

Summer Letters part 1



Six Letters we find in scripture to read and
enjoy this summer

By God's grace we have these letters
preserved for 1000's of years. Kept for us to
hear His word and know His heart of love.

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Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles

Opening the envelope

The story of the healing of Naaman is about entitlement, power, and pride.

It is about the shame attached to a chronic and visible bodily abnormality. And it is about divine power that flows through channels humble and ordinary.

We all seek healing, for ourselves or others. This letter from one powerful man to another, asked for amnesty so that Naaman could seek healing. But it was only the first and easiest hurdle Naaman had to face. He had to have the courage to face down his own pride, time and again, before he found not only the healing of his body but the remaking of his person.

2 Kings 5:1-14 Naaman Healed of Leprosy

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master and in high favour, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was a mighty man of valour, but he was a leper. Now the Syrians on one of their raids had carried off a little girl from the land of Israel, and she worked in the service of Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord, "Thus and so spoke the girl from the land of Israel." And the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel."

So he went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy." And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and stood at the door of Elisha's house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, "Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. But his servants came near and said to him, "My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you

not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

Some notes

Adapted from an essay by Brian C. Jones

A key detail of the story is that Naaman was a leper. But leprosy then and now are different conditions. The Hebrew term translated ‘leprosy’ is tzara’ath. It refers to skin blemishes and eruptions that rendered one ritually unclean and, consequently, resulted in social stigma and exclusion. It may corresponded to several skin deceases, both bacterial and viral. It is important to understand that in that world this condition meant there had to be rituals of cleansing and reintegration, before the person could be seen in public.

The story underlines Naaman’s exalted status in several ways. The king of Aram so esteems him that he endangers a fragile truce with Israel so that Naaman might seek healing. Naaman controls great wealth. He brings with him about 454 kg of silver (the same as a full sized camel), 68 kg of gold (same

as an average man of that era), and ten suits of clothing — huge treasure! And he comes with an entourage consisting of “horses and chariots,” a procession of power. The man who rolls up in front of Elisha’s house that afternoon, horses tossing their heads, chariots gleaming, boxes of silver and gold ready to buy a cure, is accustomed to honour and unquestioning obedience. If there is a prophet in Israel powerful enough to heal him, Naaman definitely has the means to persuade that prophet. He assumes that what he needs, he will get.



The humble and unlikely channels of God’s power are hinted at from the beginning of the story. Naaman learns how he might be healed from a humble source, a young Israelite girl, a powerless slave. To his credit, he values the word of the servant girl passed on through his wife. This is a hopeful sign. The true test of Naaman’s openness to the humble and humbling ways of the LORD is the scene in front of Elisha’s house. The prophet dishonours the great man at his door. He does not show himself; instead he sends a messenger. And the message offers further humiliation for Naaman. No special rite of healing will be performed. The prophet will not meet with him at all. “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times.” Elisha sends Naaman off to take a self-serve, third-rate-river cure. Outrageous! Furious, he

slams the chariot door and drives off. Perhaps it is only Naaman's desperation for a cure that keeps him from burning down the prophet's house.

Again, it is the courage of servants that saves Naaman. What temerity they have to confront their master and reason with him! And we see a second time that Naaman has the grace of being able to hear advice from outside the bubble of his privilege. He swallows his pride and treks down the long, steep road to the Jordan valley. The scene at the lowly Jordan, more of a stream than a river, less glorious by human standards than the rivers of Damascus, is the lowest point of Naaman's humiliation. While his entourage watches, he dips himself seven times in the humble Jordan. The specified number of immersions recalls the priestly rituals of cleansing. Not only Naaman's skin but his very self is remade.

He returns home a different man, a clean man with loads of foreign dirt on which to worship the true God.

Opening the envelope

After the Rabshakeh of Assyria sends a threatening letter to King Hezekiah and Jerusalem, Hezekiah went to Isaiah the prophet for council. Isaiah prophesied that God would save the city and humble the king of Assyria for mocking the “Holy One of Israel.” God sent an angel into the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 men of the Assyrian army. Their humbled king returned to Ninevah, where he was assassinated by his sons while worshiping in a pagan temple.

2 Kings 19:1- 19 King Hezekiah receives a letter threatening Jerusalem

As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord. And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz. They said to him, “Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. It may be that the Lord your God heard all the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the Lord your God has heard; therefore lift

up your prayer for the remnant that is left.” When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, “Say to your master, ‘Thus says the Lord: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumour and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.’”

The Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah, for he heard that the king had left Lachish. Now the king heard concerning Tirhakah king of Cush, “Behold, he has set out to fight against you.” So he sent messengers again to Hezekiah, saying, “Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah king of Judah: ‘Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivvah?’”

Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord and spread it before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord and said: “O Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone.”

Some notes

adapted from notes by Luke Taylor

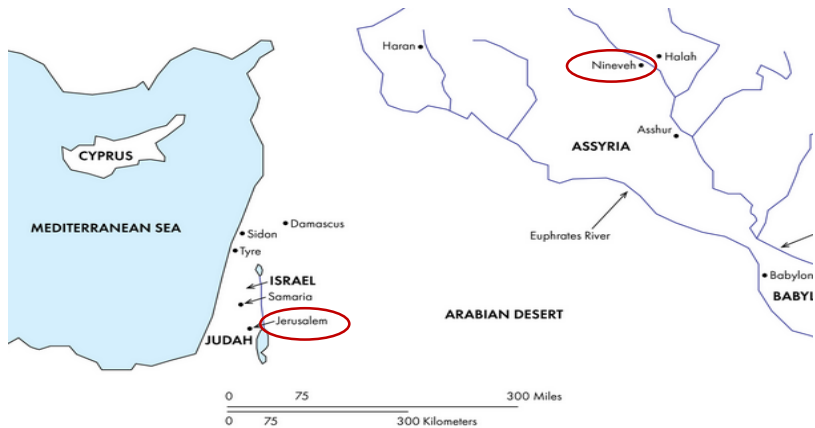
Hezekiah reigned over Judah from Jerusalem. The king of Assyria sent messengers to Jerusalem to threaten Hezekiah and try to scare him into surrendering the city.

In chapter 18, we discussed the Rabshakeh of Assyria threatening the city of Jerusalem. After hearing the threats, Hezekiah sent for God's prophet, Isaiah.

Isaiah sent back an encouraging message, telling Hezekiah the Lord would deliver the city from Assyria. God was going to strike the Assyrians and their king would return to his own land after hearing a rumor. Then the King of Assyria threatens Jerusalem again! In an attempt to get Jerusalem to surrender swiftly. His words mocked the God of Jerusalem and compared Him to the false gods of foreign cities, cities that the Assyrians had already conquered.

Hezekiah took the letter containing the threats into the Temple and spread them out before the Lord.

He prayed that God would deliver Jerusalem so all the kingdoms of the earth would know that the God of Judah was the one true God of Heaven.



Opening the envelope

The prophet's letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29, which has travelled across a vast distance in order to bring comfort and much needed advice to those who find themselves under imperial rule a long way from home, emerges as a powerful testimony to resilience and survival.

This letter reflects a traumatized community who has lost everything: their loved ones, their homes, their beloved city Jerusalem, their language and culture in addition to the familiar expressions of their religion connected to the temple that had been destroyed. The underlying question addressed by Jeremiah's letter is one that may also live in many other uprooted individuals and communities: How does one go on after such a devastating disaster?

Jeremiah 29:1-14

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. The

letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.

"For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore

your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Some notes from Juliana Claassens (Professor of Old Testament at University of Stellenbosch)

The fact that there is reference to one's children and one's children's children's weddings suggests that Judah will be in Babylon for the long haul. The exiles are hence encouraged by Jeremiah's letter to make the best of their current situation. To build a life. They are also advised to actively work for the wellbeing or peace of their newly adopted city — even praying to God for the city to prosper. As immigrant communities throughout the ages know all too well, if the city prospers, it might just go well with them as well.

Except if it does not. The reality is that quite often immigrants are scapegoated when things go wrong – for example, the king of Poland's decision to expel the Jews from Krakow at the end of the 15th century in response to a fire that destroyed a large part of the city, including the Jewish quarter.

The letter of Jeremiah thus serves also as a warning to immigrants in which they are urged to acquiesce,

to fit in to the dominant culture, to avoid bringing attention to themselves. In this sense, the letter of Jeremiah may be considered as a piece of propaganda that serves the interests of the Empire to foster peace and quiet and squelch any possibility of resistance. The potentially harmful effects of such an interpretation should be kept in mind particularly in our current context in which immigrants all over the world are struggling to survive, and perhaps hopefully also to thrive, in the cities and towns in which they find themselves.

A further theme that is worth exploring in terms of Jeremiah's letter to the Exiles, is the way in which the human activity of surviving and starting to live again is contrasted, or perhaps better, framed by God's action of fulfilling promises, of bringing back the exiles to their own land, of providing them with a hope-filled future. The reference to "finding God" is further testimony to the act of recognizing God's presence even in Exile in Babylon. Actually, it is in the midst of those ordinary activities such as building, planting, and celebrating weddings that people see God's hand. And even then, the emphasis falls upon God's action, as it is God who will allow the people to find God (Jeremiah 29:14).

A final theme in this text is the reference to the true versus false prophets that also is the focus of the

previous chapter, which outlines the battle between Jeremiah and Hananiah regarding who can claim to truly speak the word of God. In Jeremiah 29:8-9, Jeremiah warns the exiles not to listen to “the prophets and the diviners who are among you” for they are false prophets who deceive the exiles. Even when they, like Hananiah before them, say that it is God who is sending them, do not believe what they say for they are lying, according to Jeremiah.

The reason for this sharp admonition in Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles has to do with the false prophets who advise exiles to not put down roots because the current situation of having been taken against their will to a land far away was only temporary and would be over within a year or two. In contrast, Jeremiah proclaims exactly the opposite message by stating that the exile would be very long indeed. For the current exiles, 70 years most definitely meant all of their lives, and probably also for the next generation. Thus, in Jeremiah’s mind, the wise thing to do would be to accept the situation for what it is, and to seek to live a meaningful life where they find themselves.

Many of us today may encounter situations that cannot be changed, no matter how much we would have wanted things to be different. The question then is how one, amidst such difficult circumstances, can live the best possible life, including daily

practices that make life both possible and meaningful. Perhaps even more important than figuring out how to live amidst these less-than-perfect circumstances is the question of how one manages to find joy while being in exile.

