

Despite the overwhelming suppression of godly religion by Ahab and Jezebel's idolatry, there was still a godly remnant who followed the Lord and attended faithfully to God's Word through His prophets. As Tabletalk put it: In mathematical numbers, if Baal had his prophets, God had reserved for Himself seven thousand who had not bowed their knees to this false god (1 Kings 19:18). We resume notes on Elijah and Elisha now. May we be greatly encouraged in 2 Kings how God's Spirit preserved the faith of many persecuted (but persevering) believers in Israel.

Monday: Read 2 Kings 5:1-8

The Word Standing Strong

The emphasis in 2 Kings is on the reliability of the Word of God brought to Israel through His prophets. It is because they "stand before the Lord" (1 Kings 17:1) as representatives of God's saving presence to Israel that the prophets' word comes to be valued as the very Word of God.

So there is a flowering of the office of God's prophet in 1-2 Kings as God pours out His miracle-working power on the office of prophet. We should not be surprised to see prophets exalted like this since the kings and priests in Israel are sliding into apostasy. Kings led God's people into the schism of ten tribes to the North (Israel) and two in the South (Judah). Priests arose to lead false worship among the Northern Ten Tribes. Both these offices are so corrupted that God turns to the prophets to call His people back from sin.

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks, remembering the key emphasis in the Christmas story on the power of the Word to create faith and prepare the way for the coming birth of the Messiah. Sing about the power of the prophetic Word and rejoice in how Christ's birth fulfilled that Word in this Christmas carol:

1 It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth
to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to men,
from heav'n's all-gracious King";
the world in solemn stillness lay
to hear the angels sing.

2 Still through the cloven skies they come,
with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heav'nly music floats
o'er all the weary world:
above its sad and lowly plains
they bend on hov'ring wing,
and ever o'er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.

3 And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow,
look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing:
O rest beside the weary road
and hear the angels sing.

4 For lo, the days are hast'ning on,
by prophet bards foretold,
when with the ever-circling years
comes round the age of gold;
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world give back the song
which now the angels sing.

Tues/Weds: Read 2 Kings 4:38-5:8**Experiencing the Power of the Word**

Two clear examples of the power of the Word of God occur at the end of 2 Kings 4. When tainted stew threatens the starving prophets, Elisha's command to put flour in the soup makes it wholesome (2 Ki 4:38-41). In the same way, it was only by God's word through Elisha that the scarce grain set before the prophets turned out to be more than enough. All of this was done "according to the word of the Lord." (2 Kings 4:44)

Switch scenes to Syria, where the hero of the Syrian army languishes from the cursed disease of leprosy. Who is it whose suggestion ends up restoring Naaman's life? It is the girl whom Syrian raiding parties had stolen out of her Jewish home! Incredibly, she is the one who longs to see her master Naaman healed.

But when was she nurtured in the conviction that God was present in Israel's capital Samaria and that Naaman could find healing there? Surely it is because the Word of God promising salvation made a deep impression on her and her family – perhaps when they travelled with other faithful like the Shunammite woman to hear the prophet teach the Word of God (2 Ki 4:23). Her family had lived through that time of famine and seen God provide powerfully. This was preparation for the more miraculous work of forgiveness, even towards the Syrians who plundered the Promised Land. Because she had experienced saving grace, she was able to extend that grace to Naaman. That is the way grace works. Somehow that little girl was persuaded that the covenant God of Israel was still at work and that His grace could be found back home - even though she herself may never see that homeland again.

Meditate and Pray: Let us rejoice that, though the Lord in His sovereignty *is everywhere*, His people knew that there was a special, saving revelation of God's redeeming grace in the Promised Land. Even from afar, the servant girl of Naaman knew that God's power to bring life from the dead still resided in Israel and in God's servant Elisha the prophet.

For us, there is no Promised Land on earth now because Christ has superceded that narrow, geographical definition of salvation. But because He has come down "to dwell among us" (John 1:14), we now have access to the powerful, saving Word of God wherever we live. We can tell the whole world, as the shepherds did that Christmas night: "Come to Bethlehem and see!" The Incarnation means that Christ can be found on earth by His Spirit, and we can taste and see the powerful work of the Spirit despite famine or cruelty.

Sing about this fact in a lesser known Christmas carol by Horatius Bonar which celebrates that Christ took on flesh to substitute Himself for our guilt-ridden lives in every point of our existence:

1 The Son of God in mighty love,
Came down to Bethlehem for me;
Forsook His throne of light above,
An infant on the earth to be.

2 In love, the Father's sinless child,
Sojourned at Nazareth for me;
With sinners dwelt the undefiled,
The Holy One in Galilee.

3 Jesus, whom angel hosts adore,
Became a man of griefs for me;
In love, though rich, becoming poor,
That I through Him enriched might be.

4 Thou Lord of all, above, below,
He went to Olivet for me;
There drank my cup of wrath and woe,
When bleeding in Gethsemane.

5 The ever blessed Son of God
Went up to Calvary for me;
There paid my debt, there bore my load,
In His own body on the tree.

7 In love the whole dark path He trod,
To consecrate a way for me;
Each bitter footstep marked with blood,
From Bethlehem to Calvary.

6 Jesus, whose dwelling is the skies,
Went down into the grave for me;
There overcame my enemies,
There won the gracious victory.

8 'Tis finished all; the veil is rent,
The welcome sure, the access free;
Now then we leave our banishment,
O Father, to return to Thee.

Thursday: Read 2 Kings 5:1-8 & Galatians 4:4-7

Man of God Among Us

It is important to note the various titles which God gives to His prophets, for each of these titles reveal something about how God's Word works to save sinners.

For example, when Naaman's search for healing of his leprosy brings him to Israel, Elisha hears about it and sends word to the distraught King of Israel that the Syrian general should come to Elisha's home. There Naaman would learn of the real, healing power of God and that there was a true prophet of God in Israel.

But note the use of the title "man of God" in 2 Kings 5:8 & 5:15. What is this title meant to convey about God's prophet Elisha? It speaks about the awesome fact that God has come down to "possess" the prophet, compelling him to speak the words of God. It speaks, too, of the presence of God among men. When the servant girl in 2 Kings 5:3 longed for her master to go to the prophet in Israel, it was because she firmly believed that, in travelling to Elisha's home, her master would savingly encounter God, since Elisha was "the man of God."

Meditate and Pray: Let us never forget the wonder of Christmas, that it means "Immanuel," God with us. Through Elisha, God "came down" and met sinners to cleanse them and give them new life. In an even better way, Christ's came to earth to be born of the Virgin; God sent His Son down to be the final "Man of God" through whom the healing and saving presence of God came to us.

And what is the result of God's drawing near to us by His Spirit in the birth at Bethlehem? It means that we too can have the Spirit of God hover over our lives as He did over Mary. Just as she was "overshadowed" by the Spirit and then found new life born in her in the conception of Christ (Luke 1:35), so God sends His Spirit to be born in us. *Only then, when God gives us new life in what is called regeneration* – only then are we enabled to believe to the saving of our souls.

Christ coming down to be born in history is important for two reasons. The first is this: Christ has entered into human life once for all. Since that is so, Paul must go on to say something else: which he does in Galatians 4:6. "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba Father." Not only has God sent His Son into the world: He sends His Spirit into the hearts of men. This is the real issue of the mystery of the Incarnation: not merely that Christ should be born in the world, but that He should be born in us; not merely that there should be a Virgin Birth, but also a virgin birth of faith in our souls.

James Philip

Fri/Sat/Sun: Read 2 Kings 5:1-8 & Galatians 4:4-7**Received in Again**

It is so important to remember what leprosy did to the one afflicted with it, and how God used healing from this terrible disease as a picture of our restoration into the family of God: no longer estranged, no longer unclean. no longer a walking dead-man, but a son restored to the family!

There have been some who have misunderstood the laws of separation concerning leprosy as performed in order to avoid *the contagion* of leprosy. But the Scripture which deals with this disease make clear to us that out of all the diseases that mankind suffers due to the Fall, God mercifully only chose leprosy to be a vivid picture of spiritual uncleanness and death. This malady alone was chosen to picture the terrible results of living an unclean life of sin and unbelief.

All who are cursed by their own unbelief and refuse to repent and turn by faith to Christ live under the wrath and curse of God, away from fellowship with the God who made them – because of their unclean and sin-polluted lives. In Revelation 21:23-27, John the Apostle declares the final end of all those who refuse to come to Christ to be cleansed from the leprosy of sin:

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. **But nothing unclean will ever enter it**, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

On the other hand, what joy when we are drawn by the Spirit of God to do the wonderfully easy thing, by faith cleansing away our leprosy of sin in the fountain of cleansing which Jesus Christ has supplied!

The result is nothing less than a full restoration to the people of God and to real, living communion with God through Jesus Christ. 2 Kings 5:3 speaks of such a restoration. When the girl longs for Naaman to find the true prophet of God to be cleansed, she literally says:

“Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria for he would **recover** him of his leprosy.”

Her hope is that Naaman would be **recovered** from leprosy, a word that literally means, “to **receive** someone back.” The leper was completely alone, unclean just as a dead body was unclean. God is the only one who can heal this kind of leprosy *as symbolic of spiritual death*. He cleanses and makes the spiritual condition pure, “like the skin of a baby” (2 Kings 5:14). As a new person, the leper can be received back into the fellowship of God’s people.

Perhaps the most shocking case of such a need of restoration from leprosy is with Miriam, the older sister of Moses. Because of her rebellion against Moses’ leadership, God in holy wrath strikes her with leprosy in Numbers 12:10. Only when God in mercy restored her after seven days was she “received in again” (Numbers 12:14). There is our word.

What a Gospel picture. God alone can cleanse us of unforgiven sin and remove the guilt that condemns us. He cleanses this way by the blood of His Son, bringing back souls from spiritual death. The King of Israel is right when he declares in 2 Kings 5:7 that only God can “make alive” by cleansing the leper.

What a Christmas picture! Christ was born by the Spirit in the womb of the Virgin and He successfully lived a sinless, pure life in our places and died the death we deserve. He therefore can come to us as the Resurrected Savior and pour out His Spirit of life into our lives. In this way, we experience the true miracle of Christmas, in the new birth which Christ's true humanity and divinity makes possible.

As James Philip wrote (quoting John Stott's comments on Galatians 4:4-7):

“God's Son came to secure our sonship in the family of God, and His Spirit came to assure us of the reality and blessedness of this sonship; His Son gives us the status of sonship, and His Spirit gives us the experience of it.”

(Philip concludes) Apart from this experience by the Spirit of the reality of the Incarnation, there can be no real joy in Christmas – (for without Christ) a man remains desolately, wistfully, outside the glory. He looks in the shop window full of gifts, with hungry, longing eyes, but He does not enter into this reality.

Doesn't that remind you of the devastating loneliness of Naaman, with all his accomplishments and military stature – but with a leprosy that cut him off and threatened to take away his very life? Until the Good News came to him through the prophet Elisha: “Dip seven times in the Jordan River and your flesh will come again to you, and you will be clean.”

Meditate and Pray: Think about why God may have chosen leprosy to be a picture of man in his sinful condition and how this adds to our glorious picture of salvation. Sing about such cleansing and pray for its reality for loved ones and neighbors whom we love this New Year. Use these words from John Newton:

1 Before Elisha's gate
The Syrian leper stood;
But could not brook to wait,
He deemed himself too good:
He thought the prophet would attend,
And not to him a message send.

3 Thus by his foolish pride
He almost missed a cure;
Howe'er at length he tried,
And found the method sure:
Soon as his pride was brought to yield,
The leprosy was quickly healed.

5 My heart devised the way
Which I supposed He'd take;
And when I found delay,
Was ready to go back:
Had he some painful task enjoined,
I to performance seemed inclined.

7 At length I trial made,
When I had much endured; The message I obeyed,
I washed, and I was cured: Sinners, this healing fountain try,
Which cleansed a wretch so vile as I.

2 Have I this journey come,
And will he not be seen?
I were as well at home,
Would washing make me clean:
Why must I wash in Jordan's flood?
Damascus' rivers are as good.

4 Leprous and proud as he,
To Jesus thus I came,
From sin to set me free,
When first I heard His fame:
Surely, thought I, my pompous train
Of vows and tears will notice gain.

6 When by his word he spake,
That fountain opened see;
'Twas opened for thy sake,
Go wash, and thou art free:
O! how did my proud heart gainsay,
I feared to trust this simple way.