

Encountering God

2 Kings 5:1-19

By [Tim Keller](#)

The last time I was at First Presbyterian Jackson - I was in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church Jackson, Mississippi was in September of 1975! And I promise to be back in thirty-nine and a half years for another visit! And I know that I'm probably belaboring the obvious but this place looks a lot different. Did something happen between 1975? I remember it pretty well but did you do some renovations? Talk to me about that later! I'm delighted to be asked to be with you again and I'd like to read from 2 Kings chapter 5 verses 1 to 19, a great story by anyone's standards; a tremendous narrative by any measure. Compelling, fascinating.

Verse 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. 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. She said to her mistress, 'Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' So Naaman went in and told his lord, 'Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel.' 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. 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.' 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.'

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.' So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. 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. 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. 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?’ 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.

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.’ 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. 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. 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.’ He said to him, ‘Go in peace.’”

An Encounter With God

Let’s tell the story, but before we tell the story let me tell you why I’m telling you this story. As your pastor already said, twenty-five years ago I went to the middle of New York City, Manhattan, to start a church, a church that taught classic, Christian doctrine. And when I went there, there were plenty of people that said, “This will not work. The people of New York City are sophisticated, they are successful, they are powerful. They don’t know anyone of any intelligence who believes in Christianity or who believes in this sort of truth that you teach. They are intellectual; they are able. They have no deep inner needs. They are very, very, very competent and self-sufficient people. No one will come. No one will believe. No one will listen to you.” And over the years, I have found that that’s just not the case. Recently, I have no idea what the article’s going to actually look like in the end, but recently I had a lengthy interview with a French female journalist from Le Monde, the French newspaper, and they were studying Redeemer, my church, and what they were trying to figure out was this - they understood large churches in many parts of the country, in America, but what worried them or bothered them or puzzled them was Manhattan was a lot like Paris so “Why in the world were people coming to your church? No one in Paris would come to your church and we thought people in Manhattan were like people in Paris.” And so they noticed people getting converted; they noticed people having encounters with God.

Now the reason I’m starting this talk, this sermon like this is because Naaman was a Syrian general. He was essentially the Prime Minister of Syria. He was the commander in chief of the army. He was a man who was extremely wealthy, he was extremely successful, he was extremely sophisticated, and he didn’t know any one of any intelligence who believed that there was any relevance to the God of the Bible and as you can tell from the beginning, at that point he had conquered many parts of Israel, he

had beaten Israel, he didn't have any respect for Israel as a country, he certainly didn't have any respect for their religion, he had enslaved their inhabitants, and yet here he is going to seek healing from the God of Israel. Why would that happen? All I can say is that in New York City I went there being told people like Naaman will never try to have an encounter with God through Jesus Christ. They're fine; they're ok. They're self-sufficient; they're sophisticated. They're cosmopolitan. They're not ever going to come and listen and say, "I want to know God," or, "I want to have an encounter with God." I have found that that's not the case. There are plenty of people like Naaman, people who shouldn't be interested in having an encounter with God but they are.

How does that happen? Here's a case study. I'd like to show you what things - put it this way - I'd like to show you the things that open the way for an encounter with God, then secondly the marks that you've had an encounter with God, and then thirdly the secret - the reason that anyone can have an encounter with God - all from the story of Naaman.

Paving the Way for An Encounter with God

So first of all, let me give you four things that have to happen to pave the way. Four things have to happen if you're ever going to have an encounter with God.

Getting Rid of the Illusion of Self-Sufficiency

The first one is - actually you can see it right here in verse 1 - you have to get rid of the illusion of self-sufficiency, and guess what? It's going to happen. It's inevitably going to happen. Here's what you have with Naaman. He's got everything. Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, great man with his master, which is the king; high favor; victory over Syria; mighty man of valor. But, he was a leper. Let me give you an axiom; let me give you a maxim. Let me give you a truism. It doesn't matter how hard you work to put together a designer life, it doesn't matter how hard you work at getting into the right school and getting the right job and making money and being careful about your health and working out and watching everything, it doesn't matter how hard you try to put together a really good, comfortable, successful life, something will come in and ruin it eventually. Something will come in. Something from the outside. I don't care how powerful you are, how smart you are, I don't care how much money you have. Chronic illness, personal betrayal, financial reversals - no amount of power or money can stop those things from happening.

Or even, not just external threats but stuff from the inside. When you were fifteen years old, if you ever even saw a clip or a letter or something you said or you wrote when you were ten - how embarrassing! You don't want to be ever reminded when you're fifteen years old of your ten year old self. Your ten year old self was stupid, foolish; you were a jerk when you were ten. Now you're fifteen! And your twenty year old self will think of your fifteen year old self, "What an idiot I was! I didn't know anything about life. I can't believe that I even survived to the age of twenty considering the stupid things I did! But

now, I was a fool when I was fifteen but now I'm twenty!" And of course it slows down a little bit. Your thirty year old self thinks your twenty year old self was stupid, foolish, lucky to be alive today considering how stupid you were back then and your forty year old self thinks that your thirty year old self was a jerk and your fifty year old self thinks your forty year old self...it slows down a little bit. But suddenly, some day you're going to realize you are a jerk now! You are a fool now! You have blind spots now! You don't understand really what it takes to live your life now! You're only basically getting by, by sheer luck now! You are now sufficient to run your own life. You don't have the wisdom, you don't have the virtue, you don't have the wherewithal. And you know the trouble is, for many years you live with the illusion that you have arrived and you were stupid back then but not anymore. And at some point you realize you do realize the illusion of self-sufficiency goes away.

Or think about this. Think about your friends and think about your friends, especially the ones who've got something wrong with them that keeps getting them into trouble and everybody talks about it but if you even try to talk about it they get upset and it's the reason why this person keeps losing jobs. You know you like them but this person kind of rubs people the wrong way. And most of us have friends, and we know they've got flaws, that they can't seem to see or they can't really come to grips with, but so do you because your most - how do you say - the character flaw that is most destroying you is the one, by definition, that you can't see. It's the one that your parents may have told you about it, maybe your spouse is telling you about it, but you're constantly in denial about it or you say that everybody - you minimize it. You feel like other people are being unfair. "Well, there was a reason for that. Yes, I did that but there was an excuse for that." The flaw that is actually most soiling and ruining and spoiling your life is the one that you, by definition, can't see. And we've got them; you've got them. Why would you think your friends have got them but you don't? Of course you have them! They're thinking the same thing about you! I don't care what your accomplishment, there is something that is going to come in and ruin your life unless you get over the illusion of self-sufficiency now. And the reason why so many people like Naaman actually do seek and encounter with God is they start to get over that illusion. That's the first thing that has to happen.

Realizing that The World Cannot Help You

The second thing that has to happen is down here in verse 7. I'll read it to you after I tell you the principle. You will not seek an encounter with God, you will not have an encounter with God, until you not only get rid of the illusion of self-sufficiency but you also have to see that the world cannot help you. Nothing out there in the world can help you. Expertise cannot help you; medicine cannot help you. Therapy cannot help you. Consultants can't help you. You see what I really love about this passage is this. Naaman, when he hears that the God of Israel and a prophet of the God of Israel has the power to heal him of his leprosy, look what he does. It says, "He takes with him ten talents of silver, ten thousand shekels of gold, ten changes of clothing," and of course you expect me to tell you that, "Well, in American money that is..." I don't know; I didn't look it up, but it's a lot! It's a whole lot! "And he brought a letter from the king of Syria to

the king of Israel.” So he’s saying, “Here’s my credentials, here’s my money, and I’m coming into” - what? “To get my healing.”

Now here’s the reason why he thinks this works. In every other society in the world at that time the priests and the prophets all worked for the king because religion in every other society besides Israel basically supported the state. It was a way of controlling the people, it was a way of supporting the royalty and the king, and everybody basically worked. The priests in the temple - they all worked for the king. And so he thought by going to the king - you notice, the little girl, we’ll get back to her in a minute, says, “There’s a prophet in Israel. Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria.” There’s a prophet. So why doesn’t he go to the prophet? He goes to the king because he thinks that Israel’s religion is like the religion of every other country in the world and that is that it’s a function of culture. It’s just an extension of the culture. The religion is part of the culture. So if you’re Indian, you’re Hindu, and if you’re Arab, you’re Muslim, and if you’re European, you’re Christian, and if you’re Japanese, you’re Buddhist. They just said it was part of the culture; it’s an extension of the culture. It’s just an extension of the society so go to the top. That’s why he didn’t go to the prophet; he went to the king because he figured, “Well the prophet works for the king.” Poor guy, he didn’t realize that Israel is the only place in the world where the prophet doesn’t work for the king because Israel’s God is a transcendent God. Israel’s God is not under control of the king; Israel’s God is a transcendent God who judges the king. Basically, put it this way - Israel’s God is the true God. He’s not a projection of the culture. He sits in judgment on all cultures. He’s not just the God of Israel; He’s the God of the world. He created everyone and as a result He’s not a tame God. He’s not a God in your pocket; He’s not a God who basically serves the power structure.

And that’s the reason why the king tears his clothes. He thinks, of course, the Syrian king is trying to pick a fight with him that this is going to lead to war. But if only all of the elites of American society would say what the king says here. “Am I God?” I remember years ago I read a book by - Becky Pippert wrote a book when she was auditing classes at Harvard. She was auditing a psychology class; I forget what the program was. But in the class she remembers that a professor did a wonderful job explaining, he was explaining a case study and he was explaining why a particular person hated his father and why it was distorting his life and how the therapist helped the young man come to see why he was doing the things he was doing. He was acting out and he was angry at his father and how he could mitigate that and how he could respond to that and cope with that. And at one point, Becky raised her hand and asked a question. She said, “Okay that’s great. You’ve showed me how the anger of his father is distorting his life and how you’re helping him to deal with that and make that conscious and recognize it, but how do you help him forgive his father? You see, wouldn’t that solve everything? How do you help him forgive his father?” And the professor looked at her and said, “You’re in the wrong department.” He said, “You’re talking about a new heart. We don’t do that. We’re scientists. I can help him with this, I’m realistic about this, but I don’t know how to help him get a new heart. Am I God?” He didn’t say that, actually, but he should have! If only - how do I say this - if we’re going to deal with our problems, personal problems, if we’re going to deal with poverty, if we’re going to deal with racism,

violence, war, if we're going to deal with our sociological and physiological problems, this isn't going to happen, but our political leaders, our professors, our therapists, should all say what the king says and that is, "I can do a lot of good but I can't give you what only God can give you. I can't give you a new heart."

So you have to see the limits of what science can do, the limits of what therapy can do, the limits of what consultants can do, the limits of what self-help books can do and gurus can do. If God is a true God, if there is a God behind the world, then He's not a God that you can buy; He's not a God that by going to all the right experts you can somehow push the right buttons and somehow He brings into your life all the things that you need. If you're going to encounter God, you have to see that the world cannot help you. You have to see that you are not self-sufficient.

Realizing the Problem: Not Suffering, but Sin

Thirdly, you've got to see that your problem is not your suffering but your sin; it's not your suffering but your sin. You see, the thing that's driving him to seek the God of Israel is suffering. He's falling apart, literally. You know, leprosy, probably body parts are falling off and he was desperate. But it's interesting that when he gets there and the king of Israel tears his clothes, notice what it says. "Then Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes and he said, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me now that he may know'" - what? "That there is a miracle worker in Israel?" No, "that there's a prophet in Israel." Prophets, by the way, were preachers. "I want him to know not that there's a miracle worker but I want him to know that there's a truth teller, there's a prophet. I'm going to come and I'm going to tell him the truth."

And it's very important to see, and we can get to this in a second, that when he actually does encounter God, what is his response? When he actually does encounter God, he comes back after he's gone down and washed in the river - and I'll get to this in a second - and he says, "Behold, now I know" - what? "That there is a God who can heal. Your God is really great; the gods of Damascus can't heal. Your God can heal; you must be a slightly more powerful God than the gods of Damascus." That's not what he says! Look at what he says! It's an astounding thing. This is not an Israelite; this is not a Jew. This is a Gentile; this is a pagan. This is someone who is not from Israel at all. Look at what he says. "Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel." He has faith now. Yes, of course, he also got healed, but he has faith. And here's the reason why it's so remarkable what Elisha did. First of all, when the man comes to Elisha, Elisha doesn't come out; he sends his servant. And secondly, the servant says, "Just go down to the Jordan River and wash." And he goes off in a rage. Why? Well first of all it's insulting for a man of this stature not to have the prophet come out. He sends his secretary. And then secondly - this is very interesting - he tells him just go down and wash. Now it's interesting that this particular English translation says that after he runs off in a rage his servants come and say to him, "My father, it is a great word that the prophet has spoken to you. Will you not do it?" Now there's actually two ways to translate that. In the Hebrew what that literally says is, "He has asked you to do

no great thing.” One of the ways you can translate it, and some translations translate it this way, is, “O master, if the prophet had asked you to do some great thing, wouldn’t you have done it?” But it’s ambiguous because it also could mean, “He is asking you to do a great thing.”

And here’s what I think is going on. He’s insulted. If the prophet had come out personally and waved his hand and said, “If you achieve this great thing that I’m about to tell you to do, you will have your healing.” So for example, what if Elisha had come out and said, “Bring me the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West!” I think Naaman would have said, “Yes. I’m a man of valor. Yes, a few of my body parts have fallen off because of the leprosy but I still think I can do this.” And he would have gone off and he would have slain the dragon or done whatever great deed the prophet had called him to do, and come back and said, “Now have I earned my healing?” And then Elisha would have said, “Yes.” And then he waves his hands and he’s healed. And see, that’s a kind of salvation and a kind of religion that this man could have understood - it’s one that you earn. It’s one that you earn. You achieve it. But see what the prophet is saying, he is going to give the man a healing, but on the way he’s going to teach him something. Elisha’s trying to turn this entire man’s operating system upside-down. The whole way in which he thinks of identity, the whole way in which he thinks of right and wrong, the whole way in which he thinks of what it means to be a great person, the whole way in which he thinks of greatness and humility. He’s actually saying to him, “Go down and wash.” And you know why he’s insulted? He’s insulted because he’s saying, “Look at who I am! Anybody can wash; any fool can wash. Any old lady can wash. Are you really trying to tell me that I’m equal to everybody else?”

Realizing Your Bankruptcy

You see, the Gospel of Jesus Christ goes like this. If the Gospel said, “You are saved, you have an encounter with God if you try really hard, if you love one another, if you study your Bible, if you obey the Ten Commandments, if you live a good life, then God will come into your life and bless you.” Is that what the Gospel of Jesus Christ says? No. Why? First of all it wouldn’t be fair. We all start in different places. Some of us had wonderful families and we got a lot of love growing up and other people have come from broken families, terrible families, abusive families, and we all start at different places. Some of us, it’s hard just to maintain a friendship - there’s so little trust and other people it’s easy. And so if you just said, “Look, those of you who go out and get the Wicked Witch of the West’s broomstick, those of you who go out and achieve, live a good life, try to be like Jesus - you’re the ones who will go to heaven,” how unfair would that be? It would be unbelievably unfair. Instead what it says is, the Bible says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. No one is righteous, no not one. You must be poor in spirit or you’ll never receive the kingdom of heaven.” People say, “What do you mean we have to be poor in spirit? That’s insulting!” Well listen. Here’s a Christian. A Christian is poor in spirit - that’s the first of the beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” The first of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. It’s a word that means bankrupt. Do you know what it means to be bankrupt? It basically says, “I’ve got no way to pay my debt at all. No way at all. Can’t do partly; no way at all.”

Most people are not poor in spirit; most people are middle class in spirit. And middle class in spirit says this, "I'm not perfect, I do need help from God, I need some help, but I'm not terrible. I mean I do this good and I do that good so I've lived a pretty good life but I do need a little bit of help." Here's what a Christian says. "I've done bad things and even the good things I've done I've done for bad motives. Even when I've lived a good life it's been in order to look down at other people or in order to get God to do the things I want or in order to get other people to do the things I want." A Christian is somebody who says, "I am poor in spirit. I have nothing with which I can - I have no leverage on God. I've done bad things and I've done some good things but even the good things I've done I've done for bad reasons and I'm bankrupt and I'm going to need nothing but charity, nothing but free grace."

See, Elisha is saying, "Yeah, Naaman, the only way to receive God's grace is to receive it the way everybody else does. You're all equal. Everyone falls short. Any old lady can go down and wash. See?" "Have me do a great deed!" "No, you go down and wash. You're going to have to receive this by grace. You have to do this the way everybody else - you're all equal." If you're a Mafioso and you've actually killed people or if you've been a deacon or elder in your church for years trying really hard to get God to take you to heaven because you're such a good person, you too are equal. You're equal before God. You're both lost and you can only be saved by grace. And Elisha's bringing Naaman - yeah, he's going to bless Naaman, he's going to heal Naaman, but in the process he's going to change Naaman's whole understanding of how you relate to God and even how you relate to yourself. He's going to turn his identity completely upside-down.

What is it that makes a person great? And there's the irony. Here's the reason why the Hebrew can actually be translated both ways. There's a sense in which he's insulted because he wasn't asked to do a great thing, but the fact of the matter is, he was. The hardest thing is to admit that there's nothing you can do to earn your salvation. You might say that the great deed that he was being asked to do is to admit he's got nothing. It's going to have to be sheer grace so that when he receives God's blessing he will realize he didn't earn it and he stands absolutely equal with everybody else. He will never be able to look down on anyone else. He will never be able to feel superior to anyone else, and won't that be a relief, because he also won't feel inferior to anyone else. His identity will be taken completely out of that whole back and forth pendulum, that whole bipolar undulation. You have a good week and you feel better than other people and you're a self-righteous bigot and you have a bad week and you haven't lived up to your standards and now you hate yourself and you're beating yourself up. You go up and down. It's gone if you realize you're saved by grace, so that you're so sinful that you need to be saved by grace and yet at the same time now that you're saved by grace, not by your works, you're not up and down - you're saved, you're accepted. It's yours. It's not something you can lose because you've had a bad week this week. It just takes you off that whole merry-go-round. It takes you off the entire yo-yo and that's the reason why he comes back realizing not just that he was healed, yeah, he's excited about it, but how he was healed, the way in which he was humbled in order to be healed, the way in which he had to learn to go to God for salvation by grace. And he

comes back saying, “Now I know not that you’re a more powerful miracle worker,”
“There is no God in all the earth than in Israel.”

The Marks that You’ve Had an Encounter with God

Now how do you know you have had an encounter? How do you know? Look at the changed life. I’ll be real brief on this because I want to show you the secret and the reason why anyone can have this great encounter of grace. First of all, three things.

A New Grasp on Truth

Number one, he has a new grasp on truth. Do you see this? In other words, his mind has been changed. He says, “Now there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.” That’s a major change in worldview. That’s a major change in belief. That’s a doctrine. That’s a doctrine he didn’t believe before and now he believes. And so one of the signs that you’ve had an encounter with God is it’s not just strictly an emotional, mystical kind of experience. At least the God of the Bible, if you are encountering the God of the Bible He changes your mind. It happens through faith. Things you didn’t believe, now you believe. You have to learn. There’s truth that you have to imbibe and you have to take in. This is a pretty remarkable truth. In fact if we had more time I could say to say that “there is no God in all the earth but in Israel” is a complete change from polytheism or pantheism to Biblical theism. There’s one God. He’s a transcendent God. He is not one among many. It’s not everybody has their own religion and everybody’s religion is person specific or culturally relative. No, there’s one true religion, there’s one truth God. There is one God in all the earth - all other gods are actually fantasies. That’s remarkable. And you can’t encounter God unless you let God change your mind, unless you learn new truth. I’m being very brief but just, number one.

A Changed Attitude Toward Possessions

Number two, a second mark that he’s encountered God is that he’s changed his attitude towards his possessions. He changes his attitude toward his possessions. He says in the second half of verse 15, “So now accept a present from your servant.” Briefly put, he doesn’t have the same attitude toward his money that he had before. He’s not now trying to buy anything. He’s got what he came for, right? So shouldn’t he actually say, “Unbelievable. This has been a real bargain. I thought it was going to cost me ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten changes of clothing which I thought would be okay to get over leprosy. I got it free! I need to get out of here before somebody taxes me on this or something!” But instead what he says, “I want to give you a gift. I want to give you something.” One of the marks that you have encountered God is that money becomes just money. Before you encounter God, money is more than money. It can be security. It’s how you feel like, “I’m safe in the world.” Oh by the way, you’re not; it just makes you feel that way. Or it’s a way that makes you feel that people like you because you can dress pretty nicely and you can live in the nice part of town. You see money, until you encounter God, money is identity, money is security,

money is significance, money is your self-esteem, but how amazing it is when you realize that there is no God in all the earth but the true God. So the only real wealth is if God loves me and I'm going to live with Him forever. And the only real security is if God loves me and I'm going to live with Him forever. And the only real significance is God loves me and I'm going to live with Him forever. And suddenly money becomes something that you can give away in a way that you couldn't before. You were scared to give it away; you were afraid to give it away. It was just hard because money was more than money but now one of the signs you've had an encounter with God is you've become way, way more financially generous than you were before.

Christ becomes Central to Everything You Do

One more thing that might be interesting is this weird place where he says, "Could I have some earth?" Do you see this? He says, "If not, let there be given to your servant two mules, load of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any God but the Lord." Now here's what's interesting. Because he was the prime minister, he would regularly go in with the king to the temple of Rimmon, the god of Syria, but the god of Syria was really not a real god; it was just the projection of the culture, as I said. Every other religion in the world, the religion is really just a projection of the culture. It's just a way for the culture to depict itself as great. And so in a sense, this was a state function. Nevertheless, it was done in the name of a god, other than the God of Israel. And so most commentators say that this is what Naaman is saying. He's saying, "I'm going to go back, with your permission, O prophet, and I'm going to take my job as prime minister, I'm going to take it back up. I'm not going to say, 'Well now that I believe in the God of Israel I can't go back there and live with all those dirty pagans. I need to stay down here.' No, no. I would like to go back and keep my job but I want to let them know that when I kneel in that temple I'm not kneeling to the god of Rimmon. I'm going to put earth from Israel under my feet and everybody's going to know that I'm actually bowing only down to the God of Israel. So I'm actually going to integrate my faith with my work. I'm going to let people know out there in the secular world, out in the pagan world, I'm keeping my job but I'm also going to testify to Christ within my job."

Always a difficult thing to do, and I don't know how you're going to work it out, but if you've encountered God you'll figure that out somehow because God becomes central to everything you do. He's not just a private thing that makes you happy in your private life and out here in the rest of your life you just live like everybody else. No. It just changes you fully. So it changes your thinking, it changes your attitude toward money, God becomes central to everything you do. There's other marks of an encounter with God so they're not in this text so I'm not going to go there.

The Secret: Why Anyone Can Have an Encounter with God

But here's what I would like you to see, lastly. Why can God give this very - how do you say it - this man who has done some terrible things, this healing? Why, in a sense, can

God forgive this man? Let's go back to this little slave girl. "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. She said to her mistress, 'Would that my lord, my master...'" - you know the reason that I'm screwing up here is because an older translation that I grew up on says, "If only my master," and I can't get that out of my mind. I'm sorry! "If only my master would go to see the prophet who is in Samaria. He would cure him of his leprosy." Now listen. This little girl is a slave. Why? Because Naaman would go in - and you know how brutal things were back then? There was no Geneva Convention back then. You know the stories. Probably, probably this little girl saw her parents killed before her very eyes. This is a violent man. This is a man who has assaulted Israel, the people of God. Why is it possible that God would forgive him? Let me tell you why. In fact, not only am I going to tell you why, I'm going to tell you how. It's this little girl. Why isn't this little girl more angry at him? Why isn't this little girl more bitter? She's had her whole life taken away, her whole life, and probably saw her family slain.

Now here's what would have been more psychologically realistic to me - that she would have hated him, and she did know that healing was available through the prophet in Samaria and then she finds out that this man that she hates is a leper. Now what could she have done or how could she have responded? One of the ways she could have responded is like this. "Ha. Another finger fell off today. Good! I hope he rots in hell. I hope he falls apart. I hope one day he bumps into something and he just falls into little pieces. He's in my power now. You see because I have the knowledge that could heal him and I'm not going to tell him and therefore I'm killing him. I am. I'm killing him. And I owe him." See, that would make a lot of psychological sense! But instead, look at the way she speaks. She says, "Would that my master..." It's trying to get across the Hebrewism that says, "Oh, if only my master..." She loves him! She's concerned about him. How did that happen?

Forgiveness: Paying the Costly Price

Here's how it happened - she forgave him. And I don't want you to think that forgiveness, real forgiveness of a real, flagrant wrongdoing - I mean sometimes somebody hurts you, says something, "Okay, I forgive you." No, we're talking about something else here. If someone has wronged you the way Naaman has wronged this little girl, the only possible way to forgive is through a kind of suffering. It would be very costly. See, if she makes him pay for his sin she kills him, essentially, by withholding the information that could save his life. But if she's not withholding the information, if she's telling him, if she's actually urging him to go, that means she must have done the very painful, costly work of forgiving because see, forgiveness is always costly. If someone wrongs you, you can either make them pay back by hurting their reputation, scratching their eyes out, telling other people what they did wrong - you can make their lives miserable until it's about how much they made your life miserable and you've extracted the payment, right? So one of the things you can do if someone wrongs you is you can make them pay or you can forgive. But when you forgive, what that really means is you pay. It hurts; it's costly. It's difficult. Every time you want to scratch their eyes out you say, "No." So you can either make them bear the cost of the wrong they've done or you

can bear the cost because forgiveness is always very, very costly.

Dick Lucas, a great English preacher that both your pastor and I know and have benefitted from his preaching, he preached a sermon on this passage many years ago in which he said, "This little girl paid the price of usefulness." The reason why she was so useful in the lives of others, the reason she was so wise and so kind, the reason why she basically changed this person's life, in fact, the reason why you and I today know who she is, if she hadn't forgiven him, you never would have heard of her. Now she's one of the most famous people in history! I mean here we are - a couple of thousand people or whatever we have in here - two thousand years later, three thousand years later, talking about her. She's famous. Why? She paid the price of usefulness. It was very hard; she forgave. It was very costly. Very, very difficult.

But here's what's interesting about the whole Bible. The weak always seem to lead the strong. Here's the reason why. She points you and I to someone else. Jesus Christ lost His Father too. Jesus Christ came to earth and He was, in a sense, became a prisoner. Jesus Christ went to the cross and died for our sins. Basically, He paid the cost. What's interesting about this passage is, a weak little girl who suffers and bears the suffering - she's a suffering servant, have you noticed that? She's a suffering servant who bears the cost of forgiving someone's wrong and by that forgiveness saves him and brings him to faith. But she's pointing to the ultimate Suffering Servant who lost His Father, He came to earth, and we beat Him and we rejected Him, the human race did, and He did for us anyway saying, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." And therefore, it's because she forgave him that he was saved, but more importantly, the reason God can forgive anyone like Naaman is because His Son came to earth, became the ultimate Suffering Servant, took the place of weakness.

Biblical Salvation: By the Weak, For the Weak

Now this is a theme throughout all the Bible. Over and over again in the Bible it's not the loved woman through whom salvation comes; it's always the girl nobody wanted. It's always Leah, it's always Hannah, it's always Sarah - the women too old to have children. It's never the person you think. It's always the younger brother, not the older brother who inherits everything. It's not the pretty girl; it's always the girl that nobody wanted. Over and over and over again, all the way through the Bible, salvation always comes through the weak, always comes through the unwanted, always comes through the rejected. Why? Because ultimately salvation came through weakness. Jesus Christ came to earth not in strength to say, "If you want to be saved, follow Me! Summons up all your blood and live a good life!" No, no, no; then nobody would be saved because nobody can actually live the life that you should live. But He came to earth in weakness. He came to earth like this little suffering servant and He went to the cross and He died for our sins so that when we say, "Father, forgive us because of what Jesus Christ did, because He took our sins upon Him," God can accept us and God can receive us. So in a sense, Biblical salvation is by the weak, for the weak. All other religions are by the strong, for the strong. All other religions are founded by some

prophet or some sage that says, "If you've strong enough and you live like this you can be saved." Only Jesus Christ came and said, "You'll never live the way you want to live. I've come to die in your place so that you can be saved only if you admit you're weak, only if you admit that it's salvation by grace, only if you're strong enough to be weak and only if you're willing to admit that you have to be saved by sheer grace. And then it's free; and then it comes."

Conclusion. I don't care what the running sore of your soul is; I don't care how messed up you are. There is healing in the God of Israel. And I don't care how much you're suffering right now. I don't care how much you've been betrayed. Pay the price of usefulness. Don't let it embitter your soul. Become like that little girl who became a great heart and who changed this man's life and became one of the most famous people in history. You want to be forgotten? Just get bitter. You want to be remembered? You want to do good? Forgive. You want to be saved? Admit, admit that you've got to be saved by grace and no one is righteous. And also admit that there is no God in all the earth but this great God. Let's spend a little time in prayer.

Our Father, we want to encounter You. I pray that for those of us who do know You personally You would help us to look at that little slave girl and say we want to pay the price of usefulness; we want to not be bitter about the bad things that have happened. We want to reach out to others, even people perhaps who have wronged us, and love them. We want to be patient in our suffering and find ways to glorify You in our suffering. For those of us who have not really come to know You, help us to get over our self-sufficiency. Help us to see that we need not just relief from suffering but forgiveness for our sins. Help us to know that the world can never help us. And change us by doing the greatest deed which is to admit that there is no great deed that will earn our salvation and we have to be saved through the finished work of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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