

HOW WILL GOD DEAL WITH FOLLOWERS OF OTHER RELIGIONS?

(The Story of Naaman the Leper)

2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

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"Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy." 2 Kings 5:1

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

How will God deal with followers of other religions? Many find that question a bit arrogant. Who are we to say how God will deal with non-Christians? And yet it's an important question because many people remain outside the Christian faith because *some* Christians preach the Gospel as bad news. Like the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* who went around shouting, "Don't be nervous or I'll chop off your head," some Christians preach, "Trust in Christ or else burn in hell." That message doesn't inspire trust in Christ. It's hard to trust someone who threatens us. But I truly want all people to trust in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore it's important how we answer the question, "How will God deal with non-Christians?" The Old Testament story of Naaman is a good place to start to answer that question.

If it happened today, it would make instant headlines in the *Jerusalem Post* as well as *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. "SYRIAN GENERAL HEALED BY ISRAELI HOLY MAN." So unlikely. Syria and Israel have been slugging it out on and off for three thousand years and this story is all about a Syrian general discovering that there was a God in Israel who could do things that his god couldn't do. His discovery points to an answer to the question, "How will God deal with followers of other religions?"

Some of you may remember the story. The Syrian general, Naaman, was suffering from leprosy. He was told that Elisha, the Jewish prophet, could heal him. Naaman travelled over the Golan Heights to Israel expecting Elisha to treat him with the respect due to a great man. But Elisha didn't even go out to meet him. He sent a message telling Naaman to go wash seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman lost his temper and refused until his servants talked him into

doing what Elisha said. So Naaman left his pride on the bank of the Jordan River and washed and was cured.

Healed of his leprosy, Naaman suddenly realized that Elisha's God was the true God. The living God had reached out and touched Naaman and healed him even though Naaman was a Syrian, an enemy of God's people; even though Naaman worshipped a Syrian idol named Rimmon. Nevertheless, the Lord healed him. And after Naaman was healed he wanted to worship the living God. He wasn't converted by threats. Nor was God's gracious healing dependent upon Naaman's repentance and faith. God healed him. God saved him from leprosy. In grateful response, Naaman trusted God.

Only part of Naaman's story was read this morning. Right where the reading ended Naaman comes back to Elisha and makes a profession of faith: "Now I know that there's no God in all the earth except in Israel." He offers Elisha a present which Elisha refuses. And then he does two things which show how he still had very muddled ideas about God.

First, he requests two mule loads of Jewish soil so that when he's back home he can worship the god of Israel on his own turf. Naaman still believes each land has its own god. He doesn't realize that the God of Israel is the God of all the earth and doesn't require Jewish soil. God is present in Syria as well as in Israel. So, Naaman has a very poor understanding of who God is.

Second, he says to Elisha, in effect: "Look, when I get back home, my master, the King of Syria, will expect me to go with him as usual to the house of Rimmon. The king's an old man. He needs me to lean on. So when he bows down before Rimmon in worship I'm going to have to bow down too. I know it's wrong but I've got to do it. I'm sorry. I hope God will forgive me." I think of the ending of T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. The three wise men get to Bethlehem. They see Jesus. They recognize Jesus as the Lord. They worship him. Then they return to their pagan lands. And afterwards they say:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.

That's Naaman. He's caught between his faith in the living, loving, and healing God of Israel and the reality of his compromised life in Syria with its pagan god. And we're no different. When we meet Jesus and try to follow him we run into the same kind of compromises.

Naaman was a compromiser. He should have said, "Never again will I bow down before Rimmon's idol. I will worship the one true God even if it means death." Many Christians and Jews *have* said that. Dare to be a Daniel! Dare to be like the martyrs who refused to bow before Caesar's image. But Naaman was, like most of us, a compromiser. He recognized he was going back home a compromiser with the old gods and he asks for forgiveness.

Two concluding thoughts. First, where do we fit in to the story of Naaman? One reason people go to church is that we've begun to have a sense that Jesus is Lord. No other God heals and saves us by grace. No other God says, "I know you've made a mess of your life but I love you anyhow. Even though you don't believe in me, I love you and have dealt with your sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nothing you can do or fail to do can make me love you less. Nothing you can do or refrain from doing will make me love you more."

Once we see that, we're going to *want* to follow Christ. We're going to *want* to worship God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit rather than any other God. And when we come to embrace God's love in Jesus we begin to see that we *do* bow down in the house of Rimmon. All of us are involved in some way in the economic and social life of the modern world. And like every human society our society is guilty of all sorts of injustice which dehumanize people. We can't pretend we aren't compromised by these pagan gods. We are! When I buy from a firm that pays its directors too much and its employees too little; when I use a car that's polluting the air; when I find the pagan pressures too great and simply give in, then, as Naaman said, "May the Lord pardon your servant." The good news is that God does pardon. Elisha didn't say to Naaman, "You're a compromiser." He said, "Go in peace." That's the word of God to people trying to serve the living God while compromising with the old pagan gods.

The second concluding thought. Where do followers of other religions fit in to this story? Some of the best biblical and Christian theology I've ever read is in *The Tales of Narnia*

by C.S. Lewis. In *The Last Battle* C.S. Lewis gives us insight into what the Bible teaches about how God will deal with followers of other religions. In the story, Emeth, like Naaman, is a pagan soldier. His god is a pagan God named Tash. At the end of the book Emeth dies and appears before the Lord Jesus Christ. Emeth describes his encounter with Christ at the Last Judgment. He says, "The Glorious One bent down his head and touched my forehead and said, 'Son, welcome in.' But I said, 'Alas! Lord, I'm no son of yours but the servant of Tash.' He answered, 'All the service you've done to Tash, I account as service done to me.' I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, 'Lord, is it then true that you and Tash are really one and the same God?' The Lord Jesus growled like a lion and said, 'No! It's a lie! Not because he and I are *one*, but because we are *opposites*. I take to *me* the services which you have done to *him*, for I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is *not* vile can be done to him. Therefore if any one swears by Tash and keeps his oath for the oath's sake, it is by *me* that he has truly sworn, though he know it now, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in *my* name, then, though he *says* he believes in me, it is really Tash whom he serves. Do you understand?' I said, 'Lord, you know how much I understand.' But I said also, 'Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days.' 'Beloved,' the Lord Jesus said, 'unless your desire had been for me you would not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.' Then the Lord Jesus breathed on me and took away the trembling from my limbs and caused me to stand upon my feet."

How will God deal with the followers of other religions? God has made salvation available to all human beings through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. How God will deal with those who do not know or follow Christ, but who follow another tradition, we cannot finally say. We can say, however, that God is gracious and merciful, and that God will *not* deal with people in any other way than we see in Jesus Christ, who came as the Savior of the world.

Almighty and ever-living God, your Son, Jesus Christ, healed the sick and restored them to wholeness of life. Look with compassion on the anguish of the world, and by your power make whole all peoples and nations; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.