



Don't Be Afraid to Take Baby Steps

Overcoming Obstacles

Some things aren't worth the trouble. Others are. And going to a college football game is one of them. It wasn't a dark and stormy night, like the setting in one of Snoopy's unfinished novels in the *Peanuts* comics series. It was a cold and rainy afternoon in Norman, Oklahoma. The University of Oklahoma was playing another unworthy opponent, and I was there to make sure the opponent knew how unworthy they were.

Was I alone in the misery of the cold and rain that accompanied that fall football outing? No. Did that make it any more comfortable? No again. Eighty-some thousand souls had joined me for the occasion. Thankfully, for once in my ministry I didn't have to provide the refreshments! I don't remember how much I paid for the ticket. It was either too much, or someone had given it to me. I just remember what I went through to see another lopsided win by the Big 12 champions.



It started with the parking lot. Too full. Too far away. The reserved section of the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium parking lot was neatly laid out, newly striped, and within a few paces of the entrance. It was reserved for the major donors, the faculty, the university president's mother-in-law, and the family of a recruit that was still digesting a T-bone steak as he walked those baby steps to the gate.

I wasn't in the reserved section. If memory serves me right, I think I was in a nearby state—either Texas or Arkansas. Not being a major donor, an adjunct professor, or a recruit, I found myself in one of the parking lots next to the university's power plant, a mile or so from the gate. No newly painted markings graced this parking lot, just an oil leak from an old Ford pickup truck parked next to my car, a truck normally used to haul fertilizer to lawns and shrubs around the campus.

Dressed loyally in my crimson and cream, I made my way to the stadium. What seemed like hours later, I reached my goal: the refreshment stand. Football games are best observed with a huge container of popcorn, a jumbo hotdog, and a 24-ounce cup of diet soda. But by the time I got there, the friendly alumni folks were out of them all! So I rushed to the section marked on my ticket, and there, in the spirit of the occasion, I stood for the rest of the game. I did my best to watch my team play as an endless throng walked in and out of my row to get to the refreshment stand—or someplace else.

OBSTACLES ARE JUST PART OF THE PROCESS.

It's the same in life as it is in going to football games. You don't always get the reserved section. The sun isn't always shining. Sometimes it rains. And sometimes people get in your way.

Ask Naaman. He was a commander in the king's army. The Bible calls him a "great man." In 2 Kings 5:1 we read, "Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram." He must have had medals pinned to his uniform. His brand-new chariot probably had chrome spinner wheels and a 10-CD stereo, with a woofer that would scare the staunchest of horses.

Then the kicker. One description trumped the others: "He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy" (v. 1). The best and the worst were linked together in the same résumé. It may look like yours. The "bests" and the "worsts" may be different. But the dilemma is the same. You had it all going for you, but suddenly the bad news arrived. The obstacles rumbled in, and life was never the same again.

"Is this some kind of joke, Lord?" you ask either out loud or under your breath. "If it is, I guess I just don't get it." You've probably arm-wrestled with God, just as Naaman did at the first notice of the white spots on his arm—spots what would soon grow to eat away his skin, that would reduce his life's status from "great" to groveling. I love the way the Lord took Naaman from the pinnacle to the pits—and back. It's a great story and full of help for those of us who are the victims of what seems to be one of life's "practical jokes."

NAAMAN WASN'T EXEMPT FROM LIFE'S CALAMITIES

Naaman had everything going for him, including membership in the human race. And that membership would ultimately spell trouble for him. He was born into a family tree that



had bad roots and weak bark. He was one of Adam's kin. You remember Adam, don't you? The first man. The first farmer. The first husband. The first to disobey God—and the first to suffer the consequences. We read in Gen. 2:7-9,

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Adam had it all going for him, and then he lost it all by doing the one thing God asked him not to do: eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Did I mention that Adam wasn't alone in the Garden of Eden? God had given him a wife—to make sure he did everything right: Naaman's great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandmother, Eve. But she didn't do everything right. She made a fruit bowl, and Adam got bowled over! He got food poisoning—and passed it along to all generations after him. You can read the whole sordid story in Gen. 2—3. They both disobeyed God and suffered the consequences that entered the blood stream of humanity and ended up as spots on Naaman's skin.

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men. . . . Death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come (*Rom. 5:12, 14*).

For Adam, life's obstacles come from his *obstinate* attitude! He refused to obey God, and life took a turn for the worse. Obstacles come even when we don't sin. It's just part of life. Thank you very much, Adam! But like a man in the Old Testament who went from being a commander to being a catastrophe, we can overcome them. Let's learn from him.

Naaman's privilege couldn't prevent the problem. He may have been one of the richest men in the neighborhood, but the poorest man there wouldn't trade places with him. He had leprosy.

The disease didn't fit Naaman's lifestyle. He was a cut above the crowd. But now he had a very base problem.

Obstacles don't care about lifestyles. They come and go, no matter how much you have in your 401(K). Problems don't bow to people. *People bow to problems.* It's as natural as corn-on-the-cob at a church picnic.

Naaman's position couldn't prevent the problem. Naaman was a "commander," one promotion away from sitting on the throne of Israel. He was at the height of his military career. But just when he thought he had it all under control, he lost control. Life threw him a sucker punch in the form of a terminal illness. Some of the greatest military or political leaders of history have been defeated not by human enemies but by common illnesses. It's like the nursery rhyme:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall;
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

When obstacles come, your position on the corporate ladder doesn't make you taller than they are. Naaman's position couldn't prevent the problem.



Naaman's plans couldn't prevent the problem. Just to show you how the king's commander is so much like all of us, we see that he tried to circumvent the calamity with a human plan.

Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy" (*2 Kings 5:2-6*).

I love God's sense of humor. He sits on the throne of the heavens, with all power and might and wisdom, and watches us humans use straw swords to fight against the things that threaten us.

Posturing—"I will send a letter to the king of Israel."

Bartering—"Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing."

"There has to be a way out of this predicament!" we say. "Let's see—if I do this or that, maybe . . ." Naaman knew the drill: bring gifts. Pay your own way. But money can't buy healing. Human schemes and plans may make us feel comfortable for the moment, but they don't work in the end. Life's downturns or dangers are usually immune to human designs. You and I must have a higher, more powerful, source for deliverance.

No matter where Naaman went and what he took with him, he still had a problem: leprosy. It was a human calamity

without a human cure. But Naaman took a right turn at the intersection of his life.

NAAMAN'S CALAMITY CALLED FOR AN UNCOMMON CURE

Obviously "All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again." When the king of Israel got the letter, he had, as they say in my home state of West Virginia, a "hissie fit."

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? 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).

The king thought Naaman was trying to make him look bad. He knew he didn't have the power to heal Naaman's problem. In spite of the letter. In spite of the gold. In spite of the brand-new wardrobe.

Watch the sequence.

God took over when humanity gave up. Uncommon cures for the obstacles of our life begin with trusting God instead of self. That's just as important for our salvation as it is for our healing.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (*Rom. 5:6-8*).

Just when we thought we had enough spiritual funds to make bail, to get out of the prison of our past or future, God took over. God supplied an uncommon source of deliverance—His only Son. The Judge paid our penalty with His own life!



Naaman discovered an uncommon cure for his calamity.

When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: “Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel” (2 Kings 5:8).

God didn't glance at His caller ID and say, “It's Naaman! Will he never learn how to deal with his obstacles?” No, the God of compassion and mercy simply and patiently sent an ambassador: Elisha, the prophet.

Elisha, the poor prophet. Poor enough at one point to live off biscuits baked by a widowed mom. Human enough at one point to sit under a tree and weep over his failures. But rich enough in faith to approach the commander of the king's army with a solution for his leprosy: *God*.

How we have it mixed up at times! “When all else fails, try God.” Instead, we ought to simply say, “Try God. Give up pouting, pining, and planning! Give it over to God.”

Naaman started toward the cure when he started toward God. God is a perfect gentleman. He won't barge into our plans. He won't interrupt us in the midst of our tantrums and tears. He won't start removing our obstacles without our permission. “So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house” (v. 9).

Even when I don't get the joke, I love God's sense of humor. I'm out here on the highways and byways of life searching desperately for a cure for my calamities, and God looks through the window of heaven and wave—as I drive by!

Every fiber of His holy being longs to cry out, “Won't you stop in?” But He just waits, patiently, for travelers like you and me to stop at “Elisha's house”—the place of surrender, the place of healing.

Naaman stopped the healing process when he tried to regain control.

Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.” But Naaman went away angry and said, “I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy” (2 Kings 5:10-11).

Naaman was willing to go on the *Dr. Phil* show, but he wasn't willing to listen for his advice. Or, as Julie Andrews suggested so eloquently in another era, he wasn't willing to take the “spoonful of sugar” to “make the medicine go down.”

The man in need of an uncommon cure for his common calamity put the cure on “pause.” How? By trying to set the rules, by telling God what should be done instead of listening for God to tell him what to do. “I thought that he would surely come out to *me*.” He illustrated our own tendency to question God.

Namaan tried to save himself. He thought his way was better than God's, his plan more powerful than God's: ““Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed? So he turned and went off in a rage” (v. 12).

Now before we get all puffed up like a lemon meringue pie topping, let's think about our own journey. Have there not been times when we've tried our own shortcuts? Haven't we tried to insert our Plan B into God's Master Plan?

“I know it's a big obstacle, Lord. But let me suggest that instead of . . . we might try. . . .”



Then the voice of heaven rings in our ears through the words of another prophet, Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isa. 55:8).

WHEN NAAMAN OBEYED GOD, THE OBSTACLE WAS OVERCOME

God’s prophet Elisha didn’t promise healing in the river Naaman chose. The healing was in the river *God* chose. It was as different as the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean! God didn’t meet Naaman’s need until Naaman obeyed God’s plan. Common obstacles are overcome with uncommon obedience.

Everything in us says, “There has to be a better way.” But God knows the best way. That’s what the Wisdom Writer was trying to tell us: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Prov. 14:12).

Naaman listened to the right voice. See what happened next:

Naaman’s servants went to him and said, “My father, 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!’” (2 Kings 5:13).

When we take our obstacles into our own hands, we have a tendency to listen for big voices: booming TV commercials, brazen advertisements, big, expensive promises.

Naaman didn’t get what he wanted—and needed—until he got off his high horse and listened to his footmen, his servants. It’s the small voice that whispers to our hearts that’s more important than the big voice that appeals to our heads. Elijah, Elisha the prophet’s mentor, learned that lesson hiding in a cave in fear of the obstacles in his own life.

He went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper (*1 Kings 19:9-12*).

It was the “gentle whisper” that caught Elijah’s attention. He was moved to abandon the cave of fear and get back on the job, not by a loud display of God’s power but by a gentle voice of His presence. Similarly, Naaman began the healing process—again—by *stopping* and *stooping* to hear the tiniest message from God’s messengers.

Naaman did the right thing. “So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him” (2 Kings 5:14). Everything about the process was seemingly out of a commander’s character:

Listening to lowly servants.

Washing in strange rivers.

Following the instructions of a prophet instead of a political leader.

But it was the right thing to do. It was God’s way. It was the way to wholeness. And no matter how senseless it looked

on the outside, inside Naaman knew there was healing at the end of the road. God's "detour" didn't have a "No Outlet" sign at the end. When Naaman simply said "Yes" to God's Holy Spirit, his own spirit began to be made whole.

Naaman saw the right results. "And his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy" (v. 14).

Upon learning that he was diabetic, legendary Nazarene evangelist Uncle Bud Robinson was said to have remarked, "I asked God to make me sweet, and he overdid it!" That's Naaman language. God didn't just heal Naaman's leprosy—He did an "extreme makeover." Naaman's "flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy" (2 Kings 5:14).

NAAMAN'S CALAMITIES TURNED INTO A CONFESSION

The saying goes, "The best advertisement is word of mouth." It's the same in the Kingdom. When God does something for us—when He removes obstacles—the best thing to do is sing His praises. Every crisis in life is a challenge to our faith. But when God helps us meet the challenge, we ought to give Him the credit.

Naaman displayed his gratitude by praising God. "Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel'" (v. 15). The Bible says that God inhabits the praises of His people. Gratitude is a place where God dwells. When you do what God asks you to do, He'll do it—one way or another. Then, when He does what He promised to do, the parental advice to a child who has just received a blessing comes into focus: "What do you say?" Anything less than "Thank you" is unacceptable.

Naaman displayed his humanity by bartering with God.

“Please accept now a gift from your servant,” he said (v. 15). God understands our humanity. He became one of us in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. If Jesus was tempted to turn stone into bread, the enemy can surely tempt us to turn bread into stone—to lessen the miracle, to think we played a greater part in the process than we really did.

Naaman tried to give God his credit card instead of a thank-you note. Instead of simply acknowledging that there was no other way out of the obstacle than God’s way, Naaman’s humanity began to show like a gorilla at a garden show.

The prophet answered, “As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.” And even though Naaman urged him, he refused. “If you will not,” said Naaman, “please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD” (2 Kings 5:16-17).

There he goes again! Trying to set the rules, trying to tell God’s messenger how to do the whole worship thing. But Elisha knew God wanted a heart of praise more than a piece of land. He wanted a heart of obedience more than an offering in the plate, even more than perfect attendance at church.

Obstacles once overcome are stepping stones—not mile-stones. God doesn’t bring us “here” to leave us here. He brings us “here” to take us *there*.

Naaman took his miracle with him. ““Go in peace,’ Elisha said” (v. 19). So Naaman went on.

Converted to Christ at a Billy Graham crusade, a Hollywood actor by the name of Stuart Hamblen put his praise for



what the Lord had done in his life into the lyrics of an immortal gospel song, "It Is No Secret." Naaman continued his journey with the blessing of the Lord on him, a blessing he had received on knees of obedience. Others sought that blessing (v. 20), because Naaman couldn't keep his mouth shut about how God had used muddy water to make him totally clean.