

2 Kings 5:8–14 (CEB)

[Naaman is an important commander in a foreign army, a Gentile. He is afflicted with a horrible skin disease. When a captured Israelite girl tells him of a great prophet who can cure him, Naaman makes the diplomatic arrangements needed to visit the prophet Elisha in Israel. The king of Israel is none too happy about the whole thing!]

⁸When Elisha the man of God heard that Israel's king had ripped his clothes, he sent word to the king: "Why did you rip your clothes? Let the man come to me. Then he'll know that there's a prophet in Israel."

⁹Naaman arrived with his horses and chariots. He stopped at the door of Elisha's house.

¹⁰Elisha sent out a messenger who said, "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Then your skin will be restored and become clean."

¹¹But Naaman went away in anger. He said, "I thought for sure that he'd come out, stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease. ¹²Aren't the rivers in Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all Israel's waters? Couldn't I wash in them and get clean?" So he turned away and proceeded to leave in anger.

¹³Naaman's servants came up to him and spoke to him: "Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All he said to you was, 'Wash and become clean.' " ¹⁴So Naaman went down and bathed in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. His skin was restored like that of a young boy, and he became clean.

[After he is healed, Naaman acknowledges that Elisha's God is Lord of all the earth. Naaman offers Elisha gifts but is refused. Naaman then asks to take home bags of dirt from Israel for he desires to be a worshiper of Yahweh. But Naaman knows that, being the king's right-hand man, he will have to bow before a pagan God, so he asks Elisha's forgiveness for this. Elisha offers neither permission nor condemnation to Naaman, he simply tells Naaman to "go in peace."]

Galatians 6:1–16 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, if a person is caught doing something wrong, you who are spiritual should restore someone like this with a spirit of gentleness. Watch out for yourselves so you won't be tempted too. ²Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³If anyone thinks they are important when they aren't, they're fooling themselves. ⁴Each person should test their own work and be happy with doing a good job and not compare themselves with others. ⁵Each person will have to carry their own load.

⁶Those who are taught the word should share all good things with their teacher. ⁷Make no mistake, God is not mocked. A person will harvest what they plant. ⁸Those who plant only for their own benefit will harvest devastation from their selfishness, but those who plant for the benefit of the Spirit will harvest eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹Let's not get tired of doing good, because in time we'll have a harvest if we don't give up. ¹⁰So then, let's work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith.

¹¹Look at the large letters I'm making with my own handwriting! ¹²Whoever wants to look good by human standards will try to get you to be circumcised, but only so they won't be harassed for the cross of Christ. ¹³Those who are circumcised don't observe the Law themselves, but they want you to be circumcised, so they can boast about your physical body.

¹⁴But as for me, God forbid that I should boast about anything except for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world has been crucified to me through him, and I have been crucified to the world. ¹⁵Being circumcised or not being circumcised doesn't mean anything. What matters is a new creation. ¹⁶May peace and mercy be on whoever follows this rule and on God's Israel.

Live free and truly live.

Freedom. Liberty. Countless lives have been paid to achieve liberty and to preserve it. Increasingly, there are those who say the arc of history bends toward justice and freedom. I think not. The arc of history is burdened by human sin and must be resisted if freedom from tyranny, hard and soft, is to be overcome. This is the deeper meaning of July 4.

I've been writing these studies for nearly fifteen years; thus, there have been nearly fifteen "July 4ths." And most years, we have talked about freedom and liberty, and often, about our freedom in Christ. But always, we have strived to see that freedom is not ultimately about being "free from" but about being "free for." When Jefferson wrote that liberty was an unalienable right given us by our Creator, he was right. God made us free . . . for a reason.

Today, we turn to what may seem a bit of an odd story for today. But it is the story of a man freed *from* illness and rejection *so that* a gentile leader could be brought to the worship of the one true God.

A most impressive man

Naaman was a VIP, the victorious commander of the King of Aram's (Syria) army, the king's right-hand man – and, thus, a Gentile. But despite his successes, Naaman was a desperate man. He suffered from a skin disease that made him a social outcast and could even kill him. He must have been a truly remarkable man. Such a skin disease and the attendant social ostracism that was commonplace would have rendered a lesser man useless in the king's army. But Naaman had risen to the top. We aren't told how long he had suffered with his condition, but it may have come on him late in life, so incomprehensible would be his rise otherwise.

One day, Aramean raiders had captured a young Israelite girl, whom they brought to Naaman so that she could serve in his household. When the girl learned of Naaman's illness, she approached Naaman's wife, telling her of a prophet in Israel who could cure the disease. This posed a problem, as Aram and Israel were enemies. Naamen himself had defeated the Israelites in battle! Nonetheless, he took the risk of approaching his

The Book of Kings

The book of Kings is a single narrative. It was divided into two books (1 Kings and 2 Kings in our Bibles) when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek about 200 years before Jesus. Kings, like Samuel and Chronicles, was too long to fit on a single scroll.

Kings tells the story of God and his people from the death of King David (around 1000 BC) to the Babylonian exile in 587BC. In it, we find the Jews' theological understanding of their own history. The writers and editors did not gloss over Israel's unfaithfulness nor those of its leaders. The story of David's adultery is told here, though it is not told in Chronicles. Most of the kings of Israel and Judah got bad report cards. The book gives ample explanation for the Jews' exile. Yet, we also find great reason for hope. Elijah and God's triumph over the priests of Baal. Elisha and the conversion of Naaman. Even Josiah, the model of a faithful king.

king, asking that the king send a letter to the king of Israel. The king agreed to send the letter, so Naaman packed up lots of gifts and headed for Israel. When the king of Israel read the letter, he figured that the bizarre request to cure Naaman's disease was no more than a pretext for war.

But Elisha intervened with the king and agreed to a visit from Naaman. Though Naaman had taken a big risk going to Israel in the first place, when he got to Elisha's home, he refused to do as Elisha instructed. Go bathe in the river!?! Surely there had to be more to this miracle than that. Naaman had plenty of rivers at home. Couldn't Elisha make a bigger deal out of it? Naaman was an important man.¹ Say a few magic words. Place his hands on Naaman. Something! Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. His servants convinced Naaman to give it a try. He did and was cured, gaining skin like that of a young boy.

Taking the first step

It is not hard to understand why Naaman took the big risk of seeking out Elisha in Israel. It is pretty easy to take risks when you're desperate. But why did he balk when he got to Elisha's house? Why not simply do as Elisha said. Yet

¹The English translation doesn't bring this out, but the Hebrew makes clear that Naaman's ego is wounded by Elisha's simple instructions.

also to the point, why make Naaman wash at all?

John Ortberg² notes that God often wants us to take the first step. When God calls Moses to confront Pharaoh, Moses balks. So God tells him to drop his staff on the ground, where it turns into a snake. God then tells Moses to pick the snake up by the tail. Moses must take the first step. Peter must climb out of the boat before he has the opportunity to walk on water. Naaman must go down to the river and bathe.

Perhaps God asks us to take the first steps so that we might learn that faith and obedience and trust are all bound up together. Our obedience, our taking that first step, is how faith grows. Naaman's obedience is the concrete expression, the incarnation, of his faith. It is the same with Moses. It is the same with you and me. It is by taking one small trusting step followed by a second and then a third that we learn to walk by faith, to trust God even when it seems crazy or impossible or simply too hard.

This isn't really much different from how we learn to trust anyone. We take small steps, learn that the other person is worthy of our trust, and watch the bonds of trust spiral upward. Trust between two persons has to be nurtured and protected. Faith in God is no different. We have to learn to expand what Ortberg calls our "spiritual comfort zone."

Our spiritual comfort zone

The truth is that most of us don't equate risk-taking with our faith. Church is all about being comfortable, right? Certainly, our faith ought to be comforting, but genuine discipleship has to entail risks. At times in the history of Christianity, the risks were to life and liberty. And for some Christians in our world, those are still the risks. For us though, here at St. Andrew, the risks are more subtle, yet still powerful. Won't others think I'm weird if I pray in public? Do I really have to witness to others, even if it is to a peaceful person? Won't my friends think I'm a prude if they find out there are movies I just won't see or television I just won't watch? Jesus doesn't really expect me to give sacrificially does he? It is hard enough to keep up with my neighbors around here!

We could all come up with lists of the risks and fears that hold us back. But each small step we take expands our comfort zone. We trust God, take that first step, and discover anew that God is faithful, often in ways that surprise us. Then we take another step. Imagine your spiritual comfort zone to be a circle with you in the center. Each step of faith you take – big or small – leads you outward, enlarging your spiritual comfort zone. Steps that once looked like risks now seem routine. What were once fears become confident expectations of God's trustworthiness.

This is the path to freedom, genuine liberty. Yes, we are free in Christ, but actually living out that freedom day by day, requires us to step out, to risk being evermore like Jesus.

Our freedom in Christ

In nearly all biblical contexts, freedom is liberty as opposed to slavery. Thus, the Old Testament speaks of freedom from bondage in Egypt, God's great act of salvation. It is vitally important to remember that the giving of God's Law at Mt. Sinai came *after* the Exodus. God chose the Israelites and freed them from slavery *before* God gave them the Law. If you bear this in mind, it will help you to understand why the Jews have never believed that they could earn their way into God's good graces by keeping the Law.³ They had already experienced God's grace in the Exodus. For an Israelite, it was now a matter of staying in God's grace-created community, not getting in. This meant

²Ortberg's book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to get Out of the Boat*, is the inspiration for this sermon series and also my September book recommendation. You can pick up a copy in the St. Andrew bookstore.

³Always remember that the heart of God's Law is to love God and love neighbor. All the rest is the working out of what it means to love. This is why Jesus can speak of his coming to fulfill the Law, not abolish it.

keeping the Law, especially those very visible markers, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the food laws that set the Israelites apart from the world around them.

But it is also true that the Law was accompanied by blessings and curses; blessings that would flow from keeping the Law (living rightly with God and one another) and curses, such as exile, that would fall on the Israelites when they did not.⁴ Who is surprised that things go well when we love well and things go badly when we do not? Sadly, the story of Israel is much more about the curses than the blessings. Why? Because the Israelites were unable to keep the Law. Sure, they could get their children circumcised and avoid pork, but truly love God and neighbor? That was as difficult for them as it is for us.

Why can't we love as we should? For Paul, one explanation⁵ is that we are enslaved to powers that hold us captive (see Galatians 4:8); slavery to these powers is fundamental to the human condition. It is this slavery that explains why we and our world are so messed up. We are slaves to Sin, which Paul speaks of as a cosmic power. We are unable to do the simple acts of loving God and loving neighbor each day and in every way.

But we have been freed from this slavery by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. It is Christ who has freed us and not we ourselves. It is Christ who has defeated the enslaving powers. It is Christ who has taken upon himself the Law's curses. By his faithfulness all the way to his unspeakable death on a Roman cross, it is Christ who has defeated sin and, hence, death. Just as the ancient Hebrews could not free themselves from Pharaoh, we cannot free ourselves from our own bondage. Salvation is always about what God does, never what we do. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:2, "Did you receive the Spirit because of something *you did*—that is to say because you observed the Law—or did you receive the Spirit as the result of something *God did*—that is to say as the result of the proclamation in which God exercises his power to elicit faith?" (paraphrase of the Anchor Bible translation)⁶.

Living free

In the last section of Paul's letter to the Galatians, he touches on what it means to live free, to pursue the lives that God has given to us. Read again just the first few sentences. See how much Paul emphasizes our lives together: restore a person with a spirit of gentleness, carry one another's burdens, work for the good all and so on. As he implies our freedom in Christ is not merely for our benefit, but for the "benefit of the Spirit," who dwells in us and has formed us into this fellowship that is the body of Christ.

Certainly, Paul says we each have to carry our own load (6:5), but that is only the necessary precursor to carrying each other's load – for all of us have too much to carry from time to time. Life can be hard, but it is immeasurably better if we are there for one another.

Perhaps the most significant verse Paul's closing is the end of v. 15: "What matters is a new creation." We are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17) and the church universal is a new creation. God desires our lives to be marked by liberty, the freedom to love him and others, the freedom to live without fear and anxiety, the freedom to simply *be* his people.

⁴I always get nervous when I start writing about blessings and curses for fear that I'll be misunderstood. But this is an important piece of understanding Paul's letters. Think of them as the consequences that flow from failing to love. The book of Deuteronomy is the great statement of God's Law given to the Israelites after their flight from Egypt. It spelled out the covenant that shaped them into God's people. The giving of the Law in Deuteronomy is accompanied by long recitations of blessings and curses. This was typical of ancient near-Eastern covenants between rulers and their peoples.

⁵This is not the only explanation we find in Paul, but it is key to understanding what he means by slavery and freedom.

⁶From J. Louis Martyn's article, "The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," in the July 2000 issue of *Interpretation* journal. Martyn was the author of the Anchor Bible commentary on Galatians.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about what you think people mean by “freedom.” Make a list of various definitions. How do these contrast with the biblical meaning of freedom discussed in this study? What does Hans Kung’s statement, “The illusion of freedom is to do what I want. The reality of freedom is to want what God Almighty does,” mean to you? What does God do? What does God want?
2. Risk-taking . . . What does risk-taking really have to do with being a Christian, with being a genuine disciple? How does risk-taking help us to become more trusting and faithful? You might begin this week by making a list of risks that you think God might expect Christians to take. What are some? What do we risk? What do we not risk as we seek to be genuine disciples?
3. What about being a Christian or going to church makes you the most uncomfortable? When has God asked you to take the first step? What is one step you could take today that would expand your spiritual comfort zone? What might hold you back? What might be a second step? A third? Perhaps it has to do with the management of your time. Maybe it has to do with money. Certainly, many Christians get uncomfortable when it is time for the stewardship campaign! The key is coming to understand that taking risks, taking the first steps, is how we learn to trust God in all things, not just in the safe things.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Monday, 2 Kings 5 The entire story of Naaman, including the treachery of Elisha’s servant.</p> | <p>Tuesday, Psalm 30 You changed my mourning into dancing.</p> |
| <p>Wednesday, John 3 Nicodemus steps way out of his comfort zone, coming to see Jesus in the night.</p> | <p>Thursday, 2 Corinthians 5:16- 6:2 See verse 17: we are new creations in Christ!</p> |
| <p>Friday, Galatians 5:13-18 We have been called to freedom</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p> |

