

Naaman was a valiant military commander afflicted with leprosy. “In Scripture ... leprosy is used for a wide variety of skin diseases as well as lesions or infections” (Hahn 535). It does not appear that Naaman suffers from Hansen’s disease but a lesser infection that may be healed through ritual purification.

Naaman is a proud man, and he balked when Elisha told him to “Go and wash seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will heal, and you will be clean” (2 Kings 5:10). He is looking for a miracle and does not want to go to a muddy river for healing.

“Are not the rivers of Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be cleansed?” Naaman has a point. The Damascus river is fed from a mountain spring and the water is quite pure. The waters of the Jordan on the other hand are quite muddy and are not as hygienic. However, ritually the Jordan River is superior to water from the Damascus River (Hahn 470). As Christians, we know that John the Baptist used the Jordan River for a baptism of repentance and that Jesus himself went to the Jordan River to be baptized.

Naaman is a Syrian and following the instructions of a Jewish Prophet go against his grain. He is too proud to go to the muddy Jordan. The wise counsel of his servants helps him to overcome this false pride. “My father, if the prophet told you to do something extraordinary, would you not do it? All the more since he told you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” (2 Kings 5:13). Naaman listens and learns then goes to plunge into the Jordan seven times. He is cleansed and he becomes a convert. “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel” (5:15).

In Nazareth, Jesus encounters a prideful group that do not want to listen to him anymore than Naaman did to Elisha. Thus, his comment, that “there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian” (Lk 4:27).

When we hear of leprosy in the bible, we need to think beyond the skin disease of someone else. We should reflect on our own lives and our own sins which make us impure. Jesus suffered and died on the cross to set us free from sin. We do not go to a river for ritual purification, rather as Catholics, we confess our sins to a priest. There is something that is difficult in admitting our sins to another. Yet, the one we truly go to is Jesus. The priest acts in the person of Christ.

“Only God can forgive our sins. But Jesus willed that the Church should be his instrument of forgiveness on earth. On Easter night the Risen Christ imparted to his Apostles his own power to forgive sins. He breathed on them... and said, ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.... Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained’ (Jn 20:21-23). Priests continue this ministry to forgive sins “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>i</sup>

Pride may hold us back. The wise counsel of forgiveness calls us to overcome this pride. It is helpful for us to understand confession not only as the disclosure of our sins but also as a confession of faith in God. We acknowledge and praise the healing power of God and his mercy for us and for all of sinful humanity. “Athirst is my soul for God, the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God?” (Ps 42:3).

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<sup>i</sup> United States Catholic Catechism for Adults. USCCB, Chapter 18.