



HG203: Elijah & Elisha 'Standing For God' **Take Me To The River**

2 Kings 5:1-19a

Home Group Study Notes

12 July 2020 - Rachel Orford



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins) *Ice Breaker*

Since lockdown started many of our normal social activities have had to take place online. What is the most creative/unusual online event or activity you have taken part in?



Looking Upwards (10 mins) *Worship*

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



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Home Group Sermon

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This morning we find ourselves a little way into Elisha's ministry. But Elisha doesn't feature a great deal in the action in today's passage - because in fact he spends most of the time indoors

It is the story of Naaman - one of a whole host of minor characters who's stories are dotted throughout the old and new testaments. And I love to meet these "bit part players" because you can be sure we will have something important to learn from them. They will have been included in God's word for a reason.

The title of this week's Home Group Study is "Take Me to the River" - what else could it possible be? It seems like a bit of a long struggle to get Naaman to the river, but it's where the climax of the story takes place - where he is healed of his leprosy, literally and figuratively washed clean and his life is renewed. And although this is a story in which God's healing power is very much on display, for me what this passage most demonstrates is that our God is in the business of changing lives, of renewing minds and of the overwhelming need for all of us to be taken to the river and washed clean.

Good News and Bad News

To start with, it doesn't look like Naaman is doing too badly. He is a commander in his country's army, his king thinks highly of him and he is well regarded. He has a wife and servants, one of which is a girl who has been taken captive from Israel. She goes out of her way to help him and he in turn seems open minded enough to listen to her, which suggests that he is probably a good master. But like all good stories, the protagonist has a problem. And Naaman's problem is that he has leprosy.

Leprosy was a bad deal in those days. It was incurable and very contagious so it was greatly feared. Many people thought of it as symbolic of, as well as a punishment for, sin. And certainly as a metaphor for sinfulness it is a good one. From the first barely noticeable signs of infection it gradually eats away at the body, becoming more and more debilitating. And I expect we can all think of someone who is metaphorically like Naaman can't we? The person who seems to have it all, the perfect life, job, family, home and so on. But behind the show, underneath it all, something is lurking - some shame, hurt or guilt that is gradually eating at them.

But even in the face of this virtual death sentence, we have reason to remain optimistic for Naaman. He has people around him who want to help him. His wife's servant girl, is dutiful and compassionate even in her own captivity - an example of how God can use the most unexpected people to bring his word to those who need it. In fact, do you notice that on Naaman's journey to the river, whenever things are going badly, there always seems to be someone there in the nick of time to get him back on track to God. As Paul reminded us in his sermon a few weeks ago - it is a good job that God is more stubborn than his people....

And we know that God's hand is on Naaman's life because we are told in the very first verse that "through him the Lord had give victory to Aram." Not the plan we were expecting though. Surely Israel is God's chosen nation - not Aram? But we shouldn't be surprised. In Luke 4:24 - 27 Jesus mentions this very incident when he is talking to a cynical crowd in his own home town. He reminds them that "...there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian". If people turn their backs on Him, God will always find a way to further his plan; he can work with whoever and whatever shows up. Jesus was recognising that God chose to rescue gentiles as well as, and sometimes instead of, his chosen people - which is good news for Naaman and for us!

So Naaman still has plenty going for him - he has good standing and people who want to help him and God has his back. As the the Chris Tomlin song goes "And if our God is for us, then who could ever stop us?" Well - we can. Even with all this going for him Naaman makes some really bad life choices

Bad Life Choices

Seeking Help in the Wrong Place

To start with we see him seeking help in the wrong place. He has learned about Elisha the prophet from Samaria who might be able to help him, but his first instinct is to go to the King. Now admittedly this was probably protocol. The King was his master and he was obliged to ask his permission to leave the country. But the king has his own issues and Aram's relationship with Israel was fragile to say the least. Aram was to the north east of Israel about where Syria is today and the two countries had been taking pot shots at each other for a while, so it wouldn't take much to stir up trouble. The King in Israel is now Joram who is one of Ahab's sons so we can guess that coming from such a dysfunctional family, he will have issues of his own and in fact the message which the king of Aram sends with Naaman to greet him, completely sets off his paranoia and looks about to start a diplomatic incident. It is only the intervention of Elisha himself that sets Naaman back on track back towards God — "Make the man come to me," he says "and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel".

When we rely on anything other than God for our ultimate source of help, things are unlikely to go well. I don't mean of course that we should ignore the advice of experts and not seek help from our friends and families, but to leave God out of the equation is a bad idea. Because there are plenty of people and things jostling for us to rely on them instead. There is a whole smorgasbord of spiritualities and false gospels for us to choose from which ultimately lead nowhere. Celebrities from all walks of life want to be today's role models, and fame, status and the perfect body are goals for which to strive. How many times have you heard - when I get the right job, the perfect relationship, enough money.... then everything will be alright. Well, of course it won't. Jesus warns us about these things in the parable of the good shepherd in John 10:10 calling them thieves who comes to kill and destroy, and likening them to the hired hand who runs away because he cares nothing for his flock. These are the worldly things that ultimately cannot help us.

Trying to Earn Salvation

The King also makes sure that Naaman goes to Israel laden with money and gifts. For him, help must be earned and there will be no cure without payment. But Joram sees the whole thing as a trap and it all starts to backfire badly. Even he knows that he is not capable of curing Naaman, no matter what the payment is and he is at a loss to know what could! It seems Elisha - the man of God - has been forgotten. And it is a misconception that still prevails today - the assumption that we can be saved, but we have to earn it - sometimes with money and gifts such as Naaman did, but more often through good deeds and acts of service, forgetting that our simple faith and obedience to God is all that is required. Our salvation is a gift and we don't have to pay for it. Paul sums it up in his letter to the Ephesians 2:8-9 - "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast"

Having a Bad Attitude

Naaman's mistakes seem to result from him being swept along by the actions of the King, but he also has plenty of his own bad attitude to help sabotage his healing too. We all have a "thing" that we most struggle with. It could be a quick temper, an addiction, low self esteem, impatience, or being judgemental. Naaman's "thing" was his arrogance - his overbearing pride. Thanks to Elisha's prompting, he now seems to be back on track, but it's at this point that his bad attitude kicks in and he becomes enraged that Elisha is treating him like a normal person, sending a messenger out to him with his instructions rather than meeting him personally. He expected a bit of ritual hand waving at the very least, but Elisha seems to be curt and dismissive. So rather than take on board his instructions he then proposes his own treatment plan! The river Jordan is not a good enough river. He knows far better ones and will go and wash in them instead.

During the last few months we will have heard of plenty of people thinking they know the best way to avoid succumbing to the pandemic - surely we don't need to be that far away from each other? I'm young and really healthy so I won't get it. And then there was Donald Trump's bizarre suggestion of ingesting bleach to kill the virus! It's like we didn't want to believe the experts and their simple advice - washing our hands, keeping our distance from each other and staying at home if we developed symptoms. Elisha was the expert here. He was God's prophet and his prescription was humility and obedience. There was nothing magical about the river Jordan, other people washed in it all the time. But Naaman was being asked to have simple faith in God. Nothing heroic, nothing complicated - just humble acceptance and obedience.

Coming to the River

The miracle came about when Naaman was finally persuaded to accept this simple remedy of faith. Not only was he physically healed, but he realised that his life had been changed by the one true God and now his mind needed renewing too. Of course, we cannot help but be reminded of our own baptism when we read about this - the simple act of faith where we turn to Christ as our saviour, submit to him and are washed clean by the Holy Spirit. We no longer need to be weighed down by our sins because Jesus has taken them from us. When Naaman entered into his new relationship with God, he didn't have the power of the cross on his side. God had not yet completed this plan for the world, but he did send prophets like Elisha into the world and through his intervention, Naaman's life would never be the same again.

But despite such a radical transformation it doesn't mean that life was suddenly going to become easy for Naaman and neither does it for us when we become followers of Jesus. We don't suddenly become perfect, with a pure spiritual life, lacking in complications. There are struggles - maybe more than before. Naaman still had his old way of thinking - that his healing needed to be paid for and tried to reward Elisha who, as we would expect, refused - God wants our faith not our wealth, which will be of no value when we finally stand before him.

He wants desperately to be able to worship his new God authentically and his plan is to take some soil from Israel back to Aram. He thinks this is how he can take the true God of Israel home with him, not understanding that this God is not tied to any land, but is the Father of all mankind and will be just as present in Aram as he is in Israel.

Because the other thing he realises is that he will be severely compromised. His master, the king of Aram will undoubtedly be pleased to see him cured but will be unlikely to stop worshipping his god - Rimmon. And Naaman will still be expected to go with him - even to help him when he bows. He knows it's wrong, but he will have to do it. And living in the kind of society that we do today, we cannot help but come up against dilemmas like this every day. In his book *Following Jesus*, NT Wright devotes a whole chapter to "The Mind Renewed" in which he looks at this account of Naaman's healing. When it comes to this part of the story and what we can learn from Naaman's quandary he says "It's no good trying to pretend that we aren't compromised; we are. We have to think straight about what we're doing and own up to the compromises which we can't seem to avoid."

When we buy from firms who pay their directors too much and their employees too little, when we use transport that is polluting the atmosphere and when we give in to other pressures here and there or ignore injustices, then we have the opportunity to ask for God's pardon as Naaman did. Elisha did not reprimand Naaman and call him a half hearted compromiser, he told him to "Go in Peace" which was the word from God to someone who's heart had been changed and was doing their best to follow Him.

This is just the beginning of Naaman's new life, but we don't know how his story ends. We don't know what happened when he got back to Aram, whether he shared his new faith or how he coped with those compromises. Neither do we know how our stories will end. We know that, like Naaman, we will slip into unhelpful ways of thinking and even cycle back into our bad attitudes, struggling with whatever our "thing" is. We will find it hard to understand God's ways, forgetting that they are so different from our own and of course will come up against many things in this chaotic world which we will find hard to reconcile to our faith. But if our minds are truly transformed and we are willing to humbly ask for God's help, he will pardon us.

Each time we pray the Lord's prayer we say "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." If God had not expected us to get things wrong then Jesus wouldn't have included this in his prayer. Every time we pray this we are humbling ourselves before God, asking him to renew us - and each time we pray this we can take ourselves to the river.

Emmanuel Church Text for 2020

*"The Lord Your God is with you. He is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with
His love. He will rejoice over you with singing."*

Zephaniah 3:17



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1. Naaman is redirected towards God several times in this passage. What instances can you think of in your life when you were set back on track by people or events”?

2. What sort of things do we look to for help other than God? Can you think of any instances in your own life when this hasn't turned out so well?

3. Naaman's “thing” which showed up his bad attitude was his arrogance. Do you have a “thing” that you are willing to own up to? What is it?

4. Do you remember your own baptism and how it felt to be renewed? If not, have there been any other occasions when you had the feeling of being “washed clean”?

5. Naaman knew he would be compromised when he returned home. What things do you come up against in today’s world that are hard to reconcile with your faith?

6. Do you find it easy or difficult to ask for God’s forgiveness? Why?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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