

Flaws Bring Us Back to God

SCOTT HOEZEE

Can any human being, no matter how great, how rich, how powerful – can any human being ever finally get along without God; or is there always something that throws us back onto the mercy of God? Something in life that reveals, finally, our need for God? Today on *Groundwork*, we continue our series on the bad news/good news verses of the Bible, in which the little English conjunction *but* turns a situation on its head, and so reveals to us once again precious truths about God and about ourselves. Today, we once again dig into an Old Testament story to see an example of this. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are continuing this third program now in this series of focusing on those verses in the Bible that take a startling turn somewhere right in the middle of the verse that really reverses a lot of expectations; moves us from darkness to light; or in this case, moves us from light to darkness, because the verse we are going to look at today starts out good and then turns in a bad direction, but that bad direction will prove fruitful.

DAVE BAST

And it comes from a great story that many of us, I think, are familiar with. It is a popular Sunday school story, and it has to do with Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, as we used to call them in older translations, or the army of Aram, in a more modern version; but here is the text. It comes from 2 Kings Chapter 5:

¹Now 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. Or, as it is sometimes translated: but, he was a leper.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He was a leper... So, there you have it. Naaman has it all going on, as we say today, right? He has risen to the level of what today, if you are in the United States, it would be like he would be a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the president, or he would be the top commander at the Pentagon. He is a five-star general; he is Dwight Eisenhower; he is Norman Schwarzkopf; he is Colin Powell. The king of Aram regarded him as a man's man. Naaman was the best of the best. He is brave; he is wise; Naaman was a great man; but, he was a leper. Naaman was a valiant soldier; but, he was a leper.

DAVE BAST

Right; and very successful. Interesting little point here; I do not know if you picked up on it as I read the text, but it says: Through him the Lord had given victory to Aram; which is a little illustration of the pervasive view of the Bible that everything really comes from God. He is not just the God who is guarding Israel and guiding Israel's affairs, but all of the nations fall under him; so, if a nation wins the victory, it is because the Lord decided to give it to them, and in this case, he decided to do that through Naaman.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you have a feeling that God had plans for Naaman, and we will see what those are as this program continues, Dave. So, he is working in Naaman's life. The Lord helps Naaman become as successful as he did, but does not take away the leprosy, and there is a reason for that. One of the reasons I know about this text when we were planning out this series, Dave, is that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had so many wonderful sermons in his life, but he had one that I heard years ago on this particular text, and in that sermon, Dr. King turned that line: Now, Naaman was a great man, but... and he turned that into a refrain in the sermon, and King used that as a reminder that all of history's great figures – powerful people, rich people, successful people – people who had all kinds of great things going on; yet, in every case, there was that *but*; but, but, but; there was always a *but*. George Washington was a great man, but... Thomas Jefferson was a great man, but...

DAVE BAST

They were both slave owners...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That was King's point of the sermon, yes. Alexander the Great was a great man, but... The list goes on and on. So, with the exception of Jesus, of course, everybody after Adam and Eve always had that other thing that could be said; no matter who they are, there is always that other thing that is not quite right.

DAVE BAST

We could all probably multiply examples. He was a wonderful businessman; but, he was terrible to his wife and his children and ignored them. Or she was a great preacher; but, she was rather distant and aloof and did not really care about people. She was lost in books all the time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is an outstanding, award-winning chef; but, he treats the servers and kitchen staff with such contempt, he leaves people in tears. Or, she is a warm and generous person; but, so much of the joy of life escapes her because she does terrible battle with chronic depression.

DAVE BAST

Yes, as you say...

SCOTT HOEZEE

We can fill in the blank in our own lives, if we are honest, right? If we are honest, we see ourselves in the picture: Hey, I am good at this. People think thus and so about me in life; but, my wife knows... my husband knows... my kids know... that I struggle with this or that; and I know I am not always a very nice person. I am not the person people think I am. I am weak. I have problem areas. So, only the truly self-deceived would not be able to see themselves in the picture of Naaman here; a great and valiant man; but... there is a problem.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think especially with respect to ourselves, it is hard to strike that balance. I mean, if we are focusing on our secret faults, and you think of the psalmist in Psalm 19: Lord, cleanse thou me from hidden faults; from secret sins. If we focus on those, we can maybe get too down on ourselves; but then, if we are trying to pump ourselves up and present this picture – this image – to the world of successful, happy, rich, wealthy, well-to-do, whatever the case may be, then we gloss over that truth.

I think of a wonderful line that I read years ago in a sermon by Fleming Rutledge, a very fine preacher; she was preaching on a text from Romans 8 where Paul says God demonstrates his love to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And she says near the end of that sermon: I see myself in that word *sinner*; and I think that is the healthy thing – not to deny who we are – not to grovel – but to recognize that, yes, we are flawed; we are sinful; we see ourselves that way; we remember the *but* about ourselves...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and if we are a public person, if you work for a law firm, if you are a pastor, if you are a teacher, or even just with your family, it is not as though we have to browbeat ourselves or air all of our dirty laundry in public and tell everybody: Oh, yeah, yeah, you know, but I got... But in our heart of hearts, and with those with whom we are closest, and above all, with our Lord Jesus Christ, we have to be honest. He, at least, we cannot hide the truth from; but as we are going to go on to see, not hiding that truth – acknowledging it – owning up to it – can lead to some really remarkable things. It did for Naaman.

DAVE BAST

Right; well, you know, here is the interesting thing, too, in context. Leprosy in the Bible is always a symbol of sin; and so, you have this wonderful passage in Psalm 51, where David says – it is all about confessing his sin – purge me with hyssop and I will be clean. Well, that was the prescription in the Old Testament Law for being cleansed from leprosy. That is how you showed it and went to the priest. So, Naaman was a great man; but... he was a leper... is really, he was every man; he is all of us; and we are going to follow his story through to how he deals with that problem in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And let's loop back now, Dave. We read just a verse – the first verse of 2 Kings 5, in the first segment. We know Naaman has a problem; now, let's get back to the story and read the wider context from 2 Kings 5. So, here we go:

¹Now 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 taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy. So, this little girl, now, it telling Naaman's wife: Get to Israel – she is referring to Elisha. So, his wife tells Naaman this, and Naaman decides to go. He goes to the king of Israel first, who says: I cannot help you. But then he does find his way to Elisha, and we will pick it up there.

DAVE BAST

⁹So, Naaman went with his horses and chariots, and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger – this is great. He does not come out himself; he just sends a servant out to say to him, ¹⁰"Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed. ¹¹But 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 and wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. He wants the whole ritual. ¹²Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could not I wash in them and be cleansed? So, he turned and went off in a rage.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹³Naaman'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?' ¹⁴So Naaman 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.

DAVE BAST

What a great story! And what an illustration. I am sure you have preached on this story, Scott; I have too, of how we are cleansed before God; how we are treated for our problem of spiritual leprosy. It is such a simple thing. If it were some hard thing, like Naaman's servants say to him: Yes, we would undertake it. We would go to the ends of the earth if you knew that you had to do this. Make a pilgrimage to get cured; to gain eternal life; to be saved. So, Naaman apparently has more problems than just his leprosy – like many great people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he is a little full of himself; but what is so interesting is how God is working to get Naaman to himself. Twice in this story you have people who are not Naaman's equals socially, militarily, whatever, helping him. First there is this little slave girl from Israel who – of course, by all rights, she could have just sat on this information. If I were a captured girl, I would say: I know somebody who could help him, but I am not going to tell him.

DAVE BAST

Serves him right; let him rot; yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, she gets to Naamana's wife and she says: Look, there is somebody who can help him... And then when Naaman gets all offended because Elisha does not even come out himself and he does not do some little dog and pony show that, you know... whoo, whoo, whoo, waving his hand over it, then his servants say: No, no, no; this is easy. Just try it. So, twice in this story, the lessers of Naaman are God's voice to him to say: Get with the program and give it a shot. He does, and of course, he is cured.

DAVE BAST

By simply dipping himself in the waters of Jordan, the river of the Holy Land, we might say...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a little muddy.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is a little muddy; it is not too impressive. He has these beautiful, clean rivers in Damascus, and surely Damascus at this point in history, was a much grander city than anything in Samaria or Israel; but, it is just the humble thing... You know, Paul says: The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. So, there is something rather almost despicable about the simple Gospel message: Look, it is a gift.

We were saying in an earlier program, if you want what you have earned, you will get death; that is your wage; but if you will simply accept the gift God offers you, and do what he tells you; just put your trust in him and his Word and Jesus, then you will get eternal life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here, also, Dave, is a point that it does loop back to some earlier programs in this series, and it points forward to where we will end this particular program in a few minutes; but what is so interesting, and what is so key is that Naaman never would have found his way to the true God of the universe if it had not been for that affliction. If it had not been for the thing he could not be successful...

DAVE BAST

He could not deal with, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No matter how successful he was, he could not get rid of his leprosy. He was brilliant; he was bright; he was well thought of; he was valiant; he was brave. Again, as we said in the first segment, by most human

standards Naaman had made it; he had arrived; he was a man's man; but, there was this one thing, and it was that one thing that leads him to come to worship the true God; and we should note that not only was Naaman cured, he really does come to the heart of God, and we can read that a little later.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; absolutely; and that is where the story leads. It is not enough just to get cured of your leprosy. I remember a line somebody said once: If you give up drinking, you do not necessarily go to heaven. You could just go to hell sober. So, getting rid of whatever the *but* problem is in your life; whatever that thing may be does not really amount to a whole lot if it does not lead you to the Lord, who does the healing; and that is what happens with Naaman, as we will read as we continue.

¹⁵So, Naaman and all of his attendants went back to the man of God (that is Elisha, the prophet). 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." ¹⁶The prophet answered, "As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing," and even though Naaman urged him, he refused.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁷"Well, if you will not," said Naaman, "Please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry; for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord. ¹⁸But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and so I have to bow there, too; when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon may the Lord forgive your servant for this." ¹⁹"Go in peace," Elisha said. So, there it is. Evidence that God got through, not just to his skin – He went more than skin deep – God got to this man's heart, and the reason he wanted some soil, I think, in that day if you were going to worship the god of a different country, you would do it by touching the soil of that land. So, it was his commitment to say: I am going to be praying to only one God from here on out, and it is Yahweh.

DAVE BAST

He wants a little piece of the Promised Land to put in his garden out back so he can kneel there and pray. I love this touch, too, about... You know, political expediency is going to require that I still go to the pagan temple of the idol. The king is going to be with me and leaning on my arm, and when he bows, I am going to have to bow; but secretly in my heart, Elisha, I want you to know I am praying to the Lord, not to this idol.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of a mental reservation.

DAVE BAST

It kind of gives us sort of hope for many perhaps secret Christians throughout the world...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Elisha is okay with it...

DAVE BAST

It is not farfetched, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You would think Elisha would say: No, of course not. You cannot do that. Get the wrath of God. No, no, no; he says: Go in peace. That is fine. God knows your heart.

So, what an amazing story. Naaman was a great man, *but* – but he needed God, the same as we all do, and I think, Dave, in just a moment we will discuss a little bit more how that applies to all of our lives.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are digging into the story of Naaman, the Syrian general, or the general of Aram – Aramian general – who was a great man; a valiant soldier, says 2 Kings 5:3; *but*, he was a leper; and that is that great adversative – that great switch – U-turn from the good news to the bad news; and a truth that we think applies to everybody, Scott, really; everyone in the world, great and small.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we said that earlier in the program, that unless we are quite nicely self-deceived – and some of us maybe are – but unless we are just duping ourselves – fooling ourselves – we all know; we can fill in the blank. I am a skilled person, *but*; people think really well of me at work, *but*; I know the truth about myself, and I am not always so nice at home, or whatever – whatever it is. I have an addiction. I am lazy. I know the truth; and God knows that truth; but as we were saying, the thing about Naaman, who becomes – as we just saw in the last segment – becomes a worshiper of God for, we assume, the rest of his life – that would not have happened if it were not for that affliction, that thing that said... Sort of what they talk about in various addiction programs: I have to turn myself over to a higher power. I am not going to take care of this on my own, and I might struggle with this for my whole life. If you are an envious person, if you are a jealous or a greedy person – fill in the blank – it might be something we struggle with – it is an area of weakness... It sort of reminds me of Paul's thorn in the flesh. The great Apostle Paul had something that just kept him tethered to God, and God would not take it away, for whatever the reason; but maybe part of the reason was that is sometimes what does keep us tethered to God that makes us dependent on his grace.

DAVE BAST

So, let's ask: What are some of the practical implications of this truth? Or, how could we perhaps apply this story of Naaman to ourselves? I think the first thing we might do is ask if there is something that is keeping us from acknowledging or admitting our need – at least before God – and turning to him for help. You know, Naaman at first is very angry because the cure for his problem did not fit his preconceived notion of what ought to happen. He thought he deserved some special treatment because he was such a big-shot. He is such an important guy; and so he starts out going to the king of Israel, who is appalled that someone from the enemy comes and says, cure me of my leprosy; thinking that is just a pretext for attacking me. I cannot do that; what am I, God? And then he goes to the prophet, and the prophet sort of dismisses him and says: You know, you do not really deserve special treatment, or an elaborate ceremony...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just go do this.

DAVE BAST

Yes; just go do this; and it is such a simple thing. I wonder if there are cases where our own pride keeps us from the simple thing God tells us to do, which is to turn to him in prayer; in repentance; put our faith in Christ, and ask him to heal us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And sometimes – now, in Naaman's case, Dave, the problem was obvious. Sometimes in our lives, our problems – what really should go in the blank behind the *but* – I am a skilled person, *but* – sometimes we do not acknowledge that ourselves, and one of the ways that God works in our lives... So, even as Naaman had to listen to a little servant girl – a slave girl from Israel – and had to listen to his servants when they said: No, listen; do what the man said, okay? Sometimes we have to listen to the people in our lives who tell us the hard truth about ourselves: Look, Scott, you have a problem here. If we reject those people and will not listen to those people, and just keep ourselves in denial, then we cannot turn ourselves over to God the way Naaman did because we refuse to acknowledge there is a problem. So, it is a hard truth to swallow sometimes, but God puts people in our lives, just like he did in Naaman's life, to get through to us, and then we have to listen or else we are self deceived.

My friend, Neal Plantinga says: The thing about self-deception, nobody sets out to deceive themselves. First we deceive ourselves, and then we deceive ourselves that we did not deceive ourselves. And so, we are kind of doubly self-duped, and we need outside people sometimes to crack through that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is very hard to humble ourselves, but that is what we are really getting at here. Everyone needs humility, and one of the great marks of a person who genuinely knows God is that humility. There is a verse in 1 Peter that says God opposes the proud; he resists the proud; but he gives his grace to the humble. It makes me think of a famous Winston Churchill line. He said of one of his political opponents: He was a modest little man with much to be modest about. But we really are people with much to be humble about; each of us is, if we would only acknowledge it, and that is what Naaman finally does when he acquiesces – when he bows and goes down to the Jordan.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, most everybody has a good reputation in some part or another of life, and that is a great thing; but we cannot use that as an excuse to avoid the other truths about ourselves; and indeed, that is humility; to bow before God and say: Look, I cannot deal with this on my own; I cannot forgive this on my own; only you can forgive me; I cannot solve this on my own. So, it is humility that... and I think that is what the Apostle Paul was saying. I had mentioned earlier the thorn in the flesh. Paul said: Look, that is what keeps you humble. It is also what keeps you thankful; because, when in humility you bow before God, and you know God is the one who has done it... Look how grateful Naaman was. He wants to give Elisha huge amounts of riches and Elisha refuses, but that is gratitude. So, thankfulness and humility – those are two of the greatest hallmarks of disciples of Jesus you could think of – and that is where these afflictions in our lives – these weak areas of our lives – when they drive us to God, they drive us to a greater humility, and thus, a greater thankfulness.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; as you point out, that motivation – his prompting, his desire to give a gift to Elisha – that was the only way he knew to express his thankfulness for his healing; and of course, Elisha rejects it because he does not want to divert attention from the Lord. It was not Elisha who healed him, it was the Lord; and Naaman comes to know that. So, yes; if we could cultivate those twin attitudes of humbling ourselves, of genuine humility, thankfulness to God for loving us, not because of who we are, so much, but in spite of who we are; and then, the gratitude that comes from knowing that he heals us; and you know, it may not happen right away. It may take our whole life before we are healed of the *but*, whatever comes after; but ultimately he will, and we know we will be clean and whole in the end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures; so, visit the website: groundworkonline.com, and tell us topics and passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/flaws-bring-us-back-to-god>

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