July 30, 2016

Prison Ministry

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition – Chapter 20 – “Naaman”

"Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honorable, because by him the Lord had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valor, but he was a leper."

Ben-hadad, king of Syria, had defeated the armies of Israel in the battle which resulted in the death of Ahab. Since that time the Syrians had maintained against Israel a constant border warfare, and in one of their raids they had carried away a little maid who, in the land of her captivity, "waited on Naaman's wife." A slave, far from her home, this little maid was nevertheless one of God's witnesses, unconsciously fulfilling the purpose for which God had chosen Israel as His people. As she ministered in that heathen home, her sympathies were aroused in behalf of her master; and, remembering the wonderful miracles of healing wrought through Elisha, she said to her mistress, "Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy." She knew that the power of Heaven was with Elisha, and she believed that by this power Naaman could be healed.

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. There is no higher trust than that committed to fathers and mothers in the care and training of their children. Parents have to do with the very foundations of habit and character. By their example and teaching the future of their children is largely decided.

Happy are the parents whose lives are a true reflection of the divine, so that the promises and commands of God awaken in the child gratitude and reverence; the parents whose tenderness and justice and long-suffering interpret to the child the love and justice and long-suffering of God, and who by teaching the child to love and trust and obey them, are teaching him to love and trust and obey his Father in heaven. Parents who impart to the child such a gift have endowed him with a treasure more precious than the wealth of all the ages, a treasure as enduring as eternity.

We know not in what line our children may be called to serve. They may spend their lives within the circle of the home; they may engage in life's common vocations, or go as teachers of the gospel to heathen lands; but all are alike called to be missionaries for God, ministers of mercy to the world. They are to obtain an education that will help them to stand by the side of Christ in unselfish service.

The parents of that Hebrew maid, as they taught her of God, did not know the destiny that would be hers. But they were faithful to their trust; and in the home of the captain of the Syrian host, their child bore witness to the God whom she had learned to honor.

Naaman heard of the words that the maid had spoken to her mistress; and, obtaining permission from the king, he went forth to seek healing, taking with him "ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment." He also carried a letter from the king of Syria to the king of Israel, in which was written the message, "Behold, I have . . . sent Naaman my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, "he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me." {PK 246.2}

Tidings of the matter reached Elisha, and he sent word to the king, saying, "Wherefore has thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel."

"So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha." Through a messenger the prophet bade him, "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean."

Naaman had expected to see some wonderful manifestation of power from heaven. "I thought," he said, "he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper." When told to wash in the Jordan, his pride was touched, and in mortification and disappointment he exclaimed, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean?" "So he turned and went away in a rage."

The proud spirit of Naaman rebelled against following the course outlined by Elisha. The rivers mentioned by the Syrian captain were beautified by surrounding groves, and many flocked to the banks of these pleasant streams to worship their idol gods. It would have cost Naaman no great humiliation of soul to descend into one of those streams. But it was only through following the specific directions of the prophet that he could find healing. Willing obedience alone would bring the desired result.

Naaman's servants entreated him to carry out Elisha's directions: "If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing," they urged, "wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?" The faith of Naaman was being tested, while pride struggled for the mastery. But faith conquered, and the haughty Syrian yielded his pride of heart and bowed in submission to the revealed will of Jehovah. Seven times he dipped himself in Jordan, "according to the saying of the man of God." And his faith was honored; "his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

Gratefully "he returned to the man of God, he and all his company," with the acknowledgment, "Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel."

In accordance with the custom of the times, Naaman now asked Elisha to accept a costly present. But the prophet refused. It was not for him to take payment for a blessing that God had in mercy bestowed. "As the Lord liveth," he said, "I will receive none." The Syrian "urged him to take it; but he refused.

"And Naaman said, Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord. In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing.

"And he said unto him, Go in peace. So he departed from him a little way."

Gehazi, Elisha's servant, had had opportunity during the years to develop the spirit of self-denial characterizing his master's lifework. It had been his privilege to become a noble standard-bearer in the army of the Lord. The best gifts of Heaven had long been within his reach; yet, turning from these, he had coveted instead the base alloy of worldly wealth. And now the hidden longings of his avaricious spirit led him to yield to an overmastering temptation. "Behold," he reasoned within himself, "my master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought: but . . . I will run after him, and take somewhat of him." And thus it came about that in secrecy "Gehazi followed after Naaman."

"When Naaman saw him running after him, he lighted down from the chariot to meet him, and said, Is all well? And he said, All is well." Then Gehazi uttered a deliberate lie. "My master," he said, "hath sent me, saying, Behold, even now there be come to me from Mount Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets: give them, I pray thee, a talent of silver, and two changes of garments." To the request Naaman gladly acceded, pressing upon Gehazi two talents of silver instead of one, "with two changes of garments," and commissioning servants to bear the treasure back.

As Gehazi neared Elisha's home, he dismissed the servants and placed the silver and the garments in hiding. This accomplished, "he went in, and stood before his master;" and, to shield himself from censure, he uttered a second lie. In response to the inquiry of the prophet, "Whence comest thou?" Gehazi answered, "Thy servant went no whither."

Then came the stern denunciation, showing that Elisha knew all. "Went not mine heart with thee," he asked, "when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and olive yards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed forever." Swift was the retribution that overtook the guilty man. He went out from Elisha's presence "a leper as white as snow."

Solemn are the lessons taught by this experience of one to whom had been given high and holy privileges. The course of Gehazi was such as to place a stumbling block in the pathway of Naaman, upon whose mind had broken a wonderful light, and who was favorably disposed toward the service of the living God. For the deception practiced by Gehazi there could be pleaded no excuse. To the day of his death he remained a leper, cursed of God and shunned by his fellow men.

"A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape." Proverbs 19:5. Men may think to hide their evil deeds from human eyes, but they cannot deceive God. "All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." Hebrews 4:13. Gehazi thought to deceive Elisha, but God revealed to His prophet the words that Gehazi had spoken to Naaman, and every detail of the scene between the two men.

Truth is of God; deception in all its myriad forms is of Satan, and whoever in any way departs from the straight line of truth is betraying himself into the power of the wicked one. Those who have learned of Christ will "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness." Ephesians 5:11. In speech, as in life, they will be simple, straightforward, and true, for they are preparing for the fellowship of those holy ones in whose mouth is found no guile. See Revelation 14:5.

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.

Today in every land there are those who are honest in heart, and upon these the light of heaven is shining. If they continue faithful in following that which they understand to be duty, they will be given increased light, until, like Naaman of old, they will be constrained to acknowledge that "there is no God in all the earth," save the living God, the Creator.

To every sincere soul "that walketh in darkness, and hath no light," is given the invitation, "Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God." "For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside Thee, what He hath prepared for him that waiteth for Him. Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember Thee in Thy ways." Isaiah 50:10; 64:4, 5.

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition – Chapter 21 - Elisha's Closing Ministry

Called to the prophetic office while Ahab was still reigning, Elisha had lived to see many changes take place in the kingdom of Israel. Judgment upon judgment had befallen the Israelites during the reign of Hazael the Syrian, who had been anointed to be the scourge of the apostate nation. The stern measures of reform instituted by Jehu had resulted in the slaying of all the house of Ahab. In continued wars with the Syrians, Jehoahaz, Jehu's successor, had lost some of the cities lying east of the Jordan. For a time it had seemed as if the Syrians might gain control of the entire kingdom. But the reformation begun by Elijah and carried forward by Elisha had led many to inquire after God. The altars of Baal were being forsaken, and slowly yet surely God's purpose was being fulfilled in the lives of those who chose to serve Him with all the heart.

It was because of His love for erring Israel that God permitted the Syrians to scourge them. It was because of His compassion for those whose moral power was weak that He raised up Jehu to slay wicked Jezebel and all the house of Ahab. Once more, through a merciful providence, the priests of Baal and of Ashtoreth were set aside and their heathen altars thrown down. God in His wisdom foresaw that if temptation were removed, some would forsake heathenism and turn their faces heavenward, and this is why He permitted calamity after calamity to befall them. His judgments were tempered with mercy; and when His purpose was accomplished, He turned the tide in favor of those who had learned to inquire after Him.

While influences for good and for evil were striving for the ascendancy, and Satan was doing all in his power to complete the ruin he had wrought during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, Elisha continued to bear his testimony. He met with opposition, yet none could gainsay his words. Throughout the kingdom he was honored and venerated. Many came to him for counsel. While Jezebel was still living, Joram, the king of Israel, sought his advice; and once, when in Damascus, he was visited by messengers from Benhadad, king of Syria, who desired to learn whether a sickness then upon him would result in death. To all the prophet bore faithful witness in a time when, on every hand, truth was being perverted and the great majority of the people were in open rebellion against Heaven.

And God never forsook His chosen messenger. On one occasion, during a Syrian invasion, the king of Syria sought to destroy Elisha because of his activity in apprising the king of Israel of the plans of the enemy. The Syrian king had taken counsel with his servants, saying, "In such and such a place shall be my camp." This plan was revealed by the Lord to Elisha, who "sent unto the king of Israel, saying, Beware that thou pass not such a place; for thither the Syrians are come down. And the king of Israel sent to the place which the man of God told him and warned him of, and saved himself there, not once nor twice.

"Therefore the heart of the king of Syria was sore troubled for this thing; and he called his servants, and said unto them, Will ye not show me which of us is for the king of Israel? And one of his servants said, None, my lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber."

Determined to make away with the prophet, the Syrian king commanded, "Go and spy where he is, that I may send and fetch him." The prophet was in Dothan; and, learning this, the king sent thither "horses, and chariots, and a great host: and they came by night, and compassed the city about. And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots."

In terror Elisha's servant sought him with the tidings. "Alas, my master!" he said, "how shall we do?" {PK 256.3}

"Fear not," was the answer of the prophet; "for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." And then, that the servant might know this for himself, "Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see." "The Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." Between the servant of God and the hosts of armed foemen was an encircling band of heavenly angels. They had come down in mighty power, not to destroy, not to exact homage, but to encamp round about and minister to the Lord's weak and helpless ones.

When the people of God are brought into strait places, and apparently there is no escape for them, the Lord alone must be their dependence.

As the company of Syrian soldiers boldly advanced, ignorant of the unseen hosts of heaven, "Elisha prayed unto the Lord, and said, Smite this people, I pray Thee, with blindness. And He smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha. And Elisha said unto them, This is not the way, neither is this the city: follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom ye seek. But he led them to Samaria.

"And it came to pass, when they were come into Samaria, that Elisha said, Lord, open the eyes of these men, that they may see. And the Lord opened their eyes, and they saw; and, behold, they were in the midst of Samaria. And the king of Israel said unto Elisha, when he saw them, My father, shall I smite them? shall I smite them? And he answered, Thou shalt not smite them: wouldest thou smite those whom thou hast taken captive with thy sword and with thy bow? set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink, and go to their master. And he prepared great provision for them: and when they had eaten and drunk, he sent them away, and they went to their master." See 2 Kings 6.

For a time after this, Israel was free from the attacks of the Syrians. But later, under the energetic direction of a determined king, Hazael, the Syrian hosts surrounded Samaria and besieged it. Never had Israel been brought into so great a strait as during this siege. The sins of the fathers were indeed being visited upon the children and the children's children. The horrors of prolonged famine were driving the king of Israel to desperate measures, when Elisha predicted deliverance the following day.

As the next morning was about to dawn, the Lord "made the host of the Syrians to hear a noise of chariots, and a noise of horses, even the noise of a great host;" and they, seized with fear, "arose and fled in the twilight," leaving "their tents, and their horses, and their asses, even the camp as it was," with rich stores of food. They "fled for their life," not tarrying until after the Jordan had been crossed.

During the night of the flight, four leprous men at the gate of the city, made desperate by hunger, had proposed to visit the Syrian camp and throw themselves upon the mercy of the besiegers, hoping thereby to arouse sympathy and obtain food. What was their astonishment when, entering the camp, they found "no man there." With none to molest or forbid, "they went into one tent, and did eat and drink, and carried thence silver, and gold, and raiment, and went and hid it; and came again, and entered into another tent, and carried thence also, and went and hid it. Then they said one to another, We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace." Quickly they returned to the city with the glad news.

Great was the spoil; so abundant were the supplies that on that day "a measure of fine flour was sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel," as had been foretold by Elisha the day before. Once more the name of God was exalted before the heathen "according to the word of the Lord" through His prophet in Israel. See 2 Kings 7:5-16.

Thus the man of God continued to labor from year to year, drawing close to the people in faithful ministry, and in times of crisis standing by the side of kings as a wise counselor. The long years of idolatrous backsliding on the part of rulers and people had wrought their baleful work; the dark shadow of apostasy was still everywhere apparent, yet here and there were those who had steadfastly refused to bow the knee to Baal. As Elisha continued his work of reform, many were reclaimed from heathenism, and these learned to rejoice in the service of the true God. The prophet was cheered by these miracles of divine grace, and he was inspired with a great longing to reach all who were honest in heart. Wherever he was he endeavored to be a teacher of righteousness.

From a human point of view the outlook for the spiritual regeneration of the nation was as hopeless as is the outlook today before God's servants who are laboring in the dark places of the earth. But the church of Christ is God's agency for the proclamation of truth; she is empowered by Him to do a special work; and if she is loyal to God, obedient to His commandments, there will dwell within her the excellency of divine power. If she will be true to her allegiance, there is no power that can stand against her. The forces of the enemy will be no more able to overwhelm her than is the chaff to resist the whirlwind.

There is before the church the dawn of a bright, glorious day, if she will put on the robe of Christ's righteousness, withdrawing from all allegiance to the world.

God calls upon His faithful ones, who believe in Him, to talk courage to those who are unbelieving and hopeless. Turn to the Lord, ye prisoners of hope. Seek strength from God, the living God. Show an unwavering, humble faith in His power and His willingness to save. When in faith we take hold of His strength, He will change, wonderfully change, the most hopeless, discouraging outlook. He will do this for the glory of His name.

So long as Elisha was able to journey from place to place throughout the kingdom of Israel, he continued to take an active interest in the upbuilding of the schools of the prophets. Wherever he was, God was with him, giving him words to speak and power to work miracles. On one occasion "the sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell." 2 Kings 6:1, 2. Elisha went with them to Jordan, encouraging them by his presence, giving them instruction, and even performing a miracle to aid them in their work. "As one was felling a beam, the axhead fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he showed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim. Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it." Verses 5-7.

So effectual had been his ministry and so widespread his influence that, as he lay upon his deathbed, even the youthful King Joash, an idolater with but little respect for God, recognized in the prophet a father in Israel, and acknowledged that his presence among them was of more value in time of trouble than the possession of an army of horses and chariots. The record reads: "Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he died. And Joash the king of Israel came down unto him, and wept over his face, and said, O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof." 2 Kings 13:14.

To many a troubled soul in need of help the prophet had acted the part of a wise, sympathetic father. And in this instance he turned not from the godless youth before him, so unworthy of the position of trust he was occupying, and yet so greatly in need of counsel. God in His providence was bringing to the king an opportunity to redeem the failures of the past and to place his kingdom on vantage ground. The Syrian foe, now occupying the territory east of the Jordan, was to be repulsed. Once more the power of God was to be manifested in behalf of erring Israel. {PK 261.2}

The dying prophet bade the king, "Take bow and arrows." Joash obeyed. Then the prophet said, "Put thine hand upon the bow." Joash "put his hand upon it: and Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands. And he said, Open the window eastward"--toward the cities beyond the Jordan in possession of the Syrians. The king having opened the latticed window, Elisha bade him shoot. As the arrow sped on its way, the prophet was inspired to say, "The arrow of the Lord's deliverance, and the arrow of deliverance from Syria: for thou shalt smite the Syrians in Aphek, till thou have consumed them."

And now the prophet tested the faith of the king. Bidding Joash take up the arrows, he said, "Smite upon the ground." Thrice the king smote the ground, and then he stayed his hand. "Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times," Elisha exclaimed in dismay; "then hadst thou smitten Syria till thou hadst consumed it: whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice." 2 Kings 13:15-19.

The lesson is for all in positions of trust. When God opens the way for the accomplishment of a certain work and gives assurance of success, the chosen instrumentality must do all in his power to bring about the promised result. In proportion to the enthusiasm and perseverance with which the work is carried forward will be the success given. God can work miracles for His people only as they act their part with untiring energy. He calls for men of devotion to His work, men of moral courage, with ardent love for souls, and with a zeal that never flags. Such workers will find no task too arduous, no prospect too hopeless; they will labor on, undaunted, until apparent defeat is turned into glorious victory. Not even prison walls nor the martyr's stake beyond, will cause them to swerve from their purpose of laboring together with God for the upbuilding of His kingdom.

With the counsel and encouragement given Joash, the work of Elisha closed. He upon whom had fallen in full measure the spirit resting upon Elijah, had proved faithful to the end. Never had he wavered. Never had he lost his trust in the power of Omnipotence. Always, when the way before him seemed utterly closed, he had still advanced by faith, and God had honored his confidence and opened the way before him.

It was not given Elisha to follow his master in a fiery chariot. Upon him the Lord permitted to come a lingering illness. During the long hours of human weakness and suffering his faith laid fast hold on the promises of God, and he beheld ever about him heavenly messengers of comfort and peace. As on the heights of Dothan he had seen the encircling hosts of heaven, the fiery chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof, so now he was conscious of the presence of sympathizing angels, and he was sustained. Throughout his life he had exercised strong faith, and as he had advanced in a knowledge of God's providences and of His merciful kindness, faith had ripened into an abiding trust in his God, and when death called him he was ready to rest from his labors.

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." Psalm 116:15. "The righteous hath hope in his death." Proverbs 14:32. With the psalmist, Elisha could say in all confidence, "God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for He shall receive me." Psalm 49:15. And with rejoicing he could testify, "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth." Job 19:25. "As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness." Psalm 17:15. {PK 264.1}

Next Mailing: **Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 22 – “Nineveh, That Great City”