

5. Great God of Wonders

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Date: 02 August 2009

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- [0 : 0 0] And we'll have a moment of prayer before we look at it. Father, we believe you have words to say to us, words that we need to hear.
- So I pray that you will take my human words in all their weakness, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.
- Amen. One not particularly serious feature that occurs sometimes in the Times newspaper is a page that tells you who is up and who is down.
- Celebrities of various kinds from various fields, and we are told whether they have gone up in popularity or gone down in popularity. It's not particularly serious, it keeps on changing, because that's the nature of human society and human opinion.
- Take political opinion polls. All the commentators are pointing out that what we are seeing now is a curious mirror image of what we saw 12 years ago.
- [1 : 1 6] I'm not giving a political point at all, this is just to illustrate the general point about the change of opinion. 12 years ago, an exhausted government was faced with a reinvigorated opposition under a new leader, and that's what appears to be happening again.
- But we know very well that in a few years' time those polls will change. People will change their minds. Things will move on. But it's very different when God decides who is up and who is down.
- Psalms 75 verse 6 says this, It is God who judges. He brings this one up and puts this one down. When God exalts, then that person is exalted.
- When God humbles, then that person is humbled. There's no doubt about it. And the structure of this story is very interesting. We have in the first part of the story, the story of Naaman, the Syrian, who was up in one sense.
- He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper, and he was humbled, very literally, very physically, as well as spiritually, in order that he could be exalted.
- [2 : 2 8] A pagan who is exalted by God. But in the second part of the chapter, we have an Israelite, a very privileged Israelite, who is exalted by his association with the prophet, and he is put down.
- It's a wonderful story. The brilliant storytelling, tremendous characterization, full of interesting details. And here, Elisha is carrying on the work of Elijah.
- Back in 1 Kings 19, Elijah was told to anoint Elisha so that he could put down kings and set up kings. We're going to be seeing this in the next few weeks, how Elisha behind the scenes is working so that God's will in the nations will be carried out.
- But also, there is the humble and the nameless. We've seen this in the Elisha story as well. This unnamed little girl, an evangelist, if ever there was one, who brought this great man into the kingdom of God.
- Because above all, this is a story of God, about God. It is history. It actually happened. But it's far more than history.

[3 : 38] This is what God is like. This is the kind of God that we believe in. Who is a pardoning God like you? As we sang. That's why I've taken the title for the sermon from that hymn, Great God of Wonders.

That's our title for this evening. I want us to look at this story that develops in three acts, so to speak. First of all, verses 1 to 7. The God who continually surprises us.

The Bible is a radical book. It keeps on overturning our expectations. It keeps on being unpredictable. Now that doesn't mean that God is inconsistent. It means that we are inconsistent.

We form our ideas of God, and then expect Him to conform to them. And here are several of the ways in which God surprises us in these first seven verses.

First of all, it overturns the assumption that God always gives victory to His people. Look at verse 1. He was a great man, we are told, and in high favor, because by Him, the Lord had given victory to Syria.

[4 : 50] Not given victory to Israel, God is using the ancient enemy to punish His people. And why is that? Remember the background of the Elijah, Elisha stories, the idolatry, the apostasy, the turning away from God, the immorality, the breakdown, the chaos.

And God is punishing His people. It's what the prophet Isaiah says in chapter 63 about God's people. They rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.

It says Isaiah 63.10. Therefore, He turned to be their enemy and Himself fought against them. God does not have favorites.

And this remains true. These people, some years later, some decades, centuries later, were to go into exile because they had ignored the words of the prophets.

Think of the disappearance of the great first century churches we read about in the book of Revelation. The seven churches in Asia. And they fell to Islam because the risen Lord removed the candlestick.

[5 : 59] The risen Lord dispensed of them, essentially. Remember, no church has a right to exist. A church, Don Carson who says, a church is only ever one generation away from extinction.

It's unfaithfulness that causes churches to disappear. And look at the decline of the church in our day because of unfaithfulness. Empty churches, the apostasy, the unbelief, the apathy.

All because God does not give victory to His people unless they are faithful to Him. Oh, I know sometimes when we are faithless, God will rescue us in spite of us.

I know that's true. But here we are talking about deliberate faithlessness, deliberate rebellion. That's what's happening here. So that's the first surprise in verses 1 to 7.

Second surprise is we always think ordinary people can't make a difference. Verse 2. 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.

[7 : 09] Obviously she is part of the believing remnant because she knows exactly where to go to in trouble. She's kidnapped, probably never to return home again.

Obviously not badly treated, obviously able to talk to her mistress and her master. But think about the agony being torn away from her parents and her family, probably never to see them again.

Why does the God of Israel do this? Why doesn't he allow instead some girl from some pagan household to be kidnapped? But surely here it is that this household, this man Naaman is to hear of the name of the God of Israel.

He is to be shown that there is only one God in the whole world. Sometimes the difficulties that God brings into our lives indeed always I imagine are for the furtherance of the gospel.

That's what Paul says, isn't it? The problems, the difficulties, the trials, the persecutions have come for the progress of the gospel. And a third assumption that's overturned here, a third surprise, is that the powerful always sway events.

[8 : 25] There's a little pantomime here of posturing at a fairly major level in verses four to seven. It's a comedy of errors. the little girl says, my master needs to see the prophet.

My master needs the word, the living word of the prophet. What does the king of Syria say, verse five, go now, I will send a letter to the king of Israel.

Prophets don't matter after all. They are just court lackeys. You see, the powerful are accustomed only to dealing with the powerful. The powerful imagine that nothing can be done unless they control events.

So here we have a full-scale diplomatic mission. World leaders love this, don't they? They love being televised on the screen along with other world leaders, particularly if one of the leaders is the President of the United States.

That's very often what political leaders do when their popularity at home is fading. They get a photo opportunity on a diplomatic mission. The king of Israel, verse six.

[9 : 33] The king of Israel is probably Jehoram, whom we've met already, Ahab's second son. Jehoram, we noticed, was a compromiser.

He doesn't, he's not an active, proactive pagan like his father and mother. He is a compromiser. Read back in chapter three, a passage we looked at some months ago.

He can use religious language. Am I God to kill and make alive? He uses all the right words but he has no living faith. So you see, the God of surprises.

The God who, the God who tells us that he will become our enemy if we turn away from him. The God who uses humble, nameless people to make a huge difference.

And the God who marginalizes the powerful. The powerful do not always sway events. So that's the first part of the story. These surprises. God is continually surprising us.

[10 : 34] And I'm sure you've noticed this in your own life. You've come into an impasse that there's no way out at all and then God suddenly, unexpectedly, confounds our pessimism with his complete relevance, bringing an answer that we had never imagined would happen.

then the second part, verse 8, to the first part of verse 19 where Elisha says to Naaman, go in peace. We have the God who turns the world upside down.

Taking that phrase from the book of Acts, Acts chapter 17, where Paul and Silas at Thessalonica are described as those who have turned the world upside down.

And that's what the gospel does. The world continues with its power struggles, continues with its normal way of doing things, whereas God is working to subvert all this.

The first thing is the conflict of perceptions. Verse 8, When Elisha, the man of God, heard the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king saying, Why have you torn your clothes?

[11 : 43] It does actually sound rather silly once it's done. You know, he sounds like a little boy. He tears his clothes. Why have you torn your clothes? What good is that going to do? It doesn't need to cure anybody or change anything.

Let him come now to me. And notice why he says it. Let him come now to me that he may know there is a prophet in Israel. Now that's not what you'd expect him to see.

You'd expect him to say, let him come to me and I will show him the power of God. He doesn't. He says, let him come to me and he will know there is a prophet in Israel.

After all, there's plenty of prophets in Syria. Ahab had plenty of prophets of Baal and Asherah and all the other gods and goddesses. What Elisha is saying, let him come to me and he will discover the power of the word of God.

That's what it's about. He didn't believe in the power of the word. You notice verse 14. According to the word of the man of God. In other words, Naaman is not going to see a display of magic.

[12 : 48] He's not going to get razzmatazz. He's not going to do anything that can be reported in the Damascus Chronicle. This is simply the power of the word. The word that changes. The word that raises the dead.

Those who are in the grave, says John, will hear the voice of the Son of God and will live. And this is what lies at the heart of the Elijah, Elisha stories.

When the nation of Israel goes far away from God, what does God do? He sends prophets. He sends preachers.

He sends his word. He unleashes that living word. That word that creates. That word that destroys. So we've got the conflict of perceptions. The great and the good are working in their world for everything to be sorted out by diplomatic means.

But this is not what happens here that he may know there is a prophet in Israel. And Naaman needed to learn to be humble.

[13 : 49] Now notice I use these words deliberately, to learn to be humble. I used to think pride was a characteristic of a few conceited individuals. I realize now that pride is the natural human condition without the grace of God.

We are all proud. We are all self-centered. We all want to write the script. Verse 11, Naaman was angry and went away saying, Behold, I thought he would surely come out.

To me is emphatic in Hebrew. It stands at the beginning of the sentence. To me. Doesn't he realize who I am? He's not even coming. He's sending one of his lekkies.

Now is Elisha being petty and trying to pull rank? I don't think so at all. I think Elisha is doing two things. First of all, he is showing, if you like, on the diplomatic level that the prophet is every bit as important as the king.

Indeed more so. And secondly, it is the word of the prophet, which is the word of God, which is going to do the work. Not some kind of magic tricks that Elisha will do if he comes out.

[15 : 02] Naaman was angry. I thought, verse 11 again, 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. In other words, Naaman wanted something he could actually see.

Something he could tell people about. You see, Naaman sees faith as a bargain. And isn't that true?

So many people, many people will call themselves Christians, see faith as a bargain. God does his bit and we do our bit. That's why you discover that some people actually don't want to go to heaven at all.

When they discover, they have to sing Worthy is the Lamb. What they actually want to sing is Worthy am I. They want to go to heaven and say, Look, I'm here and here are the good deeds that have brought me here.

And Naaman is behaving like that. And, I suppose you can understand what's so special about Jordan.

[16 : 09] Jordan is not an impressive river. Are not Abana and Farfa, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Go not wash in them and be clean. So he turned and went away in a rage.

See, once again, Jordan is not magic. There's nothing different in one sense about the water of Jordan from the waters of Abana and Farfa. But you see the powerful symbolism here.

When God's people enter the promised land, they pass through the waters of Jordan. Naaman is going to become part of that redeemed community and that's going to be symbolized by his going down into Jordan.

Now, I don't mean this is an allegory or a myth. I'm simply saying it's a literal act he has to do. But there's powerful symbolism behind it. This is the divinely appointed way.

After all, it's no more crazy than the message that tells the crucified criminal is the Lord of glory who died for the salvation of men and women. A scandal to the Jews, foolishness to the Gentiles, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1.

[17 : 19] But he does it, my Father. It is a great word the prophet has spoken to you. Some of the versions say if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? Both are possible.

But he actually said wash and be clean. And notice how this proud man humbles himself. It must have been extremely humiliating. It must have been extremely degrading to him.

But he goes down and according to the word of the man of God, his flesh was restored. Notice it doesn't say he washed in the Jordan. The magic water cured him.

It says according to the word of the man of God. This is the word of salvation. The word that brings new life. The word that frees him of his leprosy.

So there's this conflict of perception. You need to learn to be humble. And the third thing I want you to notice in these verses is that Naaman doesn't know all that there is to know.

[18 : 21] But he does know a great deal. Look at verse 15. Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.

Now that is an astonishing statement. If you go back to chapter 1 of 2 Kings, you'll find that Ahab's older son, Ahaziah, when he is suffering from an illness, sends not to the Lord but to Beelzebub, the God of Ekron.

Elijah sends the message, is it because there is no God in Israel that you go to this pagan God? Surely the point is that that is being made here again, there is no God but the God of Israel.

There is no God but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, at this point, though, some of the commentators begin to get super spiritual and snooty about Naaman.

Verse 17. How can you get it so badly wrong, say the commentators? Please let me be given two mules load of earth from now on your servant not for burnt offering or sacrifice to any God but the Lord.

[19 : 34] Surely he realizes that the earth of Israel is no more holy than the earth of Syria. But I think that's a gross misunderstanding.

The point is the distance geographically, particularly in those days, and the distance spiritually between the God of Israel and what he goes back to in Damascus is going to be such that he needs some tangible reminder that it actually happened.

In other words, he's not showing lack of faith, he's showing realism. He realizes when he gets back to Syria with all its temptations, all its razzmatazz, quite easy to forget he had been in Israel and that's what I think is the point of taking the earth.

It's not a sign of faithlessness but worse is to come surely in verse 18. In this matter may the Lord pardon your servant. When my master, that's the king of Syria, goes in the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, I bow myself in the house of Rimmon.

When I bow myself in the house of Rimen, the Lord pardon your servant. In this matter, Elisha says to him, go in peace. Oh dear, is he reverting to paganism so quickly?

[20 : 50] Rimen, the thunderer, is another name for Baal, the god whom we've met so often in the Elijah-Elisha story. I want you to notice one or two things.

First of all, Elisha says, go in peace. Elisha is authorizing him to do this. Elisha realizes that he is not going to worship Rimen. He may have to go to the temple of Rimen as part of his official duties, but he is going to be worshipping the god in Israel, the god of heaven and earth, the lord who made heaven and earth.

And even more strikingly, he is commended by the lord Jesus Christ in his synagogue sermon in Luke chapter 4, says there were many lepers, but the only one, the only one who was healed was Naaman the Syrian.

You see, a pagan converted, does convert it in an instant, doesn't become sanctified in an instant. We can't expect when people come from paganism to know everything there is to know.

Now, often in churches like the Church of Scotland or the Church of England, established churches, we often say it's a good boat to fish from because we have contact with so many people.

[22 : 10] Well, there's no doubt the boat is in the water. Indeed, there's so much water in the boat, you don't have to leave it to fish. But the problem with that is, so often the gospel word is blunted.

So often it simply becomes a case of being nice to people, going to all the world and be nice to everybody. We have some insights we can share rather than we have a gospel to proclaim.

But the problem is in some ultra-strict groups, it's not enough to bite the hook, so to speak.

You've got to become a fisherman before you're allowed into the boat. In other words, you've got to be the completed article before you're welcomed into the fellowship. Elisha is so much wiser.

Elisha realised this pagan man who had never up to now heard of the God of Israel doesn't know everything there is to be known. And we need to remember this. As people come to our fellowships, as people are converted wonderfully from lives where they've never heard of the Lord, we can't expect, of course there's a transformation, passed from death to life, converted, justified, fit for heaven.

[23 : 22] But lifestyle changes take a bit longer. And we mustn't set up barriers to people from coming to the Lord. God. So you see, the world is turned upside down.

Perceptions are changed. The mighty are humbled and by being humbled are truly exalted. So the God of surprises, the God who turns the world upside down.

But finally, this very sad and chilling last part of the story, 19b to the end of the chapter, the God who will not tolerate the misrepresenting of the gospel.

So I'm calling this the unbelieving Naaman becomes a child of God. The privileged Israelite, Elisha's servant, is turned away.

It's a sad and tragic story. There's two things I want to say about it. First of all, there is pure old-fashioned greed. He wants a reward.

[24 : 32] He wants some money for himself. He sees a chance for profit. And he is going to a man. And once again, this shows the quality.

I mean, Naaman, even before he was converted, was a man of some quality and some graciousness. He's totally unsuspecting here. Of course, the grace of God already working in him.

But notice verse 25, where have you been, Gehazi? Surely that echoes a much earlier question.

Adam, where are you? Because this is the sin of Adam, repeated once again. And remember how John the Apostle describes that first sin, all that is in the world, the desire of the eyes, the desire of the flesh, and the pride of life.

All these were the sins of Eden, the sin of greed, the sin of covetousness. I used to wonder why the last commandment, the tenth commandment, was you shall not covet.

[25 : 39] I thought this is a crashing anticlimax. Surely, after all, we all do a bit of coveting, don't we? But the problem about coveting, surely, is that we can covet and no one apart from God will know.

If we steal, we commit adultery, if we murder, if we break the other commandments, they're very obvious. But coveting is something that eats away. Coveting is something that destroys us spiritually.

Coveting, the only number that coveting knows is what is number one. The only job that coveting is interested in is in my job. There is no pronoun but me.

me, me, me. The heart of idolatry, the heart of covetousness. So you see how the commandment begins with the believing in the one God who demands our allegiance and ends with the command not to covet.

But there is something more serious than that. And this explains, it seems to me, the seriousness of the punishment. You might feel, oh yes, he was greedy. He went over the top.

[26 : 46] But why this terrible punishment? And ultimately, it's a punishment because it is a denial of grace. It is a total misrepresentation of who the God of Israel is.

It represents him as a pagan God who can be bought. A pagan who can be bartered with, whom we can draw hard bargains with.

And that is a total denial of the gospel. And whenever we advocate a gospel of good works, we make the same deadly mistake.

God is not to be bought. We cannot buy our way into salvation. We cannot please God by our good works.

We cannot win his favor. That's the bad news. The good news is we don't need to know any, do any of these things because he has already given us that favor.

[27 : 50] While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Before we had done any of the things, good and bad, which fill our lives, Christ already died for us.

The heart of the gospel is free and undeserved grace. It's not grace. It's not Jesus plus. It's grace alone. saved by grace alone.

That's the great truth that the reformers rediscovered, justification through faith alone, through the free grace of God. So you see, Naaman, you can imagine his returning to Syria, just as the wise men returned to their own country, to much later generation.

He had come across this amazing God, the God who will continually surprise us. Come across this God who turned his world upside down, but also this God who will not tolerate being misrepresented.

What actually happened to Naaman? Well, he was cured of his leprosy, that's true. But, something else happened. And you can, over this chapter, you can read this word, you can write the words, by faith, Naaman.

[29 : 12] How were people converted in Old Testament times? Not by works, they were converted by grace through faith. If the death of Christ saves us who live thousands of years after him, surely it also saves those who live thousands of years before him.

Indeed, had Naaman known the words he could have sung, long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night. Your eye diffused the quickening ray I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.

That's what happened to Naaman. And that is what happens to all people who come to Christ simply receiving, accepting, repenting, and believing in his grace.

And for long now, Naaman has seen clearly what he only saw dimly, realizing at the very heart of the universe, who is a pardoning God like you, and who has grace so free and true.

Amen. Let's pray. was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace those fears believed.

[30 : 28] How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.