



## A GENERAL'S BIGGEST FIGHT

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According to the News Tribune, a couple weeks ago, on July 13th, a man in Puyallup went to his closet and discovered 3 sticks of dynamite. They weren't planted there by terrorists or even by his wife. Turns out he had left them in there himself and had forgotten about them. You might wonder how you forget leaving dynamite in the closet. Well, he had put them in there more than 40 years ago. If I worked for one of those closet organizer companies, I'd be all over this as a case study of why you should clean out your closets every once in a while.

Dynamite sitting for 40 years in your closet without you knowing about it. The only thing more dangerous than dynamite is old dynamite. It is extremely unstable. Over time it weeps or sweats its nitroglycerine and forms crystals on the outside of the cylinders. Anything could set it off. The man set it out on his porch, then called 911. Police had to call in the bomb squad and evacuate the neighborhood, all to handle just 3 sticks of old dynamite.

Our story today is like old dynamite. Hundreds of years after it happened, Jesus pulled it out of the back closet, and it became highly explosive. It's the only story of Elisha that Jesus mentions in the Bible, the story of his dealings with a man called Naaman who had leprosy. And when he mentioned it, the crowd in the synagogue at Nazareth blew up at him.

### **Luke 4:24, 27-30**

*I tell you the truth, he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown...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."*

*All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.*

Old dynamite. Powerful enough to make people want to kill Jesus for bringing it up, long after the actual fact.

What is it about this story that could have that kind of effect? Granted, it was partly due to the context Jesus used it in and the way he told it. But that doesn't take away from the fact that it is an incredibly dynamic story. Let's go back to 2 Kings and look at the original sequence of events more closely.

## **2 Kings 5**

*Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.*

This opening paragraph tells us quite a bit about this man. First off, he was a foreigner. Aram is present day Syria. Then as now, Syria was not friendly with Israel. They were enemies. The hero in this story, the main character isn't even Jewish. No wonder the crowd got upset with Jesus.

So Naaman is this foreigner, and he's also a famous man. He's top brass in the military, with full access to the halls of power. He's become a celebrity for the battles he has won. He was good at what he did. The Bible has nothing but the highest praise for his skills. And did you catch what it said about God? "...through him the LORD had given victory to Aram."

Here is the God of Israel, being credited for another nation's success. God isn't just the God of Israel – he's the God of the world. He isn't just God of the church – he's Lord of the whole universe. Sometimes we act like we have a corner on him. But as Psalm 24 says,

## **Psalm 24:1**

*The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.*

What an awesome thought – that God isn't just the God of the people who like him or believe in him. He's literally got the whole world in his hands. God determined the success of the Arameans in battle, whether they knew it was him or not. Naaman was certainly not aware of God's involvement at that point. But God retains his control whether or not we acknowledge his role.

Naaman had all this success, but he contracted leprosy. That made him a social outcast. Leprosy was a terrible disease to have. It carried such a stigma with it that even Naaman's reputation wouldn't have been able to overcome it. Nobody wants to be around a leper.

*Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."*

The focus shifts from a prestigious army commander to a little nameless slave girl. She's never done anything important. She's seen a lot of tragedy in her young life, not big

victories. You couldn't find someone more different from Naaman. And yet she's the hinge that his entire life story swings on. Everything that follows is because she remembered something from her home. She saw Naaman's need and knew exactly where to look for hope. She brought God into the picture. When you're in that place of seeing someone's hurt and knowing a cure, you have a choice. Do you risk embarrassment, rejection, the possibility of being wrong? Thankfully for Naaman, the little girl spoke up

It's pretty humbling, actually. I think if I were her, I would be feeling sorry for myself, missing my family, hating my new situation. Instead she was genuinely concerned about her boss's condition and what she could do to help.

That's real evangelism in a nutshell. We freeze up at the thought of having to share a word about Christ with somebody. Images of door to door missionaries make us run the other way. But evangelism isn't about turning into a salesperson and forcing your faith on other people. It's recognizing when people are hurting and telling them what you know that could help.

### **1 Peter 3:15**

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

It's all about hope. What do you do when you know a true source of hope that could really make a difference in someone's life? You say something. Whether or not they respond is up to them. Against all odds, Naaman took the little girl seriously. When people are truly desperate, they won't refuse a hand, no matter where it comes from.

*Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. 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."*

*As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"*

There's a story about a couple we'll call Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith had always wanted to go to Europe, but Mr. Smith was too stingy to spring for two tickets, so he sent her on vacation by herself. While she was there, Mrs. Smith found some beautiful jewelry that she fell in love with instantly. So she excitedly emailed her husband about it, told him how much they were, and asked his permission to buy it.

Mr. Smith was shocked at the overpriced trinkets and shot a terse email back: NO. PRICE TOO HIGH." But email being what it is, the line breaks happened differently

than he had intended and the note read “NO PRICE TOO HIGH.” And Mrs. Smith fell in love with her husband all over again.

I have a rule about using email. If it’s a potentially delicate subject, or if there’s a chance the message could be misunderstood, I won’t communicate it that way. If you’ve ever made that mistake, you know what I’m talking about. Things can get blown way out of proportion and taken the wrong way. Maybe you try to make a joke and it gets taken seriously, or that little parentheses smiley face you put at the end is seen as too sarcastic.

The King of Aram would have been terrible at email. His note to the king of Israel wasn’t very precise at all. It didn’t even mention Elisha. So the King of Israel takes it as some sort of test, that the other king is picking a fight. He gets all hysterical about it until Elisha calms him down.

*When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."*

*So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."*

*But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.*

Can’t you just picture this whole thing? Naaman’s big entourage leaves the palace and pulls up in front of the much more modest home of a prophet. Naaman is probably already wondering, “What am I doing here?” He feels like he’s getting the runaround. Then to add insult to injury, Elisha doesn’t even come out to meet him. He sends out his errand boy to say, “Go take a bath and you’ll be all better.”

Naaman really struggled with Elisha’s way of helping him, and he did so really on three levels. For one thing, it’s so simple it’s ridiculous. Leprosy doesn’t wash off, whether you go in the Jordan seven times or 700. Not only that, the Jordan’s a pathetic excuse for a river compared to what Aram has. If Naaman was looking for a way to get clean, he had better options.

Secondly, Naaman is very honest with how this did not meet his expectations. He said, “I thought Elisha would come out and wave his hand over the spot and make it disappear.” Some prophet he turned out to be. Naaman is supposed to just take the messenger’s word for it and go. It’s a total let down.

Really though, at the heart of this, it insults his pride. For a person of his stature to be treated this way just seems wrong. He's offended by the whole process.

Has God met your expectations? I don't know how many times I've been in Naaman's shoes. I come to God for help, but I have in mind the way he should help me. And when he doesn't do it the way I want him to, I'm disappointed or angry. I get offended.

But really, that's God's M.O. That's the cross – God's offensive way of dealing with our disease. It's so simple it's ridiculous. There's nothing for me to do but believe Jesus died for me. I just ask him to forgive my sins and he does. I accept him and I have eternal life. That's it? That's the answer to my problems? I want to do something for myself. I want to be part of the solution.

And I want him to talk to me directly if he's for real. I'm supposed to just take his messenger's word for it? Just because the Bible tells me this is the way, I'm supposed to go along? We want a more dramatic, personal experience of God than that.

Paul told the Corinthians how it is human nature to be just like Naaman and be skeptical of God's idea of help:

### **1 Corinthians 1:23-25**

*We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.*

That's the gospel. It's not something easily accepted. And it's not easily accepted because it means submitting to it, letting go of pride and giving in.

Naaman now faces a choice. What's going to win out – his ego or his desire to be healed? This is the most defining personal battle the general has ever faced, because he's not used to raising a white flag of surrender. It is the central struggle we all wrestle with over and over again. Are we going to submit and surrender to God's way, or insist on our own? Do we want to preserve our ego or do we want to be healed? We can't have both.

Time and again I find myself digging in my heels and resisting God's good plans for me because they look different than I expect or they offend my pride. When you're watching somebody else's fight, the choices seem obvious. When you're living it yourself, it's much harder.

*Naaman's servants went to him and said, "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!'"*

You can tell how much Naaman's servants all respected him, from that little girl on up. They all want to see him healed up. These servants have such great perspective and help Naaman see that his logic is faulty. If he would have been willing to do something spectacular to get healed, why wouldn't he give the simple route a chance? The only thing standing in the way is his pride.

Thankfully, Naaman gave in.

*So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.*

He didn't just get healed of his leprosy. It's like Naaman's skin got an anti-aging treatment, with botox and Alpha Hydrox. The writer says his skin became smooth like a young boy. In Hebrew, the word there is just the masculine form of the same word that was used for the young girl at the beginning. The great man has become like the slave girl.

*Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please accept now a gift from your servant."*

The transformation in Naaman wasn't just physical – it was spiritual. He had become like his slave girl in more ways than one. His big tough warrior heart had been made every bit as new as his skin. He was cured on a far more radical level than he would ever have anticipated. This is what God was after – a new worshipper, one more person who could testify to the great things God had done for them.

You can see just how extreme the change was in his return to see Elisha again. The proud man who had stormed away in a rage from Elisha would never go back to see him again. That would be humiliating. But Naaman doesn't think twice about it. He wants to give Elisha some sort of thank you present.

*The prophet answered, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.*

*"If you will not," said Naaman, "please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD.*

Naaman wants a physical reminder of this place with him. He wants to take back enough Israelite soil that he can build a new altar on it just for God. Then he makes this very interesting comment:

*But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also -- when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this."*

*"Go in peace," Elisha said.*

Already, you can see Naaman's conscience is being sensitized. He's already looking ahead to when he gets back home. Life in Aram for him is not going to be very

conducive to living out his new-found faith. He already knows he's going to be placed in a position to make compromises he doesn't want to. His heart and his actions aren't going to line up all the time.

Maybe you can relate to how Naaman felt. It's not always easy to know the Christian thing to do in a given situation. In this culture, it often feels like we are making compromises and concessions. Maybe we don't have trouble with the clear cut choices, but there are all kinds of gray areas that have to do with priorities and loyalties.

When Naaman paints this scenario, Elisha tells him to go in peace. What are we to make of this? Bowing down to an idol was no small thing. Look at the story of Daniel being thrown to the lions for not bowing down to one. There have been thousands of martyrs down through the centuries who gave their lives before compromising in the way Naaman's talking about. Is God just winking at him and saying, "It's okay. I know you don't really mean it. Your heart's in the right place." Has Elijah just given him a free pass to do whatever he wants?

Let me just make a few observations about this: First, Naaman is viewing his entire life through a new set of lenses. He now sees a potential sin where he never would have thought about it before. His heart IS in the right place, because otherwise he wouldn't even be asking the question he's asking. It would be good for all of us to examine our lives with that kind of clarity. What about my work, my life, my relationships, my entertainment could potentially call into question my loyalty to God? Am I even aware of how my actions reflect on my relationship with God? Naaman is on the right track.

But he asks forgiveness for a wrong he hasn't yet committed. Can you do that? It seems backward.

Elisha's answer isn't, "You're forgiven," but "Go in peace." Literally, the words are "Walk in peace." Walk in peace as you go into the future. Don't worry about sins you may or may not commit. When you're in that moment, God will help you know what to do.

Jesus told his disciples something similar when he warned them that many of them would be put on trial for their faith. It was a scary prospect to think ahead and wonder if they would be strong enough to stay true to him. But he said,

**Luke 21:14-15**

*Make up your mind right now not to worry about it. I'll give you the words and wisdom that will reduce all your accusers to stammers and stutters.*

Naaman had come to God and discovered grace and mercy in the form of healing. That same grace and mercy would be with him in times where he might be tempted to compromise. And if he made a mistake and messed up, that same grace and mercy would be available to restore him again. He didn't need to worry ahead of time – he could walk in peace and full confidence that God's love for him was ongoing.

I've said this before, but grace is not a one time thing. We don't just need God for an initial dose of Jesus in our lives. We need him every day. Because we are constantly faced with situations where our faith will be put to the test. Despite all our best intentions, we will slip and bow to something other than God. There will be times when we cave to pressure and do what we don't want to. But as Paul told Timothy,

## **2 Timothy 2:13**

*If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.*

We can walk in peace, knowing that God's grace is there for us to return to. We can wash and be cleansed again and again.

So Naaman left Elisha feeling ready to face whatever would meet him when he returned home. But he didn't get very far.

*After Naaman had traveled some distance, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said to himself, "My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him."*

Elisha may have let Naaman off scot free, but Gehazi wasn't about to. It really bothered him that Naaman was not an Israelite. He was a foreigner from a country that had mistreated Israel. He probably had even fought against Israel. He shouldn't get a free miracle from Elisha. That should be a privilege for more deserving people.

Sometimes we can feel stingy with God's grace. We want evidence that someone is really, really sorry for what they did before we let them off the hook. Sometimes we want them to suffer a bit, to feel the pain of their choice. We want them to pay, to earn the right to grace.

It's a sense of entitlement – that somehow we're more worthy of God's love and forgiveness than somebody else.

Gehazi was sure Elisha had gotten this one wrong, and he decided to correct the situation.

*So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running toward him, he got down from the chariot to meet him. "Is everything all right?" he asked.*

*"Everything is all right," Gehazi answered. "My master sent me to say, 'Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing.'"*

*"By all means, take two talents," said Naaman. He urged Gehazi to accept them, and then tied up the two talents of silver in two bags, with two sets of clothing. He gave them to two of his servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. When Gehazi came to the hill, he took the things from the servants and put them away in the house. He sent the men away and they left. Then he went in and stood before his master Elisha.*

*"Where have you been, Gehazi?" Elisha asked.*

*"Your servant didn't go anywhere," Gehazi answered.*

*But Elisha said to him, "Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money, or to accept clothes, olive groves, vineyards, flocks, herds, or menservants and maidservants? Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever." Then Gehazi went from Elisha's presence and he was leprous, as white as snow.*

What had Gehazi done that was so terrible? Was it his lying to Elisha? Was it his taking matters into his own hands and keeping the plunder for himself? Those were bad, but bad enough to smite him with leprosy?

The real evil that Gehazi did was this: He fed the lie that says God's favor can be bought. Naaman had come prepared to pay – that was how things worked with the gods in his country. A bribe here, a donation there. You could buy your grade, so to speak. That's how it was done.

But not with the Lord. Elisha had done everything in his power to prove to Naaman that what God did for him was a completely free gift. Gehazi was communicating a different type of god. He didn't just skew the truth about God – he cut the heart out of it. It was a drastically different understanding of him, and that's what made his actions so terrible. God's grace will not be turned into something less than what it is.

Most of the time, most of us still think like Gehazi, that there's got to be some payment for God's goodness. I just saw a TV show this week where two characters were talking about prayer. One of them said to the other, "The reason people pray is so God won't squash them."

We feel we have to do something so God won't squash us, to earn his approval. But God's grace is free. It's the easiest statement to say, and the hardest one for us to remember. Paul had to hit it over and over again for the early church.

### **Ephesians 2:8-9**

*Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish!*

Elisha said Naaman's leprosy would cling to Gehazi for the rest of his life. The leprosy represented Naaman's state of ungrace. It's as if God is saying, "Alright. If you're not going to give grace freely, then ungrace is going to stick to you like a glove."

Gehazi had chosen to withhold mercy, so he would get a taste of what it was like to be in that merciless state of his own making. It's such a contrast with the way Jesus encouraged his disciples to live when he said:

**Matthew 10:8**

*You have been treated generously, so live generously.*

It's a double challenge, really. First, to learn to accept God's generosity the way Naaman had to learn it. And secondly, to turn around and share it, to fill up the same measuring cups God used when he forgave us, and then pour that out on people around us.

We're coming to the Lord's Supper again this morning, the ritual that best captures the extent of God's generosity. While you prepare to take part in it, take the time to do a little personal reflection in light of Naaman's story.

What am I needing healed up? Naaman knew his own condition. Do I? How do I need to be restored?

What bath am I refusing? Naaman thought the idea of a dip in the Jordan was ridiculous, and maybe God has been giving you an instruction that you've been resisting. What's he saying to you even this morning?

Who do I know that needs hope? I might feel as helpless as that slave girl to improve somebody's condition, but there's always someone I can point in the direction of Jesus. Who's in my life right now that desperately needs to know the source of real hope?

How can I live more generously? Have I been trying to make somebody pay? Where am I being stingy with God's grace?

There's plenty of forgiveness for all of us – not just for our past, but for our futures as well. We will fall we will compromise, but we can walk in peace – knowing that the generous love of Jesus is more than enough.