

## Good News for Troubled Times

Current events in our troubled economy and places of works call for extraordinary ministry. I have neither easy answers nor magic solutions. What I offer and pray will succeed in doing is to point to Jesus, who holds each of us in his more than capable hands. Jesus' many local churches offer everyone a safe place to come and be together, and support one another with fellowship, encouragement and prayer.

To supplement what churches can do, and for the greater glory of God, I offer a five part series to reflect on, and which will unfold in the coming weeks. I pray that some or all of them will help us find God in the particular needs of our lives:

Part 1 *Overworked and Overstressed*, the story of Naaman (2 Kings 5: 1-14)

Part 2 *When The Bottom Falls Out*, God's message through Isaiah (Isaiah 40: 21-31)

Part 3 *God's Economy*, how God manages (Matthew 20: 1-17)

Part 4 *Why Have You Forsaken Me*, holy ground (Gospel stories of Jesus' crucifixion)

Part 5 *Stewardship*, living and doing by God's values (thematic)

### **Part 1 - *Overworked and Overstressed***

When the economy turns sour, *work* becomes skewed. Some people have too little work while others have none. Those who are still working full time are expected to achieve more results with fewer resources. The loads from these expectations are heavy, and they are making people sick.

So, where do we find God in all this, and what difference would that make? A personal case study from 2 Kings (5: 1-14) gives us a helpful example to guide our way toward finding God. And the fact that we still tell the story, 3,000 years after the fact, points to its timelessness, truths and contemporary relevance.

Once upon a time, Syria was a world super power, and major threat to its neighbors. Its armies were commanded by Naaman. His job was to maintain Syria's dominance in the Middle East, and defend it against internal rebellions and external invasions.

Syria's king greatly valued Naaman for his victories and accomplishments, but not necessarily as a human being. He was a human DOing, not a BEing. Everything in Naaman's life depended on his performance.

Then, Naaman became sick. Although the 2 Kings story says that it was *leprosy*, some scholars think that it may have been one of many stress-induced skin diseases. Having to advance and defend his country's interests, and always perform for his king with excellence, stressed him to the point of sickness.

Adding to Naaman's stress was what sickness would have done to his position, prestige and performance. Valued as a DOing, what would be his worth, now? Accustomed to achieving success at whatever he did, what would Naaman do now that his ability to achieve was impaired?

Interestingly, Naaman used one of his personal strengths from his workplace. He was humble in his interactions with people and was willing to listen to them. So, when his slave girl recommended that he go to Israel and meet the prophet Elisha to be cured, Naaman listened. He was open to the possibility that what she believed would happen. He risked his faith in her before his king, and chose to trust that his foreign slave girl might indeed have something great to offer him. And, sure enough, Naaman was healed through Elisha's ministry, just as the slave girl said it would be.

Naaman's physical healing was miraculous. But the story's greater miracle is what God did for Naaman's understanding of himself and God. Part of his greatness was his humility with other people. He could see greatness in every human being. Although a rugged, heroic, muy macho commander, he was also humble enough to submit himself before his slave's God. In order to allow himself to submit, he drew on a further strength: his nature as a risk-taker. He now risked his prestige before others to respond to his slave.

The point is that Naaman took the strengths that he knew he had and decided to place them before God. Initially, this was more risk than faith, since he had no reason to believe in God. But, his willingness to trust in the possibility that his slave's God could be real, would open himself to receive God's blessing for him.

God did more than just physically heal Naaman. God took his sickness and turned it into abundant new life. God also loved Naaman as a BEing, liberating him from the need to prove himself to others. The King of kings valued Naaman as a human.

Naaman's healing included his spirit, transforming his vision and understanding of what life is really all about, and what it can become with God. His sense of self-worth was transformed. His ability to cope with his high-stress, high-profile job was transformed. Although the world and, in all probability, his workplace remained unchanged, he had changed. The world's ability to make him sick had been broken by God, whose power is always greater than any workplace and its demands.

Naaman's story is our good news. Though the world may never change, how it affects us will change as we bow before God with humility, risk, and willingness to try God's ways - as Naaman did. Naaman's story, then, can and will be our story. May it be so.

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