

# Improving Our Spiritual Habits



Adult Bible Class  
April 5, 2020

God of the Unexpected – Palm Sunday

If you've walked with God for any amount of time at all, you've learned that He is rarely predictable when it comes to problem solving or how to be God. We can expect specific behaviors when it comes to His love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, justice, righteousness ... In those He remains constant. What we learn if we are paying attention at all is that He is also creative and most certainly God of the Unexpected answers to our needs. Today we remember Jesus' ride

into Jerusalem on the Sunday before His crucifixion. His Passion is before Him as He sits on the back of a donkey colt, hearing the cheers of the crowd.



Throughout the Bible, we find stories of God's unexpected acts in response to our need. Today, I want us to look at two of them. One in the Old Testament and one in the New. When it comes to the unexpected, I always think of a Syrian commander named Naaman. His story is part of the larger story of the Prophet Elisha who served the Northern Kingdom (Israel) 800 years before the birth of Jesus.



When I was a kid, I used to watch my mother crochet these bandages by the hour, especially during the winter. Her making of these bandages was my



introduction to leprosy. She told me about colonies of people who were afflicted with this disease and how they suffered the loss of limbs and life. She made them along with several other ladies from the church and every few months they would mail them off to some colony somewhere as a part of Lutheran World Relief. That ministry still goes on today, by the way. Since we're in the midst of this pandemic, I thought maybe we could discuss infectious disease and Jesus' response. Not only were there healings at the hands of Jesus, God also heals people in the Old Testament as well. One of those most interesting stories is buried in the book of 2 Kings, at a time in Israel's history when they were actually on their way out.



If you've ever gone to Sunday School, you probably know the story of Naaman's healing. It's filled with drama, miracles, and salvation. First, let's put this story into its context. Naaman's story takes place during the time of the prophet Elisha in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The leadership by the kings of Israel has been abysmal and ungodly. Elisha's voice is powerful but largely unheeded by the people and definitely by Ahab's son, King Joram. Naaman's was from Syria and his king, Ben-Hadad II had soundly conquered Israel. The unnamed little girl in the story was a captured Jewish slave which was the common practice after conquering a neighboring country or tribe.

### Naaman and Elisha – 2 Kings 5:1-14

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." <sup>4</sup>So Naaman went in and told his lord, "Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel." <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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." <sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>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." <sup>9</sup>So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. <sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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



The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, 924 to 722 B.C.



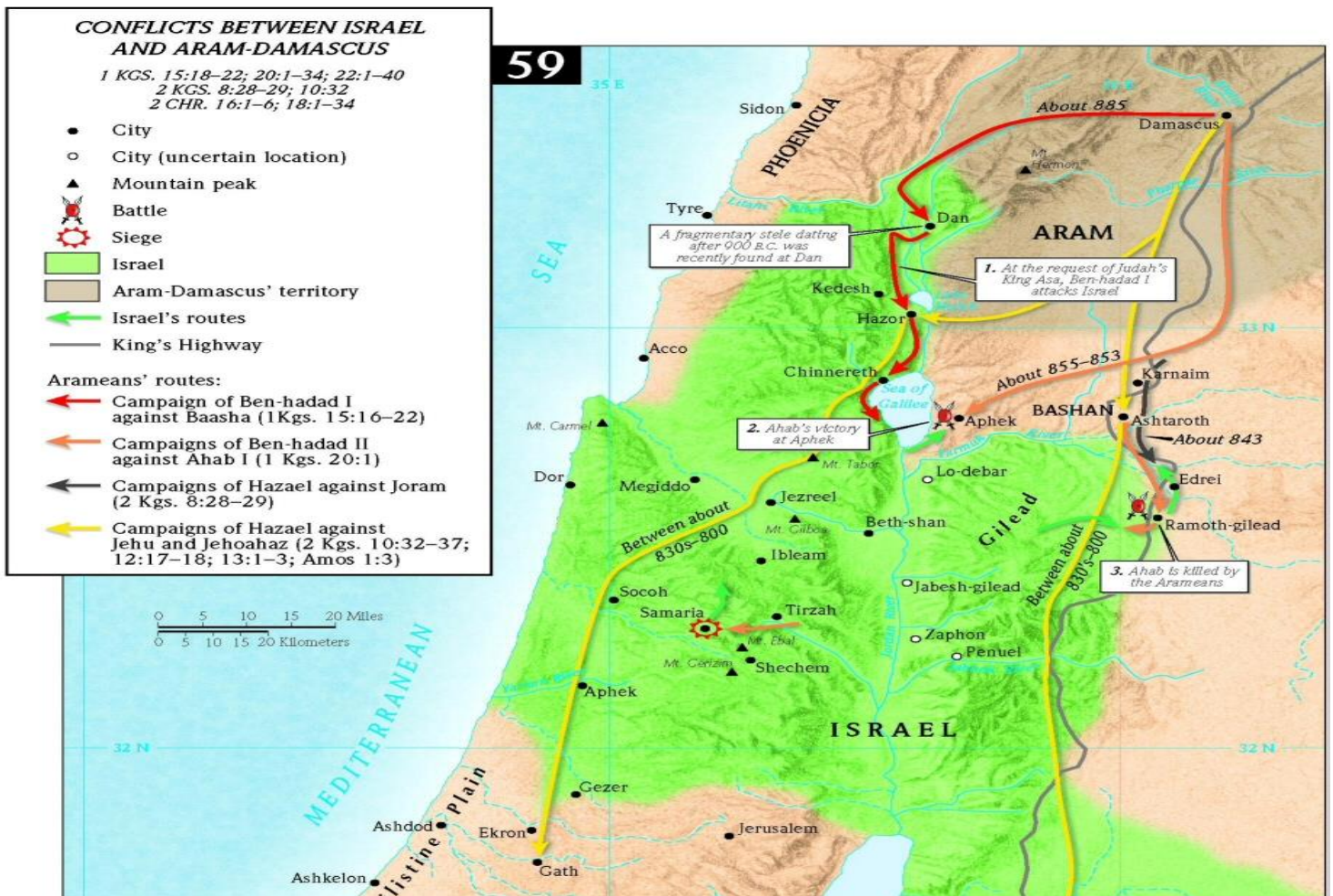
turned and went away in a rage. <sup>13</sup>But his servants came near and said to him, "My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" <sup>14</sup>So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. <sup>15</sup>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." <sup>16</sup>But he said, "As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will receive none." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. <sup>17</sup>Then Naaman said, "If not, please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the Lord. <sup>18</sup>In this matter may the Lord pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon your servant in this matter." <sup>19</sup>He said to him, "Go in peace."

## Leprosy



"*A leprous disease.* The term leprosy is applied in these chapters to a wide variety of imperfections that appear on the skin of people and on the surface of garments and houses. In all cases they constituted not a sin in themselves but an uncleanness, contact with which had to be avoided. If it was a curable disease in human beings or if garments and houses responded to treatment, ritual procedures had to be followed in order to restore afflicted persons to the "holy nation" and to make the material things usable by its ceremonially clean constituents. In the diagnosis of human diseases the skin was examined for various irregularities that might be the symptoms of the incurable kind of leprosy in its earliest stages. Not all symptoms can be definitely identified."

*Roehrs, W. H., & Franzmann, M. H. ©1998. Concordia self-study comentary (Vol. 1, p. 95). St. Louis, MO: CPH.*



## Aramean

Loose confederation of towns and settlements spread over what is now called Syria as well as in some parts of Babylon from which Jacob and Abraham came. The Aramaeans were rarely gathered into a cohesive political group; rather they lived as independent towns and tribes settled by nomads prior to 1000BC. Although the Aramaeans were quick to form alliances with each one another or with other countries if threatened, once the crisis was ended they disbanded and often fought among themselves and against their former allies.

The OT records interactions between Israel and the Aramaeans on a number of occasions. Deuteronomy 26:5 contains what has become an important confession for Jews—"A wandering Aramean was my father" which claims Aramaean lineage for Jacob and by extension for Abraham. The first mention of Aramaeans outside of the Bible dates from the reign of Tiglath-pileser I of Assyria (1116–1076 b.c.). The most important city of the Aramaeans was Damascus. Although the political influence of the Aramaeans was relatively unimportant, they made a lasting contribution with their language.

1. Naaman is the epitome of "alone" or distanced in community. His disease demanded that he be separated from everyone else lest they too become infected. (Although – if he'd actually had leprosy as we know it today, he would not have been contagious. All little ignorance goes a long way!) He has everything in life one could want in some ways having prestige, wealth, and respect. But he is ostracized from the world. You see the question coming, right? Have you ever been ostracized for any reason? What were the circumstances and how did you react?
2. Think about that little slave girl for a moment. She could have resented her position as slave and kept her mouth shut about a "prophet in Israel" who may actually be able to help Naaman. But instead, she reaches out (making this the perfect Sunday School story, right?) and offers this information to her master. She's

willing to become involved in her enemy's lives. It seems like a simple thing, but are we willing to become involved with our enemies? (Maybe you don't have enemies. But think about the people who might be problematic in your life. Are you willing to become involved with them? Are you willing to take the risk and point them to Jesus?)

*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." 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. (2 Kings 5:10-11)*

1. Naaman's reaction to Elisha's instructions is rather stunning. What stands in his way? Why wouldn't he willingly submit to something so simple?
2. Think about the words expectations and pride, as both of these attitudes play into his derision. Pride is easy. Let's discuss expectations. How have your expectations of God gotten in your way? Or God's way?
3. Naaman is immersed in his own pride and issues. How often do we go our own way rather than follow God because He has disappointed our expectations?

Sometimes we want a miracle. The situation is just so bad that nothing else will do. And not only do we want a miracle, we want it exactly the way we envision it. We have a plan and an idea as to how this can best work out; problem solved!

Naaman is in a desperate situation. He is a social outcast because of his disease. Every aspect of his life is hampered by leprosy. (This could have been any debilitating skin condition from actual leprosy, known today as Hansen's Disease, or any number of other skin ailments.) And as far as he knows, there is no cure or treatment. Then a little slave girl suggests he visit the Prophet Elisha in Samaria. She is quite sure that because the prophet knows God he will be able to help. Her faith makes her bold to share what she believes. Naaman, filled with hope, goes to see Elisha bearing gifts that he believes will entice the prophet to help him and he goes with certain expectations. Much to Naaman's disappointment, Elisha doesn't wave a magic wand, recite strange incantations, or even come out to greet him. Sight unseen, Elisha tells him to dip himself in the Jordan 7 times and he will be healed. A very simple task, right? And yet Naaman is "in a rage." His expectations were not met! Where is his magic show? Where is the hand waving? God did not live up to his standards. Fortunately for Naaman he allows himself to be convinced that he's been asked to do a simple thing and so he does it, thus securing a healing from the Lord.

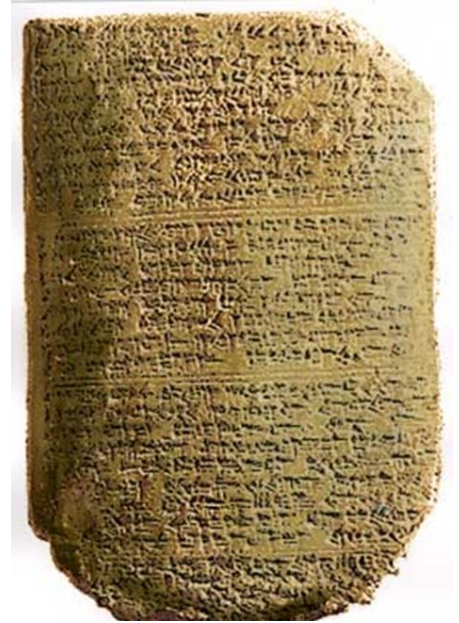
This is an important story for us to study. We have all kinds of expectations of God, some spoken, some kept to ourselves. And when God doesn't perform the way we think we should, we are disappointed and angry. Surely He must know that our plans are good ones. Why wouldn't He graciously accept our plans and do what we say? Doesn't He know that our way is the best? Even as you read the words, you know they are ridiculous. Why would God, who always means us well, lower His standard of care to meet our puny expectations? Who among us would come up with a plan that would mean the shedding of innocent blood for our sins? And yet that is God's perfect plan and meets the demands of His purity and justice. Learning how to step out of God's way and see His plans take shape in our lives can be exciting and faith building. The story of Naaman helps us see the wisdom of that path.

([www.devos365.blogspot.com](http://www.devos365.blogspot.com))

## The End of Naaman's Story

Naaman still thought that he needed to worship God on Israelite soil if his offerings were to be acceptable. The notion prevailed in his day that the domain of a god was determined by national borders.

Evidence from sources outside the Bible indicate that Naaman did faithfully confess the Lord before others. The Amarna Letters (cuneiform tablets discovered in Egypt in 1887) tell us that Naaman was the right-hand man of Pharaoh Ikhnaton and returned to Egypt after being cured from his leprosy. Unlike the other Egyptian pharaohs, Ikhnaton worshiped *one* God, Aton, the Egyptian name for Adonai which is the Hebrew word for "Lord".



## Jesus and Naaman

### Luke 4:27-30

*<sup>27</sup>And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup>When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. <sup>29</sup>And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. <sup>30</sup>But passing through their midst, he went away.*

Jesus clearly did not hold Naaman in derision but instead held him up as a true believer, mocking the fake faith of the Pharisees and Jewish leadership. What Jesus saw was a man who was repentant and thus a member of His Kingdom. As soon as Naaman was taken in by the Most High God, his isolation was ended. His sin was covered by the coming Messiah.

Now we come to the event we celebrate today – Palm Sunday.



### Luke 19:28-40

*<sup>28</sup>And when he had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. <sup>29</sup>When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, <sup>30</sup>saying, "Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>31</sup>If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say this: 'The Lord has need of it.'" <sup>32</sup>So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. <sup>33</sup>And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" <sup>34</sup>And they said, "The Lord has need of it." <sup>35</sup>And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt,*

*they set Jesus on it. <sup>36</sup>And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. <sup>37</sup>As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, <sup>38</sup>saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" <sup>39</sup>And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." <sup>40</sup>He answered, "*I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.*"*

By the time Jesus rides into Jerusalem, He is famous. He has publicly healed people, cast out demons, feed thousands, controlled the weather. He has been kind, loving, merciful, and spoken words of forgiveness. Now, 5 days before His crucifixion, He rides into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey colt. But – what He didn't do was what the people expected. They were looking for a fix for their very temporal problems. Since He had power over everything else, it was assumed He would take power over the Roman government that was enslaving them. Thus their shouts of "Hosanna!" which means "Save Us"! Much to their sadness, their expectations were dashed. God had a far more superior and long-lasting salvation in mind.

By far, the most unexpected thing God did was send His Son Jesus into the world, not to take over as King of the nation, but to hang on a cross for our sins. I don't think even the Old Testament Patriarchs envisioned a brutal death for God Himself because of our sin. But God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit knew of our great need and provided exactly what was necessary to win us back from sin, death, and the devil. Because of Jesus' spilt blood, we are forgiven and as such, allowed to stand before His throne in glory someday to praise His name forever. God's actions are usually unexpected but always exactly what we need.