

*2 Kings 5:1-15a***Love for Souls: It's not always easy, but it's always worth it!**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It's hard to love souls sometimes. Oh, my own kids, that's easy! My spouse, my best friend, no problem. But the guy who robbed my house? The competitor who ran me out of business? My ex? The student who bullied my child? Is that even possible, that you and I could still love those souls too – that we could want them to be with us in heaven? Today we turn to an account from Bible history that astounds me more and more every time I read it. When it's taught at Sunday school, it's usually given a title like "God Heals Naaman's Leprosy." And it is true the Naaman is the central figure in this story, but there is another intriguing figure – a girl from Israel, she isn't even named, that I want to focus on today. In fact, I'm going to split up the Bible reading from 2nd Kings chapter 5 just so we can take the time to stop and contemplate how God used her in what you will find to be a most surprising way. Let's start with verses 1-2: **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. ²Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife.**

So right off the bat we're introduced to Naaman. He's a military man – the chief general of the whole army of Aram, a neighboring country to Israel. The Bible presents him as a successful military leader, but with a big problem: leprosy. It's an incurable, slow moving, visually repulsing disease. Your flesh gradually rots away until infection sets in and finally you die. So not only are you sick, you become a social outcast as well. Eventually you would have to stop being around even your closest loved ones. So that's Naaman, but then with very little fanfare, we are introduced to the girl I spoke of earlier, taken from Israel by bands of raiders and who now serves Naaman's wife. Stop for a second and take that in! Often the term "servant girl" is used to describe her. I don't think the term does her justice. Let's be frank! This girl was forcibly abducted, taken from her family and forced into a life of slavery. That's what's going on here. Now don't misunderstand, the Bible isn't condoning it, but God does choose to share these details. She is a slave. Naaman is her slave owner. So ask yourself – if you were that girl, living away from home, never to see family again, your whole life given to following the orders of the people who stole you, how would you react if you found out that your owner had caught a disease that would slowly kill him and make him hideous to everyone who would see him? "Good! He had it coming!" "God is having the last laugh!" "That'll teach him." "I hope his wife catches it too!" The last thing on earth that you would expect is that she would go out of her way to help him. But read on: **³ She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."**

If that one little sentence doesn't impress you, it should. There is a ton packed into those few words. First they tell us a little more about this girl. She was probably from Samaria. So just to be clear, that is the Northern Kingdom of Israel, ten tribes who would eventually be deported and never returned. We usually think of Samaria as the land the Jewish people avoided and the people they hated during Jesus' day. It was the same piece of land, but it had been resettled with a different nationality by the time of Jesus. At this time it was just the northern region of Israel. We also learn that she knew the prophet from that region and trusted that with God's power, he could heal this incurable disease. That tells us this girl was no ordinary girl. Most of the people in Samaria had abandoned the God of the Bible. The kings of the Northern Kingdom had instituted pagan religions such as the worship of Baal, and actively tried to kill faithful prophets like Elijah and Elisha, and Obadiah. Elisha was the prophet that she knew, and she had good reason to be confident that he could heal Naaman. God had allowed Elisha to perform many miracles in his name during his ministry which leads to another intriguing reality when it came to this slave girl. God had not prevented this difficult and painful situation from happening to her and her family even though they were faithful to him! I can only imagine that both she and her family wrestled with questions of "why." "Why God? Why take our daughter from us when we still believe in you and so many do not?" "Why God did you allow me to be captured like that and taken to a foreign land when I was faithful to you?" But whatever questions might have been going through her mind, whatever the injustice that she endured, look what she does! She tries to help, and the help she offers is not only able to bring physical healing, but help for the soul as well. How hard was it for her to do what she did? How much trust and humility did it take? Again, just step back and appreciate how remarkable this is, that she would care about Naaman's soul. And then look at what happens!

⁴ Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. ⁵ "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. ⁶ The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷ 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!" ⁸ 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? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. 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." ¹¹ 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 his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, 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. ¹³ Naaman’s servants went to him and said, “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’!” ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him 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.”

So Naaman listens to his slaved and travels to see Elijah, and despite some initial reluctance follows the instructions of Elisha and is healed. That’s amazing in and of itself, but take a second look at his concluding remark: “**Now I know that there is no God in all the world except the God of Israel!**” Wow! Naaman comes to faith. He isn’t just cleansed from leprosy, but from sin. He’s spared death for a time yes, but when he does die, he would be in heaven. God uses that slave girl to bring Naaman into his family! But what happened next? Did Naaman return her to her parents? Did he promote her in his house and treat her like a daughter? Did he lavish her with gifts and thanks? You would think it likely that he did something like that, but the Bible doesn’t say that he did. It is quite possible that she lived the rest of her life as a slave. That’s not fair! True – it was never fair to begin with, but remember something. In spite of her being a victim of abduction, in spite of her bold selfless action of suggesting seeking out Elisha, this slave girl was a sinner too, she needed a Savior too, and we assume based on her knowledge of Elisha, that she knew one was coming, God’s promised Messiah. So no matter how the story ended here, whether she was rewarded or not, returned to her parents or not, what is true of this slave girl today? She is in heaven, not because she earned it – but because Jesus earned it and gifted it to her. Today, she can see Naaman, he can see her, and there is not any resentment between them, no animosity – just thanks, just smiles, just eternity with Jesus! Love for souls – sometimes it’s hard, but it’s always worth it!

I heard this lesson for the first time in Sunday school and hundreds of times since, but every time, I am more drawn to the actions of this slave girl. When I think of her I am humbled: it reminds me that all too often I have been a Naaman – not thankful, even mistreating those whom God has sent to care for me, parents, teachers, pastors, faithful friends, and relatives. How about you? Ever resisted when Mom or Dad brought you to church or rebuffed a friend who took you to task for the language you were using? Ever taken advantage of your position of power demanding more and more from those who work for you, but doing less and less yourself? Or like Naaman turned his nose at the prospect of bathing in the Jordan River, have you ever turned your nose at the simple things God asks you to do for your own benefit. “I can’t get to worship, practice on Thursday, and games on Saturday and Sunday.” I just don’t have time to read my Bible, between work and carting the kids around. But look at the “screen time” monitor on your phone – count how many hours of TV we’ve DVR’d, take an inventory of the movies we soak in, or the hours of games or shows. But we turn our noses at a couple of hours or week, minutes a day to come and receive God’s gifts. And then we’re upset with those who might bring it to our attention – how dare they! Plenty of Naaman in all of us and for that, make no mistake, repentance is in order – this is not a laughing matter. God desires that we do humble ourselves and return him to priority number one.

But thinking of that slave girl also leads me to be thankful, thankful for all those whom God has placed in my life who loved my soul even when it was hard, even when I was a Naaman. Thank you God for Mom and Dad, who lovingly dealt with me when I was a mouthy teenager. Thank you God for Mom and Dad who made their expectations clear that I would be in your house every week no matter my schedule. Thank you for Sunday school teachers and teachers who showed up faithfully each day even when I wasn’t paying attention, even when I was blatantly disobeying, even when I complained about them to my friends, and was too much a coward to talk to them face to face. Thank you for friends who took me to task when my behavior was out of line, and continued to do so even when I rolled my eyes at them or worse. Thank you for the friends who still spoke to me and prayed for me and loved me as a brother in Christ, even when I treated them as if they were beneath me. Thank you God for those like that slave girl that you placed in my life who cared for my soul even when it was hard. Who are they in our life? Grandma, Mom, a teacher, a pastor, friend – thank God for them, and thank them when you get the chance!

Finally that slave girl is an inspiration to love others isn’t she? It’s hard to truly care about a person’s soul at times isn’t it? They’ve said a hurtful thing, wrecked a marriage, hurt a whole family, disparaged us, yet I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I’ve ever been in a situation where it would have been as hard as it was for her. Abducted, enslaved! But if God can move her heart to do it, he can do the same for you and me. So, who are the Naamans in your life? The boss who demands perfection but never says thanks? The spouse who just doesn’t seem to be pulling their weight in the marriage? The teenage child at the height of rebellion, resisting and arguing at every turn, the teacher or pastor with whom you don’t see eye to eye? The classmate who treats you like you don’t belong? The sister or brother-in-law always looking to one-up you? How does God see them? Just like Naaman, just like the slave girl, just like you, just like me: sinners – people with problems, problems that Jesus fixed. Sins that Jesus paid for when he died. He loves them and he urges us – go! Humbly go and love those souls. Talk to them. Live your life as a witness for them. Pray for them. Will be hard? Yes. But maybe someday and you and I will stroll the halls of our heavenly mansion, and we will bump into our Naaman. And maybe, just maybe, someone will bump into us and think the same thing! Love for souls – sometimes it’s hard, but it’s always worth it! AMEN.