

The Healing of Naaman

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of accepting the full implications of the Cross and setting aside our natural life and reputation to accept resurrection life.

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1

Topics: "Transformation", "The Cross and Self-Denial"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the story of Naaman's healing as a profound illustration of the natural man's condition and the transformative power of God's grace. Naaman, despite his status and success, is plagued by leprosy, symbolizing the spiritual death that affects all humanity. The sermon emphasizes that true healing and life come only through the acceptance of the Cross, which requires a complete surrender of self and reputation. Naaman's journey to healing illustrates the necessity of faith and obedience, culminating in a new life that reflects a deep devotion to God. Ultimately, the message calls believers to recognize the implications of the Cross in their lives and to pursue a deeper relationship with God through self-denial and worship.

Transcript

Reading: 2 Kings 5.

While, strictly speaking, this incident has its place within the realm of the salvation of the sinner, it has general principles of a wider scope and fuller application, and therefore becomes a matter for the serious consideration of the Lord's own people.

Let us remind ourselves, at this point, of the position typically represented by Elisha. It is not a study of the life of Elisha, nor of a book of the Bible with which we are occupied, but a seeking to know the Lord in the power of His resurrection. The power and fullness of resurrection life is what gives meaning to the life and ministry of Elisha.

The Natural Man

Naaman is a representation of the natural man, as he is outwardly, and as he is inwardly.

Naaman is said to have been a great man before his master, a man held in honor, a man of reputation, of position, of ability; a man of success in his own realm. And yet, with all that can be said for him as to his greatness, his reputation, position, ability, success, death is working in him. There is one thing set over

against all the rest, which casts a shadow over it, and brings it all into a realm of death. Death is active, death is working, death is the master of the situation, and, therefore, all else is under the reign of vanity; that is, everything is subject to a lease, and can at best only go on for a while. It will all pass, unless something happens. That is the man presented, the man by nature.

Then he is brought into the realm of things Divine. Initiative in the matter is taken apart from himself, outside of himself. He is not the first one to move. The little serving maid of his wife is the instrument by which the link is made between him and the source of life. Sometimes quite small things become the means in the hands of God of bringing about such a link. Insignificant things, humanly speaking, are often used; and it is a thing to note in this story how the Lord's means and methods are of a different character altogether from those which Naaman would have considered suitable to his case. Grace very often moves for our good through means which we would hardly take account of, things which do not bear any mark of reputation whatever.

Through this simple, and, so to speak, insignificant (it proved to be a very significant) instrumentality, Naaman is brought within the compass of the ministry of life. It looked like a chance thing. The thing seems to be so unarranged, so like a chance expression. This little serving maid said to her mistress: "Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! then would he recover him of his leprosy." It is little more than a sympathetic ejaculation - "I do wish that you could get into touch with such-and-such a means that the Lord uses!" And within a hint, a mere suggestion, there is the working of a Divine energy with tremendous issues involved.

Men organize great movements, and bring a good deal of pressure upon people as to why they should attend such-and-such a thing. The Lord very often effects His great ends in much more simple ways, which look to be merely accidental, incidental, at times. There is a wonderful simplicity and quietness about the ways in which the Lord gets His main ends. They just come about. A suggestion, a hint, an indication, an intimation, but lying in the direction of that there may be the ultimate things in the will of God.

This thing was never planned, never worked out beforehand, never elaborately arranged. In a very simple way, it just came about. It is something to take account of, lest the very simplicity of the ways of the Lord should catch us in an unwatchful state, and because we expected some voice from heaven, or some far more imposing method of God to get us into His full purpose, we miss those simple movements of life which were pointing in that direction. What a great deal hangs upon this very simple heart-expression of this maid!

Out of that Naaman eventually comes into direct touch with the instrument, the vessel of life - life in its fullness, life which was to triumph over death at work in him. But then his real difficulties commence. It is not until he comes into touch with life itself that the real state of the man is made plain. He knows he is a leper; that is, he knows that despite everything he possesses there is a serious lack, and that unless that lack is made good, life for him is after all a disappointing thing, and could never satisfy him; everything has a shadow over it because of that one lack. In reality, however, the true character of the man's whole condition is not disclosed until he comes directly into touch with the means of his deliverance, when another kind of history commences, which really illustrates for us the nature of the natural man, even at his best.

Embodying it all in one comprehensive statement, his difficulties are the acceptance of the full implications of the Cross. He can accept the fact that he is seriously in need. He can accept the fact that his need

might very well be met in a certain direction, and is prepared to go so far in that direction to have his need met. But then he comes up against the full implications of what that direction means, and he finds himself at that point unable to accept all the implications. Being the natural man, he requires some recognition of his own qualities. He needs to have himself taken into account in his own person. He is a man with a reputation, held in honor, and therefore he ought to be dealt with by quite reputable means, something quite in keeping with his standing. Thus when it is proposed that he should adopt means, and go by a way which to him, from his standpoint, was quite disreputable, he finds himself confronted with what Paul calls "the offence of the cross." "Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean?" Something with a reputation, something more suitable to such a one as I am! And that is the root of his trouble.

That can be applied in many ways, and various people come up against the same deadlock along different lines. For some it is intellectual; they must have an intellectual salvation, and if they cannot bring everything into the realm of their intellect then the thing is not worth considering, it is beneath them. Others must have it in other vessels, and by other means which are suitable to them in nature. But, be it what it may, God has His own position as represented by the Cross, and God never deviates one hair's-breadth from that. God's ground is utter self-emptying. That is the Cross! When we come to Jordan, that means that we have come to the place where all consideration for reputation, position, honor, or any such thing in the realm of the natural man has been fully set aside, and we can never come to Jordan until that is so. Naaman may have his battle, just as multitudes of others have had their battles, on exactly the same ground, until they could get through to the place where no consideration whatever for themselves, as being anything of any value at all, has a place. If the waters of Jordan remain symbolic of Divine judgment of man, then that puts man down into a very low place, that reduces man to something without a reputation, without honor. There can be no getting through to the Lord's fullness of life, only insofar as man by nature has been emptied out to where he no longer regards himself as being of any account before God.

These are simple truths, but they apply to believers as much as to unbelievers. The full implications of the Cross have not been kept clearly before the Lord's people through the ages. Unfortunately a great deal of Gospel preaching has laid all the stress upon the satisfaction of man, the good and the blessing of man, with the result that afterward, sometimes years afterward, the Lord has to bring home the fact of the Cross as ruling out man by nature. The consequence has been that we have had to have conventions and special meetings to get Christians consecrated; and consecration is really a matter of full surrender. But what an obvious fault that is, when all that should have been done right at the beginning without any reservation at all. And had the Cross in its full implications been presented right from the beginning, then the believer would be living on the level of the convention life from the first. We have all suffered from the fault. Most of us, or many of us, have spent years in floundering along in a large measure of weakness and ineffectiveness, because we had never from the beginning seen the full implications of the Cross as to ourselves. We saw that Calvary was salvation for the sinner, but we had never seen clearly that Calvary was the setting aside of man utterly in himself; and it was not until we came to see that, that we came through into the fullness of life. We had brought over a very great deal of our natural life on to new creation ground, and, having tried to use it, we found that it was a constant burden and handicap, whereas the meaning of the Cross is that all things are of God. That is a comprehensive and conclusive "all." All things are out from God.

For Naaman the full implications of the Cross were presented, and not one bit of consideration was given to his flesh. No provision was made whatever for his flesh. He came with his pomp and retinue to the tent of Elisha, and sent to announce his arrival, but the prophet did not so much as rise from his stool to look out and see what a wonderful man this was. He simply went on with whatever he was doing, and said: "Go and wash in Jordan seven times..." The man of reputation felt the sting of the ignoring of HIMSELF, and he was going away in a great rage, saying: "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 recover the leper." Elisha's attitude was: "Not in the least! that is the measure in which I respect the flesh!" That is the measure in which God takes account of man by nature!

It is a painful lesson for a great many servants of the Lord to learn. Not in the least does the Lord take account of what a man is in himself; not even as to what a saved man is in himself. That man does not come under the eye of God. The prophet would not even look out to see Naaman. That is God's attitude. The eye of God does not take into view what man is by nature; He simply ignores him and sets him aside. Calvary represents that.

It is the way of life, the way of fullness. It seems to be very much the opposite when you are going through those stages, when those principles are being applied. There seems to be no life at all in that direction, and little hope. It is quite true! The natural man may as well take it for granted that there is nothing for him in that direction, as the natural man. Our flesh will get nothing out of salvation when God has His way. Our natural life is not going to get any gratification. Taking up the Cross and denying ourselves is something of a very radical character when wrought out in spiritual terms. It is self DENIAL!

That is the meaning of Calvary, and such a presentation discovered Naaman's real heart state, and illustrates for us what death is. Death working is, after all, only the working of the natural life. To men it may appear a great thing. There may be that about it which man would call honorable. It may have a good deal of success in this world. There may be features of great ability. There may be a good reputation amongst men. But before God there is something else which renders all that as nothing, not to be taken into account; it is the reign of spiritual death. Naaman was put to a very thorough test as to whether he really meant business in this matter of resurrection life, life triumphant over death. He was fully extended as to whether to him this was a matter of life and death. "Go and wash in Jordan seven times." The meaning of "seven" is spiritual completeness. Naaman was being drawn out to a point of spiritual completeness.

The story has nothing to say about Naaman stopping short after the second, the third, or the fourth time, and this shows that now he was really going right through with this whole thing, having once definitely faced the issue. His servants had reasoned with him, and he had listened to reason. Then confronted with the issue, he said in effect: "Well, if this is the way, then I am going this way without any reservation. My alternative is to go back to my country as I came, in this living death. Am I prepared for that? or am I really prepared to go all the way with this matter without a reservation?" He decided, because of the seriousness of the issue, that he would go all the way. And so, although on any other ground of a less complete consecration he might have stopped after the second dip in Jordan, and said: "Well, there you are! Nothing has happened! Just as I expected!" we find instead that Naaman persevered. And now the third time, nothing! The fourth time, nothing! The fifth time, nothing! The sixth time, nothing! But he went through to the seventh time. His faith was tried on this matter right up to the end.

We know what that means in our own experience. God has placed before us an issue. That issue is no less a thing than life triumphant over death. That not only applies to the unsaved, that applies to saints. The full expression of that life was seen by the Apostle Paul to be bound up with a certain point of advancement, when he said: "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect... but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind... I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus." "If by any means I may attain unto the resurrection [Greek - out-resurrection] from the dead," a resurrection which is a reward, and not a resurrection which is a general thing; some expression of the power of His resurrection which is not general but specific. So that you see the matter of life triumphant over death in its full meaning is something which concerns saints after Paul's type, and goes a long way on into the Christian life and experience. But beyond the initial expression of His resurrection in our salvation, and the ultimate full expression in the out-resurrection from the dead, there are continuous crises, progressive developments of that life, and each fresh stage issuing in further fullness is marked by some crisis of this very character, namely, as to how much more of self we are prepared to leave behind. It may be that at a given point our own personal will is set against the Lord's will, or that a form of sin is present that we are not prepared to give up. On the other hand it may not be in the realm of definite and positive selfishness, but there are points of a fine character to which we come in the matter of our preparedness to let go something, some position, some relationship, and move on with the Lord into a new realm which is costly, and which means the setting aside in a new way of our own sensibilities, and our own feelings, and our own ideas, in order to attain unto that fuller power of His resurrection. We shall be challenged by these things continually as we go on, and for us the power of His resurrection is bound up with the extending of our faith to some further point than ever before. That is the statement of facts. We shall know that that is true, if we are going on with the Lord, and perhaps the value of what is before us now will be found in our being able to say, when we come to such issues, and such crises: "This is just that: the question for the moment is whether I am prepared to take this further step, which, involving me perhaps in further difficulties, means that my own personal considerations have to be set aside in a new way." Thus it is a step of faith more than ever before. But it is the way of life, the way of increase. Naaman went the whole way with God, and God went the whole way with him, even unto the seventh degree.

After the seventh time Naaman came again whole, not only of his leprosy, but with his flesh as the flesh of a little child. It is not only that the positive action of death has been removed, but he has come into a new realm altogether. The flesh of a little child speaks of entire newness, a new life, a new realm. For him, speaking typically, it was like beginning life all over again as a babe; everything was before him. A whole new world was stretched in front of him.

That is the spiritual effect of every fresh breaking through into resurrection life. Every time we are touched with some fresh experience of His life we are conscious that it is a new world. There are new possibilities. The limitations of the past have become as nothing in the fresh possibilities which have come to us on the ground of this measure of risen life. It is always like that. There we reach the point of newness of life in possession. What remains is simply the expression of that newness of life in certain directions.

A New Attitude Toward the Instrument Used for His Spiritual Good

Naaman was very angry with Elisha beforehand. He would go away in a rage. But now he came to Elisha. There is no question of reputation now, of personal importance now. He made his way instantly and directly to the tent of Elisha. He sought fellowship with the instrument of blessing. He was no longer ashamed of that.

You can make the broad application of the principle of fellowship being established in life, because life shared is the basis of fellowship, and when once we really share some life we have the foundations of fellowship, and all dividing elements are put away.

Naaman Worshiped Jehovah

He worshiped Jehovah and said: "Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel." It is a test as well as a fact stated, that genuine knowledge of the Lord in resurrection life shows itself in an adoration of the Lord, worship of the Lord, devotion to the Lord Himself. If it is but the acceptance of a teaching it does not carry us that far. If it is the association with a movement we fall short of that. But if it is a personal knowledge of the Lord in the power of resurrection, the mark of our lives is a deep, reverent devotion to the Lord Himself. That is really the Testimony. It is not what we have to talk about. It is not our teaching, not our system of things, and not our movement. It is not even our fellowship as representing something technical on the earth. It is our Lord! Let us never be found talking about the teaching which we have accepted, or which is represented by certain people in certain places. Let us see to it that for us it is a matter of the Lord, and if the teaching does not bring us to the Lord then there is something wrong, perhaps not with the teaching, but with our apprehension of it. Worship must become the dominating feature of those who know Him in the power of His resurrection.

His Resources at the Lord's Disposal

The third thing noticeable is that Naaman wanted to place his resources at the service of the Lord in offering a gift. That has always been a feature of real life. It was so at Pentecost. When the Lord does something within and brings into a new fullness of Himself, we want all the fullness that we have to be at the Lord's disposal. At any rate that was the inclination of the heart of Naaman.

At this point we are brought to another consideration. There was this proffered gift, but it was refused by Elisha simply because a peril was recognized. Elisha had had no difficulty in accepting material kindness at the hands of the Shunammite, but he absolutely refused to accept anything at the hands of Naaman. These two people stood in altogether different positions spiritually. The peril which Elisha clearly discerned in this particular direction was lest Naaman should go away feeling that, after all, he had some hand in this matter, and that he had paid for it. The Lord never wants any gifts, any resources placed at His disposal which carry with them the slightest suggestion that they are acts of patronage. He leaves no room for any reactions of the flesh, of nature, the gratifying of anything in that realm. So Elisha, recognizing that there might creep in, even at this point, some little bit of that natural life which loves to have satisfaction in itself because of what it does, closed the door to that, and refused to admit any possibility of it. He sent Naaman away with the blessing, but with no personal gratification.

At that point the tragedy of Gehazi comes in. Gehazi saw what was done, and when Naaman had well begun his return journey, Gehazi went after him, made up a long story as from Elisha, his master, asked for the gift, and got it. We do not know what mischief that may have done with Naaman, but we do know that it brought Gehazi under a terrible judgment; "The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever."

What is the explanation of this? The Lord Jesus Himself seems to give us an insight into it in the Gospel by Luke, chapter 4:27-29:

And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. And they were all filled with wrath in the synagogue, as they heard these things; And they rose up, and cast him forth out of the city...

Gehazi had been in close touch with Elisha, had seen his works and heard his words, and all that Elisha represented was available to Gehazi; but Gehazi, with all his knowledge of it and association with it, remained upon a merely official ground, and never came on to a vital ground. Now we can see what the Lord is saying to the Jews. Without saying so in as many words, He has transferred the situation of Gehazi to the Jews of His own day: "You have heard: you have been in close association with the vessel of Life: you have seen the works: you know all about it from the standpoint of close proximity to it, BUT you remain merely upon official ground as ostensibly representing God, and have never come through on to living ground. Your judgment is leprosy, death!" That is what happened to Israel.

Gehazi stood on official ground. You see him acting in an official way when the Shunammite's son died, and she laid him on the bed of Elisha, and went to seek him. The prophet said to Gehazi, "...take my staff in thine hand, and go thy way... and lay my staff upon the face of the child." And we can see Gehazi taking the staff in his very official, pompous way, and going as the representative of the great prophet and putting the staff on the lad expecting to see some result, but nothing happened. Perhaps he tried moving the staff this way and that, to try to get some sort of response. But death never yields to what is merely official, death only yields to life. When the one who is in person the embodiment of life triumphant over death stretches himself upon that body, then death is swallowed up in life; but nothing official can do that.

The Jewish leaders were utterly impotent, although they were supposed to be the representatives of God. They were in close association with the life, yet they were dead. And because they did not come through to the position represented by Christ, but were self-seeking, like Gehazi (and their very self-seeking made them prejudiced) they came under judgment and perished. Their generations have been under that judgment ever since, and are there today. Leprosy and death clings to them for the age.

This is the warning side of things. It is possible to come into a very close proximity to the Testimony, to be in touch with things - to hear, to see, to know, to have an association which is formal - and yet never to stand livingly on that resurrection ground. It is a terrible tragedy to be in a position like that; and yet there are many, who can talk the dialect, use the phraseology, reproduce the terms, but who have not life. We may be in the privileges of association, and yet not in the life of union.

That word of warning cannot be left out as we come to the end of this story, but having struck the note of warning which we are obliged to admit into our consideration, let us close on the higher ground of noticing again to what the Lord calls us, and that is to an ever-growing knowledge of Himself in the power of His resurrection: and that increase of Divine life is by the way of a yielding up of our own interests, our own considerations. There is no life except by death. There is no gain except by loss.

May the Lord speak that message into our hearts according as it is necessary in our case.

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