

7. Naaman and Gehazi: The Cost of Deviousness



Leprosy was a very high price to pay in exchange for two talents of silver and two changes of clothing. But the money and the things it can buy often seem so desirable and so necessary, that we may not realize the real cost until later.

It all started one night when a brutal raiding party from Aram destroyed a little Jewish village close to the border of Israel. The raiders slaughtered most of the inhabitants in cold blood but took some of the children captive to sell as slaves. Ruth was about twelve years old when this took place, and she never forgot the horror of that night. Her father and two older brothers were killed first, right before her eyes. Then the soldiers dragged her mother away from her side and she never saw her again.

The commander of the raiding party noticed Ruth and told several of his men to tie her up and put her with the rest of the few captives who had been spared. "My wife needs a slave girl," he told them. "Make sure no one touches her, or there will be trouble."

Because of this touch of kindness, Ruth was spared some of the other horrors of the night. Before dawn, the raiding party headed back across the border into Aram, carrying bags of spoil and driving their captives ahead of them. The village burned behind them, the flames lighting up the dark sky.

So it was that Ruth started her new life.



Ruth adapted quickly, as children do. Her new mistress was kind enough as far as barbarian mistresses go, and she had little to complain about. She missed her family, but she had been born into tough times, and took life as it came. With a knowledge above that of her years, she knew that she had been one of the fortunate ones that night, and still was.

Her master was Naaman, a commander in the king's army, and highly esteemed by the local population. He had played an important part in freeing the country of Aram from its Assyrian overlords and was one of the king's most important counsellors. Ruth didn't see much of Naaman, since he was gone much of the time.

But one evening, Naaman came home mid-afternoon. He took his wife into a side room and Ruth heard the murmur of voices. Naaman left the house as soon as the discussion was finished, but his wife sank down onto an ornate stool in the large living area. Obviously, whatever Naaman had told her was a shock.

"Warm some wine for me to drink," she said when she noticed Ruth. When Ruth brought her a steaming cup, she patted the floor beside her, and Ruth sat down, wondering what she wanted.

Her mistress drank deeply, then set down her cup. She sat quietly for a few moments, then looked down at Ruth. "After all the dangers our master has survived over the years, he will probably die a miserable death at home in his own bed," she said quietly. "It will be very hard for him to accept that."

She took another drink of wine. “He has been good to me, and to our household,” she continued. “But this will change all of our lives.”

“What is wrong?” Ruth asked timidly, looking up at her mistress. “Is he sick?”

Her mistress sighed. “He has leprosy,” she said.

She didn’t need to say more. Young as she was, Ruth knew what this meant. Leprosy was a death sentence. In fact, it was more than a death sentence. It was a sentence to a long lingering procedure that ended in death—a sentence to a death by torture, as it were. There was no cure for leprosy, and no hope for a leper.

Or was there? Ruth seldom thought of her days as a young child in her parents’ home. Such thoughts simply brought misery, and she was happier if she forgot about those times. But a long-forgotten memory from the past flashed unbidden into her mind one evening several days later as she prepared for bed.

Ruth had always loved her Uncle Samuel. Even though she was only eight years old, he always had time for her. That was why it hit her so hard when her mother told her that he was sick. He had a sickness called leprosy, and they would never be able to see him again. He would die from it. There was no cure, and no hope.

But several months later, Uncle Samuel came striding into their encampment with a big smile. “I went to the prophet, and he healed me,” he said jubilantly. “I’m well again!”

He reached down and picked up Ruth, giving her a big hug, then hugging her mother as well. Everyone was laughing and crying at once. It was like getting him back from the dead.

Ruth hardly slept that night. Should she say something to her mistress? Would the prophet heal a Gentile, an enemy of the Jewish people? Would her mistress believe her? Would Naaman accept the idea? But by morning she had made up her mind. This was her family now and she would try to help them, if they would let her.

Her mistress looked as if she had a bad night as well, when Ruth brought her breakfast. Ruth hesitated, unsure what she should do, but her mistress noticed her hesitation. “What’s wrong Ruth?” she asked. “You look like you have something on your mind.”

Ruth took a deep breath. “Some years ago, while I was living with my parents, my uncle had leprosy,” she said. Her mistress caught her breath and drew back, but Ruth continued before she could comment.

“He went to the prophet in Samaria, and the prophet healed him.” She looked deeply into her mistresses’ eyes. “Maybe he would heal my master as well.”

Her mistress was quiet for a moment. “You’re sure?” she asked dubiously. “Leprosy is incurable. Even our gods have never been able to heal a leper.”

Ruth nodded confidently. “I remember it as clearly as yesterday,” she said. But then her eyes became troubled. “I just don’t know if he would heal an enemy,” she added hesitantly. “But it might be worth finding out...”

Her mistress got to her feet purposely. “We can at least try,” she said. “I will speak with our master at once. Surely the king will let him go.”



The king did more than let Naaman go. He gave him a letter of introduction to the king of Israel. He also supplied Naaman with money and gifts to pay for his healing. It might seem strange that they would take the word of a young slave girl. But Yahweh, the mighty God of Israel, was well known in all the lands surrounding Canaan. Everyone always stepped a little cautiously when they trespassed on His territory or attacked His people.

So maybe it wasn't as strange as we might think, when the king of Aram sent Naaman off with his blessing to be healed by the God of the Jews...

A few weeks later the entourage from Aram reached the city of Samaria. It created quite a stir when a dozen chariots careened down the main street and pulled to a stop in front of the royal palace. The half wild horses pitched and bucked as their drivers struggled to control them. Naaman stepped from the largest chariot and adroitly found his way outside the melee. Accompanied by several body guards he marched up to the guards at the gateway to the royal grounds.

Naaman was an imposing figure. He towered over his guards from the shoulders up and looked quite able to pick up one of palace guards and break him in half over his knee. But he was also astute enough to know that doing so would not grant him any favors with the Jewish king. While he wanted to make an impression, he wanted to be healed even more, so he took a piece of papyrus from his sack and handed it courteously to the guards. "I have a message from the king of Aram for your king," he said. "May we step inside to await his answer?"

He spoke in Aramaic, the semi-official diplomatic language of the east, and the men understood him. They stepped aside to let him inside, then one of them took the message to the king. In the meantime, the captain of the palace guard approached the chariots and welcomed the drivers to pull inside and unhitch their horses. He offered food and water for the horses and lodging for the men. The king of Aram was far more likely to send an army to attack Israel than he was to send a diplomatic group to ask a favor of the king, so the entire incident was without precedent for everyone involved. But the captain of the guard was an able man. Part of his job description was to handle unusual and abnormal occurrences and he handled this one with a minimum of extra fuss.

The same could not be said for the king of Israel, who was only now reading the letter inside of the palace. It was short and to the point, and impossible to misunderstand even though it was written in Aramaic rather than his native Hebrew.

To the honorable king of the Jews, greetings. I have sent this letter to you at the hand of my servant Naaman that you may heal him of his leprosy.

The king's eyes bulged as he read the letter.

"Am I God, that I can give life and take it away?" he shouted. "Why is this man asking me to heal someone with leprosy? He's just trying to pick a fight with me." He grabbed the ornate cloak he was wearing and tore it to shreds.

The captain of the guard had entered the room after arranging for the unexpected visitors and saw immediately that the king would need some time to regain his composure. He returned to the palace grounds to speak with Naaman.

“The king needs some time to think about your request,” he said courteously. “Can I invite you to come to the visitor’s quarters for some refreshment and rest? We will have supper ready for you in several hours.”

Naaman didn’t see anything abnormal about this request. He spent enough of his time doing exactly what the captain of the guard was doing, that he wasn’t surprised. The request he had brought was unusual. Undoubtedly the king needed to discuss it with his counsellors.

The captain ushered his visitors to their quarters and left them to the householder in charge. Then he returned to the palace to find out what was going on that had upset the king to this degree. He met several guards just returning to their duty at the gates. They were eager to talk.

“The king of Aram has requested the king to heal this man’s leprosy,” the first one said. “The king is sure that Aram is trying to find an excuse to start a war with him!”

“The king is really upset,” the second man added. “He tore his royal robe to pieces. He doesn’t know what to do.”

The captain thought for a moment before replying. “Do you know where the prophet Elisha lives, in Dotham?” When the man nodded, he continued, “Run to tell him what is happening and see if he has some advice for us. I’ll talk to the king in the meantime.”

Dotham wasn’t far from Samaria and the guard was back within several hours. By then the king had calmed down somewhat and was anxiously waiting for the prophet’s response.

The guard was ushered into the king’s private quarters as soon as he returned. “What did the prophet say?” he asked. “Did he tell us what we should do?”

The guard chose his words carefully, aware that he was treading on dangerous ground. “The prophet wondered why you tore your clothing,” he said. “He wants you to send Naaman and his party to him, and he will show him that there is still a prophet in Israel.”

The king was too relieved at the answer to take offence at the prophet’s question. This was an easy way out of his predicament.



Naaman was in a hurry. He left early the next morning and arrived in Dotham at Elisha’s house soon after sunup. Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, met him at the door. “My master told me to tell you to go to the Jordan river and wash in it seven times. Then you will be healed.”

Naaman was taken aback at this unexpected reply to his request. He turned abruptly and stormed back to his chariot. “Wash in the Jordan river indeed,” he growled. “Has he ever seen how muddy that river is at this time of the year? I thought surely this prophet would call on the name of his God and strike his hand over my leprosy and heal it. Doesn’t he know who I am?”

Naaman grabbed the reins from his driver and snapped the whip at the horses. “Get moving,” he shouted. “I’ll wash in one of the rivers of Damascus rather than in the filthy Jordan”

The startled horses bucked and jumped wildly, but Naaman had a grip like iron and he brought them under control before they were a quarter mile down the dusty road. The other chariots in his escort finally caught up with him about five minutes later.

Naaman handed the reins back to his driver. "Pull over at the first creek so that we can fill our water skins and give the horses water," he said curtly. "I'm going home."

The driver opened his mouth to say something, then glanced at his master out of the corner of his eye and changed his mind. Better to leave well enough alone. Naaman was very upset.

But Naaman had calmed down by the time they found water and watered the horses. Several of the older men in his body guard took this opportunity to take him aside. They had served under Naaman for years and were the closest to old friends that he had.

"Can I give you a word of counsel?" the oldest of the two men asked courteously.

Naaman eyed him carefully at this unusual request but decided that it couldn't do any harm. These two men had always served him well. He nodded.

"You know," the guard continued carefully, "If the prophet had asked you to do something difficult or expensive, you would have done it without thought. You would have considered it worth a great effort to find healing."

Naaman answered cautiously. "Probably you're right," he said. "But what are you getting at?"

"Well, all he asked you to do was wash in the Jordan," the guard said. "Wouldn't it be worth trying? After all, what could you lose by it?"

Naaman stared at him but turned away without replying. The two guards looked at each other and the spokesman shrugged his shoulders.

But Naaman did think about it. When he stepped back into his chariot, he took a deep breath, then spoke to the driver without looking at him. "Take the road to the Jordan river." He ignored the look of surprise that crossed the driver's face. "I'm going to see if this prophet knows what he is talking about."



They reached the Jordan river by mid afternoon. Naaman descended from his chariot purposefully and strode to the bank. A look of distaste crossed his face momentarily as he looked at the muddy water, then he pulled off his clothing and stepped in.

How far under did he have to go? Just to where the leprosy covered his skin? No, he was going to make sure that no one could say he'd been half hearted about this. He walked into the river until the water came to his shoulders then took a breath and ducked under.

He held his breath as long as he could, then surfaced. He turned and walked to the shore where several of his guards were watching without comment. Naaman wondered what they were thinking. *They probably think I'm an idiot, but any of them would do the same thing.*

“Well that was once,” he said to the guard who had talked him into this. The guard nodded tersely. He knew this had been his doing and that if it didn’t work, he might have to pay for it.

Naaman turned and walked back into the river, wrinkling up his nose distastefully. But having come this far, he was not going to turn back without going through the whole treatment.

He returned to the shore. “Well, that was twice,” was all he said, though he glanced at his stomach where his sores were to see anything had changed. Nothing had and he turned again.

“Well that was three times,” had said when he returned to the shore. He glanced again at his stomach. No change. He shrugged. Okay, so maybe the great Yahweh was testing his perseverance.

“Four times,” he said. Still no change.

“Five times.” No change.

“Six times.” No change.

He noticed that some more of his men had come down the bank to gather around his guards. Everyone knew that this was number seven. This would be the big test. He took a deep breath and ducked under one more time. He stayed under until he was almost gasping for breath. Then he surfaced and looked towards the sky. “Yahweh, I’ve done what I could,” he said. “The rest is up to you.”

He turned to walk to the shore. For some inexplicable reason he was sure it had worked. He walked in until he was knee deep and looked at the men watching him. He saw their mouths drop open. The guard who had talked him into this let out a whoop and jumped into the water to give him a hug. At this the rest of the men let down their reserves as well and surrounded him in the muddy water.

“It worked! It worked,” they shouted. “You’re healed!”

For the first time, Naaman looked down at himself. His skin was pure and unblemished. He ran his hand over the spot. It was soft and pliable—like the skin of a new born baby. Just as the prophet had said it would be.

Hardened warrior that he was, Naaman couldn’t help himself. The tears ran down his face, and he knelt in the river, stretching his hands toward heaven. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” he whispered.

Half an hour later they were back in their chariots. “Back to the prophet’s house,” Naaman said. “As fast as we can get there. I need to talk to him.”

The drivers whipped their horses to their fastest pace. The group made quite a sight. A dozen chariots, each pulled by several half wild horses at full gallop. The dust billowed behind them, and the occasional traffic they met hastily moved out of the way. People looked after them anxiously, wondering what their hurry was all about.

Naaman couldn’t have cared less. He was healed! He had some things to make right with the prophet. And some credit to give to the two men who had the courage to talk him into washing in the Jordan. If it had failed he didn’t know what he would have done to them, but they had taken the risk even though they probably had little faith themselves that it would work.



This time the prophet met Naaman at the door, with a smile. Evidently, he already knew that his prescription had worked.

Naaman didn't even try to hide his joy. "I'm healed," he said jubilantly. "I know now that Yahweh is the only God in all the earth. No other God has ever been able to heal a leper. Let me give you a gift."

Elisha smiled at his exuberance but shook his head to the offer. "No, God looks after my needs," he replied. "God's gifts are not for sale."

Naaman shook his head in astonishment. Any pagan priest he had ever met would have charged him a fortune for a healing like this. This man didn't want anything?

He sputtered a little in his anxiety. "But..., but surely you will take something?" he said. "This is worth a lot to me."

Elisha shook his head again. "No, I am not in need of anything," he repeated.

Naaman bowed his head for a moment. "Could I take several mule-loads of ground with me?" he asked. "Then I could make a small altar where I could worship Yahweh. I will not offer any sacrifices to any god by Yahweh for here on."

He gulped as he remembered something else. "I know that Yahweh is the only God. But my master, the king of Aram, worships a false god, and I must accompany him into the temple when he offers his oblations. Will Yahweh forgive me for that?" He looked at Elisha anxiously. He didn't want to offend Yahweh and end up with his leprosy again.

The prophet nodded indulgently. "Go in peace," he said.

Elisha's servant, Gehazi, had watched all of this, and he gritted his teeth at his master's refusal of the rewards Naaman offered. *Surely, he could have taken something, he thought. This man is rich. He is so grateful he would have given Elisha a fortune.*

Gehazi stood inside the door and watched Naaman drive away, this time at a normal pace. He watched Elisha go into his sleeping chamber where he spent his time in prayer and meditation. He would remain there for hours. Maybe...

He thought a bit. This pagan was so grateful at being healed that he would believe anything. He would see if he could gain a little something.

Gehazi took another look at the door leading to his master's bedchamber. It would be hours before he came out again. He had lots of time.

About a half hour later, Naaman looked back over his shoulder and noticed the man running after them, waving his hands. "Stop the chariot," he said to his driver. "That looks like the prophet's servant. Something must be wrong."

He jumped from the chariot and walked back to meet Gehazi who was totally out of breath and could hardly talk at first. "Is everything alright?" Naaman asked anxiously.

Gehazi got his breath back and nodded. "Everything is fine," he said. "But just after you left, two students from the school of the prophets arrived. My master wondered if you would give them each a change of clothing and half a talent of silver."

Naaman beamed at this opportunity to prove his good will. "Certainly, I'll do that," he said. "But please take a whole talent for each of them as well as the clothing. I'm happy to do this for you."

This much silver was heavier than Gehazi could handle, so Naaman told two of his servants to carry it back for him, then catch up with the group later. Gehazi had them take his spoil to his house and thanked them for their help. Then he went into Elisha's house to see if he had need of anything.

Elisha looked up from a scroll he had been reading. "Where have you been, Gehazi?" he asked.

Gehazi glanced to one side. "I didn't go anywhere, master," he said, evading the prophet's eyes.

The prophet rose to his feet. "I saw Naaman get down from his chariot to go back and meet you," he said. "This is not a time to get money and possessions from those who are seeking for God."

He drew himself up to his full height, forcing Gehazi to meet his gaze. "Hear your punishment," he said. "Because you have done this, you and your children will suffer from Naaman's leprosy forever."

Gehazi stumbled half blindly from the room. Outside, in the sunlight, he noticed his skin. It was as white as snow, the sure sign of an advanced case of leprosy...



TO THINK ABOUT:

- In this story, as in the other ones we have been looking at, we can see many lessons. For instance, how did Naaman's sense of self-importance and dignity almost keep him from being healed? Could this happen to you? How?
- What are some reasons that Elisha may have refused to take money from Naaman?
- Gehazi's punishment was a heavy one. Why do you think God looked on his sin as being this serious?
- Was it fair for Gehazi's children and grandchildren to suffer because of Gehazi's sin? What lesson should we learn from this?
- Do you think Gehazi enjoyed spending his money and wearing his new clothing?