

A budding yet strong faith

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But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I have to bow there also—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this.

“Go in peace,” Elisha said.

(2 Kings 5:18-19)

How lenient the prophet is towards Naaman from Syria. What on earth is going on? Naaman is being allowed to bow down in the temple of a strange god! Does not the permission granted by Elisha have far-reaching consequences? And if this is considered to be no problem...why should we be concerned about all sorts of similar practices today? Apparently, God takes softening circumstances into account.

Strong, but budding

Let us start by listening in wonder to Naaman's statement. What a profession of faith: there is no God in all the world except in Israel! An easy thing to say, considering that he had just been healed...? No, it was not something that was to be expected. Seen against his religious background, he could easily have said: that god is *also* a great god, alongside our Syrian gods. The god of Israel appears to be good at working miracles and has slightly higher calibre (or kilowatts) than our gods. However, Naaman's declaration takes it much farther. *He renounces his own god!* Israel's God alone is God. And that was the very trouble with God's people. They worshipped other gods on the side. The only true God had to wait his turn in line with the others. Baal had become serious competition. The god of the economy ruled, pushing the living God to second place in the hearts of the people. Moreover, Elisha had already performed several miracles in God's name, but the people were blind to them. Yet this Syrian needed but *one* miracle to acknowledge the living God as the One True God!

Yet it is obvious that this man stands at the beginning. His faith is strong, but still budding. It still needs to grow. He and his entourage travel back to Elisha, spreading out their riches before him. Naaman insists upon paying. Elisha must name the price. Doesn't one good turn deserve another? Naaman is speaking out of his own background here. He knows no other way. This demands payment. Everything has its price and there's no such thing as a free lunch. He is willing to pay generously. That, too, fits the bill for all other religions: I give you something and I get something back in return. Nothing is for nothing. Any god you care to name requires payment and is like man in this sense. He wants something in return for the favour he has done you. Naaman knows no better. He is grateful and wishes to express his gratitude by paying generously. Were Elisha to demand his entire wealth, he would not object.

Far-reaching acknowledgement

Elisha refuses categorically. He will not accept anything at all. That is very price-conscious of him. He points away from himself. He is no miracle worker requiring payment. He points away from himself toward God. God is priceless! Naaman must be given a clearer view of who the real true God is. He is quite unlike any other godhead. He does not accept payment from people. Only the thought. *You can never make God richer than He is.* He is the Creator. He works only for free. All God asks for is acknowledgment. Naaman seems to recognize this, as he no longer urges Elisha to accept.

He is determined to return to his country. As a high-ranking general he simply has to go back. But before he does, he makes a special request. He craves to take a cartload of earth back with him. Transportation of holy ground? In order to set up his own branch of Israel? His intention is to *build an altar for God* to be able to serve him *in his own country*. This is a singular event! Once again, he shows his faith. He has been saved and freed of his disease by God. Something never to be forgotten. He does not want ever to lose this God. But isn't it superstitious to take earth home with him? Elisha passes no comment and meets Naaman's request. He, apparently, takes into account the circumstances and a budding faith that still needs to blossom and grow.

And then one step further! Whatever is Naaman asking now? Whether he can continue to uphold the religion of Rimmon, while acknowledging God in his heart? Like holding on to the outward form of one's old religion of Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam by maintaining the customs? To the observer nothing appears to change on the outside, while one believes in the God of Israel deeply inside. Is that possible? Is that permissible?

Conscientious objections

Naaman does not say that he is now going to worship God in the temple of Rimmon. That is not his intention at all. There is but one God! Not for nothing does he take earth with him to build a separate altar as a holy place to worship God. He is not pretending. As a general he must accompany his king. And when the king kneels, he always leans on his general. He must bow down as the king's so-called 'walking stick', to support him. That is a far cry from worshipping. This regards a military service and duty. Were Naaman to refuse this duty, he would place himself under suspicion and make things impossible for himself. Yet Naaman brings even this forward as conscientious objection. Under no circumstance does he wish to give the impression that he is renouncing the God of Israel. It bothers him, because he has discovered that God wants his whole life. *He brings this up out of his faith in God.* He has a pure ardour for God, acknowledging Him as the One and Only, but his heartfelt question is: will God be able to tolerate this?

How different from Israel! God's own people see no problem in combining religions. 'Why not have your cake and eat it? Serving Baal and other gods alongside the God of Israel; do they not all have their own speciality? Appearances count, so you really must follow the latest fashion.' But this is not the issue for Naaman. He maintains his acknowledgement of God as the only God. It is just that he fears that his work will get him into trouble, because the religious customs are so intertwined with state business.

Accompanied by peace

'Go in peace!' What kind of answer is that? Does Elisha not know what to say? Does the situation have him at a loss for words? Or does he not care? Do not forget that this is an

exceptional situation. It usually happened that when non-Jews came to acknowledge God, they joined the Jewish people in order to integrate further. But Naaman is not staying, he is returning to his homeland. This is a unique situation.

‘You have my blessing?’ That is a real bonus. Naaman can take the peace of God home with him. That peace must protect and guard his thoughts. And keep him close to God Himself. Elisha is not uncaring, *he does not leave Naaman to his fate. He leaves him to God* and to God’s guidance. He allows him to walk free. He does not give a straight step-by-step answer. He does not have to. God will take care of his servant Naaman. Naaman himself will progress in understanding. Since his conscience is already speaking so clearly now that he wants to hold on to God, then God will also hold on to him. Elisha seems to have all the faith in the world in him, not allowing himself to be ruled by fear, but by peace. Therefore he can say with an easy heart: Go in the name of peace.

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