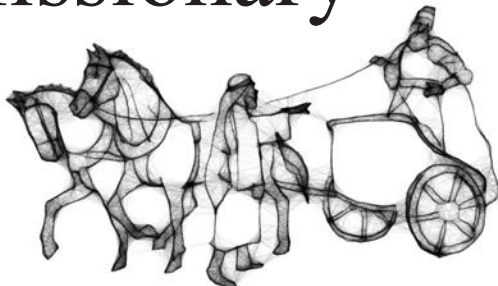


# The Unlikely Missionary



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Kings 5; Mark 1:40–45; 2 Kings 2:1–15; John 15:5; Rom. 6:1, 4–11.*

**Memory Text:** “And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian” (*Luke 4:27, NIV*).

The books of Kings, covering the history of the kingdoms of Israel from about 970 to 560 B.C., record exciting and dramatic events and far-reaching political upheavals touching God's people. Woven in these accounts are the stories of Elijah and Elisha, daring prophets of God whose adventures have gripped the imaginations of children and adults in every age.

Also interesting are the similarities between the ministry of Elisha and the ministry of Jesus. In the ministries of both, dead persons were raised, lepers cleansed, and hungry people fed from small amounts of food.

This week's lesson deals with one of these miracles: the healing of Naaman, a wealthy, powerful, and very proud idolater who, in his great need, came to experience the power of the living God and first did so through the witness of a very unlikely missionary.

Among the many spiritual truths that can be found in this account, we can get a model for cross-cultural witnessing in the midst of international tension and rivalry. We can see, too, in this story a model for how the plan of salvation works.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 18.

## He Had It All . . . But

**“Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy” (2 Kings 5:1, NIV).**

This verse contains no fewer than four descriptions or titles that put Naaman in the top echelon of Syrian, or Aramean, society. He exerted major influence on the king of Aram, was held in high esteem, and was the king’s right-hand man in religious, as well as military, matters (vs. 18). He was also extremely wealthy (vs. 5).

However, verse 1 has a major “but.” All Naaman’s power, honor, and bravery paled in light of the most feared disease in those days, leprosy. And that is exactly what this poor man had, the major “but” that cast a dark shadow over all else he had achieved. This ailment, however, brought him into contact with God’s prophet, and through that contact he became a believer in the true God.

**Read** Mark 1:40–45, Luke 8:41–56, and Mark 2:1–12. **Despite the obvious fact that Jesus did miraculous healings here, what is the common denominator in these accounts? What is it that brought all these people to Jesus?**

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Personal life disruptions, tragedies, and transitions can make people more open to spiritual truth and set them on a search for God. Physical, psychological, political, or other disasters can open people up to the reality of the Divine. Personal loss, national catastrophes, and wars are major motivators that cause people to seek a power greater than themselves. The church has long been aware that increased soul-winning results tend to come in areas in which people are struck by personal or societal suffering.

**On one level Naaman appeared to have it all; on another he was a broken man without much hope. In what ways are we all like that, having good things and bad things in our lives? How can we learn to allow both to keep us connected to the Lord?**

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## An Unlikely Witness

**Read** 2 Kings 5:1–7. What is going on here? Why would the Syrians even have listened to what a captive slave girl had to say? What might be the hidden implications of what transpired?

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The Bible gives us no real details of how this young girl acted in the home, but it's clear that there was something about her that caught the family's attention. Think about it: on the word of a captive female child in his household, a wealthy and powerful military leader goes to his king, tells him what she said, and then gets permission from the king to go. Even more so, he loads up on gifts to bring to the prophet. Obviously, more was going on than what is explicitly stated in the texts. Nevertheless, God's agent to plant the knowledge of Him in the ruling circles of Syria was an unnamed little Hebrew slave girl, cruelly snatched from her home by a Syrian raiding party. Instead of dwelling on the cruelty and meaninglessness of that act, and of her life of servitude, she shared her unshaken faith in the life-changing power of God, who was working through Elisha in Samaria (*vs. 3*). Thus, like Daniel and his companions in Babylon, she was able to turn her own adversity into a way to glorify God; and thus, God turned her captivity into an opportunity to share her faith. According to Ellen G. White, "The conduct of the captive maid, the way that she bore herself in that heathen home, is a strong witness to the power of early home training."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 245.

**What** should this tell us about how our faith, lifestyle, and actions can draw others to us and to the truths with which we have been entrusted?

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What's fascinating, too, in this story is the reaction of the king of Israel upon getting the letter. *Am I God? Can I heal leprosy?* His words reveal just how dreaded the disease was and why only a miracle could bring about a cure. For whatever reason, the letter implied the expectation that the king was to bring the cure. He knew that he couldn't do that, and so he thought it was all a trick to instigate trouble.

## Elisha, the Prophet

The ministry of the prophet Elisha in the ninth century B.C. comes to us in a series of 18 episodes, extending over more than fifty years. His ministry was conducted mostly as the head of the school of the prophets and was largely public. It included displays of signs and wonders at both the personal as well as the national level. Elisha was a prophet whose counsel and help were sought by both kings and commoners.

**Read** 2 Kings 2:1–15. What does this tell us about the calling and ministry of Elisha?

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No question that Elisha was called of God; he had some incredible experiences that must have confirmed his calling in his own mind. More important, his request for a “double portion” of the Spirit showed his awareness that for him to do what he was called to do, he would need divine power, because in and of himself he would be helpless. Thus, even back then, this man of God understood what Jesus said many centuries later: “ ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing’ ” (*John 15:5, NKJV*). It’s a lesson that we all need to recognize, no matter our position in the Lord’s work.

Obviously, as we can see from the story of Elisha’s calling, this power had, indeed, been granted to him. Thus, Elisha revealed that he had a healthy and honest understanding of his own role and calling when he declared to the king: let Naaman “know that there is a prophet in Israel” (*2 Kings 5:8*).

Also interesting must have been the scene when this military commander and his retinue showed up in all their glory at the door of Elisha’s house, probably something relatively small and modest in contrast to the luxury that Naaman enjoyed. Elisha, however, didn’t seem all that intimidated by Naaman and his troops. In fact, Elisha did not so much as step outside to meet his powerful caller; instead, he sent a messenger, who gave the military commander a command! The only reward for Naaman’s long trip from Damascus was the blunt directive to go to the Jordan and bathe! But it was accompanied by a promise: “ ‘you will be cleansed’ ” (*vs. 10, NIV*).

No doubt the pride of this important man was hurt. Perhaps, though, that was the point.

## The Healing of Naaman

**Read 2 Kings 5:11–14.** What does this account teach us about Naaman and some of the lessons he had to learn? What can we take from this for ourselves as well?

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Had the prophet Elisha personally met his prominent guest Naaman and employed exorcising gestures accompanied by magic formulas and other rituals so common in pagan religions, Naaman might not have hesitated. But two aspects of his reception insulted him. Not only did the prophet not personally come out of his house to meet Naaman, but he also directed him to the Jordan River as the place to get his leprosy cured.

From the viewpoint of protocol, Naaman was right. Elisha should have left his house to greet him. And the rivers in Damascus were undoubtedly better, since their water was clearer than the muddy Jordan's. However, through Elisha, God directed Naaman to the Jordan, a river in Israel. The entire cure process was designed to demonstrate, first, that there was a prophet of the true God in Israel and, second, that God rewarded believing compliance.

Naaman's retinue convinced him to submit to his new, divine "commander" and at least give it a try. Their argument, that if the suggested cure had been complicated he would have endured it, persuaded him. It must have been hard for Naaman to swallow his pride at having to listen to a slave girl, a foreign prophet who showed him little deference, and, finally, to his own servants. He was, though, desperate for healing.

"So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy" (*2 Kings 5:14, NIV*).

The initial requirements for Naaman's healing were belief and compliance. As soon as he conquered his pride and complied with God's expressed will by bathing seven times in the muddy Jordan, he was cured.

**Read Romans 6:4–11.** How does the story of Naaman reflect some of the principles taught in these verses? In what ways have you experienced the reality of a "new life" in Christ?

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## A New Believer

**“Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant”** (*2 Kings 5:15, NIV*). **In what way do these words help to reveal the experience of salvation?** *See Rev. 14:12; 1 John 5:2, 3; Rom. 6:1.*

It would have been easy for Naaman to return directly from Jordan to Damascus after his healing. However, as a gesture of thankfulness, he and his attendants returned to the prophet's place. This time they met Elisha in person. The confession that the God of Israel is sovereign in the world is the main theme of the Bible. These words coming from a pagan constitute one of the high points in Old Testament revelation. Naaman's conversion made clear that his new experience had to be tied to the God of Israel. The prophet was an Israelite, the river was the most important in Israel, and the number seven was a clear connection to the God of creation.

What we see with Naaman is an example of how true faith works: Naaman received something that he could never have earned on his own. The fact that Elisha refused the gifts (*2 Kings 5:16*) was a way of showing how salvation cannot be earned or bought but is wholly of God's grace. At the same time, however, Naaman's willingness to give something to Elisha for what he had done for him shows the response of faith, a response out of gratefulness for what had been given him. Elisha refused the gift. Here he followed the example of Abraham when he helped the pagan kings but refused rewards with the words that no one should be able to say, “I made Abram rich” (*Gen. 14:23, NIV*). Elisha knew that acceptance of a gift would have spoiled the lesson Naaman should learn. The healing was the work of God and an act of sheer grace.

“Let this point be fully settled in every mind: If we accept Christ as a Redeemer, we must accept Him as a Ruler. We cannot have the assurance and perfect confiding trust in Christ as our Saviour until we acknowledge Him as our King and are obedient to His commandments. Thus we evidence our allegiance to God. We have then the genuine ring in our faith, for it is a working faith. It works by love.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 16.

**If others were to look at your life, what would they see in it that reveals your love for God because of what He has done for you in Christ?**

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**Further Study:** “Centuries after Naaman returned to his Syrian home, healed in body and converted in spirit, his wonderful faith was referred to and commended by the Saviour as an object lesson for all who claim to serve God. ‘Many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet,’ the Saviour declared; ‘and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian.’ Luke 4:27. God passed over the many lepers in Israel because their unbelief closed the door of good to them. A heathen nobleman who had been true to his convictions of right, and who felt his need of help, was in the sight of God more worthy of His blessing than were the afflicted in Israel, who had slighted and despised their God-given privileges. God works for those who appreciate His favors and respond to the light given them from heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 252, 253.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Throughout the years a great deal of discussion has ensued over what happened after the healing of Naaman. In 2 Kings 5:17–19, Naaman makes a powerful confession of faith, saying, “‘for your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifice to other gods, but to the LORD’ ” (vs. 17, *NKJV*). However, right after, he says, “‘when my master goes into the temple of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand, and I bow down in the temple of Rimmon—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD please pardon your servant in this thing’ ” (vs. 18, *NKJV*). What are the implications of Elisha’s reply? To what extent do Christian missionaries have to exercise patience and understanding to new converts, especially when they come to us from a different religious and cultural background?
- 2 How rapidly should enculturation of new converts take place? “The widow of Sarepta and Naaman the Syrian had lived up to all the light they had; hence they were accounted more righteous than God’s chosen people who had backslidden from Him and had sacrificed principle to convenience and worldly honor.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 416.
- 3 Healing and salvation came to Naaman by a faith revealed in his actions. Discuss more the whole question of the relationship between faith and works. Why is it so important to understand the crucial yet distinct roles both have in the Christian life and witness?

## Twice Victorious: Part 1

by NATHALIE VILLANUEVA, THE PHILIPPINES

The Villanueva family were devoted to one another and their church. Napoleon, the father, often worked far from home. After a while, a pattern of late-night socializing with his coworkers began. He began spending more of his paycheck and sending less money home.

Lolita, his wife, grew concerned by the dwindling checks. She knew something was wrong and went to see her husband. When she learned of his activities, she tried to reason with him but eventually returned home, frustrated and hurt.

Lolita found a Bible and began searching for guidance and comfort. One day as she read the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, the fourth commandment stopped her. "Remember the Sabbath day," it said. She had always worshiped on Sunday. But if Christ died on Friday, rested on the Sabbath, and rose from the dead on the first day, Sunday, then the Sabbath day must be Saturday. She decided that if God had commanded His children to keep the Sabbath day holy, she would obey.

But she found it more difficult to obey the first and second commandments. All of her life she had prayed while looking at statues of Christ or a saint. "Lord," she prayed, "I'm sorry, but I can't pray without looking at You or a saint! Please give me a sign that I mustn't pray to these statues!"

During the night, Lolita was awakened by the sound of breaking glass, followed by beating wings. She thought that the neighbor's rooster had gotten into her house. But before she could investigate, she fell back to sleep. When she got up the next morning, she found that her statues of saints had fallen and were lying on the floor, broken into hundreds of tiny pieces. She fell to her knees and asked God to forgive her for doubting His Word.

Lolita found a Seventh-day Adventist church and decided to attend. She arrived long before services began and knelt quietly to pray. During the worship service, she wept. Afterward, a woman invited her to study the Bible. Lolita eagerly accepted and was soon ready for baptism.

Lolita invited her five teenage children to attend church, but they were busy. However, when they were free, they went with her. They found the church service to be long but enjoyed the afternoon youth meetings.

Napoleon returned home and learned that Lolita planned to be baptized. Out of respect, the family members attended church with her when they could. One by one, Lolita's husband and children were baptized.

*To be continued in next week's Inside Story.*



## *The Lesson in Brief*

▶ **Key Text:** *2 Kings 5:14, 15*

▶ **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Understand that witnessing in a cross-cultural context requires moral courage and a willingness to let God surprise him or her.

**Feel:** Experience a renewed sense of gratitude for God’s grace to him or her, as well as a keener sensitivity toward those experiencing life’s turmoil.

**Do:** Be challenged to minister to the needs of others, even at the risk of his or her own safety and interests.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: God Makes the Powerless Powerful.**

**A** It’s often said that we can effectively witness for God through our actions and our life. What can we learn from the fact that the Jewish slave girl also gave a verbal testimony?

**B** Can you find any parallels between the story of the healing of Naaman, an enemy of Israel, and the Samaritan leper healed by Jesus—the only one of ten healed lepers who returned to say “Thank you” (*Luke 17:11–19*)?

**C** What do we learn about God’s nature and approach to mission through His choice of a witnessing instrument (*2 Kings 5:2, 3*), His instructions to Naaman for healing (*2 Kings 5:10*), and the debacle with Elisha’s servant asking for “payment” for healing (*2 Kings 5:20–27*)?

**II. Feel: Authentic Compassion Produces Genuine Trust.**

**A** How does sincere empathy for our fellow human beings help to break down barriers, whether cultural, emotional, or spiritual?

**B** Even when circumstances seem less than ideal, how can our own experience of God’s grace fuel our witnessing endeavors?

**III. Do: Being Available**

**A** What practical steps can we take to build moral and spiritual courage? Why is this always a lengthy process rather than the decision of a moment?

**B** Have we told God that we’re available to be used by Him for His mission? How can we be ready for Him to take us at our word?

▶ **Summary:** Effective witness doesn’t happen by chance; God’s Spirit brings together what He needs to draw men and women into His kingdom.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *2 Kings 5:2–5*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** God’s view of equality—which tells us that we’re all His children, equally loved by Him—flies in the face of our deeply held human prejudices and partialities. But in the story of Naaman, we find God relentlessly dismantling social, cultural, and national barriers in order for His mission to be accomplished. Can we do less?

**Just for Teachers:** Václav Havel, the famous Czech dissident who became president, spent decades urging individual citizens to take a stand against the ruthless power of his country’s oppressive regime. In a landmark essay, entitled “The Power of the Powerless,” he made a compelling case that no matter how oppressive a political regime, ordinary people could transform society if only they would demonstrate moral courage through simple, everyday acts of truth-telling. Do we sometimes believe that our ability to witness for God is dependent on favorable circumstances or finding the right opportunity? As you teach your class today, challenge your students with the example of a nameless slave girl whose moral courage did, indeed, create “waves of transformation” throughout the then-known world.

**Opening Discussion:** Do you feel more empathy for people from your own racial group? Since the 1950s, psychologists have studied the theory of in-group empathy—the idea that we’ll tend to feel more compassion and sympathy for those who look like us and who appear to share our own cultural background.

In a 2009 groundbreaking study, researchers at Peking University conducted brain scans of Chinese and Caucasian volunteers as they watched different video clips of people receiving painful needle jabs. The results were startling. The empathetic neural response—the activity in the part of the brain sparked by emotion and empathy—was consistently greater when volunteers watched someone with their own racial features endure the painful jabs ([www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/06/090630173815.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/06/090630173815.htm)).

The witnessing hero of 2 Kings 5 is barely mentioned in the narrative, but her actions are at the center of what unfolds. Naaman’s healing turns on the incredible courage of the young Jewish slave girl who feels deep compassion and empathy for someone who couldn’t have been more different in terms of wealth, power, nationality, religion, and circumstances.

**Discussion Questions:**

Why is empathy such a powerful aid to witness? Can it be faked? How does prejudice—whether social, racial, or any other kind—damage us? Damage others? How can it distort and disrupt mission?

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**►STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** One of the themes woven throughout the Naaman story is the idea of the unexpected. Every turn in the plot contains yet another “shocker” that demonstrates God’s Spirit at work in ways that surpass human assumptions or expectations. As you work through the biblical account with your class, stress how the story of Naaman’s healing would have challenged the original audience—the Jewish people. Draw parallels with mission in the twenty-first century that reveal God as a God of surprises; One who longs for us to see mission through the wide-angle lens of His love for all people, rather than through our own narrow perspective.

**Bible Commentary****I. Mission in Exile** (*Review 2 Kings 5 with your class.*)

The biblical narrative stresses the importance of Naaman. He was “commander of the army,” a “great man,” “highly regarded,” and “a valiant soldier” (*2 Kings 5:1, NIV*). Persuaded that the prophet in Samaria might be able to heal him of leprosy, he writes directly to the king of Israel, rather than trying to contact the prophet. And yet, one of the ironies of this story is that it’s not the important and powerful who facilitate in Naaman’s healing. Ironically, the powerful Naaman has slaves to thank—along with God and Elisha—for his healing. Not only does a slave inform her mistress of Elisha and his healing powers, but later, when Naaman is offended by Elisha’s instructions to bathe in the Jordan River and would have returned home still a leper, his servants persuaded him to swallow his pride (*2 Kings 5:13*).

At the time of Naaman, there were constant tensions and flare-ups along the border between Syria and Israel. During one of their border raids, the Syrians take a young Jewish girl captive. We know almost nothing

about her from the biblical account, but in the story of this “little maid,” we see her facing a question that all exiles must face: How do I live in a totally foreign cultural setting?

What a tremendous challenge for a Jewish girl to be thrust into the home of the military leader of the enemy of her beloved home country, Israel. But she avoids two extremes. On the one hand, she resists the easy path of just conforming to her new situation—forgetting the religion of her home. On the other hand, she resists the easy path of keeping her religion private. Instead, she brings her faith to her situation. She summons the courage to testify about the prophet Elisha: “‘I wish my master would go to see the prophet in Samaria. He would heal him of his leprosy’” (*2 Kings 5:3, NLT*).

Let’s not underestimate the faith of this young missionary, with many negative cultural marks against her name. She was female, young, a foreigner, from an enemy country, and a mere slave. In a role where no doubt you were to speak only if you were spoken to, the girl boldly speaks up, suggesting that her master go to an enemy country for help. And what if she were wrong? Elisha was known as a miracle worker, but there was no recorded instance of him healing a leper.

Her spiritual courage results in a heathen leader bowing to Yahweh. Once again, God’s mercy crosses cultural and religious boundaries through a humble, faithful missionary.

**Discussion Question:** Many of us struggle to be witnesses even in relatively easy situations. How, then, can we account for the courage of this young servant girl?

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### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Consider all the elements that seem subversive in the Naaman narrative.

1. Elisha is a public figure in Israel. He received his call to ministry amid the drama of a flaming chariot and the blessing of the great prophet Elijah (*2 Kings 2:9–11*). Yet, the pivotal mission moment in this story belongs not to Elisha but to a nameless, powerless slave girl.

2. The beneficiary of God’s healing is an “outsider,” undeserving in the extreme. Naaman is not only a member of an enemy nation but also one of its military leaders. (See Luke 4:27–29 for a hint at how deeply

the scandal of this clearly could touch a nerve in the Jewish psyche.)

3. There's no unambiguous happily-ever-after. Second Kings 5:18 introduces an off-key note when, after declaring his faith in the one true God, Naaman informs Elisha that he must still perform his civic duty by accompanying his master the king when he goes into the temple of Rimmon (or Baal) to worship. Does God's prophet respond with a fiery rebuke or a denunciation of the Assyrians' idolatry? No. Elisha merely says, "Go in peace." While theologians have long debated the significance of this response, at the very least, the scenario sketched out in 2 Kings 5 shows us that despite his conversion experience, Naaman is still a spiritual babe and will face many challenges.

**Consider This:** As a class, try to reimagine the story of Naaman in a twenty-first century setting. Who could be Naaman, and what would be his "leprosy"? Who could be a modern-day Elisha? Who could fill the role of the unknown slave girl? Consider also Naaman's admission that he'll continue to enter the temple of Rimmon with the Syrian king. Is there a contemporary equivalent that would require us to show patience to a spiritual newborn?

How does relocating the Naaman narrative in today's world challenge our preconceived ideas about how we should approach mission or how we relate to unbelievers? Does it help us to see how God's Spirit can work in unexpected ways?

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## ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** The Jewish slave girl took a tremendous personal risk when she suggested God could heal Naaman's leprosy. Yet, perhaps the most important part of her story came long before that moment. Moral and spiritual courage doesn't appear out of nowhere. It has to be consistently nurtured through daily choices, large and small. Conclude your class with an activity that reminds students that witness always requires integrity and courage, qualities we must build before they're needed.