

Sabbath School Lesson #3 – The Unlikely Missionary – 11-17 Jul 2015

Christ came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and as His own people did not recognise Him as the Messiah but merely Joseph's son, He said to them, among other things, "And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27). Christ was beholding a people who had lost their missionary purpose, who did not recognise Him as their Master healer and were about to be passed by like the lepers in Elisha's time. Likewise, if we lose our missionary purpose, fail to recognise Christ as our Master healer, we will be passed by.

There are two basic truths that need to be kept in mind if we are to remain faithful to our missionary purpose and be healed by Christ. These two basic things have always been true namely, that "there is no respect of persons with God" (Romans 2:11), and that "none of us liveth to himself" (Romans 14:7). When we combine the two truths, we get the principle that, whenever God bestows any gift or advantage upon any person, it is in order that he may use it for the benefit of others. God does not bestow blessings upon one person or people that He does not wish all to have. God blessed Abraham and in turn blessed Israel so that all the people of the earth might be blessed. God's design for Israel was that they should proclaim the gospel to the entire world, but Israel often withheld the blessing of the gospel and thus did not fulfill its high calling. They did not let their light shine, and so in time they themselves lost it. They assumed that the light, which God had given them, was due to the fact that He loved them better than He did others, and so they became haughty, and despised others.

Nevertheless God ceased not to indicate to Israel that they were to be the light of the world. The history of the Jews, instead of showing that God was shut up to them, shows that He was continually trying to use them to make His name known to others. This is where in this Sabbath School Lesson we witness the account of Naaman the Syrian, who was sent to the king of Israel to be healed of his leprosy. This also shows that God was not then, any more than now, the God of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles also. Often, when Israel failed to fulfill the mission to which God had called them, He would send them into captivity, that thus the heathen might receive some of the knowledge of God, which they would not impart voluntarily. Even in the story of Naaman, we find a little maid in captivity, as a faithful child, being the means of bringing the truth before the heathen and a means of blessing Naaman.

The truth that God blessed Israel so that the blessing should reach the whole world was made clear to Peter. When Peter, at the request of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and the command of the Lord, went to Caesarea to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, his first words when he heard the story of Cornelius were, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him" (Acts 10: 34-35). This was the first time that Peter had ever perceived that truth, but it was not the first time that that thing was true. It had been a truth as long as God had existed. God never chose anybody to the exclusion of anybody else. The wisdom that comes from above is "without partiality" (James 3:17). It is true that the Jews as a nation were wonderfully favoured by the Lord; but they lost all their privileges simply because they assumed that God loved them better than He did anybody else, and were exclusive. In the story of Naaman, God was trying to make Israel see that what He offered them was for the whole world, and that they were to pass on to others the light and privileges which they had.

Israel as a nation finally rejected Christ thereby cutting itself off from the privilege hitherto they had enjoyed as a nation by which means other nations would be blessed. After Christ was crucified, the fact that the gospel was preached to the Jews first does not contradict the truth that God is no respecter of persons. The Jews received the gospel first because the Jews were nearest. Christ was crucified at Jerusalem. It was from Jerusalem that Christ commissioned His disciples to preach the gospel. Before ascending, Christ said, "ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). It was most natural that they should begin to preach the gospel in the place and to the people nearest them. This is the secret of all missionary work. A person, who does not labour in the gospel in his home, will not do any gospel work

although he goes to a foreign country. In the Naaman story, the parents of the little maid had taught her (Proverbs 22:6) the gospel that she later preached to Naaman in Syria.

The case of Naaman, the Syrian, affords a good illustration of that natural perversity of the human heart which prevents many people from realising the blessing of God. Naaman was captain of the armies of Syria, and a great man, but was a leper. In this respect he was like many who live today. Sin is a leprosy no less real than the loathsome disease which afflicted the body of Naaman. It is the leprosy of the soul. Of how many may it be said, as it was of Naaman: Great, but a leper! His leprosy was a complete offset to his greatness.

The king of Syria heard that there was a power in Israel to heal any disease possessed by man, and sent Naaman to the king of Israel to be healed of his leprosy. At that time the king of Israel, like many in Israel, had lost their missionary purpose and the sense of there being a prophet of God in Israel who could heal diseases, and thus the king "rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy?" (2 Kings 5:7). Elisha the prophet of God sent to the king of Israel, and said, "Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel" (verse 8).

After beholding the king of Israel rent his clothes, Naaman moved on. "So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper" (verses 9-11).

Naaman had the plan by which the Lord was to heal him all laid out in his own mind, and because the Lord did not purpose to manifest His power in that way, he first went away in a rage. And so it is with people today. They want the Lord to work for them, but they have the plan by which He is to work all arranged in their own minds, and they ask the Lord to work and then watch to see some manifestation of the nature which they have marked out. They want God to work for them in their way. And when something comes from the Lord which is not in their way at all, although perhaps a direct answer to their prayers, they turn away and will not have it. "Are not Abana and Pharpar," said Naaman, "rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean?" (verse 12). If he was to be cleansed by washing, he knew a better way of doing it than the Lord had proposed! And just so with us, for our own way seems a great deal better in our eyes than God's way. God says, "neither are your ways my ways," "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways" (Isaiah 55:8-9). Let us trust God's ways instead of our ways.

But Naaman's servants came to him, and said, "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?" (verse 13). Men are continually seeking to be cleansed of their soul leprosy by doing some great thing. This is the way it should be by the wisdom of man. It is a fundamental idea of all false religions. By doing some great thing, – going on some weary pilgrimage, enduring long fasts and other bodily afflictions, saying so many thousand prayers, or in some other way exercising his powers of mind or body to their utmost limit – he can so commend himself to God that he will receive from Him what he desires. But when man has done something that he thinks is great, and the glory is his own, not the Lord's, as God cannot work for the glory of man, his elaborate and laborious plan can only utterly fail.

God's plan, God's message, is, "Wash, and be clean" (verse 13). It is so simple that all can do it, – so simple that the glory of the result of washing must all be given to God. There is a fountain open for sin and uncleanness, and the most leprous soul that will wash in that fountain will be cleansed. The word of the Lord is, "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

To wash in that fountain is to believe the word of the Lord: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Let us be simple enough to believe God. Naaman gave up his way, he believed and washed in Jordan, and was cleansed. All who give up their own way, and take God's way instead, will be cleansed. All who believe in Christ will have every deficiency of character supplied, every defilement cleansed, every fault corrected, and every excellence developed.