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The healing of Naaman the Syrian. Whoever abides in him does not sin.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings 5. 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 Parpa 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. But when Naaman had gone from him a short distance, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, See my master has spared this Naaman the Syrian, in not accepting from his hand what he brought. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something from him.

So Gehazi followed Naaman. And when Naaman saw someone running after him, he got down from the chariot to meet him and said, Is all well? And he said, All is well. My master has sent me to say, There have just now come to me from the hill country of Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets.

Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing. And Naaman said, Be pleased to accept two talents. And he urged him and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothing, and laid them on two of his servants.

And they carried them before Gehazi. And when he came to the hill, he took them from their hand and put them in the house. And he sent the men away, and they departed.

He went in and stood before his master. And Elisha said to him, Where have you been, Gehazi? And he said, Your servant went nowhere. But he said to him, Did not my heart go when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept money and garments, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male servants and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants for ever.

So he went out from his presence, a leper like snow. The events of 2 Kings chapter 5 presumably occur during a period of relaxed hostilities between Syria and Israel who had been at war in 1 Kings chapter 22. Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Syria, is an important figure.

He is held in great favour and he has great power and influence. One of the more remarkable details here is that he is described as being the means by which the Lord gave victory to Syria. Here we see the sovereignty of God from a different perspective, a sovereignty that does not merely judge Israel but raises up someone in another nation to be a means by which he will make his own name great.

However, this Naaman the Syrian has leprosy. The leprosy described here is some sort of skin condition that changes the colour of the skin. It is most fully treated in Leviticus chapter 13 and 14.

On account of the name of the condition, many mistakenly identify it with Hansen's disease, which is the condition that we more commonly call leprosy. However most scholars suggest that it may have been a family of different related conditions, things like psoriasis or eczema. Others raise the possibility that the condition in question no longer exists.

In the book of Leviticus this condition can also afflict houses. It does not seem to be a contagious condition but it is something that requires cleansing. On various occasions it is associated with God's afflicting of a person with a judgement.

It is one of the signs given to Moses. It happens to Gehazi in this chapter, it happens to Miriam in Numbers chapter 12 and it also happens to Uzziah in 2nd Chronicles chapter 26. The seriousness of the condition seems to arise less from its contagious character or from some serious medical symptoms that accompany it, but rather lies more in the realm of symbolism.

The person with leprosy is unclean and they are restricted in their approach to holy and clean places accordingly. Naman's wife has a little Israelite servant girl who tells her that there is a prophet in Samaria who would be able to heal her husband's condition. Having heard this, Naman goes to his master the king to seek his blessing to go to the land of Israel.

He is sent to Israel with an immense quantity of money and a handsome reward in changes of clothes. The king of Syria sends a message with him to the king of Israel. Now while there has been a relaxation of hostilities between the two nations, this is truly a remarkable event.

The king of this rival power is sending the very commander of his army, the sort of man who had taken away little girls from Israel as slaves. He is sending this commander in order to seek healing from the king of Israel. Given the volatile relationship between the two kingdoms, it is not surprising that the king of Israel was deeply distressed to receive this message.

He knew that if he did not respond in a way that satisfied Naman and the king of Syria, they might seek occasion to fight against him again. Naman's need for healing becomes a matter then of immense national concern. It threatens to reignite conflict between the two nations.

Elisha however shows that something else is going on. The healing should serve an apologetic purpose, to show that there is a prophet and hence a god in Israel. Receiving a message from Elisha, the king sends Naman his way.

Naman comes to Elisha and stands at the door of his house. Much as the Shunammite woman stood at the door in the previous chapter, there are a number of parallels between these two stories and it is worth looking at them in more detail. Once again Gehazi is the go-between.

He is instructed to wash seven times in the Jordan. This instruction with the reference to washing and something being done seven times should remind us of the instructions given in Leviticus chapter 14 verses 1-9. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, This shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing.

He shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall look. Then, if the case of leprous disease is healed in the leprous person, the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds, and cedarwood, and scarlet yarn, and hyssop, and the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood, and the scarlet yarn, and the hyssop, and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water, and he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease.

Then he shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird go into the open field. And he who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean. And after that he may come into the camp, but live outside his tent seven days.

And on the seventh day he shall shave off all his hair from his head, his beard, and his eyebrows. He shall shave off all his hair, and then he shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and he shall be clean. Naaman is appalled by this instruction.

He was expecting to be received by Elisha himself. He is an important figure. He should be recognised in this manner, not just have a messenger sent to him.

The fact that there is a go-between once again might alert us to the possibility that Elisha is playing a role similar to that of the Temple. He represents the presence of God among his people. The messengers and other go-betweens are playing a role similar to priests.

Naaman was expecting a more elaborate rite as well. He wanted some waving of hands and some visual display, and what he is given is a word of instruction. He is expected to hear, to believe, and to obey.

As in many of the miracles of Christ, particularly in John's Gospel, this miracle of Elisha occurs apart from Elisha's own presence. The miracle is a word that he gives that if followed will accomplish the healing that is desired. Beyond the lack of Elisha's presence and the fact that no elaborate rite is performed, Naaman is annoyed that he has to perform all of this in the Jordan River.

There are far greater rivers in his home city. Yet the significance here is not the material rite as such, the fact that it is just a washing in water. It matters where it is performed.

It is performed relative to Israel. The Jordan River is the key river of Israel, and to wash in this river is to acknowledge the power of the God of Israel. It is not just to perform a sort of magic rite, it is to adopt a posture of submission relative to a personal God.

His servants persuade him to go ahead and to wash. What he has been asked to do is no great thing. All he has to do is wash himself seven times in the Jordan, and the promise associated with that is so great he will be cleansed.

With such a promise attached, why would he not obey the word of the prophet? As he goes down to the river he dips himself within the river, and his flesh is restored like the flesh of a little child. He is, as it were, born again. The story began with a little girl, and now there is a little boy.

At this point we might also recall that when he was given this instruction he was standing in the doorway, which is also where the Shunammite woman was standing

when she received the word that she would have a son that time next year, an event that was reminiscent of Sarah hearing about the promise of a son when she was standing in the tent door. Having experienced this great miracle he goes back to Elisha. The miracle, which, as I noted earlier, required him to adopt a position of submission relative to the God of Israel, clearly and appropriately stands for a lot more than just a great healing by a miracle man in the mind of Naaman.

His response is not just thanks for a healing, but it is a confession of faith in God. Behold I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel. As a token of his appreciation for what he has received he wants to give a gift to the prophet Elisha.

Naaman started off standing before the king of Syria, with his wife, with a servant girl standing before her. Now he is standing before the prophet of the Lord Elisha. This movement that we see in the language of the text betrays something of the greater movement that is taking place.

Naaman's principal loyalty is no longer to the king of Syria but to the God of Elisha. Elisha refuses the gift. It is not for him to receive a gift for the work of the Lord.

The Lord was the one that wrought this great miracle and by refusing the reward Elisha underlines this fact. As his gift is refused Naaman makes a request. He requests two mule loads of earth to take back because he does not want to offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any God but the Lord.

The altars of the Lord were supposed to be built out of earth or unhewn stone as we see in Exodus 20.24. Naaman the Syrian is going to establish an altar of the Lord outside of the land of Israel. He follows this with a request for indulgence that when he has to go to the temple of Rimmon, the God that his master the king serves, that the Lord will pardon him as he kneels down in assisting his master. Elisha's response implies that the pardon is granted.

The story of the Shunammite woman in chapter 4 had a surprising sequel to it. The child was born but then the child died and the Shunammite woman had to go on a journey to meet the prophet. Here it is Gehazi who initiates the surprising sequel.

He is displeased his master has spared this Naaman the Syrian. He would have liked to see his master take advantage of Naaman the Syrian. This is one of the great enemies of the people, the commander of the foreign army that had killed the Israelite king not that long ago.

After that battle with the Syrians in 1 Kings chapter 22, the blood of the slain king Ahab in his chariot had been washed in the pool and licked up by the dogs. And now the commander of the army that killed him comes on a chariot and he is sent to wash in the Jordan and be cleansed of his leprosy. Perhaps this provided some of the motivation for

Gehazi's actions.

He makes a blasphemous oath to the Lord, swearing by the name of the Lord in contravening his master's wishes. When he meets with Naaman, Naaman asks, is all well? This is similar to the encounter that Gehazi had with the Shunammite woman in the preceding chapter, although he is now on the different side of the interaction. Lying to Naaman, he requests some changes of clothes and a talent of silver, and Naaman insists that he takes two talents.

Gehazi goes back to his house, sends the servants away, and then meets his master Elisha who inquires what he has been doing. Whereas in the preceding chapter, the Lord had not revealed to him what had happened to the Shunammite woman's son, here the Lord had revealed everything that Gehazi had done. Elisha's response to Gehazi is very surprising.

Did not my heart go when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? Was it a time to accept money and garments, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male servants and female servants? All that Gehazi accepted were these changes of clothes and two talents of silver. Why the reference to all these other things? The clearest background for these seems to be found in 1 Samuel 8 verses 13-17. In Samuel's words concerning the actions of the king, He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys and put them to his work.

He will take the tenth of your flocks and you shall be his slaves. Why on earth would Elisha allude to this when speaking to his servant Gehazi? Gehazi isn't a king. It seems to me that the answer to this is found in the fact that Samuel's words concerning the king concern the way that those who have power over others will exploit that power to take advantage of others.

On account of his spiritual power, as one who has been given the power to work miracles, Elisha and by extension his servant have great power over the name of the Syrian. Elisha is very concerned not to wield that as a means of taking advantage of him. Rather he must act as a faithful servant of the Lord.

On the other hand Gehazi sees that spiritual power as something to be taken advantage of, as something to profit from, as something to subjugate others with. He sees the fact that the commander of the Syrian army is in debt to his master as too great an opportunity to let pass up. What's the point of performing such miracles for enemies of the people of God if you can't fleece them for what you can? In Gehazi's desire for

Naaman's wealth however, he receives Naaman's condition.

Leprosy, and not just leprosy as such but Naaman's leprosy, will cling to him and to his family forever. He has been struck by the Lord for his abuse of the Lord's power that was given to his master. Reading this story we can also see a juxtaposition between Naaman the Syrian and Gehazi.

Gehazi stands before his master Elisha but he ends up becoming a leper. Naaman starts off as a leper and he ends up standing before Elisha, the man of God. Jesus references the healing of Naaman the Syrian in his first sermon in the book of Luke as he speaks in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke chapter 4 verses 25-27.

But in truth I tell you there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed but only Naaman the Syrian. A question to consider, what can we learn from this chapter about the way that the Lord wanted his people to relate to the Gentiles? 1 John chapter 3 verses 1-10.

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God, and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness. Sin is lawlessness.

You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning. No one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil.

Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. In the first half of 1 John chapter 3, John explores the righteousness and avoidance of sin that will characterize the true children of God. We are the children of God on account of a remarkable love shown towards us by the Father.

The love of God is astounding, not merely in its character and in its extent, but also for the conditions under which it is given. In Romans chapter 5 verses 7-8, For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

As Christians we are born again, becoming children of God, members of a new family. John chapter 3 verses 3-8 speak about this. Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again.

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. The fact that we have been born again, that God is our Father, is an expression of the extent of God's love.

John 3.16, For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. However, as children of God there is hostility between the world and us, and also a fundamental failure on the world's part to recognize or understand us. John chapter 15 verses 18 to 19, If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. We are currently children of God, but we are waiting in great anticipation to discover what this will mean in all of its fullness.

We are like very young children, imagining what it would be like to be grown-ups, except that we are considering something that is so much more of a far-reaching transformation. We do have some intimation, however, of what it will be like. We see this in Christ himself.

As children of God, we are predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son, as we see in Romans chapter 8 verse 29. And when we see him, we will be like him. The logic of this statement is that our transformation will occur through a transforming vision of his glory.

Paul makes a similar claim in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 18. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from

one degree of glory to another. For Paul, this transforming vision is already occurring as we witness the glory of Christ.

However, our limited current vision will one day be greatly exceeded by a fuller revelation. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 12, For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

The Christian tradition has spoken of the beatific vision, of what it will mean when we behold God. This shouldn't be thought of as a sort of looking with material eyes, but as the opening up of our spiritual perception to God's goodness and beauty, so that flooded with the light of his glory, we finally enjoy true blessedness and joy in gazing upon him. When people witness something truly beautiful, their faces can open up in awe and astonishment.

A transfiguring beauty can wash over their countenance, as their faces shine in response to what they have seen or heard. Beauty and goodness can transform our physical appearances for a brief time, but seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will, according to the Christian tradition, be a sign of the coming of the Lord. Recognising this promise of seeing Jesus as he truly is, of having our eyes eternally open to the radiance of his glory, goodness and beauty, will change the way that we live now.

We will be longing for that sight and preparing ourselves for it. In the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5 verse 8, our Lord assures his hearers, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Those who live according to this hope will seek to purify themselves.

We are very much at the earliest beginnings of the reality of Christian experience. We're looking forward to something yet to be realised in its fullness. The glory that belongs to us lies in the future, and the Christian life is in large measure animated by reflection upon the hope of this.

It keeps us moving forward. And as a flip side of our awaiting this glorious transformation, there is the need to deal radically with sin. The children of God and the children of the devil are distinguished by their patterns of behaviour.

The person who sins practices lawlessness. Lawlessness isn't synonymous with law-breaking. It is more fundamental than that.

Lawlessness is a far more basic posture of rebelliousness, a refusal to recognise and resistance to God's will. It is a refusal to recognise God's authority. It produces law-breaking, but it lies far deeper than it.

John wants his hearers to be under no illusion. Sin at its root is not just isolated acts of naughtiness. It is a posture of rebellion towards the living God.

It's something that cannot but be more comprehensive in its character. A rebellious posture towards the living God is not the sort of thing that can be compartmentalised as some people think of their sins. Not only is this the case.

Christ undertook his work precisely in order to take away sins, not merely in their guilt, but also in their power and their practice. He is the sinless one, the lamb without blemish. Sin has neither presence in nor purchase upon him.

And this has direct implications for us as Christians. It is impossible to abide in Christ and also sin. The one who sins betrays the fact that he has neither seen nor known Christ.

The language here is taken by most commentators to refer to continuing in or persisting in sin, although John's language suggests something more absolute, which will probably retain some of its force in our interpretation. John clearly teaches that genuine Christians can and do and will sin. In chapter 1 verses 8-10 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. The idea that, provided that they don't make a practice of it, the Christian can have a little sin as a treat, is clearly antithetical to John's way of thinking, as would be the idea that a few slip-ups are to be expected and shouldn't be taken that seriously.

No, sin is the polar opposite of all that Christ is and stands for, and the idea that sin and Christ can coexist, provided that the sin is in minimal doses, is quite mistaken. To abide in Christ is to turn our backs on sin. To the extent that we sin, we are not abiding in Christ.

Likewise, to the extent that we sin, we betray our falling short of the transforming vision that we await and long for, suggesting that we have a limited perception of who Christ is, if any at all. Some people might think that people can be righteous while continuing in sin. God has justified me apart from my works, so my works are irrelevant.

John makes plain that this cannot be the case. The people who are righteous are manifested to be so by their works. They produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which evidences his work in their lives, producing in them a character that conforms to the justifying judgment that God made concerning them in his free forgiveness of their sins.

No one should be under any illusion that there is any such thing as a righteousness before God that is not evidenced in transformed behaviour. John presses his point even further. He has argued that sin is fundamentally rebelliousness.

He has argued that it is incompatible with and the polar opposite of Christ. And now he makes the logical next step in the argument. The person who sins is of the devil himself.

They share his character. Jesus makes a similar point concerning his opponents in John 8.44. John 8.44. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar, and the father of lies. The reason why the Son of God came was to destroy the works of the devil. This is how intense the opposition is.

The children of God are demonstrated by their behaviour. I. Howard Marshall observes, The essence of the righteous person's manner of life is found in the fact that he has been born of God. God's seed, the word of God operating by the Spirit of God, abides in the righteous person, just as they abide in Christ.

And sin and God's seed cannot co-exist. Either sin is doomed to extinction in us by God's presence and work in our lives, or our continuing in sin manifests that we are not his at all. John sums up his essential message.

The distinction between the children of God and the children of the devil is plain. The person who does not produce the fruit of righteousness in their lives is evidently not of God. Likewise, the person who does not love his brother.

A question to consider. What more might we learn about the beatific vision in this passage and in the rest of scripture?