

The God of the Whole Earth

2 Kings 5:1-27

The book of 2 Kings does not stand alone. It is not even just the second part of the two-volume history '1 and 2 Kings'. Instead, it is a part of the broader narrative of Israel, stretching back to the promises God made to Abraham, and stretching forward to Christ and beyond.

God made Abraham three promises: (1) innumerable descendants, (2) a land of their own, and that (3) they would be a blessing to the other nations of the world. By the time Moses led the Jews out of Egypt, the first promise was fulfilled: they were a vast people. In the book of Joshua, the second promise is largely fulfilled: Israel is settled in Palestine, its own homeland. After stumbling along through Judges, Israel's fortunes take an upswing in 1 & 2 Samuel. By 1 Kings, the reign of Solomon brings the third promise to the edge of fulfillment: the queen of Sheba hears of Solomon's reputation and comes to receive the blessing of his wisdom and insight (10:1-13).

Yet the fulfillment of the third promise never actually comes to pass. Instead, 1 & 2 Kings records how – and why – rather than Israel being a blessing to the nations, the nations become a curse on Israel. The book of 1 Kings begins with Israel at its pinnacle, as Solomon becomes king on the throne of his father David (1 Kings 2:45). The book of 2 Kings ends with the Jewish nation defeated and deported into exile (2 Kings 25:21).

The story of Israel's downward spiral from regional preeminence to defeat and exile is best left for another time. For the moment it suffices to note that this larger narrative provides the context for the story of Naaman. The story is set at a time when Israel's national fortunes are degenerating rapidly. The story would be first read in exile, with the nation decimated. Yet the context of the story is that the promises – and the judgments – of God are true and certain. God made three promises to Abraham and he kept them all, right up to the cusp of the third. But God's promises were conditional: to continue in his blessing, Israel and its leaders must reciprocate his love, worshipping him alone and obeying him faithfully. When they persistently and resolutely turned from him to other gods, he turned from them, and gave them over to the nations. Their national misfortune is due not to his neglect but to their own, not to his impotence but to their sinfulness. The story of Naaman picks up from here.

Day 1: 2 Kings 5:1-2 Lord of all nations

Naaman was commander of the army of Syria, enemy of Israel, victor in conflicts between the two powers (5:1-2). Why was he so powerful and highly regarded? Ultimately, not because of his brilliant strategy or his military skill,

but because “through him the Lord had given victory to [Syria].” In ancient times, every city or tribe or nation claimed its own deities; manifestly, the most powerful nation was thought to have the most powerful deity. In such a context, the author of 2 Kings insists that the God of Israel is God over the whole earth and all its peoples. Even the success of Israel’s enemies owes itself to Israel’s God. This is the central point of this narrative: God reigns over all the world, including both his people and their enemies. To this point, this is only the conviction of the author; by the end of the story, it will also be the conviction of the mighty general Naaman himself.

Given the fact that our nation has been at the top of the world for a century or so, this point may not touch us as deeply as it would have impacted Israel in exile. But we get a small taste of it when we grieve over troop losses in Afghanistan or Iraq, or when we are dumbstruck by horrors such as 9/11, or even when an individual loved one suffers or dies. God is in charge at the bad times, not just the good, over nations, not just individuals, and over his enemies, not just his worshippers.

Day 2: 2 Kings 5:2-3 The weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength

A nameless young girl, kidnapped in a cross-border raid, sold to a powerful general to be a slave for his wife: in age, gender, and ethnicity, she is about as powerless as it is possible to be. Yet not so powerless in the hands of a God who uses the foolish to shame the wise, who uses the despised to negate the elite, and who uses the weak to conquer the strong. Caught in a miserable situation, this girl rises above resentment against either master or God, and speaks a quiet word that sets in motion a life-changing chain of events.

This young slave girl is not the focus of the story, but a secondary character. So the main point lies not here, but elsewhere. Nonetheless, the author clearly intends her as a role model. His first readers were themselves captives in a foreign land, P.O.W.s of a war which razed their homeland, its capital, its palace, and its temple. The author invites them, in their misery, to learn from this insignificant slave girl who, against all odds, became a significant influence in the life – and conversion – of a powerful leader from a foreign enemy.

We, too, rightly draw a lesson from her example. Almost no matter how miserable our circumstance, or how disadvantaged our position, if we continue to trust in God rather than grow despondent or bitter, we can still play a strategic role in his work, and in the lives of those around us. To the extent that your life circumstances are unpleasant today, pray not only that God will change those circumstances, but also that he will provide you opportunity and creativity to be influential for him even in those circumstances.

Day 3: 2 Kings 5:4-8 Who really has the power?

Thinking like a king, and showing respect for such a valued general, the king of Syria sends a fortune to the king of Israel, in payment for assistance sought. The latter panics: “Am I God, to kill and bring back to life?” Who has the power? Neither the king of Syria, nor his counterpart in Israel. But a prophet speaks up: “Send Naaman to me!” Power belongs to the Lord, and he shares it with those who worship and serve him.

This is an amusing story, full of irony and satire, with a feel-good ending. But is it anything more than that? In our world, slaves do not counsel generals, or priests give orders to kings (or pastors to presidents). In our world, the powerful rule over the weak. Of course, the same was true in the time of 2 Kings: after all, its first readers were in exile, losers of a war, citizens of a nation that no longer existed. Yet to them, the author says, power rests not with the victorious army, or with the king who drove them into exile, but with their God.

This is the central message of the narrative: despite outward appearances, power rests not with kings or with generals – nor with financiers or with multi-national corporations – but with God, and he shares it with those who honor him. This should be easier for us to understand and believe than it was for them, because we see the same message writ large in Easter: there power lay in the hands not of the religious leaders who condemned Jesus, nor in the hands of the Roman officials who executed him, but in the hands nailed to the cross.

Day 4: 2 Kings 5:9-14 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:12). Naaman is an important figure. He is used to being treated with respect. So when Elisha does not even step out of his house to meet him, he is rightly insulted. Naaman is proud of his nation and its military superiority. So when Elisha tells him to wash in a diminutive stream in Israel, his nationalism is offended. So he storms off in a rage. His servants, used to being disrespected – they are, after all, servants – urge him not to take offense, but to try the cure. He does, and it works, thus illustrating a common biblical theme: God humbles the exalted, and exalts the humbled. When Naaman was willing to humble himself, God healed him.

Which also explains why the first step toward salvation is repentance: the admission that we are indeed sinners, incapable of saving ourselves, and possessing no virtue sufficient to prompt God to save us. God requires repentance not out of some perverse desire to shame us, but partly because it is true – we *are* sinners – and partly because only the hungry eat, only the thirsty drink, and only the tired sleep. Only when we recognize our need, and our impotence to solve that need, do we turn to him who alone can meet our need.

Day 5: 2 Kings 5:15 There is no God in all the world, except in Israel

This story here comes full circle. It began with the narrator affirming that Syria's military success derived not from the god whom they worshipped, but from a God whom they did not worship: the God of Israel is actually the God of all the world. By the end of the story, Naaman, the general responsible for that military success comes to the same conclusion: the God of Israel is the only God in all the world. The story offers both encouragement and rebuke to those in exile: the defeat of their nation and their deportation did not occur because God was impotent to stop it; to the contrary, God caused it (implicitly, in judgment for their sin in turning away from him). Now in exile, the Jews should not make the mistake of assuming that the gods of their victors are the true and powerful gods. Instead, they should reconcile to the true God in the hopes that he will forgive them and return them to their land.

This does not imply that whatever ill befalls us is divine judgment on our sin. Jesus is clear about this: in a fallen world, sometimes bad stuff just happens. But it does remind us that even when bad befalls us, this is not evidence against the existence, power or love of God. The narrator begins, and Naaman ends, at the same point: there is one God in all the world.

Day 6: Luke 4:24-30 Naaman and Jesus

On the day when Jesus went public with his ministry, he cited the case of Naaman. In the days of Elijah, there were many starving widows in Israel, but he was sent to rescue a gentile woman in a foreign land. In the days of Elisha, many Israelites suffered from a debilitating skin condition, but he healed only Naaman the Syrian. God – and Jesus – may not favor Jews, but may instead prioritize gentiles, perhaps even Israel's oppressors: the crowd understood Jesus' point and rioted.

As gentiles, we are beneficiaries of this re-orientation of priorities. We rightly celebrate that. At the same time, we rightly remember that these are still Jesus' priorities: not us, who have ready access to the gospel, but the unreached, who have minimal access to the gospel. He is King of all the earth, and he wants his subjects – and his subjects – to know him. God prioritizes the unreached: how might we rearrange our priorities so that they match his?