

The Loving Power of God. 2 Kings 5; Luke 17:11-19

One of the greatest preachers of the nineteenth century was Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He was a tremendous orator and thousands came to know the Lord Jesus through his ministry. It was said that Charles Haddon Spurgeon would hold his congregation over the mouth of hell and let them feel the flames! Even to this day many preachers refer to the writings of Spurgeon – they're textbooks of preaching. Now one day Spurgeon was riding his horse through the English countryside where he saw that the weathervane on a farmhouse had these words written on it: "God is love". The sight so intrigued Spurgeon that he went to the farmer and said, "Why did you put those words on the weathervane? Do you mean that God's love is as inconsistent as the wind?" The answer came quickly, "No, not all. I mean that God is love no matter from what direction the wind blows."

Now today we are presented with two of the great Bible Stories. I remember as a small boy reading in a Ladybird book the story of Naaman and the little maid. And here was this general in the king's army, a great man, rather pompous and full of his own importance and a little girl, perhaps six or seven or eight, captured in a war and now a slave girl. And in that household there's an open secret. Trouble has come with a capital T. Trouble in the form of a terrible disease of the skin called leprosy. And even today leprosy is a scourge dreaded and debilitating. Now leprosy can be treated these days, but in Bible times it was a hideous thing to see these white spots affecting the skin, taking away sensation, and feared. In fact so feared was it that those who suffered from it were ostracised – removed from the community to live in colonies with other persons with leprosy. This would be the certain fate for the once proud Naaman – to be a social outcast.

And so we find that the little girl makes a comment to the wife of Naaman and this sets in motion a whole train of events leading to one of the greatest stories ever told.

The circumstances of Naaman's life were hopeless. Without a doubt the secret would have come out. We know that he was a wealthy man; we know that he had high status in society, he had the ear of the king; when Naaman said "jump" the next question was "how high?" And when the secret came out all of that would be stripped away. Then where would he be?

Let's skip many centuries forward in time to that farmer and his weather vane. "God is love no matter from what direction the wind blows." Naaman was about to discover that in spite of the icy blast of leprosy, and even in spite of himself God was waiting to perform a miracle.

I often tell people that in this life nothing ever happens by an accident. There's always a reason for whatever happens in life. The negative things that seem to strike us always happen for a reason. It was no accident that a little girl was captured in a skirmish between the Arameans and the land of Israel. It was no accident that an anonymous little girl found her way to being a maid in the house of a great general, who most likely would never have given her a second glance. This was a situation that had been arranged thousands of years before in the Councils of Heaven, that a little girl would be snatched away from her homeland, and spirited away to become the maid of the wife of Naaman. This was the start of the miracle that was going to change a life for ever, and reveal the glory of the Lord.

And so we find that Naaman told the King of Syria what this little inconsequential girl had said. And the king who obviously held Naaman in high regard decided to act. So he sent Naaman to see the king of Israel. Now this was no ordinary visit. This was a state visit with all the trappings that come with it. Many gifts were prepared for the king of Israel, in fact the Bible tells us that Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing, and even more valuable than all of this, a letter, sincerely written from one king to another. The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

Now quite what the King of Israel was thinking, or quite what was going on at the time of Naaman's visit we don't know. But it's easy to work it out! Israel had troublesome neighbours, not to be trusted, always raiding Israel and taking even the children away as captives. So to the King of Israel it seemed that his neighbours were spoiling for a fight. And obviously he was upset. So tied up with the affairs of state was he, that he forgot about the Prophet Elisha living in his land. Poor Naaman didn't know quite what to make of it. In faith he had stepped out into enemy territory, bearing gifts, but it was a seemingly impossible request.

And so, on the brink of another “international” incident, the prophet Elisha sends a message to the king. “Why have you torn your clothes” (They did this when they were upset!) “You just send Naaman around to my house and we’ll show him!”

So off this great procession goes to the house of Elisha – horses, chariots and all!

Now an unexpected thing. After travelling all this way, the prophet, spoken of by the little girl, doesn’t come to the door. And this upsets Naaman. After all, Naaman is a man held in high honour by the King of Aram. This is a state visit. And the prophet seems not to recognise this fact. It’s not the Prophet who comes to the door, but his servant – the butler perhaps! And he comes with a message. It’s not “come in and rest your weary feet”. It’s not “the coffee’s on and a feast is prepared”. No. This was a luke-warm reception. And the messenger instead of issuing flattering words of welcome simply tells this great, proud general, to go and wash seven times in the River Jordan and that in so doing his flesh will be clean.” Well the River Jordan wasn’t best known for being unpolluted. And Naaman became angry. In fact he went off in a strop.

He was so full of himself this man, that he could not see the wood for the trees. The whole thing was offensive to him. “I’ve driven hundreds of miles here to see this religious weirdo, and all he tells me to do is to go and take a bath in the river?!!” And he was off on his way, and would have gone back home (leprosy and all), had it not been for some more servants, who talked sense into their great warrior leader.

“Now if you’d been asked to do something difficult, wouldn’t you have done it with great glee?” And all you’ve been told to do is to go and have a bath in the river. So either we can go back home and you can face the future, with whatever lies in store for you, or you can go and do what the nice prophet says.

And Naaman suddenly climbed down off his high horse, because those servants, just like the little girl, had spoken to him with the wisdom of God. Humble yourself Naaman and do what the prophet says.

And that was that. He went., washed himself in the Jordan, seven times, and at the seventh time, a tingling sensation in his skin – and that white spot, and that one and that one? All gone. And he was clean. And he came back to Elisha rejoicing and thankful – his life changed – no longer was he at the centre of his own universe. Naaman had found out that God loved him, no matter what way the wind blew.

Many centuries later, Jesus would come face to face with ten persons suffering from the same disease. They had to call him from afar, and they too became clean. Unfortunately nine of them were lacking in manners and never came back to say thank you – one did. He was from the same land as Naaman – a foreigner. He came in the full realisation that Gods loved him, no matter what way the wind blew. And as for the others? Well yes, Jesus was disappointed – but perhaps they were so excited that they just ran home rejoicing. Whatever, the Bible doesn’t say that their leprosy returned because of their ingratitude. And no doubt in the fullness of time they would realise.

God is love no matter from what direction the wind is blowing in our life. He is good today, and will be good tomorrow, no matter what circumstances we may find ourselves in, or how we may feel about them. God is good. God is the Creator and Ruler of the universe, yet it is this same mighty God who tends to our smallest needs. Nothing happens without his knowledge. Every detail and every need is known to him, the Almighty Lord.

Is there something troubling your heart today. Have you anxieties and worries, threatening to overwhelm you? Then there’s good news for you – God loves you, and he loves you no matter what way the wind blows. Naaman had a lesson to learn, and hopefully he went home a changed man – humbled in the presence of God, his life transformed because of his encounter with the living God. God is the Lord of miracles and he is unchanging through all time and eternity. So if you are overwhelmed by the icy blast of trouble take time to bring it all to the Lord and you will see miracles in your life too.

Let’s pray. Lord we thank you for the wonderful and encouraging stories of the Bible and today for this tremendous story of Naaman and those who made up the drama of the occasion – a small girl, and other servant, a proud general, great kings, and a mighty prophet, all working together to do your will. So encourage us Lord, and if there is anyone bearing a heavy burden in this place, Lord touch that person and enable them to see a miracle in the making. We love you Lord, always and for ever. **AMEN**