The leper's discovery

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[0:00] Now let's turn back to 2 Kings chapter 7. And we'll consider the passage beginning at verse 3.

There were four leprous men at the entering in of the gate, and they said one to another, Why sit we here until we die? Now we're considering these last few months, the life and the ministry of the prophet of God, Elisha.
And in this week's incident, we don't actually see Elisha face to face. He is referred to in the last verse of our reading, where we're reminded that the way that the city was relieved and food became cheap again was according to the word of the Lord, which was spoken, of course, by Elisha.
But it is the case that today we'll be leaving Elisha to one side, and looking at the way the deliverance came. The scene switches from life inside the beleaguered city, and you remember the various reactions as the situation became more and more appalling within the city, the various reactions that we considered last week, King Jehoram's reaction of penance, no true repentance, but an endeavor outwardly to, as it were, twist God's arm to do his, the king's will.
And then we saw how there was the reaction of the two women. As things became more and more atrocious, they resorted to cannibalism. Theirs was a reaction of despair.
[1:41] We saw also the reaction of the nobleman, who, when the word of God was given, that the situation would change dramatically within 24 hours, mocked, scoffed at the word of God.

And finally we saw the reaction of Elisha, how, in spite of the very difficult circumstances, and they were no easier for him than for anyone else, his attitude was one of trust that God would do according to his word.
And so there within the city you have the drama, as it were, being worked out in the lives of these different people. And now the spotlight switches, not exactly to the company of people who are besieging the city, the Syrian army, but to what we might call a no-man's land between the Syrian army and the besieged city.
In the space just outside the city gate, you have these four men. Victims of the dreaded disease of leprosy. And it's the experience and the reaction and the response of these men that God, I trust, will speak to us through as we consider his word today.
Now, there were, as these men were present, and as we follow their story, there were, I'd suggest, four elements in their experience, one following upon another.
[3:05] And we'll look at them. There was, first of all, in the lepers' experience, there was their dilemma. And the dilemma is well expressed in verses three and four.

There were basically three options for these men. The first option was to go into the city. Normally, the lepers would not be allowed because of the fear of contagion.
But no doubt the situation was such that people weren't fit to prevent them going into the city if they wanted to. And so that was the first option, to go into the city. But as they weighed it up, they decided that it was pointless.
They were starving outside the city walls. They would starve just as well with inside the city walls. And so there was no hope. It really was, as we say, a non-starter going back into the city.
And so they had the second option. And that was to stay put. Just to remain where they were, sitting in that no-man's land between the invaders and the invaded.
[4:10] But as they considered that option, they realized that there was no hope there either. As they put it very graphically, if we sit still here, we die also.

And so there was the third option. And that was to launch out into what was, in one way, the unknown. To go to the Syrians.

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Now there wasn't much hope going there. Because in those days, prisoners would tend not to be treated very kindly, and particularly leprous ones. The most likely thing would be a sentence of death.
But as they reasoned, they said, well, it would be easier and quicker and better to die by the sword than to starve here outside the city gate. And who knows?
The Syrian king might perhaps just change his mind and might give us something to eat and let us live. So there was their dilemma. A very difficult situation that these men found themselves in.
[5:12] And since, of course, a story like this is in God's word, not just for historical interest, not just for our entertainment, as if it were some kind of interesting drama, we have to look behind their experience and ask what is it that God is saying to us through their dilemma.

And it may just be that here in the congregation today that there is one or another person who finds him or herself in very much the same situation as the lepers.
Perhaps you, over the weeks or years, years, you've come to see yourself very much as they were, diseased, not by some outward loathsome illness, but by that ever-increasing disease of sin.
You become aware that there is such a thing as sin and that you are affected by sin and that this, as far as God is concerned, puts you under his judgment. And you become more and more aware, as these lepers were aware, of the fact of separation.
They were separate from the community of Israel. They were separate from the world at large. They lived in this area of non-ability to mingle and to mix with others. And it may be you've come here today and you've had that sense of separation from God.
[6:32] You're aware of the fact that you are not what you were meant to be, that you were created to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. And there is that niggling feeling within your heart and conscience, in spite of all outward respectability, that that has not been fulfilled.

And that you are spiritually just where the lepers were. Perhaps even you have come to appreciate what we mean by conviction of sin.
You might have scoffed at that before. You might have thought that was religious fanaticism, that it was going too far. But no, you don't feel that way now. You're like the lepers. You realize that there is such a thing as separation from God.
There is such a thing as death and eternity and judgment. And there is this conviction of sin, this awareness of guilt that's building up within you. And so you ask yourself, as you face death and eternity and the challenge of the gospel of Jesus Christ, you ask yourself, well, what are the options?
And it's very interesting that the same options that the lepers had are very real in the experience of people today. the first option you remember was to go into the city, to go where the world was carrying on its activities and its business.
[7:47] And there is an option. Those who have come to appreciate that they are sinners and who are desirous of being reconciled with God, there comes a voice that says, no, no, don't try that way.

Try what the world can offer. Try the world's pleasures. Try the world's business. Get into business in the world and its activities. Throw yourself into these things and then you can be free from this conviction of sin.
You can be free of this feeling of guilt. But long, long ago, God said to Jeremiah and Jeremiah passed it on to the people.
But the people then and many people today, they've tried that way and it's broken cisterns. Broken cisterns that hold no water.
You remember what God said, my people have committed a double sin. They've forsaken me, the fountain of living water and they have hewn out for themselves cisterns. But they're broken and they don't satisfy.
[8:48] They don't have the water of life. And what it means is that you're left wandering in a doomed and a starving city where there is no food for the soul.

There is no satisfaction for the deepest spiritual needs that all of us have before Almighty God. So that's one possibility. But then there's another option that they had and it was to stay put, stay where they were and to look within themselves for resources to solve their problem.
And again, of course, this is an option that is tried again and again by men and women in spiritual terms. Let me, if I feel guilt, let me, if I feel an uneasiness about my spiritual life, let me throw myself into being a better person.

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Let me look within myself for something that will satisfy God. And again, of course, there comes that word, not of works, lest anyone should boast.
But it is not by works of righteousness that we have done, however commendable, however good a citizen we may end up being, however regular a church gore, however faithful we may be in reading the Bible.
[10:00] It is not these things in themselves. It is not by our works. The resources are not within ourselves to come to know God and to be reconciled with him. And you'll notice that in this option there is also what we would call the possibility of just drifting.

They could have said, well, we'll not go into the city, we'll not go out to the Syrians, we'll stay where we are, we can't feed ourselves, but, well, who knows, something might turn up.
Maybe things will improve somehow or other, we just don't know how, but we'll stay where we are. We'll let things drift and just go on and hope that somehow or other things will improve.
And isn't it possible to do that in spiritual terms? Isn't it possible to feel conviction of sin? To feel that you're not right with God? To feel, as you've heard the gospel preached, well, I know that I haven't responded.
I know that I haven't trusted in Jesus Christ, but maybe, maybe it'll happen someday. Nothing that I can do about it really, but maybe one day. And so there is the drifting and the refusing to heed the word of God that says, no, that's not the way.
[11:14] Waiting and waiting, it is to believe, to repent, to believe, choose you this day, comes the word of God. To any who, like the lepers, might be tempted to stay put and let things drift.

And so there was the third option. Go into the city, stay where they were, or go out into the camp of the Syrians. Now, in one way, it seemed like venturing out into the unknown.
But even that, they decide, is better than nothing. Now, there was a very famous Frenchman who lived in the 17th century. His name was Blaise Pascal.
He was a very, a brilliant man, one of the most brilliant men who've ever lived. And he was a Christian and his great desire was to write a book that would, as much as man could do it, under the guidance of the Spirit, seek to convince doubters and skeptics that they should believe in Jesus Christ and become Christians.
Well, unfortunately, he didn't live to write his book. We only have jottings, thoughts, as they are called. And among the scraps of paper that were found in his drawers when he died, there were some that spoke about what he called a wager.
[12:31] Now, he was obviously like Paul. You find Paul in his letters, he's having a dialogue with somebody, somebody who doesn't agree with him. And you remember how he says, but oh man, but this, but that. He's carrying on an argument with this person.

Well, so does Pascal. And he has this friend, obviously, who's a doubter. And he's trying to convince this friend, look, you should believe in Jesus Christ. You should become a believer in God and follow him.
And this man is obviously holding back and saying, he was obviously a man of the aristocracy who had plenty money and who had plenty of this world's goods. And he's saying, but if I believe in Jesus Christ, if I become a Christian, I have to give up so much.
And I don't think it's worth it. And he'd be weighing up the possibilities. And Pascal says, you must wager. You must launch out, as it were. And if you find, having opted for God and for the gospel, if you should find that it doesn't work out as you had thought, even supposing there were no God and Jesus Christ were not real, you'll have gained a great deal.
And he speaks of truth and honesty and all the rest of it. And he says, what have you given up? Only these poisonous pleasures, luxury and glory or worldly glory.
[13:46] Now the lepers are rather in that position. Will they or won't they? And finally they decide, well, we will. We've nothing to lose. Now God, of course, does not call for a leap in the dark.

For the lepers, it was going to the Syrian king. But for us, it is hearing the word of God who has revealed himself as the God of all truth, who has pledged himself and his word in Jesus Christ and who says that if we believe, we shall know that he is true and that salvation is found in him.
So there you have the dilemma. And I want to pass on from their dilemma to their decision. And we've already implied that a decision must be made.
Now if these four lepers had stayed where they were, they would still have been making a decision. The decision would be to do nothing. But that's also a decision.

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Because in this area, you couldn't just be neutral. And that is very true where the gospel of Jesus Christ is concerned. There is no neutrality. To use the words of that Frenchman Pascal, we must wager.
[14:59] If we listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ and we do nothing, we are still deciding. We are deciding that Jesus Christ is no savior. We are deciding that Jesus Christ is not one who can be trusted.

We are deciding that God made a mistake when he sent his son into the world. We are deciding. And so these lepers, they had to decide. Now they themselves were totally involved in this decision. They had to think it through. They had to act. They had to get up and move and act. But you know, it wasn't merely their decision.
They didn't know it. But behind all they were thinking and all they were doing was the hand of God. They didn't know that God had caused the Syrians to hear the sound of a mighty army and they became so scared that they ran away and left everything behind them.
They didn't know that God had given the promise through the prophet Elisha that that time next day there would be ample food for everybody. They could never have arranged things.
[16:10] They didn't know that God was behind it all arranging for their salvation and for the salvation of the people in the city. But so it was and so it still is.

God is sovereign in the work of salvation. God, as we're reminded by the Lord Jesus Christ, he is the one who has wrought out salvation. He is the one who draws men and women to himself.
You remember how Jesus said, no one can come to me except the Father. Draw him. And so as we meet here in God's presence, it is with this tremendous assurance and if we didn't have it, it wouldn't be worth meeting and there would be no point in preaching.
The assurance that God is over and above and behind it all. It's not just one man in the pulpit and a whole lot of other people in the pews. It is God who is within us.
It is God who is in the midst. It is God who has brought us here and it is with the assurance and confidence that God is drawing men and women to himself. He has done so in our congregation in days gone by.
[17:12] He is doing it and he will do it. And so the sovereign God is at work in salvation. It is his work. But, and this is where the lepers had to act, although it is the sovereign work of God, these men had to move.

Though God was at work drawing people to himself and working out his salvation, they were no mere puppets of fate. They had to reason. They had to agonize and say, what will we do?
Will we go this way or that way or stay where we are? They had to make the decision, yes, we will go to the army of the Syrians drawn by almighty God for he had planned it and yet they, with all their mind and their will and their heart and their bodies, they had to move and make their decision and it is still the same.
God in his sovereignty is working among us. God draws men and women to himself. There is no believer in all the world who can say, well, I managed it. I was able to believe.
I managed to repent. No, all will say it is of grace. It is the work of God's sovereign spirit and yet, as God through his word proclaims the gospel today, he is saying to you, you must decide.
[18:31] You must believe in Jesus Christ. You, today, must act. And so the dilemma led to the decision and their decision led to their discovery.

As you go through the story, you find it was a very remarkable discovery that they made when they went to the army of the Syrians. One that far surpassed their wildest dreams.
You notice how they said, well, if they save us alive, we'll live. They probably thought if the king of Syria is going to give us anything, it will be a few scraps left over.
Perhaps that would be for the dogs or the horses. But it would be something. And they go to the camp of the Syrians and what do they find? There's no one there. They don't merely get the food for the ordinary troops.
They go into the tents of the commanders and the captains of the army and they find the most luxurious food and the most luxurious accommodation. They find gold and silver beyond their wildest dreams.
[19:33] their discovery was far beyond what they could ever have hoped. And you know, that is also a parable of Christian experience.

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Now, what I'm not saying that to come to Jesus Christ, to enter into the Christian life, means that all problems vanish or that life becomes easy.
Our Lord never said that. He said that the Christian life is a life of discipline and a life of difficulty and a life of sacrifice. It may be for many a life of poverty and persecution.
But what the gospel does say and what God repeatedly insists on in his word is that as he invites us to Jesus Christ to repent and believe in him, then we cannot begin to understand the marvel of the grace of God that we find is true in Christ.
He never, ever disappoints those who come to him. See, coming back to this Frenchman, Pascal, he was trying to persuade his friend who was doubting, who was saying, but will it be all that you say it is?
[20:40] Is the spiritual life, is the Christian life as great, as wonderful as the Bible portrays? And Pascal is seeking to persuade him, yes it is, you try and you'll see.

And it is true, I hath not seen, neither hath he heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those that love him. But he has revealed them to us by his spirit and every believing man or woman, all those who have taken the step that the lepers took, who go at God's word and seek to know Christ and have salvation in him, they can say the same.
What of those who find? Ah, this, nor tongue, nor pen can show the love of Jesus what it is, none but his loved ones know.
But then there might be somebody, perhaps even here today, somebody who's wondering, now is it really the case that the Christian life is so much better? That to be in Christ, to be a servant of his, a follower of his, that it is so remarkably better than it's portrayed?
And you may be saying and some may be wondering, you know, I've tried it. I've tried a bit of the Christian life. I realized that I was a sinner and I began to amend my ways to improve.
[21:59] I stopped doing this, I stopped doing that. I began to come to church, I stopped going for years, started coming again. But I don't honestly find that that language is true to my experience.

I can't honestly say that what I've experienced is as a well of water, welling up to eternal life, these words of joy and peace and gladness that the gospel speak of, if I were to use them, I'd be a hypocrite because I don't feel that, I don't know that.
Well, you see, discovery always implies commitment. It implies decision and commitment. There are no half measures with Jesus Christ, with coming to him.
Let me try and illustrate very briefly through marriage. marriage. Now, any illustration falls short. What I have in view is this. Here are two people, a young couple, who come together to be married. Now, suppose they say, well, if it doesn't work out, we can always part. It's easy nowadays. We'll give it a trial, perhaps even a trial marriage, marriage in inverted commas.
[23:10] Or perhaps say, well, if we find that there are difficulties and problems, well, we can leave. We can separate. And then, perhaps after a month or two, a year or two, that's the way it works out.

And then they will say, cynically, oh, marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be. We tried it, and it didn't work. Or they talk about a marriage growing, and a couple getting more and more in love, and more and more to know each other, and a marriage that grows and progresses.
It's not true. We tried it. It didn't work. Why didn't it work? Because there was no commitment. There was no lifelong commitment to faithfulness. From the very beginning, it was doomed to failure. Because they were not prepared to say, until death do us part. With their lips, maybe, but not with their hearts. And so it is with the gospel of Jesus Christ.
Jesus Christ comes, and he does offer salvation. But he says, if any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And there can be no coming and saying, well, if it doesn't work out, I'll go back to the world.
[24:15] If I don't find all I want in it, well, I'm not going to keep following Christ. Because a person who does that has never come to Christ in the first place. Has never become a Christian in the first place.

Because coming to Christ means a total and utter giving of ourselves to him. Repentance, faith, commitment. And a person who has never come like that cannot turn around and say, as some do, oh, I tried it.
I put my hand up at a meeting or I went to church for a couple of years and didn't get much out of it. It's not all they say it is. Of course they don't know it is because they've never come in the right way

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in the first place with true commitment, heart and soul, wholehearted repentance, as a shorter catechism puts it, endeavor after, full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.
And when you come like that, you find, as the Queen of Sheba said, the half has not been told.
There's one other thing as we go through the story and come to the conclusion, their dilemma, a very modern dilemma in spiritual terms, but it led to their decision that is called for from us if we have never made it, as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, stands before us as Savior.
Their decision led to their discovery, the marvel of salvation in Jesus Christ. And their discovery led to their declaration. And you find that in verse 9.
[25:50] They found out all the good things that there are in the camp of the Syrians. They're gathering their gold and their silver, they're hiding it, and they're keeping it for themselves, and then there flashes upon them this thought.

They said one to another, we do not well. This day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace.
And so they decide, thinking of their fellows back in the city, starving to death, we must go, and we must tell what we have found.
We must tell of God's grace to us that they might be delivered. Now you've probably heard it said sometimes that Christians should just believe what they believe, maybe very good, excellent beliefs perhaps, a certain type of person will say.
And I'm very pleased that Christians can believe that and find it helps them. And it's fine that they practice their own ethic and their own way of living. That's fine, but don't let them try and persuade others.
That's fine for them. Let other people have their own way of life, whether it's materialism or communism or Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam or whatever it is. If that's good for you, let them have what is good for them.
[27:08] And sometimes Christianity is compared unfavorably with, let's say, Hinduism, which does not seek to impose its own religion on others. But you know, to say that to a Christian is utterly and totally impossible.

Because it is of the essence of the Christian faith that having experienced it, you share it. If you do not have that desire within your heart to make known Jesus Christ and the gospel that you have come to know through him, then there is no true Christian experience.
For others must know that Jesus has died and rose again that they might be saved. for the Christian to keep quiet, not to share his own experience with others, would be like these lepers sitting there in the camp, lolling back on some couch of the city in general, enjoying the wine and the good things that were there and saying, who cares about the folk in the city?
Let them die and we'll have all the more for ourselves. and such a self-centered, such a reprehensible attitude would be the attitude of the Christian who were to say, well, I'll keep my faith to myself.
I don't want to let others know. Let them live the kind of life they live. No, we cannot. But if we have found that we are sinners and that God saves sinners through the gospel of his grace, if we have known the glory of Jesus Christ and what he is and what he does, then we cannot as the apostle said, but speak the things that we have seen and heard.
[28:50] We know the world is under the judgment of God. We know that there is an answer in Christ to their problems. And how can we then be silent? This is a day of good tidings.

We cannot hold our peace. And so to Christians here today, there comes this challenge to be earnest in making known the gospel, not merely as we do it here, but in every conceivable and imaginable way.
Because you'll notice, and this is the last thought that comes from our meditation today, you'll notice that the four men here, they weren't priests, religious professionals, they weren't prophets whose job was to preach week by week or day by day, they were ordinary people.
And as ordinary people, they were expected to make known the good news that they had received. They weren't able to say, well, let the priests come out and they can tell people or let the prophets do it.
No, there were ordinary men and women, ordinary men here who had experienced God's provision and they had to make it known to others. And surely, the challenge comes to every single one of us.
[30:01] If we have tasted and seen that God is good, if Christ has become our Savior, then we may have no training, we may have no ability to preach from a pulpit, we may have no special skills of that kind, but we are called to proclaim Christ and to make him known.

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I was reading just this week of an old peasant from Guatemala in Central America. And he was converted later on in life. And one of his greatest regrets was that he spent all his young years without Christ.
And he said, I'll have to make up for lost time. But he couldn't. He couldn't preach because he couldn't read. He never learned to read. And so, he wondered, how?
How can I witness for Christ? How can I make him known? And so, he was an old man by now, but he got a friend in the church and he said, look, here's my Bible. Will you mark in it the passages about the gospel?
That people are sinners and that Christ died for sinners and that if they believe they can be saved. Show them the way of salvation. So he got this underlined. And then he would make his way.
[31:13] He was pretty arthritic and it was a difficult job, but he would hobble up to the main square in the little town near where he lived. He would sit on a bench there in the main square.

And people would be sitting down all the time, different weather from what we have here. and he would begin conversation. He would say, look, I'm an old man and I never learned to read.
Do you think you could do me a favor and just read me these passages that are underlined? And of course, the person would respond to such a courteous request.
And Felix, for that was his name, he would be praying as they read that the Holy Spirit would apply the word. And then when the passages were read, he would say, ah, yes. You know, that's what I found.
And he would, in his own simple way, preach the gospel. My dear friends, let us be earnest and imaginative in communicating the gospel of the grace of God.
[32:15] This day is a day of good tidings. Let us not hold our peace.

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