

# “What I Thought I Wanted ... What I Got Instead<sup>1</sup>

2 Kings 5:1-14

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**LISTEN:** <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/what-i-thought-i-wanted-what-i-got-instead/>

We’ve all seen it or heard it. Pictures or sound bites of celebrities or prominent public figures who lost their cool. Tabloid covers, online ads, news stories, you can’t miss it in our technological age. I expect we each have similar snapshots in the photo albums of our lives, moments of indignation or rage when our expectations were not met. “I paid good money for that!” we think or say or post on Facebook. Not getting what you ordered at a restaurant. Getting a toy you’ve wanted so badly only for it to break the first time you use it. Having work done on your house only to come home and find the job undone and your carpet soiled with muddy foot prints.

In our text for today Naaman has shown up in Israel expecting his money’s worth. With \$80,000 in his back pocket and an array of expensive clothing, he is ready to get rid of his leprosy, the only dark spot on his otherwise spotless record.<sup>2</sup> Expecting to receive the royal treatment, Naaman arrives at the king of Israel’s palace only to be sent over to Elisha’s place. The military general responsible for the defeat of the king of Israel’s father is not even offered sweet tea and pound cake in the parlor.<sup>3</sup> Already things are headed south. Elisha, a prophet, who is socially beneath Naaman, does not even show Naaman the courtesy of a face-to-face.<sup>4</sup> He sends a messenger and tells Naaman to go for a swim in the Jordan River. The muddy, ugly, lifeless Jordan river.<sup>5</sup> One slight after another becomes too much and Naaman is filled with rage.

Naaman, like all of us, carries with him a ruler of sorts by which to carefully measure his experiences. This ruler he carries with him was shaped by a lifetime of experience in the royal and military realm that shaped him into the mighty, well-decorated, general standing in front of Elisha’s house. Naaman, a man of big stature and big accomplishment, expected a big cure - a magnificent magic show on the part of Elisha and some kind of dramatic appearance by God.<sup>6</sup> Naaman’s experience with Elisha does not measure up. He came to Israel feeling confident that his wealth, power, and status were more than enough to merit healing from the Israelite God. He feels he has earned the right for this part of his life to be better, and in case that wasn’t quite enough, he brought a bunch of treasure with him just to be doubly sure.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Groves, “What I Thought I Wanted,” *The Other Side of Something*, (Brentwood, TN: Fair Trade Services), 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Norman H. Snaith, “The First and Second Books of Kings: Exegesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 3, ed. By George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952) 210.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, “2 Kings 5:1-14: Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year C*, vol. 3, edited by Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 199.

<sup>4</sup> M. Pierce Matheney and Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, edited by Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 240.

<sup>5</sup> Snaith, “The First and Second Books of Kings: Exegesis,” 212.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, “2 Kings 5:1-14: Exegetical Perspective,” 201.

Boy, isn't this the water we swim in? We live in a world of endless transactions. You work, you get paid. You put in the study hours, you pass the test. You eat your vegetables, you get to have dessert. You go to college, you get a job. You come with money, you buy what you want.

Not only do we live in a transactional world where we believe we can earn what we want, we live in a time of tremendous expectation. Science and technology know no bounds. Right at our fingertips, we have access to a wealth of resources and information. YouTube videos make self-help and do-it-yourself accessible like never before. And while the challenges of this world are real and pressing, we live among young people who believe we can build a better world and make it accessible to more people. The rulers we use to measure our experience are consuming and complex.

Like Naaman, we misunderstand God.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes we approach God with a sense of pride, the way Naaman did. We feel God should give us what we've worked hard for - a new job, a salary increase, an easier life. We believe our prayers earned us an easier time in a difficult relationship. We believe our piety has in some way earned us the right to avoid this difficulty or that tragedy. If this is how we understand God, as some force that's "in charge of all the uncontrolled contingences along the way" and is responsible for working things out to our level of expectation, then when difficulty comes - and it will--our faith will crumble.<sup>8</sup>

Another way we misunderstand God does not come from pride, but from a place of guilt, shame, and fear. We are ashamed of our past, our feelings, or our failures and try desperately to earn God's love, or to earn love and acceptance from people. We feel guilty when we are not perfect and so we add more and more things to our lives to atone for our shortcomings.<sup>9</sup> We are afraid of being a disappointment or being abandoned and so we live in this endless cycle of trying to earn our way into the loving embrace of God. If this is how we understand God, then when real life happens, our faith will crumble.

As we walk around in our everyday lives, we pass countless people whose belief died when real life happened. People who, in the darkest moments of their lives, only knew to relate to God in this transactional way - could not understand why bad things could happen to good people, why hard work did not turn up results, why good intentions did not earn love or commitment or safety. People who tried church or a small group and came away thinking if only I would pray this prayer, if only I would stay in church, if only I would believe this certain set of beliefs, if only I would write a check for this amount then I would feel right with God, then I would find God, then I would be saved. There are many people, living right outside the wall of this building and even sitting in the pews today who have learned that transactional faith isn't just a shallow way to relate to God, it doesn't work.

<sup>7</sup> Carrie N. Mitchell, "2 Kings 5:1-14: Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C*, vol. 3, edited by Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 196, 198.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>9</sup> Heather Walker Peterson, "5 Signs You Have a Transactional Faith," *Humane Pursuits*, online: <http://humanepursuits.com/5-signs-you-have-a-transactional-faith/> (accessed July 1, 2016).

For those of you here today, for anyone listening out there who has struggled on this road, who is hungry for transformation, for healing, for a deeper faith that means something in the difficulties of life, I am here to tell you that God does not deal in transactions and God is not limited by our expectations. God is much bigger than these limited ideas. God does not deal in contract but in the unconditional promise to love and create, to save and heal all of creation.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars agree that 1 and 2 Kings came together a few decades after the Babylonians conquered Judah and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup> We can only imagine the chaos and crisis the Israelites experienced. This was a tremendous blow to every part of their lives. The books of Joshua through Kings are a way to help Israel make sense of what has happened to them.<sup>12</sup> It's a way of helping them to survive, to find God, to find some way forward.<sup>13</sup>

In this part of the Bible we feel this tension between judgment and grace.<sup>14</sup> The people struggling with the idea that God is punishing them for their failings and at the same time God is saving and preserving them in spite of their failings.

The whole point of the story of Naaman's healing is the grace and provision of YHWH winning out over what Naaman deserves.<sup>15</sup> The whole point is that Naaman, that we, despite all the things that disqualify us from being loved by God, are transformed in God's presence not only on the outside, but also on the inside. The final word of this story, of our story, is that God's liberating power overcomes the barriers in our hearts and in our lives, freeing us from living shallow lives caught in cycles of trying to earn something from God.

God calls you and me, the same way God called Naaman, to lay down our rulers and to wash ourselves again and again in the River Jordan. To drench ourselves in the terrifyingly beautiful truth that the gospel, in the end, wins out over judgment, condemnation, and punishment. And as much as we want and need and try to earn our way and meet our own expectations, God is all the more calling us deeper into the mystery of unconditional and everlasting love.

When we encounter God's presence, we like Naaman find the only God capable of such wholistic healing, such life-giving imagination, such vibrant lived faith and communion in the world, the only God who captures the hearts and devotion of broken and prideful people like us. We like Naaman, climb out of the Jordan River changed people, moved to be and do differently in the world.

So what does that look like? What does it look like to live in covenant with God instead of under contract with God?

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-147, 153.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-147.

<sup>15</sup> Carrie N. Mitchell, "2 Kings 5:1-14: Pastoral Perspective," 196

Around the holidays last year I came across an Ikea commercial where children wrote, basically, letters to Santa and letters to their parents about what they wanted for Christmas. I think this commercial ironically helps us to glimpse what covenant living looks like. As they so often do, children give us a window into God's heart and help to reset our expectations and direction.

Link to Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ3ePGr8Q7k><sup>16</sup>

"Imagine, you want to give them the best you can and the best is yourself!"

The best is yourself.

On our journeys with God, when we run into disappointment or disorientation, maybe we, like Naaman can lay down our pride, lay down our guilt and shame and fear, lay down our ideas of what we thought we wanted so that we can instead dive into the life-changing, sustaining creative grace of God.

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<sup>16</sup> (Subtitled by) Anna Johndrow, "Ikea: The Other Letter," *YouTube*, online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ3ePGr8Q7k> (accessed June 29, 2016)

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