

Two Ways, Only Two

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're reading from 2 Kings 5, verses 1-16, and found on page 371 of your Bibles.

Naaman healed of leprosy. Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master, and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram.

He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife.

She said to her mistress, If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy. Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said.

By all means go, the king of Aram replied. I will send a letter to the king of Israel. So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of clothing.

[1 : 21] The letter that he took to the king of Israel read, With this letter I am sending my servant Nahum to you, so that you may cure him of his leprosy.

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy?

See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me. When Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message.

Why have you torn your robes? Make the man come to me, and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.

Elisha sent a messenger to him to say to him, Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored, and you will be cleansed.

[2 : 27] But Naaman went away angry and said, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord, wave his hand over the spot, and cure me of my leprosy.

Are not Abana and Farpar the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?

So he turned and went off in a rage. Naaman's servants went to him and said, My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it?

How much more then when he tells you, wash and be cleansed? So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him. And his flesh was restored, and he became clean like that of a young boy.

Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before them and said, Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel, so please accept a gift from your servant.

[3 : 34] The prophet answered, As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing. And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.

Thanks be to God. Thanks Stephen for reading. If you could keep your Bibles open there on page 372, that would be a big help to me as we look at that together.

It might seem, if you're here as a guest, that we've just heard an account of something that happened an awfully long time ago and quite far away. But that's because at St Silas we're committed to our belief that God speaks to us through the Bible, through his word, and that's how Jesus viewed the Bible.

And it's our normal pattern that we just work through books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, so that it's God setting the agenda rather than us cherry picking. And over the last year, from time to time, we've gone back to look at this life story of Elijah and Elisha, these two men from around the 9th century BC.

So that's what we're looking at. But much more important than anything I say about these events is that we do hear God speak to us. So let's pray for that. Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer.

[4 : 48] Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us. Father God, thank you that you've made yourself known to us through your word and through history.

We pray this morning that you will meet with each one of us, that you'll give us ears to hear your voice, and we'll receive this story not just as an event from the past, but rather as spiritual food for our souls.

So give us minds that know who you are and hearts that are willing to respond rightly to you. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Well, I don't know if you've ever had the experience of going in the wrong direction, realizing that you're actually going completely the wrong way.

Maybe you've got on a train and you've realized it was the wrong train, or it decouples and you're on the wrong half of it. Or maybe you're going along following your sat-nav and you realize you've put the wrong address in and you're going in the wrong direction.

I saw in the news in March, you might remember this, that there was a British Airways flight meant to fly from London to Dusseldorf and then landed in Edinburgh. And the people on the plane got a bit suspicious when instead of seeing the, quote, typical German industrial landscape, they in fact were seeing mountains and thought, well, what's going on here?

[6 : 07] And then the plane landed and the chief steward came out and said, how many of you thought you were going to Dusseldorf? And the whole plane, all the hands went up. They were in the wrong place. It's a bad thing to be going in the wrong direction.

Well, there's two men in this account, we're looking at this chapter of the Bible this morning, that between them make us ask ourselves, spiritually, what direction am I going in?

When it comes to God, what direction? You might be someone who normally wouldn't dream of being seen in a church. You've come because you know Andy and Mayer or Donald John and Crippen and you've come to support that and you've found yourself here.

Well, nonetheless, could this be a day that you see as a step in a certain direction, a direction towards God, towards knowing more about him? Or you might be someone who, for whom coming today was a real struggle.

You didn't want to come to church today. You don't want to speak to anyone. But the fact that you're here amidst whatever chaos is going on in your life is an expression of going in the right direction towards God.

[7 : 11] Or you could be someone who's here every week, who's stuck in serving in all kinds of ways, but actually, in your heart, you're drifting. You're going in the wrong direction. Well, let's look at this chapter.

The king at the time this is written is King Joram. We know he reigned in Israel from 852 BC to 841 BC. So about 850 years before Jesus came, we're after Abraham, we're after Moses, we're after great King David.

And God's people at that time, before Jesus came, they're living as a nation state in what's politically now modern-day Israel, but basically the land of Canaan that was given to God's people then.

But though they were living there, meant to be God's people, they'd actually stopped worshipping God. And they were worshipping pagan gods, this god Baal, who's a false god, made-up god. They were worshipping him instead.

And what happened was God raised up these two men, Elijah and Elisha. And through dramatic works from God through Elisha and dramatic words from God through Elisha, he called the people back to himself.

[8 : 17] And in chapter 4, if you just glance back, what happened in the last chapter, you can see from the headings in our church Bibles, was that God showed through great works to Elisha that it is a wonderful thing to be on God's side, to be blessed by God.

There was a widow who got rescued from debt through miraculous provision. Then a woman's only son raised from death. He dies and Elisha raises him to life.

There's a group of God's people rescued from danger. There's poison in their food and Elisha cleanses it. And then people rescued from drought as 100 people are fed.

It's a phenomenal time in history. It's worth saying, if you're thinking, hang on a minute, what's going on here as we look at this, these stories of miracles? Miracles are actually quite rare in the Bible. The Bible covers a lot of human history, and God's dealing with people in history. And even then, the miraculous is pretty unusual. There are, I think, four key moments in Bible history when God dramatically broke in with unusual supernatural activity as he wanted to show that something unique was happening in human history.

[9 : 32] The first was the time of Moses when God rescued a people to be his people. They were in slavery in Egypt, and he rescued them. The next was this time, Elijah and Elisha, as God's people in the world had turned from him and forgotten him, and he used miracles to draw them back to him.

The next time we see a great concentration of miracles from God is in the time of Jesus, as God steps into our world to save us and marks that with signs and wonders.

And then the fourth time is in the first generation of Jesus' followers, the apostles, as they took that message about Jesus and God's love through him to the world and God attested to the truth of their message through miracles.

And he does it through Elisha here to prove that the blessings of God are better than anything the world could offer you. That God can give you what your heart was made for, your heart longs for, and the world can never give you that.

Just as we see in Jesus, Jesus healing the sick, even giving sight to the blind, even raising the dead. He does those miracles not just to prove who he is, though they do demonstrate who he is.

[10 : 45] He also does them to demonstrate that you want to be blessed by God. Having God on your side is everything that your heart was made for and longs for. So we've just seen that in two kings through Elisha's works, and then we get this story of Naaman.

Why is it here? I think that it's here because God is showing us through Naaman and through Gehazi, who comes after him, what it looks like to go in the right direction and the wrong direction, to take steps towards God and his blessing or away from God and his blessing.

So our first point, there's a notice sheet. Inside the notice sheet, there's an outline, if you find that helpful. And we're at point one now, which is that Naaman is miles away, but in his faith, he takes steps to salvation.

That's what we're looking at in chapter five. From what we hear about Naaman in verse one, he is as far away from God as you could get. Verse one, now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram.

He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded. So he is in what's now modern day Syria, the commander of the army of the enemies of God's people.

[12 : 00] He's right up there in strength and power, but already we get reminded that nobody is really far from God. Verse one, if you just look again, it says, he was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded because through him, the Lord had given victory to Aram.

If you think of successful people around us today, perhaps people who seem to have no need for God and no interest in God, people who seem as far from interest in Jesus Christ as you could get, it's good to remember that God still gave them everything they've got.

It's God that gave them the successes. They're just not aware of it yet. God shapes our entire lives, whether or not we are rejecting him or accepting him.

And now the steps towards God begin for Naaman. The first one comes right at the end of verse one. We read, he was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. The point being, there's just a chink in the armor.

God brings something into Naaman's life to show Naaman that he hasn't got it all sorted. He needs help. There's an analogy I've heard attributed to C.S. Lewis, the writer of the Narnia books, where he was a Christian and he described how the normal way of God dealing with people is a bit like, if you imagine that you're sitting on a chair in your house and you're just reading the newspaper and God knocks on the door, it's God here, and we're reading the paper, we carry on reading and we say, I'm not interested.

[13 : 32] Not interested. Well, what does God do about that? He's not going to knock on the door again, is he? Because it doesn't work. Instead, he's going to take out the back wall or he's going to bring down the staircase.

Not because he's callous, but because he's kind. And he made us to know him in all his goodness. He wants to get our attention so that we get what we were made for.

And sometimes he brings things into our lives that are there to be like a megaphone to us, to shock us into seeing that we haven't got it all sorted. And Naaman's first step here is to know that he's got a problem.

And folks, whatever our skin condition today, Naaman's, he got a skin disease, but we might have perfect skin, but we all have a problem that only God can fix.

It's that we've not treated God as we should and we've not treated each other as we should. And it's really a critical step in our journey towards God that we're willing to admit that, that we get convicted that we're not the people we ought to be, that God is good and holy and righteous and we've got a problem with him because of how we've lived.

[14 : 47] If we don't believe that, then the news that God loves us enough to have sent Jesus to forgive us sounds boring. It sounds irrelevant. It's true of our friends, our colleagues, our family.

It's true of our children. If we go through life, you know, I've got three kids. If I just go through life affirming their every move to boost their self-esteem and tell them how amazing they are, then when I tell them that Jesus died so they could be forgiven, they're going to think that's irrelevant. It's boring. And for us ourselves, we have to have this realization that God says he'll give us by his spirit and actually he is holy and because of the way we've lived, we're not right with him and we need to be forgiven.

Well, he and Naaman knows that he needs help. The leprosy reveals to him that his life isn't sorted. That's step one. And then step two comes into his life and it's a messenger with compassion and courage and truth.

In verse two, we hear of this girl. She's been captured from Israel by raiders. She's been trafficked to Aram to be Naaman's wife's slave.

[15 : 53] Her parents are quite possibly dead. She seems to have come from one of the few families in Israel who was still worshipping Yahweh, the God of the Bible. And so look at her extraordinary compassion.

Verse three, she said to her mistress, if only my master would see the prophet who was in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy.

Just think about that. This girl, her life is in the hands of her mistress. And she has the compassion to care for her enemies who've carted her off to this foreign land.

She wants what's best for Naaman. And she's got the courage to speak out, to say, you know, there is a true God, Yahweh, and he has a prophet who has the power to heal your husband.

And without that intervention, the story ends, and Naaman never finds God. It's a great inspiration for us who know Jesus, that really our place in the world is to know that we're not at home here.

[16 : 57] Ultimately, our home is in heaven, that we're like exiles here, really. But all around us, there are people who need to hear of God's love for them in Jesus so they can have their sins forgiven.

And God's placed us in their lives. Could we have the compassion for them? And could we have the courage to speak the truth to them? Inviting them to hear more about Jesus.

That's step two, and it's a key step in Naaman's journey to salvation. So he gets permission from his boss, the king, to head off to Israel, and the king wants to support his commander, so he sends these amazing gifts, silver and gold, and amazing clothes.

And this letter in verse six, to the king of Israel, the letter, with this letter, I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.

And the king's response is brilliant, isn't it? If you just have a look at verse seven, I mean, how would you feel if you got a letter like that? Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life?

[17 : 59] Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he's trying to pick a quarrel with me. And we feel some sympathy there for the king of Israel.

Nobody wants a letter like that from their enemy. But notice the contrast there between the king in Israel at the epicenter of God's people and the slave girl in a foreign land who remembered the truth.

The king of God's people has stopped trusting God. He's forgotten there's a prophet in the land. He's not willing to turn to that prophet for help. He's like, if you imagine, the bishop or archbishop or cardinal today who's entrenched right at the heart of Christian religion and they've lost their faith all along.

They don't believe it anymore. While that simple slave girl in a foreign land, she knew exactly where to appoint her mistress. Go to God's savior. Elisha in her time.

It's Jesus in our time. Well, Elisha, he is the news about this man arriving. So he sends a message to the king to get the man to come to him. And then the next big step for Naaman, you can picture him arriving in all his grandeur.

[19 : 10] He's got horses and chariots and he gets to the door of Elisha's little home and he hears the message that can save him in verse 10. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.

So how does Naaman react? Verse 11, but Naaman went away angry. Why is he angry? 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 spot and cure me of my leprosy.

What we're seeing there, folks, is the great scandal of the Christian message. Naaman, in his self-importance, rejects Elisha's offer because it's humiliating, it's too simple, and it's narrow.

You just imagine how humiliating it would have been for Naaman to go walk down in front of all his servants and soldiers, walking down into the Jordan River, coming back out again.

He looks exactly the same, six times. And the message is so narrow. Verse 12, why does it have to be this river? We've got perfectly good rivers in Syria. Why did I have to come here and wash in that river?

[20 : 29] It's too easy to ridicule the message, isn't it? Why on earth is this going to work? By washing myself seven times in that river, why will that cure me? It goes against human reason.

And the reason for that is because it's not about human reason. It's about the intervention of a good God. It's about the power of God. And so it is with the message that we believe about Jesus today.

The man who said, I'm the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. His message is, if you just put your trust in him and his public execution on a wooden cross at Calvary, God will count his death as your death in your place for sin.

And he counts you as righteous and offers you life forever with God. It's offensively humiliating. Just like everyone else. The same way to be saved as everyone else.

You're no better than other people. The ground around the cross is level ground. Nobody gets special treatment and nobody is treated as worse than anyone else. It's offensively simple.

[21 : 37] You don't have to pass an exam. You don't have to do some religious works to earn yourself back into God's good books. You just put your trust in Jesus' death on the cross. And it's offensively narrow.

Only one way. There's no other name under heaven by which you can be saved. If there was, Jesus wouldn't have come and died for us. His way is the way. And I don't know what you think about that kind of message this morning, but when Naaman hears the message for him about being healed, he goes off in a rage and his servants plead with him.

They say, come on, if you'd been asked to go and do something great to get healed, you'd have gone and done it. Why not do this very simple thing? And the next step is that he finally has faith.

Verse 14, have a look. So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times as the man of God had told him. And his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

It's an extraordinary miracle. It's breathtaking. And then even more wonderfully, Naaman doesn't just get physically healed. He is spiritually healed as well.

[22 : 47] In verse 15, look at his confession to Elisha. He stood before Elisha and said, now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.

So please accept the gift from your servant. And then he shows marks of clear, true conversion. He even asks for permission that when he goes back to his homeland, he'll end up having to go in the pagan temple when he's serving his king.

But he won't be worshipping because he's realised that the God of the Bible is the true God. His life is transformed. And it's a wonderful thing when you see a life transformed by coming to see who Jesus is.

We see that miracle happening all over the world today. I was hearing last week from a friend, a friend of hers, she's got to know, has become a Christian. How did she become a Christian? Her friends, who live in a different flat to her, came to her one day, they said, you'll never guess what's happened, it's the most hilarious thing.

You know our flatmate, he's become a Christian. They thought it was hilarious. So all the friends of this guy who's become a Christian, they're all just laughing. How absurd that someone in today's world will become a Christian.

[23 : 57] But she was intrigued. And so, she never met a Christian before. So she got to know him and she was so amazed by the transformation in this guy's life that she came to look at Jesus herself, did a course at a church, and has become a Christian.

The transformation of someone's life. Well, Naaman, a complete outsider, commander of God's enemy's army, and he goes on this journey of salvation. And any of us can go on a journey like that. But then we see a man going in the opposite direction. That's our second point. Gehazi is right near God, but in his greed, he takes steps to disaster. So we've heard about Naaman and he was miles away.

Gehazi couldn't be more privileged in terms of knowing about God. He's the personal servant of Elisha. And so, if you look at the language that he uses in verse 20, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, the man of God, said to himself, my master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought.

As surely as the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something from him. So these are disastrous steps that Gehazi makes here. The first one is, did you notice, he still uses religious language, Christian language, even though it doesn't mean anything to him anymore.

[25 : 23] As surely as the Lord lives, just as, you know, to be honest, sometimes I meet people today who can talk the talk of the Christian life. They're full of Christian chat and their heart seems to be miles away from Jesus.

Well, that's Gehazi. And look at the steps he takes. He listens to himself instead of God. Verse 20, he says to himself, my master was too easy on Naaman and he's greedy.

He wants something for himself. And then he starts his scheme. So in verse 21, he goes after Naaman, he hurries after him. Naaman stops the chariot and turns round.

In verse 22 comes his first lie. He says to Naaman, my master sent me to say two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim.

Please give them silver and clothes. So he gets the silver and the clothes and in verse 24, he keeps scheming. So he gives them to his servants but when he gets near home, he dismisses the servants in verse 24.

[26 : 28] So he can take the things from them and hide them away in the house. He sends the men away and they leave. And then in verse 25, he thinks he's got away with it. So, Elisha says, where have you been, Gehazi?

And Gehazi says, your servant didn't go anywhere. But you can't hide things from God and Elisha knows exactly where Gehazi has been and his supreme concern is what Gehazi's actions have done for God's mission in the world.

God's mission in the world is that people come to know him through the faithful witness of his people. Verse 26, Elisha says to him, was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you?

Is this the time to take money or to accept clothes? You can see what he's saying. Finally, we've made some progress here. The whole nation of God has turned away from God. Here we had an important man come and realize who God is.

Finally, we had some progress and you have wrecked it by being greedy. Just as today when God saves us, he calls us to throw everything we have behind that plan of saving other people by serving them and loving them.

[27 : 50] Let your light shine so that men might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. That's what Jesus says. And when we fall into sin, it undermines the work of God in the world today.

Was this really the time to have done that? To have been greedy like that? To have had that affair? It's a key reason not to sin. It brings shame on the gospel.

And then the judgment, verse 27. Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever. Then Gehazi went from Elisha's presence and his skin was leprous.

It had become as white as snow. Friends, the God of the Bible is immensely patient. He tolerates a lot from us. He welcomes us back any day we want to turn back to him.

But ultimately, he won't be fooled. And there comes a point when our sin has consequences as it does for Gehazi here. So folks, this is a chapter of the Bible that's hugely heartwarming as we see Naaman but also deeply challenging as well.

[28 : 54] It reminds us there are only two directions for your life. Only two. And the key question that determines the whole direction of your life spiritually is how are you responding to the word of God?

In Naaman's time that word came through Elisha, the prophet. In our time the word of God is Jesus. How are we responding to him? You can have every Christian privilege you could imagine. Born into a Christian home, raised by Christian parents, at church every week, CU committee at university, relatives on the mission field, but your heart's grown cold for the things of God. So you can still talk the talk but God is not fooled. You're not living a life of day-by-day repentance, thanking God for the cross, living for future hope with him, rejoicing in God's grace day-by-day, submitting your life to Jesus and his word.

And Gehazi's downfall is his greed, a temptation we've all got today. What draws us away from God so often is what we think we could get if only we were a bit richer.

[30 : 01] I remember the Australian minister Peter Adams saying to me, I think the church in the Western world is conducting a massive experiment at the moment to try and work out can you really serve both God and money?

Well, Gehazi shows us where that leads us. But if any of us feel convicted this morning that actually maybe our hearts have been going in the wrong direction from God, then let's let that wonderful story of Naaman draw us back to God.

Friends, this is the way that God deals with us when we're far away from him. That God would see that man Naaman standing against God and he patiently but powerfully step by step draws him to salvation.

He realises he hasn't got it all sorted. He knows a Christian or he knows a servant girl who can point him to God and he takes these steps of faith. And that phrase of Gehazi there at the end of the chapter is that he ends up with skin as white as snow.

But that's a Bible phrase that's used elsewhere and the prophet Isaiah uses us being as white as snow as a picture not of judgment but of forgiveness of having our sins washed away.

[31 : 15] Though your sins may be scarlet they should be as white as snow. And all we have to do to get that is ask God for it through Jesus to turn back to God. It doesn't matter what we've done all that matters is what direction we want to go in.

Two directions only two. If you're here as a guest this morning you've never come to church what could that look like for you taking a step towards God.

We've got some copies at the back there of just of Luke's account of Jesus life. Luke's gospel from the Bible. Could you take one? Just have a read of it. Might take you an hour.

Just have a read through. Take a fresh look at Jesus. Ask God to make him known to you if he's really there. Come back next week and hear more. For those of us here in the church family it's a chapter that just calls us to self-examination.

Has your heart grown cold for God? Could you make a fresh decision this morning before the Lord to walk towards him and his blessing again this week? Let me read some words from Psalm 139 as a prayer now that each of us could echo in our hearts to God.

[32 : 30] Search me oh God and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Amen. We're going to sing in response to what we've heard from the Bible and while that's going on we have prayer ministry as a church over to my right.

So if you're someone here who'd like prayer for something that you'd like