

## **“Lepers Fat and Happy” or “Four Stooges in Graceland”**

2 Kings 6.24-25; 7.1-17

January 11, 2015

*Now it came about after this, that Ben-hadad king of Aram gathered all his army and went up and besieged Samaria. <sup>25</sup> There was a great famine in Samaria; and behold, they besieged it, until a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a fourth of a kab of dove's dung for five shekels of silver.*

*Then Elisha said, "Listen to the word of the LORD; thus says the LORD, 'Tomorrow about this time a measure of fine flour will be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria.'" <sup>2</sup> The royal officer on whose hand the king was leaning answered the man of God and said, "Behold, if the LORD should make windows in heaven, could this thing be?" Then he said, "Behold, you will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat of it."*

*<sup>3</sup> Now there were four leprous men at the entrance of the gate; and they said to one another, "Why do we sit here until we die?" <sup>4</sup> "If we say, 'We will enter the city,' then the famine is in the city and we will die there; and if we sit here, we die also. Now therefore come, and let us go over to the camp of the Arameans. If they spare us, we will live; and if they kill us, we will but die." <sup>5</sup> They arose at twilight to go to the camp of the Arameans; when they came to the outskirts of the camp of the Arameans, behold, there was no one there. <sup>6</sup> 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 that they said to one another, "Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us." <sup>7</sup> Therefore they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents and their horses and their donkeys, even the camp just as it was, and fled for their life. <sup>8</sup> 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.*

*<sup>9</sup> Then they said to one another, "We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, but we are keeping silent; if we wait until morning light, punishment will overtake us. Now therefore come, let us go and tell the king's household." <sup>10</sup> So they came and called to the gatekeepers of the city, and they told them, saying, "We came to the camp of the Arameans, and behold, there was no one there, nor the voice of man, only the horses tied and the donkeys tied, and the tents just as they were." <sup>11</sup> The gatekeepers called and told it within the king's household. <sup>12</sup> Then the king arose in the night and said to his servants, "I will now tell you what the Arameans have done to us. They know that we are hungry; therefore they have gone from the camp to hide themselves in the field, saying, 'When they come out of the city, we will capture them alive and get into the city.'" <sup>13</sup> One of his servants said, "Please, let some men take five of the horses which remain, which are left in the city. Behold, they will be in any case like all the multitude of Israel who are left in it; behold, they will be in any case like all the multitude of Israel who have already perished, so let us send and see." <sup>14</sup> They took therefore two chariots with horses, and the king sent after the army of the Arameans, saying, "Go and see." <sup>15</sup> They went after them to the Jordan, and behold, all the way was full of clothes and equipment which the Arameans had thrown away in their haste. Then the messengers returned and told the king.*

*<sup>16</sup> So the people went out and plundered the camp of the Arameans. Then a measure of fine flour was sold for a shekel and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the LORD. <sup>17</sup> Now*

*the king appointed the royal officer on whose hand he leaned to have charge of the gate; but the people trampled on him at the gate, and he died just as the man of God had said, who spoke when the king came down to him.*

I'm filling in for John who WAS filling in for ME (but who got ill and needs our prayers in his present weakness)... So that's a little weird and THIS is a weird sermon – and... a weakness sermon and a Good News sermon...and THAT is, of course appropriate to any situation.

This is the time of Elisha - Elisha an OT prophet (8<sup>th</sup> C BC) - It's quite a ride actually to look at...some of the lesser known stories of the OT (Lucas will end his Judges series...last story in THAT book is a WILD STORY!) So many of these stories are full of "dark grace".

Today's passage is LONG and maybe you noticed we left out a whole section and I'm not sure you're going to get it-after just one initial reading. It's really a picture of weakness - it's a kind of seed theology - an emerging doctrine.

The OT is demonstrating here and in a variety of ways how God thinks about and responds to human weakness. And what eventually emerges (fully in the NT) is an understanding of weakness that is opposite and counter-intuitive to everything we're taught in society (in the secular world) and even opposite to what we learn in spirituality, religion and morality as well.

Let's just look at the story and then look at what the Bible really teaches about weakness:

1. Retelling the story
2. What it teaches about: the Bible's unique understanding of weakness

The marauding bands of the Syrians or "Arameans" have withdrawn from Northern Israel ("Samaria"/Northern Kingdom).

Syria stopped (as it were) the terrorist activity but they've now returned with a proper kind of war. And - as was common - they surround the capitol city and they imposed famine. They starve the enemy into surrendering - don't allow any food into the city.

And in this flash-famine, Samaria (that is N. Israel) has quickly become desperate! Imagine how it would be for us... Suddenly, the price of food is so outrageously high that the least desirable part of an unclean animal sells for one month's wages - a donkey head sells for 80 shekels of silver.

And the king of Samaria (that is N. Israel) learns that people in the city are cannibalizing human babies. (I told you: this is dark stuff!) And when the king hears that, he weeps and he rages, "This is because of that prophet Elisha - he's brought judgment on us!"

And the king (from the palace) sends his deputy (the Lieutenant) to execute Elisha!

And when the Lieutenant arrives, Elisha has the elders bar the door - and the guy yells in “We can no longer trust God - God is not the solution – God is the problem!” (paraphrase of 6:33)

But the man-of-God (Elisha) has a message from God, a message of grace: “No! Don’t stop trusting God now! Tomorrow, God is going to supply us with more than you could possibly dream—Good News!”

But the Lieutenant says “Bah Humbug! I don’t believe God means us well - and I don’t think He can supply us - even if a window from heaven opened, God couldn’t provide in the way you describe! He’s NOT willing and not able! - I tell ya’: we won’t see it!”

And Elisha, seeing that this man WILL not believe the Good News about God’s plans and God’s character, Elisha says “Oh -you will see it - but you won’t eat it”

And it’s at this point...in the story...we meet the four stooges – Four Lepers Fat and Happy. But (of course) at this point, they’re only lepers starved and desperate.

And-being “between a rock and a hard place” (can’t go into our home-city - there’s no food and we’ll die!...Can’t go the Arameans - they’ll kill us...probably...But then again, they DO have food...so... it’s worth a try!...’cause we’ve got nothing to lose!”)

So, driven by desperation, the weakest of the weak, the famished, four dying lepers leave the city gate and stumble at twilight into the enemy camp, right through the front door.

But - the Arameans (Israel’s enemies) heard a rumor (as some scholars...v. 6, “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”) either a rumor or an audio-illusion. And believing that Israel could somehow have hired a huge mercenary army from another country and that the hired army is now attacking, the Arameans go into complete panic and mayhem and they leave out the back door fleeing for their lives.

They leave almost everything in the camp: they had-massive supplies of food (to keep up the siege forever) and these withered/desperate/diseased/outcasts stagger into the enemy camp and ...It’s better than Christmas morning! They go wild - there’s food and clothing and treasure everywhere. And they’re plundering - like pirates! And they’re carrying as much as they can hold, arms full of spoils. Taking and stashing...and stuffing their mouths! And you can imagine - they’ve gotta be giddy and laughing and crying and scared and amazed – “THIS IS C R A Z Y ! !”

Until ... one of these lepers, fat and happy, says (v.9), “Hey guys...wait! This ain’t right — I feel guilty not sharing this Good News (LXX-“evangellias”=“Gospel”) we have to share this news with the King or we’re gonna get in trouble...”

So it’s back to the city gate - and from there (by messenger) back to the palace - the writer takes us full circle. We started at the palace with the king weeping!

Now the King has to send out scouts because it's all too good to be true – it could be a trap!

And the scouts ARE willing to go because they've all got nothing to lose - they're all gonna die if they stay in that city. They're THAT needy and desperate and weak...But after the scouts return confirming the Good News, the people of the city go and plunder the Aramean camp and suddenly there's a super abundance of food—really is rags to riches!

Fine flour sells for the price of common barley (like filet mignon selling for the price of Spam)!

And the King sends the unbelieving Lieutenant back to the city gate and he attempts crowd-control but he's trampled...and doesn't get to eat and dies (as Elisha said).

Alright now, what's the budding idea, the emerging doctrine in this story...What does it say about the Bible's unique understanding of human weakness?

Let's trace this bud all the way to the full flower in the NT: 3 perspectives on weakness (and a final question).

#1-You only see the uniqueness of the Bible's teaching on weakness when you face that moment when God Himself became weak - in the death of Jesus Christ. God becomes a Man (unites Himself to a human body and human nature) and He loses (as it were) gives up His power and becomes totally weak.

Becomes a baby.

Becomes a minor child.

A servant (Phil 2:1-11).

And finally...becomes cursed and condemned with no power, no legal rights/status, a criminal/an outcast/like a leper ("like one from whom people hide their eyes" – Isaiah 53)

And yet—as Paul wrote, (1 Cor. 1:25) "The weakness of God is stronger than men."

That is, when God became weak in the Person of Jesus Christ, in THAT weakness, God undermined and disarmed all of humanity's strong objections and defiance and opposition. He exposed our strength and showed: it's an illusion...It was IN this weakness that God planted His Kingdom on planet earth...plundered the enemy and triumphed! God's weakness > our strength!

And because this weakness is so central and so important to the way God does things: it means: for those who enter His Kingdom and live through faith in Jesus Christ—weakness is also very important to them.

They enter the Kingdom not by their qualifications or connections or by the strength of their will or discipline—they don't make some qualifying gesture of goodness or power/commitment.

They enter the kingdom thru the door of need - through desperation and hunger, recognizing their disease and weakness. It's not by becoming strong/good but by becoming weak. It's not by strength but weakness. That's why the basic ethic of this kingdom is stated in the words of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5):

“-Blessed are the poor in spirit  
For theirs is the Kingdom of heaven  
-Blessed are those who mourn  
For they will be comforted  
-Blessed are the meek  
For they shall inherit the earth”

These lepers contribute to the Bible's whole teaching that says: “unlike the world and the constant longing for strength and influence and control AND unlike in religion - using moral strength to measure up and show one's worth and deserving - IN THE GOSPEL seeing our weakness and need puts us in position to be blessed.

So-that's the first perspective - the Cross of Christ-provides a new paradigm for understanding weakness.

2<sup>nd</sup>-Seeing the world/life in this new way can almost make us want to be weaker - the lepers were the weakest of all and they became fat and happy. And the apostles, particularly Paul, taught that when people really get the Gospel - they will inevitably draw a conclusion that, “If the more sinful people get more grace well let me sin MORE so I can get more grace!”

People who sort-of measure up to societal standards and to the expectations of their religious community, people with manners and success - they often think they don't need this bloody, messy cross-salvation – they just need a few fine adjustments.

But really big sensational sinners - the morally diseased and outcasts - they see Jesus Christ as their only hope. So...why am I trying so hard? Why not sin big so I can get big grace- but Paul always says “No Way! Don't do that!”

And Paul's point is: you are already more messed up than you know you are – and the key is: just see what's already there and you'll have all the weakness you'll ever need.

The key is not to sin more - the key is just to see your sins and weakness, seeing your flaws makes you humble - and God gives grace to the humble. Grace is for the desperate and dissatisfied who really want to change and grow—so don't sin more—just see more of the sin that's already there. C. S. Lewis quote (The Four Loves) “The good man is sorry for the sins which have increased his Need. He is not entirely sorry for the fresh Need they have produced.”

3. The penalty for deliberately refusing and reversing this Gospel and grace order. The penalty is always great. You see it in Elijah when the prophet's asst.- tried to make the new convert

(Naaman) pay for grace-the penalty was stiff. And here too when this Lieutenant says, “No Way! I don’t believe God is good to the weak—I won’t accept it!..Can’t happen!” He ends up not only hungry but dead.

A pretty big warning there: God is turning the world’s value system upside-down-showing that grace is not for the strong and proud but for the weak and humble. And this really is why—in this world—sometimes the very worst thing that can ever happen to a person is that he is strong...or wealthy...or independent. Some people-who have had a lot of pain can’t see that God is gracious (that was this Lieutenant) and others are so secure in stuff: they never see: it’s all a gift from the God of grace. Either way - nothing is more spiritually fatal than to reject/deny – or neglect God’s grace and goodness.

Fourth, what should you do with your weakness? Two ways to use your weakness:

First - Learn to share it with others - this was a little band of lepers - a little weakness community. So learn not to hide whatever it is: your hurts/your failings/difficulties and develop what one friend calls “appropriate vulnerability.” That is: on one hand avoid being secretive/self-justifying and private (that’s a misuse of weakness).

On the other hand don’t be fixated and defined by your weakness - the victim mentality - the self-punisher – that low self-image that is really just another form of self-ish-ness and therefore the flipside of pride. All these ways exploit personal weakness and make it an end rather than a means. One rule of thumb might be: share it, when it can help others.

A second Gospel-use for personal weakness is that I identify with the weak/needy. What do I mean by that? Seeing myself as a radically flawed person - weak in loving as God calls me to love, seeing MYSELF as weak, I am able to move toward other weak people and -not as the Big Daddy, Mr. Superior Guy, but as a fellow leper, I can say (like the ones in this episode) “Hey this is too good to keep to myself and there’s so much to go around – can I share some good news about where I got fed?”

And this is why believing the Gospel way (living in Graceland) engenders a kinship for widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor (those categories mandated by God again and again throughout the Bible).

A final question: What do you have to lose? Today’s story had so many people with nothing to lose - the lepers, the scouts, the people. But imagine (if you can) imagine someone in that starving city but HE is not starving. HE has a donkey’s head and when everyone goes to get the treasure and unlimited fine flour - he says, “No thanks-I’m not in need” - I hope you won’t lose the kingdom because you’re satisfied with reputation/strength - don’t be satisfied with fake strength... when infinite joy is offered!