

Have you ever seen, either on television or in real life, a situation where some guy threw caution to the wind and rushed into a dangerous situation and came out a hero, or maybe someone who took a huge financial risk and came out a multimillionaire? When they were interviewed, maybe you heard them say, “I’m not brave – I was desperate! That was my best friend in that burning house! Of course, I ran in to get him!” Or maybe you heard the now fabulously rich man say, “I may be fortunate, but hardly courageous. Frankly, I was at a point where *I had nothing to lose*. You’d have done the same.”

At the time of this narrative from 2 Kings 7 Israel and Aram were almost continuously at war. God’s people had *nothing to lose*. Aram was the biblical name for what we today call Syria. Relations between Israel and Syria have, unfortunately, never been good. In the previous chapter (chapter six), the king of Aram, Ben Hadad, had laid siege to Samaria, the capitol city of Israel in the north. “*There was a great famine in the city,*” says 6:25. No one came in or out of the city. A siege was designed to starve the inhabitants of a city into surrender or else reduce them to a state of such weakness as to be unable to put up any resistance once the wall was breached.

Our Scripture reading this morning takes place during a time when the situation was so desperate in Samaria that people had begun to resort to cannibalism! When the Israelite king hears of such an incident, he was beside himself. He tore his robe—but not in repentance. Instead of recognizing that this adversity was a judgment from God on account of Israel’s forsaking the covenant (Deut. 28:53) instead of repenting he reacts with rage, directing his anger at Elisha. He swears an oath before God to have Elisha’s head cut off.

A few verses before our passage begins, King Joram has arrived at Elisha’s house. Elisha, being the prophet he was, knew beforehand that the king was coming, and what he intended to do. But instead of a stinging rebuke (a well-deserved rebuke, I might add), Elisha gives the king some great news! Verse 1 says, “*Elisha replied, Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the LORD says: About this time tomorrow, a seah of the finest flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria.*” In other words, the famine will be over and food will once again be plentiful—so much so that we’re not talking about a gradual reduction in prices. The very next day grain and flour would be sold at completely normal prices. That would require a miracle, given the desperate situation. But that’s exactly what is being promised. Elisha, the prophet of God, has declared “*Thus says the Lord...*”

Did Israel deserve such a miracle? No way. So why would God rescue a rebellious people? Because he chose to. Because he is good and merciful. After all, if God only rescued the deserving, where would that leave you and me? You and I could “kiss it goodbye.” Humankind would long ago have ceased to exist if God’s mercy depended on us.

And so, God, speaking through the prophet, promises a monumental miracle; to take place by the same time the very next day. How was this news received? With joy? With praise to God? No. With cynicism and unbelief.

The officer on whose hand the king was leaning answered the man of God and said, “*Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?*” Then Elisha said, “*You will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat any of it.*” The king’s #1 guy was cynical. While a measure of skepticism can protect a person from being taken advantage of, this was the man of God speaking. Elisha was a good prophet (unlike the false prophets who would “prophesy” whatever their benefactors wanted to hear). Secondly, this is good news, not bad news. Would it absolutely kill you to believe it? Thirdly, is anything too difficult for the Lord?

Falling into cynicism is one of the worst things that can happen to a person. Paul wrote, “*love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres...*” (1 Corinthians 13:7). But the cynic trusts nothing, hopes in nothing, because the one thing they are certain of is that they will be let down if they trust or hope. In that way the cynic plays it safe, rather than risk disappointment. Guard your souls against the downward spiral of cynicism. Allow yourself to be vulnerable. Give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Take God at his word, that he will neither fail you nor forsake you. He has promised eternal life, and he will deliver. In the case of this royal officer, cynicism would cost him dearly. Elisha tells him he will see this miracle with his own eyes but will not live to enjoy it. Now let’s meet the protagonists of the story.

It doesn’t get much worse than it was for lepers in ancient times. In fact, did you know that the Hebrew word for “leprosy” is *tzara’at*—meaning troubles. Lepers were complete outcasts from society. They were feared and loathed on account of the perceived threat of contagion. More than that, leprosy was considered by many to be a divine curse. For that reason, lepers were generally not trusted, and not to be taken at their word.

These four lepers are sitting outside the gate of the city and suddenly it dawns on them that *they have absolutely nothing to lose!* They can’t go inside the city because they’re lepers, besides which, there’s a horrific famine inside the city. They can’t just sit there and starve to death. They realize they have only one option that doesn’t guarantee death: go out to the

enemy camp and surrender to the Arameans. If they let them live, they'll at least be able to eat and stay alive. If the Arameans kill them, they'll just die a little quicker.

It's amazing how much clarity one can have when you're out of options. When we come to our wit's end, that is the very place God wants to meet us! These four lepers threw caution to the wind. Really, they took the only logical course of action left to them. Were they ever surprised at what they found!

At dusk they arose to go to the camp of the Arameans. When they came to the outskirts of the camp, behold, there was no one there. For the Lord had caused the army of the Arameans to hear a sound of chariots and a sound of horses, even the sound of a great army, so they said to one another, "*Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite and Egyptian kings to attack us!*" Therefore, they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents and their horses and their donkeys, the entire camp just as it was, and ran for their lives.

You've got to wonder how big this panic was. Enough that they didn't even have the presence of mind to get on their horses to flee! They heard a thunderous sound—the sound of thousands of horses, causing the earth to shake. But this wasn't even a real army—it was a phantom army! God caused them to hear something that wasn't there! And notice that nobody inside the city heard a thing. How thunderous a sound it must have been to cause trained soldiers to panic and run for their lives!

The defeat of the massive Aramean army came without Israel lifting a finger. The "battle" was all in God's hands. Let's remember that Israel was, at this time, completely undeserving of this miracle. God did it only because he is good and kind.

When these lepers came to the outskirts of the camp, they entered one tent and ate and drank, and carried from there silver and gold and clothes, and went and hid them; and they returned and entered another tent and carried from there also and went and hid them. Then they said to one another, "*What we're doing is not right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace.*" (v. 9) This was the last thing the lepers expected to find. It was quite a reversal. The lepers, the biggest "losers," turn out to be the biggest winners, which is fairly typical of biblical stories!

While initially acting on impulse (eat, drink, grab the gold and silver), the lepers are stricken by their consciences. "We may be outcasts in Israel, but our own people Israel are dying at this very moment, and we've found food—how can we keep this good news to ourselves?"

So they came and called to the gatekeepers of the city, and they told them about the deserted camp. The gatekeepers called and told it within the king's household. The lepers had to call to the watchmen from outside the gates because nobody wanted them in the city. So they call out to the gatekeepers and announce this incredible news. Remember that lepers were frequently regarded as being under a curse from God and were not generally trusted. And that the king of Israel was not a godly man. Immediately, King Joram assumes the worst. It can't possibly be what it seems to be. There's got to be a catch. "It's a trick, I tell you!" Never mind that Elisha had promised just a day earlier that the very next day God would provide food in abundance. It has happened, just as promised, but the king isn't willing to believe it.

This is more cynicism at work. I can hear him saying, "Nobody's going to take me for a fool! I'll let us all starve to death, but I won't be tricked." How pathetic is that? Proudful cynicism can be deadly. I mean in that every moment King Joram delayed, people in the city of Samaria were dying. What, I wonder, was the cost of his inaction? Thankfully, at least one of the servants in his court had the presence of mind to offer a suggestion which the king followed.

Conclusion? Israel was saved. The prophecy of Elisha was completely fulfilled and the beauty of it was that no one had to lift a finger! Then imagine you're the guy they appoint to be in charge of crowd-control in the aftermath of a famine and now suddenly there's food! Thanks, I'll pass on that. But this is the fulfillment of what the man of God had prophesied. The royal officer's unbelief cost him his life! There is a cost to unbelief.

And like it or not, you and I are the lepers. We're the outcasts. Meanwhile, we've found food and drink and clean clothing and great riches—the Good News of Jesus. The Messiah has come to save us! We dare not hoard the Good News. Week by week, sometimes several times a week, we receive from God "Prophecy and Power," his Word. We've been given something precious and it's to be shared with others. We must take it to people who are dying, *people who have nothing to lose*.

We need to act in obedience to Jesus' Great Commission. "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...baptizing...and teaching...and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" (Matthew 28:18-20) Amen.

(Thanks to Rabbi Glenn for helpful sermon ideas)