

Sermon Text (2 Kings 5:1–15 ESV)

¹ Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favor, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. ² Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord, "Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel." ⁵ And the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel."

So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. ⁶ And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷ And 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 sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me."

⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, "Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants came near and said to him, "My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" ¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant."

Jesus Cleanses You from the Leprosy of Sin

It can be a bit difficult to define the leprosy of biblical times. The Hebrew word that we translate as "leprosy" does not refer to Hansen's disease, which "leprosy" has become a technical term for today. The word refers to a wide range of skin diseases and even to imperfections that appear on garments and houses. Signs of leprous diseases included "the hair in the diseased area [having] turned white" (Leviticus 13:3 ESV), "the disease [appearing] to be deeper than the skin

of [the person's] body" (Leviticus 13:3 ESV), and a "scab [having] spread on the skin" (Leviticus 13:8 EHV). However, while it can be a bit difficult to define the leprosy of biblical times, it is clear that leprosy was treated very seriously by God and the Israelites.

According to the Old Testament laws, if a person had leprosy, "the priest [was to] pronounce him unclean" (Leviticus 13:8 ESV). Additionally, the person was to "wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he [was to] cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He [would also] remain unclean as long as he [had] the disease" (Leviticus 13:45–46 ESV). Finally, the person was to "live alone. His dwelling [was to] be outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:46 ESV). The reason why leprosy was treated this way by God and the Israelites was because leprosy symbolized sin. Like leprosy, sin is an imperfection. It separates us from God, and we remain separated from God until we are made clean by him.

In contrast, the Syrians did not seem to treat leprosy as seriously. In fact, Naaman is described as the "commander of the army of the king of Syria" (2 Kings 5:1 ESV), "a great man with his master [that is, the king of Syria]" (2 Kings 5:1 ESV), "in high favor" (2 Kings 5:1 ESV), and "a mighty man of valor" (2 Kings 5:1 ESV) despite being a leper. That being said, being a leper likely made him unfit for the fulfillment of many of his duties. Therefore, when "a little girl from the land of Israel" (2 Kings 5:2 ESV), who "the Syrians . . . had carried off [on one of their raids]" (2 Kings 5:2 ESV), said to Naaman's wife, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" (2 Kings 5:3 ESV), and when Naaman told the king of Syria what the little girl said, the king of Syria sent Naaman to Israel so that he could be healed, even though Syria was Israel's greatest threat at this time. However, despite being an enemy of Israel, God chose to show mercy to Naaman and heal him of his leprosy.

You also were once someone's enemy. I'm not referring to you being the enemy of another nation. The person who you were an enemy of was God. This is because of the leprosy that all of you had from the moment you were conceived in your mother's womb, and this leprosy did not symbolize sin. This leprosy was sin. As King David says in the fifty-first psalm, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5 NKJV). Because you were by nature sinful, all you ever wanted was to satisfy your sinful desires, which meant that you wanted nothing to do with God or his commandments, making you his enemy. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "For the mind that is set on the [sinful] flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (Romans 8:7 ESV). Because of your sin, you couldn't have been further separated from God, and you deserved to remain separated from him forever. However, like Naaman, despite being his enemy, God chose to show mercy to you and heal you of your leprous sin, and he showed you this mercy by sending his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to die for you.

The apostle Paul also says in his letter to the Romans that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 ESV). He goes on to say that "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10 ESV). While you were once separated from God due to your sin, Jesus' innocent death on the cross is what brought you and God back together because, by his death, your sins were paid for and, therefore, there is nothing else that has to be done. Thanks to the blood of Jesus, you are completely healed of your leprous sin, completely clean, and one of the ways in which Jesus' blood comes to you today is through the waters of holy baptism.

The apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with

the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25–27 ESV). In these verses, we hear that there are two elements in baptism: water and the word. It can be tempting to only focus on the water since it is the visible element, but, in doing so, we can make the water more important than it actually is.

There is nothing special about the water in and of itself. What makes it special is the Word of God that is connected to it. It is only when the water is applied to us “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:20 ESV) that our sins are washed away and we are made clean. Otherwise, the water is just simple water and nothing more. As Martin Luther says in his explanation of the power of baptism, “It is not the water that does these things, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is simply water, and no baptism; but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit.”

Naaman being cleansed of his leprosy when he washed in the Jordan River is another instance of a washing with water that gets its power from the Word of God. However, that isn’t what Naaman expected to happen. When the prophet Elisha said to him, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean” (2 Kings 5:10 ESV), Naaman said, “Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” (2 Kings 5:11–12 ESV). He then “turned and went away in a rage” (2 Kings 5:12 ESV).

Naaman expected to see a grander display of God's power, not the use of humble means. He was not expecting to have to wash himself in murky waters that had little irrigation value, unlike the waters of the rivers of Damascus. Naaman was someone who focused more on the visible elements than the invisible elements. It was only once his servants put the focus back on the Word of God when they said, "[I]t is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" (2 Kings 5:13 ESV), that Naaman listened and did as he had been told. And, once he had finished washing himself in the Jordan River, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (2 Kings 5:14 ESV), which is just what the prophet Elisha said would happen.

When we are washed with the water connected with the Word of God, it may not appear to be anything grand or special on the surface. We can't even see any visible change, unlike Naaman, but we do have God's promise that "[w]hoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16 ESV). Therefore, like Naaman, who boldly said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15 ESV), we boldly say, in the words of that great baptismal hymn:

God's own child, I gladly say it:
I am baptized into Christ!
He, because I could not pay it,
Gave my full redemption price.
Do I need earth's treasures many?
I have one worth more than any
That brought me salvation free
Lasting to eternity! (ELH #246:1)