If you think of this as a play being acted out, you will see just how I am approaching this text. It is a story with many ironies.

In Act 1 we meet the main character - Naaman. His name means charm or pleasantness. Apparently, a relatively nice fellow as standards of his day would define nice. A powerful person too - the text calls him "*commander of the army of the king of Aram*" (modern-day Syria). He was well regarded at the king’s court: "*a great man and in high favor with his master*," and the reason was "*by him the Lord had given victory to Aram*" (v. 1). Victory over whom? Israel (so the tensions between those two that exist today are nothing new). In fact, the two nations had been adversaries for years, back to the days of Solomon (1 Kings 11:23-25). Naaman was clearly on top of the world ... but.... as the old saying goes, "You can have it all, but if you don't have your health, you have nothing." Our "mighty warrior" was a leper. His ailment was most likely not the disfiguring, nerve-destroying leprosy we know today as "Hansen's Disease." We can posit this because he is not barred from any contacts or activities because of his condition. He has face-to-face access to his king. The word here translated as "leprosy" is actually a generic term that describes a large number of skin disorders. Psoriasis would be one. That said, the suffering and stigma were bad enough for the mighty Naaman to be desperate for help - any help. Yet it’s ironic: the apparently powerful so powerless.

A second irony. A major role is about to be played by a minor character, Naaman's wife's Israelite slave girl. I’s surprising that someone so inconsequential in the grand scheme of things that she is not even named plays a brief but decisive role. Is the captive helping the captor? Wait! She has advice? Well, yes. She tells her mistress, "*If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy*" (v. 3). It is a measure of Naaman's desperation that he would bother to listen, much less act on this slave's suggestion. But he does. He risks, not only his favored position with the king by requesting permission to go on this ancient version of a pilgrimage to Lourdes for healing, but he would risk his fortune loading up the caravan with an outrageous sum of money (health care was obviously overpriced back then, too). He would risk his very life with this journey into the hostile territory of a conquered nation. But what choice did he have? This powerful man was powerless in the face of something as simple (but as potentially devastating) as bad skin. This too is ironic.

Looking at the politics of the day, the Aramean king, hoping to expedite the quest of his highly valued military commander, takes it upon himself to validate this unlikely mission with an official royal letter. No longer is Naaman's search for health at the mercy of a slave girl's knowledge or a mysterious prophet's whim. No, this is now an officially sanctioned matter of state significance. "*With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy*" (v. 6).

The reaction of the Israelite king is panic. “Ahhh!” He rips his clothes in anguish. "*Am I God to give life or death? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!*" (v. 7) Despite the long history of his people, despite their deliverance from Egypt and wanderings in the wilderness, despite the powerful ministry of the prophets, it does not occur to this king to turn the problem over to God. All the king sees is that all hell is about to break loose, an imminent international incident, a threat to "*pick a quarrel*" so as to resume hostilities. He should know better. That is one more irony.

Now in Act 2 we meet a new character - Elisha. Somehow word reaches him regarding the king’s distress. He contacts the Jerusalem royal court. "*Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel*" (v. 8) And, a little theatrical aside, while you are at it, king, you might want to figure the same thing out for yourself!

The next irony is that the scene will not be played out in glorious Jerusalem, but over in the boondocks of dusty Samaria. To his credit, Naaman takes that in stride and makes the trek to Elisha's home.

He arrives with his impressive caravan, all the trappings of money and might, his whole staff of servants, not to mention all the gifts he was bringing. The prophet would surely be impressed by the show of power and prestige. But Elisha does not even bother to come out of his house. Naaman's presence, which had struck such fear into the heart of Israel's king, is hardly even recognized by Israel's prophet. Instead, he sends a servant out with instructions: "*Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed*" (v. 10). Another irony, if for no one else than Naaman.

No personal greeting? No face time with the prophet? You can see the steam beginning to come from Naaman's ears. And these instructions? They’re insulting! Naaman had anticipated a Cecil B. DeMille flourish with all the pomp and circumstance such a moment deserved - Elisha would stand tall before him, arms uplifted, "... *call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy*" (v. 11), with the style and dignity befitting such a VIP. Instead, all Naaman gets is this servant's secondhand directive to go wash in the Jordan - seven dunks in a muddy river. Big whoop!

Naaman is incensed and plans to give this up as a fool's errand. How dare this hick prophet show so little respect? He wanted to be healed, but there are ways and there are ways. Naaman wanted it done his way. Forget it! Turn this caravan around.

Once again, irony jumps in. This time Naaman's own servants speak a wise word: "*If the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'*!" (v. 13). They urge him not to reject help because the helper's style appears simple. The prophet had simply asked for obedience and humility, not some mighty act of valor or a hocus-pocus performance.

The truth of his servants' words slaps Naaman back to reality and acknowledges what he is: a leper who needs to be cleansed.

I wonder if he felt foolish, perhaps even humiliated, as he took those steps into the muddy river. One more bit of irony - the mighty warrior ducking under once ... twice ... three times ... up-down-up-down-up-down ... till seven times he’s immersed himself. But when it was done, he walked up the bank and, as scripture says, "*his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy*" (v. 14). More than the leprous scales had washed off Naaman's body in that water - so did the pride and arrogance that he had brought with him. He was not just physically healed, Naaman was a new man.

Our reading for today ends here but the story does not end here. Naaman returns to Elisha, this time actually getting a face-to-face meeting. He is grateful, of course, and he is wise enough to know the true source of his healing. He says, "*Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel*" (v. 15) That’s why I said Naaman is a new man. He has a totally different perspective on life as he recognizes the one true God.

Naaman learned something important that day. He learned that the true God of all the world does not work according to our preconceptions. It took him awhile, but Naaman was finally figured that out, things changed for Naaman, both inside and out.

I went through this to say that we have preconceptions about what, when, where and how God should act on our behalf. We will never admit it but in our minds there’s a bit of my will not Thine be done. We know that’s wrong but we act that way toward God at times. Don’t!!! It’s a recipe for disaster.

It is good to come to God expectantly but with the expectation as well that God will act in His way and time, not ours! It is always best to come to God with an obedient heart, open to what God has for us to be or do. Obedience to God is a point of utmost importance in our walk with Him. Sure, sometimes we get discouraged when God doesn’t answer a prayer we’ve prayed for a long time. However, sometimes the reality may be that God said NO a long time ago and we just haven’t accepted it. Accept what God offers even if it’s not what you may have wanted because He always has your best in mind. We just don’t always see what’s best.

Naaman was a foreigner, an enemy of God’s people and a prideful, haughty, blood stained man. Look what God did for him when he was finally willing to obey. I want to encourage you to see obedience as the gateway to God’s presence and God’s blessings.

Years ago, a Christian recoding artist named Keith Green wrote a song, based on a verse in Micah? The key line was, “To obey is better than sacrifice.” Be like Naaman. Do whatever it is God directs you to do, even if or maybe especially if, it goes against your personal sensibilities.

That said, I want to repeat something I just said: Naaman was a foreigner, an enemy of God’s people and a prideful, haughty, blood stained man. Look what God did for him when he was finally willing to obey. I want to encourage you to see obedience as the gateway to God’s presence and God’s blessings. Amen