



# “Grace and Expectations”

a sermon by

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Our reading comes from 2 Kings 5:1-17- it is a passage that is in the midst of the story of the prophet Elisha- known as the 'man of God' who did all sorts of miracles of healing in the name of the Lord in Israel. At the opening of our reading, the text introduces the commander of an army at Syria- a country that had a very tumultuous relationship with Israel.

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord."

For all of the talk about how much our world is changing and our culture is changing and so many things about our life and economy are uncertain, it gives me a measure of comfort to know that some things never change. If nothing else, there is one thing that we can count on being somewhat predictable in this world and that is our humanity. And the story of Naaman is such a great illustration of this point. Because even though this story took place a few thousand years ago, it is a drama that I would dare say gets played out every day at least somewhere in Charlotte.

Naaman- himself a pretty wealthy, influential leader- commander of an army, in fact, has a problem. So he goes to his boss who is sympathetic who then writes a letter and puts together an offer that really can't be refused- not only was Syria much more powerful than Israel, but

Naaman, when he goes to Israel's king, brought with him the equivalent of about a million dollars cash to make his inquiry a little more persuasive, we'll say.

Israel's king- trying to do his best and himself not a miracle worker- doesn't appreciate the pressure to accommodate an impossible request and gets angry. Then Elisha steps in and tells Naaman to come his way since he is really the one who the leverage was intended for.

Naaman is pleased- he's getting his way. I show up- I pay you- you give me what I want- and I go on my way. Your boss is happy, my boss is happy, thank you very much.

For Naaman, there was no larger issue at hand- no religious dimension to what he was asking for from the representative of Israel's God- he was simply offering a fee for a service to be rendered- there was nothing more to it. So, if you've ever felt like the politics around you are getting old, you are absolutely right- they are ancient!

If it is any consolation to you, even the church is no safe haven from these issues. One of the former professors at my seminary, Donald Juel, tells the story of how some years ago, a man stopped in at his office and said that he had just come to drop off a check for their building fund. The church had lagged behind in their goal and he sat down to write a check he could well afford for the balance they needed. He wrote a check for \$15,000 dollars on the spot and handed it to him. Dr. Juel said, "I was impressed. Thankful. Smiling. Grateful. Then... (Can you see this coming?) as he was leaving, he said almost as an afterthought, "Oh, by the way. We have friends coming to town for this weekend and their daughter has suddenly decided to get married to the fellow she has been living with. They were going to go to a justice of the peace, but these friends would really like to have a church wedding. Do you think we could work this out for Saturday? I do hope that pre-marital policy you have won't stand in the way." And this was Thursday afternoon! So, you are not alone.

So the implicit social rules of Elisha's time as well as our own, perhaps, would mandate that the party of lesser political influence upon being given a generous offer for services to be rendered on the spot would make every effort to accommodate, with all due displays of gratitude for the opportunity. But when the caravan pulls up to Elisha's door Elisha not only doesn't deliver the instructions in person, he sends Naaman away and tells him to go take a bath. He offers Naaman what he wants- just not the way that he wants it.

"But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! And what about the rivers near my house- aren't they better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" And he turned and went away in a rage. And thank goodness his servant talked some sense into him. Because his pride was so invested and offended that he almost missed the very blessing that would make his life whole. His expectations nearly crowded out his ability to see how and through whom God was going to work to his benefit and to God's glory. Because it wasn't going to be his way. "I thought surely for me..."

There are a lot of Biblical precedents for the same human failing. And I do say failing because the failure on our part to understand the vast scope and activity of God's grace is only human. And sometimes it is upsetting too, especially when our ego and sense of entitlement and our expectations are on the line.

Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son- a wayward young man who returns home after squandering his father's money- and his obedient elder brother- who is so angry that the undeserving younger son is welcomed back with open arms. He also tells the story of workers in the field who become outraged when those who had shown up to work in the last hour got paid the same wage as they who had labored all day in the hot sun. The expectation is that if God is just then things are going to work according to justice as we understand it should be in this world. But that is not the case. Grace will have its own way and it is far more generous than we are. So much so that it pushes us to expand the boundaries of our own generosity too in ways that I know that I am not always prepared to do.

In Naaman's case what Elisha was asking of him was quite easy. But he first had to accept the fact that God's blessings were not for sale- God is not interested in our influence or purchasing power, he's interested in our obedience- because our obedience will help condition our hearts to receive the grace. And he had to accept that that grace was not going to look like he expected- but that it would come. And when it did, it changed him- transformed him, actually, forever.

Somewhere in history between Naaman and us Jesus faced the politics of his own home town. And stared down the sudden amputation of enthusiasm in the room that took place when countless eyes- long-familiar eyes- eyes of family friends and community figures he'd known since he was a boy- eyes that expected that this home town miracle worker would be a team player for them- suddenly filled with rage.

Jesus had turned the tables of their expectations that he would cure all their sick, resolve their budget deficits, put them on the map, perhaps. "I tell you the truth," he said to them, "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."

And at this they were so enraged that they jumped up that very moment and dragged Jesus to the top of a cliff with the intention of throwing him off. So powerful are the forces within us to have it our way.

I suppose that he said this to illumine the mystery of grace- that in a city of chosen people, only the enemy- the outsider- the rich Syrian- was healed by the prophet of their Lord. And perhaps also to share that God's grace is so thoroughly unexpected. And, much to their surprise and dismay, that it was not going to be just for them.

No expectation of ours will define how God's grace will act- but if we are willing to let go of how we think things should be- and concede to working on our obedience instead of our terms, then a vast new landscape of possibility can open up before us.

Not just for healing in the moment, but for transformation for a lifetime- transformation that comes when a heart has been conditioned by acceptance, surrender, and grace. The Apostle Paul writes that, "Jesus humbled himself and became obedient unto death-even death on a cross- therefore God also highly exalted him."

James writes, "Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord and he shall lift you up." "Your thoughts are not my thoughts," said the Lord through Isaiah. "Nor are your ways my ways." "So you also must be ready," Matthew reminds us, "Because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you least expect." Amen.