

Seven Dips to Forgiveness

Elisha: Living the Impossible Life – Part III

II Kings 5:1-15

Introduction

Certain words conjure up immediate emotional responses and conclusions. Whether we know all the details or not, one word can bring mental pictures to mind. Let me throw a few words out to you:

- honeymooners

The first thing that comes to your mind when I say that word is, Jackie Gleason, right?! Wrong! When I hear the words, “They’re on their honeymoon,” I immediately think of the words, “Do not disturb.”

How about the words:

- graduation,
- grandson,
- nature,
- laughter,
- Krispy Kreme (sorry . . . a slip of the tongue!).

Some words bring wonderful scenes and vivid colors into your mind as soon as you hear them.

Then, there are words that immediately bring unspoken volumes of pain and darkness. These are words like:

- suicide,
- rape,
- slavery,
- divorce,

- abortion.

There is a word that, while we do not hear it often, carries with it a mixture of horror, revulsion, and sadness. It is the word “*leprosy*”.

Although we do not know all the reasons why, we recoil at that word. It immediately conjures up thoughts to our mind, though somewhat foggy for lack of details. The word automatically warns, “Unclean.” The word shouts, “Stay away; don’t touch; keep clear.” There is a foreboding mysterious despair to the words, “They have leprosy.”

Philip Yancey, in his book, *Where is God When It Hurts*, describes his visits with a man by the name of Dr. Brand. This doctor spent most of his life working with lepers in the country of India.

Yancey writes,

We have been conditioned to view leprosy as one of the most cruel diseases imaginable. It is cruel, but not at all the way other diseases are. It primarily acts as an anesthetic, numbing the pain cells of hands, feet, nose, ears and eyes.

Most diseases are feared because of their pain. What makes a painless disease so horrible? Well, for thousands of years people thought leprosy caused the ulcers on hands and feet and face which eventually led to rotting flesh and loss of limbs. Mainly through Dr. Brand’s research, it has been established that in ninety-nine percent of the

cases, the destruction follows solely because the warning system of pain is gone.

How does the decay happen? In villages of Africa and Asia, a person with leprosy has been known to reach directly into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato. Nothing in his body told him not to. Patients in India would work all day gripping a shovel with a protruding nail, or extinguish a burning wick with the bare hands, or walk on splintered glass.

On one occasion, Dr. Brand tried to open the door of a little storeroom, but a rusty padlock would not yield. A patient, an undersized, malnourished ten year old said, "Let me try, sahib doctor," and he reached for the key. With a quick jerk of his hand he turned the key in the lock. Brand was dumbfounded. How could this weak youngster out-exert him? Then his eyes caught the tell-tale clue – a drop of blood on the floor. Upon examining the boy's fingers, Brand discovered the act of turning the key had gashed a finger open to the bone, yet the boy was completely unaware of it. To him, the sensation of cutting his finger to the bone was no different from picking up a stone or turning a coin in his pocket.

Leprosy is death by degrees. There is bodily injury, physical scarring, ignorant abuse, a thousand different disorders, and all because the person cannot feel the sensation we call pain.

As you have studied the Old Testament, you have probably noticed that leprosy was the disease inflicted by God on a sinful, stubborn, rebellious person. While that is not the case in our dispensation, it is interesting to consider that, in past ages, God may have sent leprosy as a signal. He may have been making a statement that indicated, "Since you no longer feel pain in your heart and conscience by the act of sin, you will now be cursed with the inability to feel pain in your flesh."

The Tragedy of a Helpless Leper

A brief biography of a leper is given to us in the book of II Kings. This leper is a desperate man whose path ultimately crosses the path of God's prophet Elisha.

His position of honorable respect

Let us pick up our study in chapter 5, verse 1.

Now Naaman, captain of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man with his master, and highly respected, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man was also a valiant warrior, but he was a leper.

While the text does not give us chronological clues, it is clear that Naaman's leprosy did not surface or activate in his body until his later years. This brief description of Naaman shouts one clear message – apart from his current condition of leprosy, Naaman had it made. He was at the top of the heap in the kingdom; he was the respected, trusted confidant and friend of the king, and because of his victory over King Ahab, he was every soldier's idol.

Josephus believed that it was Naaman who shot the arrow into the air that found its mark in the disguised king of Israel. It was Naaman who killed Ahab, which immediately catapulted Naaman into legendary status.

His predicament of hopeless ruin

The prophet Jeremiah is writing specifically to show, I believe, a contrast, a paradox between highest achievement and hopeless despair.

Let your eyes wander over the description in verse 1 once again.

. . . a great man . . . highly respected . . . a valiant warrior . . .

(and then the shocking declaration),

. . . a leper.

A leper! Naaman was a valiant soldier who would soon be unable to swing the sword; who would soon be unable to grip the saddle with strong legs; who would soon be unable to lead the charge up some windswept hill. He would no longer be sought out by his army. He would be avoided at all costs. The whispers would sweep through the camp. Of all the great titles he had enjoyed, the title now used, as people cast their saddened looks his direction, was, "There goes Naaman, the leper."

There was not a soldier in his army who envied Naaman now. The most ordinary foot soldier would glance at Naaman and gaze at the medals and ribbons that adorned his uniform and conclude, "As great as

he is and as common as I am, I wouldn't change places with him for one second!"

Naaman was a leper.

His plan of human reasoning

Now in the course of his skirmishes, he happened to take captive a young Israelite girl. Verse 2 tells us that she was the personal attendant of Naaman's wife. In verse 3 we are told that,

She said to her mistress, "I wish that my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! Then he would cure him of his leprosy."

I would like to point out that it is an amazing thing that this young captive girl is concerned at all for her abductor. He is the one who is responsible for ripping her from her country, her family, and her home. It was so unusual that, to Naaman and his wife, it was clear that she must be sincere. So, they think, "Maybe there is a miracle worker in Israel who can cure the incurable!"

Two rational approaches

Notice verses 4 and 5.

Naaman went in and told his master, saying, "Thus and thus spoke the girl who is from the land of Israel." Then the king of Aram said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." He departed and took with him ten talents of silver and six thousand shekels of gold and ten changes of clothes.

At this point, Naaman becomes a perfect example of humanity – lost, diseased by incurable sin. And, his plan for physical healing provides a perfect illustration of mankind's approach to spiritual healing – he displays two very typical, rational errors.

Error #1 – Healing can be bought with good intentions and valuable gifts

1. The first error is in believing that healing can be bought with good intentions and valuable gifts.

There was no one more sincere about healing than Naaman. He simply figured that since healing an incurable disease would require special power, that healing would cost a great deal of money.

The Bible records that his gift included ten talents of silver. That is approximately 850 ounces of silver. Its worth in today's market is around 40,000 dollars. A shekel of gold weighed .4 troy ounces and therefore, 6,000 shekels of gold weighed around 2400 ounces. That would be worth, in today's market of about 500 dollars an ounce, approximately 1.2 million dollars. Throw in the clothing for the king, and you are looking at an immense amount of money.

Now this army captain probably did not have 1.2 million dollars lying around. I personally believe this was everything Naaman could pull together. He probably had to beg and borrow from his friends and family; his soldiers may have passed the hat, and his good friend, the king, probably contributed a large portion of this money as well. Then, as Naaman set off for Israel, everyone cried, "Naaman, we're all rooting for you. Surely you have enough to buy the magic cure. Good luck."

He is about to discover that you cannot buy healing – physically or spiritually. They are both gifts from God.

Error #2 – Healing can be provided by someone other than God

2. The second error that he made is in believing that healing can be provided by someone other than God.

Notice verse 6.

He brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying, "And now as this letter comes to you, behold, I have sent Naaman my servant to you, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

Now, the servant girl had clarified that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal. Evidently, these pagan idolaters believed that if a prophet, who was low in the order, could heal, then certainly the king would have access to that magic wand and he could heal at will. Verse 7 strongly fortifies that implication, because of the king's response.

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man is sending word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? But consider now, and see how he is seeking a quarrel against me."

In other words, the king is saying, "I can't do that! And, if I don't try or if I tried and failed, it

would start a full scale war between us and Syria and we're dead."

So, while the king is ripping his clothes and lamenting, the word finally makes its way to Elisha. Look at verse 8.

It happened when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, that he sent word to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Now let him come to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel."

The king cannot heal. No one in the kingdom can heal except one man – God's man.

Why would God be so limited as to send spiritual healing to humanity through only one person? Why can there not be many roads that lead to heaven?

There is terrific resistance to the biblical truth that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Does that mean that if you believe in Buddha you are wrong? Yes. Does that mean that if you follow the Dalai Lama you are wrong? Yes. Does that mean that if you follow a self-made religion for your own comfort or a spirit guide of your own choosing or a superstition of your own making that you can be lost forever? Yes. Even if you are sincere; even if all of your friends are rooting for you; even if you have put everything you own on the line!

Peter, preaching in Acts, chapter 4, verse 12, about Jesus Christ, declared to a people who had multiple gods, many religious traditions, and a myriad of superstitions,

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

That is the truth. You either believe in Him or die a leper – an outcast forever from the splendor of heaven and the glory of God.

Two typical responses

Now imagine the splendid entourage that pulls up in front of the prophet Elisha's humble little hut. Look at verses 9 and 10.

So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots and stood at the doorway of the house of Elisha. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan

seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean."

Famous, powerful, idolized Naaman does not even get a personal handshake from the humble prophet. Elisha says to his servant, "Gehazi, go on out there and just tell Naaman to take seven dips in the Jordan."

It is as if Elisha is implying that where God is concerned, He is no respecter of persons. It does not matter whether you are wealthy or poor, whether you are idolized or unknown, the ground is level. That message was communicated.

Now, Naaman will respond to the servant's message once again as a typical illustration of humanity to this day. He will respond with a couple of responses. Let me summarize them for you.

Response #1 – I think healing should come like I imagined it

1. The first response is, "I think healing should come like I imagined it."

Look at verse 11.

But Naaman was furious and went away and said, "Behold, I thought, '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 cure the leper.'"

Naaman thought there would be some hocus-pocus. He thought Elisha would come out in long robes, carrying a few candles or something, and wave his hands in the air and chant to his God . . . and he would be healed. That is how Naaman imagined leprosy would be healed.

I received a flyer about a seminar where music has become the spiritual guide. The title of the seminar is, *Alignment Through Music Workshop*, and it is put on by the Raleigh Conservatory of Music. The flyer displays someone's imagination, as it says,

Start your new year with the healing energies of music. Music is the master healer, so get in tune for the new cycle. Find out how to use sound and music for healing, emotional clearing and balancing, self-discovery, stress reduction, change of state, and spiritual awakening.

I will not argue that the right kind of music can have a terrific effect on you, but it cannot bring spiritual awakening to a dead spirit. The flyer continues to say,

This is a participatory workshop, so wear comfortable clothes . . . you may want to bring a pen, notebook, and a pillow or two.

I forgot to attend.

This is really sad, ladies and gentlemen, because all of humanity knows the emptiness; they feel the need for something spiritual; they know there needs to be some kind of awakening, some kind of connection, some kind of re-alignment. They say, "I imagine it will come through this."

This is one of a myriad of imaginations. Naaman thought leprosy would be healed by some waving of the hands and some chanting to God and maybe a little bit of razzmatazz. Then, he thought he would be healed and would pay his money. Naaman thought, like all of humanity, "Healing will come the way I imagined it."

Response #2 – I think something from my past should be good enough

2. The second response is, "I think something from my past should be good enough!"

Now notice verse 12.

Are not Abanah 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.

Do you see the problem?

By the way, the rivers of Damascus that Naaman was referring to in this verse, made Damascus a beautiful oasis. The Arab's called it, "The Garden of the World". It was clear, flowing water.

Naaman thought, "The rivers of my own world would do as good as the muddy waters of this insignificant prophet."

Ladies and gentlemen, Naaman represents the thinking of every generation. Thinking such as, "I imagine cleansing for my spirit will come the way I think it will. And, when it comes, I think we will use some of my stuff from my past, from my own world, from my own thinking, from my own life and sort of combine it with some hocus-pocus and I will be healed."

How tragic it will be, one day, for a host of people who will stand before the Lord with perhaps the thought in their hearts as they are condemned, "I

thought it was alright with me. I thought sin wasn't that big of a deal. I thought God was all love and forgiveness and He would just kind of wipe everyone's slates clean when we stood before Him. I thought punishment was a myth made up by people who tried to scare us with death and hell and the devil and all that sort of stuff. I thought everyone would go to the heaven of their own imagination. I thought . . . I thought . . . I thought . . .".

They will have thought wrong.

The Ecstasy of a Healed Leper

Well, Naaman is in a rage. He is not going to have anything to do with this prophet and his muddy water.

His humility is exhibited.

Look at verse 13. This is the hinge verse and it is classic.

Then his servants came near and spoke to him and said, "My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?"

What simple, profound perception into the human heart these slaves have. "Naaman, we know you real well. If the magic formula had been, 'Naaman, go conquer a kingdom,' you would have said, 'Alright, I'll do it,' or 'Naaman, go risk your life on some battlefield,' you would have said, 'I'll do it,' or 'Naaman, give me 1.2 million dollars,' you would have said, 'I'll do it'. You would do those things, so why not take a bath in that muddy water? What's so hard about that?"

I will tell you what is so hard about that bath in muddy water, for those of you who have struggled on the banks yourself. It takes the loss of all pride and pretense to say to God, "I'm nothing. I'm leprous and you will accept nothing from me in payment."

That is hard to swallow.

Well, in that moment, there is a deathly silence. The servants have delivered an arrow to Naaman's heart. For just a moment, he has to decide whether he will choose to do this. I wish I could have been there. He must have stood there stunned, as the servant's words sank in. Then, he must have said something like, "You're right. I'll do it."

Continue to verse 14a.

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; . . .

Now stop there and imagine this scene. Here is this magnificent man and he comes to the edge of the Jordan with all of his retinue. He leaves behind his uniform with all of the medals attached, with all the regalia of his honored position. He walks away from the chariots and horses and his servants that bespeak his power. He leaves, in the chariot, the 1.2 million dollars. He walks, stripped nearly naked, into the waters of the Jordan River – awkwardly, maybe a little embarrassed, and not too sure he is not being foolish.

Naaman takes a breath and goes completely under the murky water. He comes back up, wipes the water from his eyes, and looks at his ulcerated hands to see . . . no change. He goes under again, a second time, and comes back up. He looks again . . . no change. The third time . . . under and up. The fourth time . . . under and up. The fifth time . . . under and up. There is still no change; nothing is happening. The sixth time . . . under and up . . . and nothing. What was racing through his mind at this point, we are not told. We have every reason to believe that he took a longer breath than before and went under knowing that this was it. He knew, “If this does not work, I’m dead. If this doesn’t heal, I won’t last much longer. I will be Naaman, the leper.”

His healing is received

Naaman obeys, even after six, what he would consider, failed attempts. He went under the seventh time and I think he stayed under a long time. He came bursting back to the surface, gulping breath. His servants, the retinue, the soldiers, all look carefully, closely, and he wipes the water from his eyes and looks at his trembling hands. The Bible says, in verse 14b,

. . . and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean.

His homage is announced

Can you imagine the celebration that erupted on the bank of the Jordan? There is a Syrian dance going on. There is hugging, kissing, crying, and shouting, “Naaman, the great leader, is no longer Naaman, the leper!”

And, in the ecstasy of being a healed leper, Naaman would shout, “I am cleansed!”

Application – Lessons Taught By a Leper

This leper taught me a few lessons that I want to share with you, by way of application.

For those of you who have taken the bath, according to God’s prescription for healing spiritually, you will understand if there are those who are hearing this and are struggling with God’s prescription. They are thinking, “You mean, Lord, I’m to lay everything of myself aside? What about everything I’ve done or am doing? What about what I just gave? What about my morality? What about my standing and my position?”

My friend, I have to tell you, you are spiritually like I was – a leper. There are three lessons this leper can teach you. Let me give them to you.

It is much easier to work for our spiritual healing than it is to simply receive it

1. First, it is much easier to work for our spiritual healing than it is to simply receive it.

If it were hard, there would be people standing in line.

Let me share a story, told by a pastor named Gary Tolbert, that comes to mind.

A little boy came to the Washington Monument and noticed a guard standing by it. The little boy looked up at the guard and said, “I want to buy it.”

The guard stooped down and said, “How much do you have?”

The boy reached into his pocket and pulled out twenty-five cents. The guard said, “That’s not enough.”

The boy replied, “I thought you would say that.”

So he pulled out nine cents more. The guard looked down at the boy and said, “You need to understand three things. First, thirty-four cents is not enough; thirty-four million dollars is not enough to buy the Washington Monument. Second, the Washington Monument is not for sale. And third, if you are an American citizen, the Washington Monument already belongs to you.”

We need to understand three things about forgiveness. First, we cannot earn it. Second, it is not

for sale. And third, if we accept Christ, we already have it.

It is difficult to accept a plan of salvation of which we were never consulted, nor fully understood

2. The second lesson that I learned from this leper is that it is difficult to accept a plan of salvation of which we were never consulted, nor fully understand.

“You mean to tell me that God has a plan for me and He never asked me what it would take?”

“That’s right.”

“God has this plan of salvation and He never asked my advice?”

“That’s right.”

That is Thomas’ point when he understands, all of a sudden, his ignorance, along with the other disciples, as Jesus is talking about going to the Father. Thomas blurts out, “Lord, we don’t know the way there. How are we going to get to the Father?”

Jesus told Thomas and the others, as John, chapter 14, verse 6, records,

. . . I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

I think that is why Jesus Christ is referred to most often as Savior – not Helper; not give you a little power to pull yourself up by your own boot straps – Savior. A Savior saves people who are lost and cannot save themselves.

Perhaps you have said, “Lord, I want You to help me get into heaven.”

No. He takes lepers only. You must say, “Lord, I can’t get into heaven by anything I do or give or say or become. I want You to become my Savior. Like a drowning man who cannot save himself, I want You to save me.”

It is impossible to experience God’s forgiveness without following God’s plan, God’s method, God’s cure

3. The third lesson I learned from this leper is that it is impossible to experience God’s

forgiveness without following God’s plan, God’s method, God’s cure.

I went in to this study with question marks. One question, because I had known this story for some time, was, “Why was Naaman told to go under the water seven times? Was that just some figure that Elisha pulled out of his hat with the thought, ‘I think that would really embarrass him to go under seven times. That would really get him wet.’?”

I pulled out my Bible encyclopedias and dictionaries and read on the subject of leprosy. I found an interesting point. In the Old Testament system, if a person had leprosy, they were to go to the priest. If they claimed to have been restored or healed, there was a simple practice for the priest to perform. The priest was to take a bird, kill it, and empty the blood of that bird into a basin. Then, he would take running water and pour it into that basin and make a mixture. The priest was to then, anoint the leper with this water . . . seven times.

Seven dips for forgiveness. Seven times for cleansing.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are invited today, not to a river filled with muddy, Jordanian waters, but to a fountain, filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel’s veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stain.

The bloodshed of Christ represents the giving of His life in your place; His enduring the wrath of God to pay the penalty for all your sins, past, present, and future.

To those who have been washed, though their sins were as scarlet, now they are white as snow. To you, John writes in the final book of God’s story, the book of Revelation, in chapter 1, verses 5 and 6, “I’m writing to you about,”

. . . Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood – and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father – to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

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