

## A DIP IN A DIRTY RIVER: WHY NAAMAN'S STORY DETAILS MATTER

### 2 Kings 5:1-27

Na'aman, 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. <sup>2</sup> Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little maid from the land of Israel, and she waited on Na'aman's wife. <sup>3</sup> She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Sama'ria! He would cure him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup> So Na'aman went in and told his lord, "Thus and so spoke the maiden from the land of Israel." <sup>5</sup> And the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten festal garments.

<sup>6</sup> And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Na'aman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy." <sup>7</sup> And when the king of Israel read the letter, he rent his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me."

<sup>8</sup> But when Eli'sha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, "Why have you rent your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." <sup>9</sup> So Na'aman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the door of Eli'sha's house. <sup>10</sup> And Eli'sha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." <sup>11</sup> But Na'aman was angry, and went away, saying, "Behold, I thought that he would 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 cure the leper. <sup>12</sup> Are not Aba'na and 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. <sup>13</sup> But his servants came near and said to him, "My father, if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean?'" <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him; and he said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant." <sup>16</sup> But he said, "As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will receive none." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. <sup>17</sup> Then Na'aman said, "If not, I pray you, let there be given to your servant two mules' burden of earth; for henceforth your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD. <sup>18</sup> In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in

the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter.”<sup>19</sup> He said to him, “Go in peace.”

\*\*\*\*\*

But when Na’aman had gone from him a short distance,<sup>20</sup> Geha’zi, the servant of Eli’sha the man of God, said, “See, my master has spared this Na’aman the Syrian, in not accepting from his hand what he brought. As the LORD lives, I will run after him, and get something from him.”<sup>21</sup> So Geha’zi followed Na’aman. And when Na’aman saw some one running after him, he alighted from the chariot to meet him, and said, “Is all well?”<sup>22</sup> And he said, “All is well. My master has sent me to say, ‘There have just now come to me from the hill country of E’phraim two young men of the sons of the prophets; pray, give them a talent of silver and two festal garments.’”<sup>23</sup> And Na’aman said, “Be pleased to accept two talents.” And he urged him, and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two festal garments, and laid them upon two of his servants; and they carried them before Geha’zi.<sup>24</sup> And when he came to the hill, he took them from their hand, and put them in the house; and he sent the men away, and they departed.

<sup>25</sup> He went in, and stood before his master, and Eli’sha said to him, “Where have you been, Geha’zi?” And he said, “Your servant went nowhere.”<sup>26</sup> But he said to him, “Did I not go with you in spirit when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept money and garments, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, menservants and maidservants?”<sup>27</sup> Therefore the leprosy of Na’aman shall cleave to you, and to your descendants for ever.” So he went out from his presence a leper, as white as snow.

**Revised Standard Version (RSV)** Copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 Downloaded from the [Oxford Text Archive](#) and used with permission.

Source: Transcribed from: The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version containing the Old and New Testaments, translated from the original tongues: being the version set forth A.D. 1611, revised A.D 1881-1885 and A.D 1901 : compared with the most ancient authorities and revised A.D 1946-52. -- 2nd ed. of New Testament A.D 1971. Freely available for non-commercial use provided that this header is included in its entirety with any copy distributed.

## 2 KINGS 5:1-27: THE "JOE FRIDAY" VERSION (JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM)

### What's Obvious in This Story?

1. Naaman is a high-ranking officer in the army of the king of Aram.
2. He has leprosy.
3. He has a slave girl captured in a raid in the land of Israel.
4. The maid serves Naaman's wife.
5. The maid believes that a powerful prophet in Samaria can cure Naaman.
6. Naaman reported the possibility to his king, who sent Naaman to the king of Israel.
7. Naaman went, taking a huge load of riches with him, and he had audience with the king of Israel.
8. The king of Israel read the letter from the king of Aram and went ballistic.
9. Elisha, the prophet (man of God), heard about the king of Israel and offered to help.
10. Naaman went off to find Elisha; he stopped at Elisha's door.
11. Elisha sent a messenger (instead of coming out himself) to tell Naaman what to do to be healed.
12. Naaman went ballistic and had a huge fit because he expected more drama and better elements to be involved in this cleansing. He left in a huff.
13. His servants offer the voice of calm and reason and persuade Naaman to do as he had been told.
14. When Naaman did, he was restored.
15. Naaman returned to Elisha, praising God, and offered Elisha a gift of thanks.
16. Elisha wouldn't take a gift, but he did consent to give two mule-loads of earth to Naaman to take home.
17. Naaman indicated an intent to worship God, but asked for pardon when he was obliged to help his king in worship to Rimmon. Elisha consented.
18. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, decided to capitalize (privately) on Naaman's generous offer.
19. Gehazi ran after Naaman's entourage, caught up with them, and lied that Elisha had changed his mind about the gifts.
20. Gehazi asked for a specific gift of one talent and two changes of clothing for two fictitious prophets, which Naaman gladly gave him.
21. When Gahazi returned to the city, he hid his booty in the citadel wall and dismissed Naaman's men.
22. Elisha asked him about what he had been doing.
23. Gehazi lied to Elisha too, denying he had even gone out.
24. Elisha confronted Gehazi with his vision in which Elisha saw all that had transpired.
25. To punish Gehazi's duplicity, Elisah transferred Naaman's leprosy to Gehazi and as a legacy to Gehazi's descendants forever.

## SECOND-LEVEL DETAIL: INFORMATION TO BE GAINED “BETWEEN THE LINES”

### 1. THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

#### Naaman

- What do we know about him, personally? [He has rank and privilege, is proud, has a temper, hopeful, open to persuasion, capable of humility, pragmatic, grateful, capable of generosity.]
- What does it mean to be the commander? [He gives orders, respects others who give orders, is accustomed to some level of deference, has power over others.]
- He has leprosy. Does this matter to anyone? If so, to whom and how does it matter? [The Hebrews isolate and marginalize people with leprosy. It is a disease with serious social implications. A leprous Hebrew is unclean, which carries consequences for the ritual and worship life. Hebrews would not want to be in the presence of a leper, not touch one. True leprosy is ultimately very debilitating, and the commander could not command if the leprosy affected him badly enough.]
- There’s much more...

#### Hebrew slave girl

- What do we know of her personally? [She cares about her master; has faith in her God and prophet.]
- What does it mean to be a slave? [She is at the absolute bottom of the pecking order as a slave and a female; it is very odd that she would be listened to.]

#### King of Aram

- What do we know about him personally? [He had at least one successful campaign of conquest against Israel; he values Naaman and is willing to help.]
- What does it mean to be king? [He expects compliance from the king of Israel. He expects the king to follow a chain of command—since Naaman told him the healer is a prophet, but the letter is sent to the king.]

#### King of Israel

- What do we know about him personally? [He and his country has been humiliated at the hands of the Arameans; he is fearful of another quarrel and/or attack; he is worried and angry at the demand placed upon him; he is not sure about the favor of God—see verse 1.]
- What does it mean to be king of Israel? [He has limited temporal power because of the Aramean victory; what power he has ultimately resides with God, and he knows he isn’t God.]

## Elisha

- ❑ What do we know about Elisha personally? [He is a prophet; he is held in high regard as a healer; he is confident in God and in God's power used through him. A word from him turns into action. He needs and takes no reward for using God's gifts. He "sees" things; holds others accountable.]
- ❑ What does it mean to be a prophet of God? [God's power resides within; God gives special insight, special gifts; the prophet's will and actions are aligned with God's will, so the action is of God.]

## Naaman's Servants

- ❑ What do we know about them personally? [Deferent and obedient; know their master and care about him; reasonable and apparently trusted; willing to risk speaking directly to their master.]
- ❑ What does it mean to be a servant of the commander? [Expected to be obedient.]

## Gehazi

- ❑ What do we know about him personally? [Greedy, cunning, deceitful, skilled liar.]
- ❑ What did it mean to be the servant of a prophet? [Should be faithful and trustworthy.]

## 2. ANALYZE THE ACTION/ADD IMPLIED ACTION AND INFORMATION

- **Prologue:** Introduction of Naaman (v 1)
- **Scene 1 (vv 2-3):** The Hebrew servant girl speaking to her mistress/ *Naaman was present or his wife told him about the conversation*
- **Scene 2 (vv 4-5a):** Naaman approached the king, who agreed to set things in motion with the king of Israel
- **Scene 3 (v 5b):** Naaman on the road with all his servants and stuff (*With that much cargo, which had to be bulky and heavy, he must have had a sizable entourage.*)
- **Scene 4 (vv 6-7):** Naaman's audience with the king of Israel. *He must have caused quite a spectacle and struck fear for what he wanted. Naaman may have had a very limited idea of just how his request would be granted; almost seems naïve.*
- **Scene 5 (v 8):** Elisha knows of the king's fears and extreme response. *Word travels fast, because he seemed to get wind of the king's feelings pretty quickly. He had time to receive word and send a response before Naaman got out of the court.*
- **Scene 6 (vv 9-10):** Naaman's arrival at Elisha's house - *More pomp and ceremony! And evidently the expectation that he would be greeted by the prophet, since he had been seen by the king in person.*

- **Scene 7 (vv 11-13):** Naaman leaving Elisha's home in a huff, complaining to his servants. - *What would Elisha's neighbors think?! Someone else must have seen this great procession, coming and going.*
- **Scene 8 (v 14):** Naaman at the Jordan River. Gosh almighty! It worked! - *The commander must have had his dip in the crummy little river, possibly without all his commander regalia. Did he skinny dip?*
- **Scene 9 (vv 15-19a):** Naaman's first face-to-face audience with Elisha. Obviously Elisha consented either to come out or to allow Naaman to come in. Naaman has not only been healed, he has had a religious conversion experience. Since Elisha has declined Naaman's gift, he consents to allow Naaman to take home a little bit of Israel. Naaman begs forgiveness in advance for having to attend to ritual to his god because of his duty to his own king. - *Naaman has had a major attitude adjustment, for his demeanor is quite different; respectful and chastened from his miraculous experience. He believes there is a special connection between the land and the deity being worshiped there. He recognizes the great power of God and hopes to forestall adverse effects after promising to worship God alone and then realizing that he will have to break that promise because of duty to his king.*

This is what we can "know" with reasonable certainty just by reading the text. That does not mean what we read is necessarily "history" or "fact" rather than parable, metaphor, or morality fable. It is what the storyteller wants the reader to notice.

### 3. IDENTIFY WHAT OTHER QUESTIONS ARE RAISED

- **Scene 1 (vv 2-3):** What would it mean for a slave girl to speak so freely to her mistress, especially if it were in the presence of her master?
- **Scene 3 (v 5b):** Where, exactly, was Naaman, and where was the king of Israel? How long did it take to get there with all that cargo? What terrain did he have to travel? What was travel like for a person of means? What was travel like for the servants (who may not have been on a horse or chariot)? What was the worth of all the treasures Naaman was carrying? How much did all that stuff weigh? How many pack animals would have been needed to carry it all? What danger would there be of theft during the travel with all that loot?
- **Scene 4 (vv 6-7):** What was Naaman expecting? What is the meaning behind the king of Israel's desperate response? How might he have felt realizing that the lavish gifts were not for him, the king, but for the healer?
- **Scene 5 (v 8):** What was Elisha's relationship with the king that he could be so casual? What might the king's reaction have been to Elisha's "take charge" response (other than just sending Na'aman ahead to Elisha)?

- **Scene 6 (vv 9-10):** What would the protocol have been, typically, in receiving a guest of such stature? Was it observed? If not (and it apparently wasn't), what might have been the consequences to Elisha for such a social failure? What would the neighbors be thinking and feeling to see this entourage stop at Elisha's residence?
- **Scene 7 (vv11-13):** Did Na'aman have any right to feel insulted and angry? What about the apparently magical thinking—that a wave of the hand or a bath in some river would do the trick? Was there something different about the water of the Jordan from the water in the rivers of Damascus? If the river had healing power for him, was it so for everyone and anyone? How did Elisha know what Na'aman wanted? (The story does not record a request or any conversation between Na'aman and Elisha.) Is our contribution to a cure more effective if we have to work hard to get it? Would it be typical for a man of Na'aman's stature to listen to counseling from underlings?
- **Scene 8 (v 14):** Is there something curative about repeating an action seven times? What was the significance of the number 7 in that religion/culture? What was Na'aman wearing (or not) for this dip in the river? Was anyone watching? How did this cure happen? Was it a miracle?
- **Scene 9 (vv 15-19a):** Why might Elisha have permitted an audience this time but not the first time? Why might Elisha have refused the gifts? (And what would he have done with ten Syrian festal garments, anyway?) Why would Na'aman ask for sacks of dirt? What would be the implications for a man of such power to have converted from his native god to the LORD? Why would Na'aman think God would mind if he attended his master in worship to Rimmon? What sort of god was Rimmon?

## THIRD-LEVEL DETAIL: HOW IS ALL THIS RELATED TO MY LIFE NOW?

### 1. CAN YOU RELATE TO ANY OF THE CHARACTERS?

- **Na'aman:** He has power and a disfiguring and debilitating disease; is forced to listen to people considered “beneath him”; is accustomed to getting what he wants and is angry when things don't go his way; is very needy and desperate; will go to great lengths to get what he wants and needs, including humiliating himself; has access to considerable resources, but they are of no use to him in a crucial situation; makes a life-changing decision but knows instantly that he will have to compromise it.
- **The servants:** They have little or no social standing, yet have worthwhile advice and counsel, which is offered at risk; must do the bidding of a superior, no matter what. (Elisha's servant is devious and dishonest and gets an extreme punishment as a “reward” for his duplicity.)
- **The kings:** Power, position, and popularity come and go, and that makes all the difference. How you behave when a position of ascendance has an impact on how you might be treated when in a lesser position?
- **The prophet:** He is so aligned with God's will that he can perform miracles; has gifts that others seek out; refuses to take rewards for God's work; is gracious and understanding.

### 2. CAN YOU RELATE TO ANY OF THE CHARACTER'S ACTIONS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES?

- Have you ever learned of something potentially life changing from an unlikely source—and been open enough to follow through with it?
- Have you ever walked away in a huff because something was different from what you thought it should be and were not willing to compromise or listen?
- Have your assumptions and prejudices ever been challenged and found to be in error—and to your detriment to hold on to?
- Have you ever been caught in a lie and had to pay for it painfully?
- Have you ever thought someone set you up to fail and panicked before finding out all the facts?
- Have you ever gone to great lengths to get something precious or needful, even at great personal effort and sacrifice?
- Have you ever needed the grace of another and been blessed to receive it?
- Did you have the good grace to be thankful and acknowledge the gift?
- Have you engaged in magical thinking or bargaining with God rather than approaching God with appropriate reverence, expectation, and humility?
- Have you made a commitment to God in response to God's goodness to you? Have you recognized the ways in which you fail to keep that commitment? Have you asked for pardon?

**3. THESE ARE THE SITUATIONS IN MY LIFE THAT HAVE SOME SIMILARITY TO THE BIBLE STORY AND THE WAYS I MIGHT APPLY MY LEARNING FROM THE BIBLE STORY:**

1.

2.

3.

**4. AS YOU EXAMINE THE DETAILS OF THE STORY AND ITS CHARACTERS, IN WHAT WAYS DOES THE STORY URGE YOU TO CHANGE AND GROW?**

1. One insight I have gained about myself is:
  
2. One attitude or behavior that I need to work on is:
  
3. One prejudice I hold that needs to be challenged and changed is:
  
4. In what ways did the characters find community? Who is in your community?
  
5. One realization about the way I relate to God or expect God to be/ behave is:
  
6. One way in which I can make a commitment to God and keep it is:
  
7. One gift I can use for God (without hope for reward) is:

## TAKING THE DIP ON YOUR OWN

Examine the Scripture listed (see the following page) for your birth month.

1. What is obvious in the story?
  
2. Who are the cast of characters?
  
3. What happened? (Analyze the action.) What action and information is implied?
  
4. What questions does the Bible text raise?
  
5. In what way do you relate to the characters?
  
6. How do you relate to their actions and experiences?
  
7. What situations in your life are similar to those in the Bible story? How might you apply your insights?
  
8. In what ways does the story/passage urge you to change and grow?

## Scriptures for Examination (use the one listed for your birth month)

January	Genesis 18:1-15 (A son promised to Abraham and Sarah)
February	Exodus 1:8-22 (Pharaoh commands the death of Hebrew male babies)
March	Judges 3:12-30 (Ehud defeats King Eglon)
April	1 Kings 3:16-28 (King Solomon's wisdom)
May	Jeremiah 1:4-19 (God's call to Jeremiah)
June	Jonah 1:1-16 (Jonah called to go to Nineveh)
July	Matthew 15:21-28 (Cure of the Canaanite woman)
August	John 9:13-34 (Scene 2 of the cure of the man born blind)
September	Acts 9:1-19a (The conversion of Saul—later known as Paul)
October	Philemon 4-22 (Paul urges the freedom of Onesimus)
November	James 2:1-13 (Guard against partiality)
December	3 John 1-15 (Commendation and criticism among believers)

### Other questions for when you REALLY have the chance to dig in:

- Can you visualize what the action is, who is present, what the scene would look like?
- What is the social context? How is that context like or different from mine?
- What is the religious context? How is that context like or different from mine?
- What is the historical context? Who are political allies? enemies?
- What has been recorded in this passage? What, by implication, would the hearers know that I don't know?
- Who is NOT present or represented here? (For example, women are often unnamed in stories; what might that mean?)
- What is the process for something to have occurred? How long might it have taken? What, specifically, happens? (For example, Abraham had a calf killed and prepared for a meal for the angels in Gen. 18, and his servants did not have a modern kitchen!)
- What were the cultural values? Who was accorded respect and why? Who was held to be of little account? What were the taboos and what happened if a taboo was violated? What positive behaviors and values were expected?
- What religious laws and traditions were understood, implied, and expected to be upheld? Who were the "stakeholders" or "guardians" of those laws and traditions and what were the likely consequences for violating law or tradition?
- What "code words" are there that meant something different then than now? (For example, "feet" is often a euphemism for male genitals.)
- Who are the people named? What was their role in church/synagogue/society?

Prepared by Diana Hynson, Director of Learning and Teaching Ministries in the Congregation for the General Board of Discipleship.