

Naaman

LEPROSY was a terrible disease. Not all of the illnesses described as leprosy in the Bible would be called that today, but they are all dreadful afflictions. The people of Israel had strict hygiene regulations to try to halt the spread of any of those diseases. The rules are found in Leviticus chapters 13 and 14, detailed and rigorous laws to ensure that the population was free from such problems. Those afflicted had to dress distinctively and live apart from the rest of the population.

In the time of Elisha, the commander of the Syrian army was stricken with leprosy. It would probably mean that he would not be able to function in his role as commander properly, even though he is described as a ‘mighty man of valour’, and perhaps he would eventually have to relinquish his role. There was no medical help; future life would seem quite bleak.

Unexpected Hope

There was one ray of hope. Naaman’s wife had a servant girl, carried off from Israel, and she knew all about Elisha the prophet. She said to her mistress:

If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:3).

Anyone with leprosy would grasp any chance of a cure, and Naaman was swiftly

talking to the king, telling him what the girl had said. The king of Syria quickly recognised the benefit of having his army commander restored to full health once more, and wrote to the king of Israel, seeking a cure for Naaman.

The letter was bound to cause problems. It was not the king, but the prophet who would be able to effect the cure. But there is protocol, and kings talk to kings. Generous gifts were also required: ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. It was a large amount, as a talent is about 75 pounds (34kg) weight and a shekel is 0.4 ounce (11.5 grams). So Naaman took with him 750 pounds (340kg) of silver, and 150 pounds (69kg) of gold. It was a very large sum.

Naaman arrived in Samaria and presented the letter from the king of Syria.

Now be advised, when this letter comes to you, that I have sent Naaman my servant to you, that you may heal him of his leprosy (v6).

The king of Israel suspected that this was a plot by the Syrians to try and gain some advantage, to score a point. He protested that he was not a god, able to kill and make alive, able to heal the



most loathsome disease. He was sure the king of Syria was seeking a quarrel with him.

Strangely he did not seem to know much about Elisha, even though the prophet had already performed some notable miracles.

A Real Cure

Elisha heard that the king had torn his clothes in his anguish over the letter, and sent a message to the king suggesting that he send Naaman to see him. It was important that Naaman and the Syrians should know that there was a prophet in Israel.

So it was that Naaman arrived with his entourage, horses and chariots at Elisha's house, and stood at the door. He must have expected that Elisha would invite him in, showing due respect to such an important visitor, but the prophet did nothing of the kind. Elisha simply sent a messenger to Naaman with instructions.

Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean (v10).

It was brief, and easy to do, but Naaman was not in a mood to take the easy option. He had expected a great show of healing, and there was none.

Naaman became furious, and went away and said, "Indeed, I said to myself, 'He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.' Are

not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage (v11-12).

Naaman seems to have known something about the Lord God of Israel, as he uses the special name by which He was known to Israel. Fortunately, he had servants who had more wisdom, and were calmer. They suggested that if Elisha had asked him to do something great, he would have done so, but all he wanted was for him to wash in the river Jordan seven times: why not wash, and be healed?

Their advice prevailed, and they went down to the river. There Naaman dipped



himself under the water seven times, and his leprosy was gone. His skin was like that of a little child; he was clean once more.

Different Futures

If the account had ended there, it would have been a happy ending, but sadly it did not. Naaman went back to thank Elisha, now recognising the status of the Lord God of Israel.

Indeed, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel (v15).

He asked Elisha to accept a present, but the prophet refused even when pressed. Then Naaman made what seems to be a strange request:

So Naaman said, "Then, if not, please let your servant be given two mule-loads of earth; for your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifice to other gods, but to the LORD (v17).

We might wonder about this, but it is probable that he would use this to enable him to worship the Lord God of Israel on soil from Israel.

He also asked that when he went into the temple of the Syrian idol, Rimmon, in his duty to support the king, he would be excused. Naaman now recognised that the God of Israel was the only true God, but the king would not do so. He asked in advance for pardon for this, to receive Elisha's response "Go in peace".

So Naaman left, but sadly, Elisha's servant Gehazi was tempted beyond his capacity.

How could he allow such wealth to escape him? He followed Naaman and his attendants, and asked for a gift, declaring that Elisha had two visitors and would like a talent of silver and two changes of clothes.

Naaman, not realising the deception, urged him to take two talents of silver as well as the clothes.

Gehazi returned, thinking he had got away with that. He should have known that he worked for a man of God. Elisha knew exactly what he had done!

Then he said to him, "Did not my heart go with you when the man turned back from his chariot to meet you? Is it time to receive money and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever." And he went out from his presence leprous, as white as snow (v26-27).

The prophet's servant would be marked for ever and know that this disease would progress until his death. Was it really worth it?

We do not read any more about Naaman, but presumably he remained faithful to what he had said, worshipping God in Syria, and supporting the king when needed.

Once more the Lord God had demonstrated that He had a true prophet in Israel.

Mark Sheppard