

Dr. John Oswalt, Kings, Session 19, Part 1

2 Kings 5-6, Part 1

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Hello, it's good to be with you again in our study of the covenant on the ground, the books of 1 and 2 Kings. Today, we're beginning with one of the most famous stories in the books of Kings and, indeed, in the Bible, the story of the healing of the Syrian general Naaman.

But before we dive into that, let's pray together.

Dear heavenly father, we come to you with joy because you care about everything that we care about. No matter how small, no matter how insignificant in the context of the whole universe, you know and you care. Thank you.

Forgive us that so often we forget, we look at the tragedies, we look at the difficulties, we look at the stresses of our situation and we forget. We forget to bring them to you. We forget that in you, we have resources to deal with these things that enable us to triumph.

We don't seek to escape these things into you, but rather Lord, we want to bring you in your reality to bear on all of these situations and thus to heal, to cleanse, to renew, to enable us to see. Thank you. Help us as we study your word today to see you and see you in relation to our lives. In your name, we pray. Amen.

We have been looking at the sections of the two books that deal with the ministry of Elijah and Elisha.

That extends from 1 Kings 17 all the way to 2 Kings 13. I've said to you several times that this is not two ministries. These are not two unrelated prophets.

This is one ministry and it is a single ministry which is aimed at showing Baal is not God. The gods of this world are not God. Are there spirits? Spirits with great power? Oh yes, but they're not God.

There's one God, and he stands outside of the universe, able to penetrate it at every point, but he's not the universe, and you can't manipulate him through the universe. That's what the ministry of Elijah and Elisha is demonstrating. We've been looking now at the second part, the Elisha part of the ministry, and we've noticed that, particularly here, there is a whole series of miracles, and all of these are aimed at demonstrating Yahweh's divine power.

He is able for every situation that develops. We saw at the very beginning how his ministry can be looked at in two ways. It's a ministry of blessing as he provided the healing of the water at Jericho, but it's a ministry of curse for those who will defy Yahweh and his minister.

And so, we see it the same way here. Is this a blessing? Is this a ministry of blessing? Yes. Is it a ministry of curse? Yes.

It's up to us which it will be. The story of Naaman is a story of blessing. One of the things that we see when we look at the first three verses of chapter 5 of 2 Kings is a contrast.

A contrast between a great man and you notice how, in verse 1, his greatness is emphasized. He's the commander of the army. He's a great man.

He's in high favor. Yahweh has given him victory. Now we might ask, wait a minute, what's that about? The Syrians don't serve Yahweh.

Ah, but the biblical writer is going to say, if it happened, it happened because of Yahweh's purposes and his will. The king of Syria may not have thought that was the cause. Naaman may not have thought it was the cause, but it's Yahweh who gave the victory.

But again, my point is a great man, high favor, victorious, mighty man of valor. And in Hebrew, that whole long sentence ends with one word, a leper. All of the accomplishments, all of the glory, all of it is marked by this one thing.

As I've said to you before, this is almost certainly not what we know today as leprosy, which is technically Hansen's disease. That disease only appeared in Egypt in the second century AD. But this is a contagious skin disease, which did render a person unclean as far as the kinds of worship that might be involved.

So, his life is marked. So, there is a great, great man over against him. What do we have now? The Syrians, on one of their raids, had carried off a little maid from the land of Israel, and she waited on Naaman's wife.

What a contrast, a mighty warrior, a little maid, a great man, a little girl, a captain, a captive. But this little girl knows the secret. This little girl knows what life is about.

This little girl has the cure. Oh, the truth is, however great you may be, if you do not know the secret of Yahweh in your life, you are a loser. No matter how small, insignificant, or unimportant you may be, if you know the secret of Yahweh in your life, you are the winner.

So, we have the contrast there. Which side are you on? Which side am I on? Now, think about this little girl. Her life is ruined.

She has nothing to look forward to except a life of captivity and service. Do this, go there, get that. How easily she could have fallen into despair.

How easily she could have become cynical, depressed. How easily she could have become angry with Yahweh? No. She knows that her life is not in the hands of the Syrians, her life is in the hands of Yahweh.

And Yahweh is good. Again, she may have been a captive, but she wasn't a captive. Oh, is that possible for you and me? Can we live our lives not under the dominance of circumstances, but can we, in fact, be in charge of the circumstances because we know Yahweh? So she says to her mistress, you know, there's a prophet in Samaria.

Now, I'll say a little more about this in a few moments. There are some questions: Is she talking about the actual city of Samaria, or is she talking about the country? Oftentimes, the country gets named by its capital. And so, it may well be that she's not saying he's actually in the capital city, but he's in the land of Israel.

At any rate, she says there's a prophet. I'm not sure she even knows his name, but she knows there is a man who's in touch with God, and he could cure him of this. No ifs, no ands, no buts.

The faith of a child. Now, again, the narrator is so capable here. He doesn't weigh us down with a lot of, well, the wife told Naaman, and they talked about the... No, Naaman went in and told his Lord.

This is what this little girl from Israel has said. So, the king of Syria said, go now. I'll send a letter to the king of Israel. Again, how interesting.

In the ancient world, prophets were paid by the king. Prophets exist to make sure that the king is successful. So you want a prophet to do something for the commander of your army, you write to the king of Israel, and the king will tell one of his prophets, okay, do this.

He didn't understand. Elisha doesn't work for the king of Israel. Elisha is not under the hand of the king of Israel.

Again, how important this is for you and me. How easily we can feel oppressed. How easily we can feel under the control of great people.

It's not true. And if we know that our life is in the hand of God, we can trust him. So, a lot of money, a lot of money, thousand pounds of gold, 100, 150 pounds of silver.

Wow. And the king of Israel, when he gets his word and it's interesting, we saw in chapter three, this is Joram, the second son of Ahab. We saw in chapter three that when trouble came immediately, he said, oh, Yahweh's out to get us.

Same thing here. Joram must have been a kind of anxious person. He says, oh man, he's trying to provoke war with me because I can't heal anybody.

Does he even think about Elisha? No. Right through this account, in chapter five, and into chapter six, you have this picture of people who can't see people who can't figure out what reality is. And so it apparently never occurs to him.

Well, there's Elisha. Now, if it's true that Elisha is, in fact, down along the Jordan at Gilgal, he's not immediately present in Samaria. We can give Joram a little bit of a pass here, but it never occurs to him.

Elisha, on the other hand, especially if he's some 25 or 30 miles away, he can see, he hears the word. Oh, the king up there in Samaria is terrified. He didn't know what to do.

In verse eight, when Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had rented his clothes, he sent to the king saying, why have you rented your clothes? Why have you torn your garments? Let him come now to me that he may know there is a prophet in Israel. Now, that's a little surprising to me. I would have thought Elisha might've said that he might know there is a God in Israel, but it may well be that this is a stage on the road.

Naaman is going to end up knowing that there is a God in Israel, but maybe, first of all, he needs to know that there is a man of God in Israel who can work for God. I don't know, but I find that kind of interesting. So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots.

Again, the narrator is drawing the picture for us. Here comes this great Syrian general with his whole panoply, horses, and chariots. And he stopped at the door of Elisha's house.

Now, what's he expecting? He's expecting that this prophet is going to say, wow, oh my goodness, here's this great man. I need to go out there, and I, Elisha, sent a messenger to him. Wow.

Elisha doesn't even do him the courtesy of coming to the front door. He sends a servant out. Now, if you remember, Elisha did the same thing with the woman from Shunem.

It's pretty clear that Elisha is not going to bow down to great people. The issue here is not to somehow match swords with these people. Well, you think you're great.

I'm greater. It's not that at all. It's again, in our littleness, we build these facades to try to make ourselves look more important, more significant.

Elisha is not going to be impressed by anybody's facade. I'll say more about this in a few minutes because it's not unimportant. Go wash in the Jordan.

Oh my. Now, even in ancient times, when the Jordan had a good bit more water in it than it does now, both Jordan and Israel are draining it off from the Sea of Galilee and, and elsewhere. So today it's, it's what my dad would call a creek, a little creek.

But even then, it was a little river flowing in a jungle, not at all impressive, like the streams that come off Mount Hermon there in Damascus, full of the melt from the snow, clear and beautiful and sparkling. What are we dealing with here? We're dealing with pride. We're dealing with Naaman's pride.

Again, as always, there's a lesson here. So long as you and I think God owes us something, he's not going to be able to do anything for us. Not because he doesn't want to, but because our pride stands in the way.

What is pride? Pride is simply the conviction that I'm God. It's the conviction that I'm ultimate in the world. And if you think that, you're wrong.

There's only one who is ultimate in the universe. And until we recognize that, he can't do anything for us. Well, Naaman's pride is offended.

The guy doesn't even come out to see me. As important as I am. And what does he do? He tells me to go jump in this muddy little creek over here.

It's fascinating that, as in chapter three, when Joram is saying, oh, what are we going to do? It's one of his servants who says, well, there is a prophet with us. It's a servant who says, well, sir, you've come all this way. It wouldn't hurt to try it.

I mean, if it doesn't work, fine. But suppose it works. What is it? He's not blinded by his pride.

And so Naaman does it. Again, precisely because the narrator is so spare, we're tempted to embellish the story. Can you see it? He goes under the water once, comes out, and says, what did I tell you? The guy says, seven times, sir.

Second time, I told you this is useless. The third time, oh no. The fourth time, look, it's not doing a thing.

Fifth time, sixth time, seventh time. I'm clean. I'm clean.

Oh, friends, are you clean? Can you stand in the presence of the most high God alive, whole? Well, that's what Jesus has come to do: to make us clean, clean in the presence of the most high God. And so Naaman comes roaring back and notice what it says. His flesh was like the flesh of a little boy.

That's no accident. This thing started with a little girl. And now mighty Naaman is as clean as a little boy.

And he got the picture. What a wonderful statement. Now I know there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.

It's not just, and I know there's a prophet. No, I know there's a God. Oh, what a great place to come to for you and me.

Is there a God? Is there a God over the universe? Is there a God over my life? Is there a God who is the master of everything? Yes, yes, yes. So, accept the gift. Again, do you see the difference in the man? He's not standing in his chariot, waiting for this guy to come out.

Would you please accept a gift from your servant? And Elisha takes an oath as the Lord lives. Now in the Hebrew Bible, oath forms are always condensed. But the full form of this would be, may God strike me dead as God lives.

If I do this, he puts an oath upon himself. No, no, by God, I will not do that. Whoa, that's kind of churlish, isn't it? Do you remember Abraham? Abraham, after the cities of the plain had been captured and his nephew Lot had been carried off along with all the spoils of the city, went and fought the army, defeated it, and brought the people and the goods back.

And the king of Sodom said, Abram, give me the people back, and you keep all the spoils. And Abram says, not a chance. Why not? I'm not going to have it said that you made me wealthy.

I think the same thing's going on here. No way, no way. I'm not having people say, oh, yeah, yeah.

Look, yeah. Oh, Elisha, how do you get rich? The Syrians did it. The Syrians are Elisha's supply.

And Elisha says I'm never going to run that risk for a minute. Yahweh is my supply. Who's your supply? And so, and again, you just have to love the realism and the honesty of the Bible.

Clearly, Naaman needs a little discipling. He says, OK, all right, if you won't, please, will you give me a gift? Will you give me two mule loads of dirt? Now, he said, Yahweh is the God of the whole world. Well, if that's true, you can worship Yahweh on Syrian dirt.

But well, he's the God of Israel, so I'll need to take a little Israelite dirt along so I can worship their God. And then he says, and would you please, would you please forgive me? I'm going to have to go into the Temple of Ramon with the king. King leans on my arm.

And when he bows down to Ramon, I'm going to have to do that too. Please forgive me. It's interesting that Elisha doesn't quite say yes or no.

He just says, go in peace. Again, what we're seeing here is you don't have to give your testimony every place you go. But here's a man who has understood who God is, who has been changed.

In a real way, his eyes have been opened.