash in what Matt called “the stinky little Jordan, that dinky little river.” Which is the third point.

► 1:21:36

Think about what Naaman actually had to do. An important man, with his entire brigade watching, taking a bath seven times in a muddy little puddle. No hocus pocus, no waving of the hand. A simple request that required humility and faith, and nothing else.

8. Tap water in a bucket

► 1:22:17

Six people were about to be baptized — two younger children, a teenager, three adults — and Matt named the culture they were doing it in: a world where we live like kings and queens and everything is centered on our being happy and gratified at every single moment. What they were about to do is debasing to the ego, because it lifts up Christ's name and not theirs. Instead of "nah, I'm good," it is a form of admitting need.

Then he inventoried what Hope had not provided. "We did not import waters from Fiji. It's tap water in a bucket." No baptismal gowns gilded with golden thread. No dyed water, no LED lights, no bubbles, no fog machine, no impressive hand-waving.

► 1:23:01

"Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

1 PETER 3:21 ↗

You are not taking a bath. It is an appeal to God, made in humility, acknowledging our mortality, that sin deserves death, that we are unclean — a confession of sin and limitation in an age that would rather imagine it will never die, should always be happy, should get what it wants, and should get it shipped today.

► 1:24:15

The fanciness is not what gets it done. The person doing the baptizing does not have to be perfect, or wearing gilded clothing, or waving their hands through long loud hocus-pocus prayers that sound impressive. "From heaven's perspective," Matt said, "it is a moment full of glory, beauty, and honor." It is a respectable event, when you have the right perspective.

► 1:25:01

Because all our earthly glory, wealth, and power is of no effect in saving us from sin and death. The fatal nature of sin is resolved by one thing only, the precious blood of Jesus Christ — God the Son made flesh, truly man, who bled for us and identified with us, so that we can be baptized into his death. His name is the one lifted up in the water, because what is really happening there is the gospel preached again in physical form: that we are saved by grace through faith, and not by our wealth, our power, our fancy pools, or our Fiji water.

And then the buckets came out. Naaman got clean in the river he thought was beneath him; six people at Hope went down into tap water in front of everybody for the same reason — because the only name coming up out of it is the one that actually sets people free.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- 2 Kings 5:1–19
- 2 Kings 5:1
- 2 Kings 5:2–4
- 2 Kings 5:5–7
- 2 Kings 5:8–9
- 2 Kings 5:10–12
- 2 Kings 5:13 (NIV)
- 2 Kings 5:14
- 2 Kings 5:15–16
- 2 Kings 5:15–19
- 1 Peter 3:21
- Romans 6:3–4
- Ephesians 2:8–9

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt said we instinctively read Israel as the home team instead of God. Where have you been cheering for a side rather than for what God is actually doing?
2. Naaman had every advantage and still could not touch the thing that was killing him. What are you counting on that does not reach as far as you need it to?
3. He was not angered by a hard command but by an easy one, delivered without ceremony. What simple thing has God asked of you that you have written off as too small to bother with?
4. Twice the general listened to someone far beneath him in rank. Who is the servant girl in your life — the voice you are inclined to discount?
5. If baptism is an appeal to God for a clean conscience rather than a performance, what would it look like this week to admit need out loud instead of saying “nah, I’m good”?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wew9nfhfPLg&t=3660s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.