

### 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS

#### Week 8, chapter 6

Last week's lesson in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 5 revolved around the gentile Syrian army commander Na'aman, who gave us a surprising look at the most foundational principles of the Gospel. I say surprising because most Believers (even seekers) expect to find such principles not in the Old Testament but the New. Yet in reality they are looking in the wrong place; the Gospel of deliverance from sin for both Jews and Gentiles is actually constructed in the Hebrew Bible and not in the Greek New Testament. The importance of this narrative involving Na'aman, therefore, must not be underestimated and so I want to begin by spending a few minutes to review it and to give it a context.

The purpose of the New Testament is not to develop the Gospel but rather to tell us who the deliverer is that the Old Testament Gospel predicted, and now that He has come and gone, what does that mean for not only His Jewish followers, but also for His Gentile proselytites that soon will arise by the thousands and eventually millions. In fact, what does His coming mean for the world in general? Thus the New Testament can be rightly classified as primarily inspired commentary (Hebrews would call it Midrash) on the Old Testament in light of the advent of the Messiah.

And what we found in the person of Na'aman was a gentile who for some inexplicable reason wore the sign of his inner spiritual uncleanness outwardly on his skin; this skin condition is called ***tzara'at***. What makes this matter so mysterious is that it was a condition that seems to have affected only Hebrews because its cause was spiritual and not physical. So it was not because of some handed-down genetic defect or inherited divine curse that ***tzara'at*** manifests itself only in Hebrews, but rather because the God of Israel would directly afflict a Hebrew individual with one of a variety of skin diseases in consequence of them refusing to be obedient to Him and thus acquiring a ritually unclean spirit within. Yet the only people that He expected such obedience and faithfulness from, and thus the only people who were susceptible to ***tzara'at***, were His chosen people: Israel. So what was this gentile from Syria doing with it? And frankly, this is the part of the story that is the crux; and it is a point that usually is missed entirely.

A young Hebrew female house slave for Na'aman recognized his symptoms and so told his wife that since this was a disease inflicted only by the Israelite God, the solution lay exclusively in the hands of an Israelite representative of God. And thus Na'aman ventured to Israel to seek out the famous Prophet Elisha to see if he could perhaps deliver Na'aman from what, to Na'aman's thinking, was merely an unfortunate but terrible skin disease he had somehow

contracted; a disease no different than measles or the chicken pox except that there seemed to be no end to it.

Elisha told him that the solution was to immerse himself into the Jordan River, where he would bathe and be cleansed. After a burst of anger and skepticism that if such a simple thing as bathing in a river could cure him that he could have done that (and in fact did immerse regularly) in Syria's beautiful rivers, instead of traveling to enemy territory in Israel. But after his servants calmed him down, he reluctantly followed Elisha's instructions to immerse 7 times in the Jordan. And immediately the **tzara'at** left him. A key principle here is that the Bible does NOT say he was cured or healed; rather it says he was cleansed. And the meaning is that in faith and obedience to the God of Israel, his unclean inner spirit was made clean, and thus the reason for his **tzara'at** was gone.

Na'aman was not only an intelligent man, he was a practical man. If there was even a remote chance that this Prophet of Israel could heal his affliction, he was going to avail himself of it. And not only was he a practical man, he was a blessed man because for some mysterious reason Yehoveh had prepared what must have been his willing heart to accept the God of Israel as his only god. Something that no man had detected, and maybe Na'aman himself didn't entirely recognize it, had been occurring within Na'aman; he must have been seeking the truth. It's just that he didn't know that the truth he sought resided not in human philosophies or wooden idols but rather in the glory of Israel's God.

Na'aman had been worshipping other gods; Syria's gods. He no doubt believed in them, mostly, even if perhaps there was skepticism. This was what all gentiles did, he was no different. But the Lord for His own good reasons chose this particular gentile, one with an open heart, to afflict him with **tzara'at** and use this great discomfort to drive him in his anguish towards the God of Israel to be delivered. In another sense the **tzara'at** was meant to reveal how a gentile's inner spirit was automatically unclean before the Lord (something that the Lord had also shown the Levite Moses centuries earlier). And if that gentile wanted a clean inner spirit (which at some subconscious level Na'aman must have), then he would necessarily have to bathe and be cleansed in the living waters of Israel. There was no other route, there was no other solution.

There couldn't be a clearer picture of how a gentile is delivered into salvation and it is this: A gentile MUST accept Israel's God, and must be immersed in the living waters of Israel to be cleansed of his or her unclean spirit. But even more that gentile must give up his own false gods and worship only YHWH, and we see that Na'aman did exactly that. In chapter 5 verse 15 Na'aman confesses this to Elisha:

**<sup>CJB</sup> 2 Kings 5:15** *Then, with his whole retinue, he returned to the man of God, went and stood before him, and said, "Well, I've learned that there is no God in all the earth*

***except in Isra'el....."***

Even more, when Na'aman explained to Elisha that now that he had pledged his full allegiance to the God of Israel, nonetheless he had no choice but to return to Syria and remain within the gentile Syrian culture, Elisha wished him ***shalom***. That is, Elisha put no requirement upon him to have a circumcision and thus become a Hebrew. This delivered gentile did NOT become an Israelite, he did NOT leave his gentile nation or abandon his gentile-ness and become a citizen of Israel, yet he was just as delivered as if he had become a national Israelite.

It is important for us to grasp that in the Bible era (of the Old and New Testaments) that a nation, its culture, its traditions and its gods were of one cloth. Worshipping a certain national god was part and parcel of that same nation's societal fabric. One didn't belong to a nation and then make a decision as to their personal religion of choice as we see in most of the world today, especially in the West. It was automatic and unquestioned and never came to mind. So when Na'aman was shown the truth, and he chose to worship Israel's god and reject his own nation's gods, he indeed went back to continue living in Syria because his family was there, and he felt his duty lay there, but in his mind and heart he was in some difficult-to-define way now also joined to Israel BECAUSE he was joined to Israel's God.

So yet another element of the Gospel (especially as it pertains to gentiles) is revealed. And it is that one must adopt the Hebrew God, and be given a clean Hebrew spirit by means of being immersed into Israel's living water to be delivered from our uncleanness before the Lord; but one does not have to be or become a physical or national Hebrew in order for that to happen. Na'aman's new inner spirit was the result of his faith and trust in the God of Israel, and nothing more. There was no ritual performed over him (even though he thought there had to be), no holy man presided over or caused his deliverance, and no money would be paid or accepted because his deliverance was a free gift from God and no amount of earthly wealth could ever be enough to purchase such a deliverance, anyway. And this principle remains enforce even since the advent of Christ. We must accept Our Lord in faith. We cannot work our way or pay our way to obtain our own deliverance. There is no human intermediary who is needed, or even is capable, to usher us into the Kingdom. Gentile Believers remain as gentiles; yet have been joined with (Paul says "grafted in to") Israel. Not physically. Not nationally. But rather spiritually; not with a circumcised foreskin but with a circumcised heart, precisely as it was with Na'aman. So this concept of gentiles being grafted in, declaring allegiance to the God of Israel, and becoming part of Israel on a spiritual level by means of faith alone was by no means a New Testament Christian innovation that began upon Yeshua's death and resurrection. We find it here, in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, over 800 years before Christ was born.

Let's move on to 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings Chapter 6.

### READ 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS CHAPTER 6 all

We have here a series of stories about Elisha that blends important matters of national survival with smaller matters of everyday life and concerns. And the first issue involves a simple axe head.

Before we even discuss this specific case of God working through Elisha, I'd like to make some observations. Sometimes in life we wonder just how trivial of an issue that has suddenly come up that we ought to take to the Lord, and which ones that we ought to just handle and move on. On the one hand we are told this in the Book of Philippians:

**CJB Phil. 4:4-7**

***4 Rejoice in union with the Lord always! I will say it again: rejoice!***

***5 Let everyone see how reasonable and gentle you are. The Lord is near!***

***6 Don't worry about anything; on the contrary, make your requests known to God by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving.***

***7 Then God's shalom, passing all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with the Messiah Yeshua.***

Yet on the other hand, just how small and mundane of a matter are we supposed to trouble the Lord with? I think what the story of the lost axe head tells us is that God is not like a harried boss who is sick to death of his employees laying every minute problem in his lap to decide or to fix. Rather the Lord demonstrates here in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 6 that nothing is too small for Him to show care for, mercy for, and provision for, to those who trust Him. And in the axe head story we see that those who cling closely to the Man of God, Elisha, in faith experienced deliverance not just from the big dangerous things, but from the small but distressing things as well.

So the context of the first story is that the members of the local prophet guild where Elisha is staying have run out of room to have their communal meetings. Despite the political pressures of a wicked Israelite king and his government, and the peer pressure brought on by the apostate religious establishment of Israel, the prophet guilds have never grown and thrived more than they are now. Therefore a larger building is needed and the guild approaches their leader, Elisha, for permission to get to work to build the needed facility.

As they went down to the Jordan River to get lumber, a prophet began chopping down a tree when the axe he was using came apart. The heavy iron head separated from its handle and fell into the water. The young prophet was greatly distressed because an iron axe was an expensive tool. And depending on how the various translators interpreted the Hebrew word **sha'al**, we see the passage imply that the axe was either borrowed or begged. The difference between the two terms is that borrowed means that the expensive tool didn't belong to the prophet and so he felt terrible losing a lent item that belonged to someone else; or if it was begged means that someone had responded to the prophet's need for an axe and had donated it to him as a valuable gift, but now it is lost.

Either way we have a very upset prophet, and the work to gather lumber for their new building is now in jeopardy. He goes to Elisha with the problem and Elisha fashioned a replacement handle, threw it in the water, and the heavy iron axe head miraculously floated to the surface whereupon it was retrieved by a relieved young prophet. In addition to showing the Lord's concern for such mundane matters in our lives, there is a solid Biblical principle here that is perhaps the underlying point of the story. One might ask why didn't Elisha just reuse the existing axe handle to throw in the water after the axe head; why did he fashion an entirely new one? And the answer is that when God is about to do a miraculous new work, He typically uses something new to do it. And what can be more miraculous that a dense iron axe head acting against nature by suddenly floating on the surface of the water?

Earlier in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings we saw Elisha decontaminate some undrinkable water in the city of Jericho by throwing salt from a **new** flask into the city's water supply. And of course most Christians are familiar with this famous saying by Yeshua about some wineskins:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Mark 2:22** *And no one puts new wine in old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins will be ruined. Rather, new wine is for freshly prepared (NEW) wineskins."*

Jesus's saying is merely another illustration for the principle that when God is going to do something new, he uses new things.

In verse 8 we move from the trivial to the critical; from a problem for an individual to a problem for a nation. The situation is that Aram (Syria) and Israel are in a chronic state of hostility between one another. There was no major warfare happening but instead each side would send raiding parties into the others territory to harass, steal, and kidnap (a common Middle Eastern mentality that is still present to this very day). But this time something had happened to cause the King of Aram to take the daring step of escalation to the highest level; he formulated a plan to kidnap and kill **Y'horam**, King of Israel. And we are privy to the meeting Ben-Hadad had with his royal court where the assassination plot was hatched. The idea was that Ben-Hadad's men would go to a place where they knew Jehoram frequented, and lay in

wait for him. But because one of the prophetic gifts that Yehoveh had endowed Elisha with was second sight, Elisha foreknew of the plan and quickly warned King Jehoram to avoid passing by that place.

After a few frustrating near misses, the King of Syria figured that some traitor in his ranks had to be informing **Y'horam** of the kidnap escapade and he openly accuses his confidants of it. But one of his men told him that it was not any one of them divulging Ben-Hadad's plan to the enemy, but rather it was that darn Prophet Elisha who could supernaturally discern such things and he was warning the King of Israel. Even more, that meant that Elisha probably knew everything that Ben-Hadad was planning and thinking (that's the meaning of saying "even in his bedroom") and this of course couldn't be allowed to stand. So Ben-Hadad's attention turned from assassinating King Y'horam to capturing (and presumably killing) Elisha.

Some of Ben-Hadad's scouts reported that Elisha was currently staying in Dothan. This is about 12 miles north of the city of Samaria, and so Syria's king sends troops to capture him. The king sent a large military unit, and they arrived at night, when hopefully the prescient Elisha would be sleeping and thus not discern the plan. But Elisha turned the tables of the Syrians.

So far Ben-Hadad's strategy seemed to be working because when daylight broke, one of Elisha's assistants woke up before his master, went outside and was shocked to see the Syrian army surrounding their city! Panic stricken he ran to Elisha and told him what he had seen. But Elisha's response is cool and calm, because he knows something that nobody else does: he has forces arrayed that far outnumber and have far more power than any army from Aram. So he says to his servant, "Fear not!" The Hebrew term is **al tira** and whenever we see it we know that the subject is deliverance; that is, there is about to be a divine deliverance from danger or trouble.

Just as God opened Elisha's eyes so that he could witness the spiritual act of Eliyahu being taken heavenward in a whirlwind amid the presence of a fiery chariot and horses, now Elisha asked Yehoveh if he would open the eyes of his terrified attendant. His petition was granted, and behold! Covering the hillsides around Dothan were innumerable fiery chariots and horses; God's heavenly hosts are there to protect God's people even though they cannot be seen and usually not sensed. The Psalmist puts it this way:

**CJB Psalm 34:6-8**

**<sup>6</sup> They looked to him and grew radiant; their faces will never blush for shame.**

<sup>7</sup> *This poor man cried; ADONAI heard and saved him from all his troubles.*

<sup>8</sup> *The angel of ADONAI, who encamps around those who fear him, delivers them.*

Elisha wanted his frightened assistant (and us, of course) to know that Yehoveh protects the righteous; he wanted the lad's faith (and ours) to be strengthened with this knowledge.

The army of Aram who had no idea that such a supernatural host was there watching and waiting for the Lord's Word to mobilize, attacked; and rather than ask the Lord to use those heavenly hosts to destroy these enemy soldiers Elisha asked the Lord to close the eyes of these troops (to make them blind). The Hebrew word used in this instance for blindness is **sanverim** and it doesn't mean for the troops to lose their eyesight. Rather the idea is that while they could still physically see, they could not perceive. They became confused and unable to function. It is in the same sense that we might say that someone is blind to the truth or to the danger that lay right in front of them.

Elisha told the Syrian army leaders that if they were looking for the Man of God that this was not the right place but he would take them there. And he led them to Israel's capital city of Samaria where the King of Israel had his palace. Now what happened here has bothered some Christian scholars and Bible teachers because Elisha out and out deceived and lied to these people and lying is a sin. But there is no Biblical invective against deceiving one's enemy in battle. And in fact we'll find that in a very real sense Elisha did them a great kindness; every one of these soldiers went home, alive, when if the battle had proceeded many would have died.

After Elisha leads the soldiers to Samaria, he prays that their eyes would again be opened (that is, that they could perceive normally again). When **Y'horam** saw Elisha leading this enemy army right to him like they were a bunch of lost sheep, his first thought was to kill them. But at least he had the presence of mind and had gained enough respect to inquire of Elisha if he had led them here just for that purpose. And Elisha told him no. Essentially the ever sharp-tongued Prophet wondered why the King thought he had any right to kill a bunch of enemy soldiers whom he had not captured. The Kings only purpose would have been to make political points by claiming a great victory over which he had no part. **Y'horam** heeded Elisha's instructions and instead of killing these Syrian soldiers, prepared them a banquet, cared for them, and then released them to go home unharmed.

Because this was an honor-shame based society, no doubt the King of Aram had to show proper honor to his enemy, Jehoram, in return for Jehoram's kindness to his army. Thus verse 23 explains that the Arameans stopped attacking Israel for awhile. This in no way means that they found peace with Israel; it just means that an appropriate amount of time passed so that Israel's kindness was properly repaid such that the King of Aram wouldn't be shamed when

he again began hostilities.

Quickly in verse 24 our chapter moves to the third story about Elisha. The verse begins with the words “some time afterwards”, meaning that some undetermined amount of time had passed since the Aramean soldiers had been freed to go home after their run-in with Elisha. Ben-Hadad sent his army back to Samaria and laid siege to the walled city. And what follows is a vivid description of what happens when a city comes under siege. Let me remind you that in the era of walled cities, siege warfare was the usual method of conquering that city. The high walls and thick city gates usually worked quite well in keeping the attacking army at bay. So the purpose of siege warfare was essentially to surround the city and the inhabitants trapped inside of it, and to cut them off from food and perhaps water sources. Naturally most cities had some amount of stored food and where ever possible the city’s water source lay inside those high defensive walls; so it became a waiting game.

Sieges typically lasted for anywhere from weeks to many months. Eventually food supplies inside the city ran out, starvation set in, and disease caused by the dead and the dying ran rampant; the last resort was for the city’s famished and ill residents to just give up, open the gates and plead for mercy as the enemy marched in. So not surprisingly verse 25 explains that there was a great famine and food became so scarce that the head of a donkey sold for an exorbitant amount of money, as did a small quantity of something called dove’s dung. The point of mentioning the donkey’s head is that a) a donkey is an unclean animal that is not permitted for food, and b) the most inedible part of a donkey (if one was to eat it) was the head. The dove’s dung is not well understood. There are two lines of thought on it: first is that dried animal dung was a common source of fuel for cooking fires when wood was unavailable. And to sell a very small amount of dove’s dung for a high price shows the extreme lack of cooking fuel even if there was little to eat. But another line of thought is that dove’s dung has nothing to do with doves or dung but rather is a colloquial name for seed husks that come from a certain kind of carob. It was food for very poor people. It had no nutritional value, it was merely added to make what little food there was stretch and at least fill up your belly. That is, to my way of thinking, the more likely meaning.

But then we get a report of the shocking extent of the hunger of those trapped inside, and the degrading depths people will sometimes go to get sustenance to stay alive. As King **Y’horam** is walking along the top of the city wall, theoretically attending to the city’s defense, a woman shouts out to him for help. He responds that if Yehoveh won’t deliver her how can he? Is he supposed to manufacture food out of thin air? It was with a combination of sarcasm and defeat that he replied to the desperate woman. But what the woman asked the king for was actually a kind of awful, irrational justice. It seems that she had made an agreement with another woman that in order to survive they would both kill and cook one of their children, and then share the feast of human flesh. First she was to kill her own son, and then when more food was needed the other woman would do the same.

The woman who was talking to the king had been the first to kill and cook her child, but now more food was needed and the other woman refused to follow through with her part of the bargain. The conversation so unnerved Jehoram that he tore his garments and vowed in God's name that if didn't behead Elisha this very day, he would submit to being the victim of cannibalism.

First, this story is neither hyperbole nor a myth. There are countless reports of cannibalism when cities fall under long term sieges. The Book of Lamentations reports that when Nebuchadnezzar put Jerusalem under siege, the Jews ate their own to survive. In fact, the Lord promised Israel that this exact thing would happen if their rebellion against Him went too far.

**CJB Lev 26:27-29**

***27 "And if, for all this, you still will not listen to me, but go against me;***

***28 then I will go against you furiously, and I also will chastise you yet seven times more for your sins.***

***29 You will eat the flesh of your own sons, you will eat the flesh of your own daughters.***

But what is fascinating in a kind of macabre way is that somehow the King of Israel blamed Elisha for his predicament and the horrible deprivation the residents of Samaria were suffering, such that he wanted him dead immediately.

We'll take up the conclusion of this story next time.