

Naaman was one of his nation's truly outstanding men. He was competent, resourceful, respected, influential, cultured, and affluent. He was a real asset to his country. It was, then, a shock, not only to him, but to everyone else, when it turned out that he had the crummy, lingering, repugnant disease, leprosy. "Why would this happen to a great man like Naaman, of all people?"

As one would expect, though, from a "can-do" person like Naaman, he's going to fight this thing. Having been told that there might be some help for him over in Israel (one of those off-shore clinics, said to achieve remarkable healing of all kinds), he decides to go there. Resourceful person that he is, he leaves no stone unturned. He makes certain that his visit will be taken very seriously, by working through the highest of diplomatic channels; that is, by having his king write a letter to the King of Israel. Because he is the sort who always pays his way, he takes with him 6000 shekels of gold, ten talents of silver and other gifts – about a million-and-a-quarter of our dollars. It's a lot of cash to be carrying while out of the country, and far more than health care back in those times. Naaman, though, is not bargain hunting. He is willing to pay any amount to any foreign specialist in order to get the best of treatment.

That is why he is so totally unprepared for, and so incredulous at, the way he is treated in Israel. At his audience with Israel's king, the king is nervous, sweaty and obviously anxious to get rid of him. That is not at all reassuring. The king makes a referral to Elisha.

When he arrives there, Naaman isn't impressed with the facility. Elisha's place isn't the exotic cave of a mystic hermit, nor the temple of a successful priest, nor an up-to-date medical facility. It's just an average dwelling: two-story frame house, vinyl siding, one-chariot garage, and no patio. It isn't at all what one might expect of an international health expert. Nevertheless, Naaman and his entourage pull up and park along the street. He takes a few additional moments, "psyching" himself up for whatever this Elisha person might put him through.

He is just climbing out of his chariot to go to the door, when the ultimate put-down happens. A common servant, for God's sake – not even Elisha himself – comes out and tells him (tells HIM, Naaman, the commander and chief of the armed forces of Aram – an army which had conquered this little two-bit country more than once) to go soak himself seven times in the Jordan River. That's it. That's all. The messenger goes back in the house and Naaman gets back into his chariot and drives off in a boiling rage.

But you can understand that, can't you? He has done everything precisely and astutely; he has pursued a cure with sincerity, with taste, with dignity, with decorum, not to mention his willingness to pay "big bucks" for it. And here, out on the street, he has been told by some house-boy, who works

for a scruffy, flea-bitten, foreign religious practitioner, to go jump in an Israeli creek, not just once, but seven times. The insolence, presumptuousness, and the impertinence of it leave him seething with blind fury.

After all, a man like Naaman doesn't have to put up with being treated this way, and he won't. He's not sure he wouldn't rather die. He prepares to head home and would have done just that were it not for the intervention of a couple of his servants, who persuade him to rethink this matter.

And right here is where we need to pause to look carefully at Naaman – maybe even try to put ourselves in his place. If, in his rage, he now heads for home, it will not be because he knows whether or not the seven baths in the Jordan will be helpful. It will not be because he knows anything more than he did when he got up this morning, as to whether Elisha has helped other people. If he goes home, it will not have to do with ANYTHING other than his incredulity over Elisha's lack of class and Elisha's failure to treat him and his problem with the special deference and dignity that he believes someone of his station, his intelligence, and his sophistication is entitled. This is unmistakable when he blurts out, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!"

You do hear what he is saying, don't you? "I will not tolerate a solution, will not put up with a cure, am not open to a source of help that isn't a proper fit for someone of my dignity and repute."

A novel I read some time ago may have described the kind of physician Naaman was actually looking for. The physician was described as a specialist; that is, one who specialized in the diseases of the wealthy.

Happily, when his servant pointed out that, had Elisha required some extraordinary, painful, intricate ordeal (walk barefooted across hot coals or drink the blood of a possum or eat twenty pounds of broccoli at one sitting), Naaman would undoubtedly have done it. So why not this? Naaman relented, took the seven baths, and was cleansed. But it WAS a close call –TOO close!

As maybe you know, in that blinding, near-fatal quirk of his, Naaman has a lot of brothers and sisters. It's not that a person like that doesn't want to be rid of the problem or free from the predicament or out of the stress or through the trouble. Rather, it's the feeling that certain answers are beneath him or her, are too obvious, maybe are too simple, or are too hard on the ego.

One can sometimes see it unmistakably in letters in the "Dear Abby" columns. These are the ones in which a person definitely wants help, but it has to be help that dignifies his problem. They are of that ilk of letters where, had it been Naaman writing, the letter would have said, "Dear Abby, I've got leprosy and it is terrible. It is humiliating, depressing, and incapacitating. I'd do anything to be rid of it. But please don't ask me to go wash in the Jordan River. Dr. Elisha has already recommended

that, and I just cannot do it. I hate the Jordan River. But please, please help me. Desperately yours, Naaman.”

The right answer to that would be something like, “Dear Naaman, Having made up your mind that you’ll accept only the help you want, rather than the help you need, I recommend that you develop a real taste for leprosy, because leprosy is what you’re going to be living with! Abby”

Now, it’s not that there are always simple, obvious answers to every problem and trouble. There aren’t. But frightfully common is the problem Naaman had with himself that day; that is, the person’s ego gets squarely in the way of the very thing which he hopes for and prays for. “Yes, I want a solution, but it needs to be a solution that keeps intact the dignity and exceptional quality of my problem. It must be a kind of help that won’t embarrass me. It needs to be a diplomatic kind of assistance that won’t raise the question of why I have waited so long to do something about the problem. Surely, somewhere there is a solution for a person like me that will change things, without requiring change from me.”

If you don’t think this goes on, think again. “I’m willing to try to put behind me what happened, but don’t ask me to forgive her. That I won’t do.”

“I’m willing to be reasonable and to make certain compromises, but one thing I am NOT going to do is go to a counselor. NEVER is some third person going to be allowed to pry around in my personal matters.”

“I know I have a bit of a drinking problem, but one thing I’m not going to do is go to Alcoholics Anonymous. AA is for a whole different kind of person than I am.”

“Oh, I know that in some situations the thing to do would be to admit that I made a mistake – that I was wrong. That’s not an alternative. For one in my position to do so would cost me everyone’s respect and confidence.”

“Yes, I sincerely want the conflict between us to be over, and it will be over, but not ‘till she meets my terms.”

“I’ll admit I’m very lonely, but I’d rather BE lonely than have to settle for friendships beneath my professional level or my social level or my educational level.”

On and on it goes.

“Of course, I want to be loved, but love me for that about me which I consider lovable. I can’t stand it when people get so close that they are seeing things about me that are none of their business.”

AND, YES --- “Of course I don’t want to have leprosy,” says Naaman (and all of his brothers and sisters), “but the cure needs to be appropriately complicated, it must leave my ego intact, it needs to fit my image, and it should somehow justify all of the fuss I’ve made.”

You do see the implications of all of this, don't you? Maybe one way to cut to the moral of the Naaman incident goes something like this: "Don't bother to pray for help if you are not open to the full gamut of answers that might be out there, including not only seven baths in the Jordan, but also quitting the job, coming right out and asking someone for his or her help, letting go of the bad marriage, going ahead with the surgery, using up the money, reversing your position, or opening yourself to yet some other seemingly unthinkable alternative."

Like Naaman, we are NOT too special or too competent – not any of us – to never have to immerse ourselves in the most common kinds of asking, repenting, searching, returning, forgiving, apologizing, praying, relinquishing, starting from scratch, reaching out, or whatever.

The truth is (very much as it was in Naaman's case) that much of the time, it is NOT that the help isn't there. All too often, it is blocked by one's own sophisticated stubbornness -- demanding that the help or solution be one that fits our appetites, our ego, and our self-image.

In Naaman's case, and right down to the present, most of the time, there are plenty of sources of hope, of healing, and of truth, plus unused alternatives and no lack of personal power. But embarrassingly often, prayers go unanswered, deep needs go unmet, or we remain permanently stuck in some problem or dilemma, much as in this ancient story. It's because I'm holding out for the answers I WANT, rather than embracing the ones I NEED. And that is about as self-defeating as a person can get.