

II Kings 5:19b-27 The Tragedy of Gehazi

Introduction

In life there are endless examples of people who have lost sight of how they ought to behave in a particular situation. A recent example in the news concerned the supermarket firm Lidl, in relation to its advertising strategy for a brand of cheese. On the front of the packaging is a picture of the Greek island of Santorini and in particular of its picturesque Orthodox Churches. On the surface this appears to convey an image of summer and warm sunshine and a feeling of wellbeing – which the company hoped would be associated with its product. Except for one thing – the company digitally altered the pictures to remove the crosses from the domes of the churches. It was claimed that this symbol of Christianity might be offensive to some potential customers so they had removed it. The company claimed that they had a policy of removing religious symbols from pictures on their products to avoid causing offence – we wait to see which symbols of other faiths are removed by this company from pictures on their products! (Andrew Brown, *The Guardian*, 4 September 2017). They are now rightly embarrassed by their foolish actions, but we can expect to see more similar actions in our increasingly secular society. The problem, though, runs deeper than politicians in government, major media corporations and big business policy makers. In fact, there are people who would claim to have faith in God who behave in a similar fashion. Their words and actions reveal that at that point in time they have lost sight of how a man or woman of God should behave. When we live in a society where Christians will be in a minority and in some workplaces and families are the only believer, it is easy to feel pressured to go along with values and ways of behaving that are contrary to the teaching of God's Word. In this passage of the Bible there is a sobering example of a man who lost sight of how he ought to behave and as a result faced some consequences that would overshadow the rest of his life. This short story is a sobering account to challenge each of us to keep alert and watch over our lives so that we don't experience a similar loss of perspective.

II Kings 5 contains two stories that contain some significant contrasts between the actions of Elisha and Gehazi, but also in the vision and sense of perspective in the latter half of the story between Naaman and Gehazi. It is salutary that the same factual information and miraculous intervention of God in this situation has such a different outcome in the lives of the participants in this story. It is no different, in many respects, to numerous situations in every generation where people respond very differently to events taking place around them or in which they are participants. However, this account of the tragedy of Gehazi should also make us stop and think about our priorities and sense of perspective on life. Here was a man so close to the spiritual leader of the nation, yet so far from living in a way that pleased God. Here was a man who could have given all the 'right' theological answers to questions about his convictions, but who was choosing to live in a completely different way, allowing the influences of people of different world views to shape his lifestyle more than the God he professed to serve. It serves as a clear warning to us today about the choices we make.

1. The self-centredness of Gehazi (II Kings 5:19b-20)

(a) **It was not a momentary slip** This man had been in body with Elisha for a significant period of time, but in his inner convictions this was not the first time he was on 'a different page' to the spiritual leader with whom he served. Remember, for example, when the distressed Shunamite woman whose son was dying came to find Elisha a few years earlier, what was the response of this man to her? II Kings 4:27 states: ²⁷ *When she reached the man of*

God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. **Gehazi came over to push her away**, but the man of God said, 'Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me why.' In that context there were a few concerns about his behaviour. First of all there was a lack of interest in this person in their time of need. There was evident harshness in his approach that was out of place given the position he held so close to Elisha. His concern was about a possible breach of social etiquette with the woman holding onto Elisha's feet, rather than maintaining an appropriate distance in speaking with him. It never occurred to him that she was in serious distress. He could do the right things in his job and must have done so to retain it for some years, but his heart was not in the right place. It is deeply sobering that someone could be in body in church, but in their heart and values be far from those God desires. But God knows everything that is going on in our inner person. Remember the lesson the earlier prophet Samuel learned when going to Bethlehem to choose a king from the sons of Jesse to replace Saul. In I Samuel 16:6-7 it states: ⁶ *When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord.'* ⁷ *But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'* We can fool other people as to what is going on inside us some of the time, but we can never hide from God our attitudes or inner thoughts on anything. Is there something you need to ask the Lord to help you address in your inner person that no-one else knows anything about? If only Gehazi had done that prior to the tragic mistake made when Naaman visited his community.

Psalm 139 is a wonderful Psalm that celebrates the joy of a child of God who delights in being in fellowship with such an amazing God. It begins with these words: *You have searched me, Lord, and You know me.* ² *You know when I sit and when I rise; You perceive my thoughts from afar.* ³ *You discern my going out and my lying down; You are familiar with all my ways.* ⁴ *Before a word is on my tongue You, Lord, know it completely.* ⁵ *You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.* ⁶ *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.* ⁷ *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?* The answer is of course 'no-where'! David did not view that as something to fear but as an opportunity for spiritual growth and development. This is clear from the closing words of the Psalm in Psalm 139:23-24: *Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.* ²⁴ *See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* We naturally are advised by doctors to watch out for early signs of physical disease in our bodies and where appropriate seek medical advice, but do we watch over our spiritual lives and seek to take action when we observe inappropriate attitudes or priorities developing within us? May God the Holy Spirit help us to maintain spiritually healthy lives. Tragic falls into sin do not happen overnight, but are a process that could be stopped at any stage – if there is a willingness to address it. Had Elisha noticed anything untoward in his servant Gehazi? We simply don't know, but having a concern for someone does not necessarily mean that we are able to prevent them making tragic mistakes or even lesser ones.

(b) **It had racial overtones** (II Kings 5:19b-20) *After Naaman had travelled some distance, ²⁰ Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said to himself, 'My master was too easy on Naaman, this Aramean, by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something from him.'* One thing about the Bible is that there is honesty and openness about the lives of the people observed in its pages. This should not surprise us as racism is an ugly blight in every generation and is experienced in every continent of the world. The sin nature within us can so easily cause us to view inappropriately some people who are different to ourselves. So there is a battle to overcome within us at times. Racial stereotyping can be a real problem greater than is sometimes acknowledged. The law of the land may come down heavily on blatant examples of speech and actions that are racist, but changing attitudes can be a much harder process. I suspect had we the capacity to ask him,

Gehazi might have declared: 'I'm not a racist, but...' to justify his actions. But underlying his thought process here was a justification that had a clear racial undertone. Sadly many people in the world will have experienced or observed this kind of behaviour in the workplace or some other social context. We must be vigilant to ensure that this kind of problem is never given an opportunity to develop within Christian Churches. Paul's remarkable words in Galatians 3:26-28 need to be practised across the world in the communities of faith that profess to be following Jesus. ²⁶ *So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,* ²⁷ *for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* ²⁸ *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* ²⁹ *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

(c) **It had materialistic overtones** (I Kings 5:20)... *by not accepting from him what he brought. As surely as the Lord lives, I will run after him and **get something from him.*** As has been increasingly recognised we live in a society dominated by materialism- that is the primary focus on things we can obtain to make our lives easier, or bring greater comfort or pleasure. People living to shop for more... whatever it may be. Linked to it is an expectation that we have a right to an ever increasing standard of living at a time when others in the world are struggling to actually live! The saying 'everyone has a price' is not universally true but is more accurate in the Western world than it ought to be. How many people in a workplace will keep quiet about unethical practices, if they are offered a promotion or a pay rise? How many politicians value party offices / promotion up the political ladder rather than stand for their principles? How many people think of work promotions or advancements in their careers ahead of their families? How many of us struggle to distinguish between our needs and our wants? The latter is not necessarily bad, we strictly need very little, and it is good to enjoy the pleasure of purchasing something we have saved for over time. Or a special holiday to mark a special occasion or anniversary; these can be the source of treasured memories in our families or with our friends. We also enjoy our little treats that make stressful days a little more bearable. The question we need to face is this: Are my possessions my reason for living or are they simply tools or means to enable me to live some aspect of the life God has for me? If I am getting a particular house / car / clothing item or whatever it may be to impress someone else then maybe I need to think again. Our society is economically dependent on materialism which sadly makes it vulnerable to market crashes like the one we have lived through over the last decade. For the Christian our priorities ought to be first and foremost to honour God in the choices we make. Then secondly our families followed by other people, including our church families; sometimes parents can feel pressured to work extra hours to get the latest things for their children –because other children in their classes have them, rather than recognise that they might value some of your time ahead of the things, even if that is not how it is always articulated! The goods on offer from Naaman were too enticing to say 'no' to! What a contrast to Elisha's response in II Kings 5:16: *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. This was such a shock to Naaman. He had not met someone of significance who had declined such a gift before. There was a simple reason for it. God had healed Naaman not Elisha. Therefore, Elisha needed to make his point very clearly and it was a powerful witness to this influential Syrian leader. Gehazi, by the actions he had planned was threatening to undo the significant work done by his master. What was particularly bad was his vow in II Kings 5:20: *As surely as the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something from him.* Invoking an oath as Elisha did in his public witness was one thing, but using the same vocabulary prior to doing something contrary to God's will is extremely serious. Sadly Gehazi's blind-spot was his greed for things. Do you or I have any potential blind-spots in our lives we need to address?

2. The dishonesty of Gehazi (II Kings 5:21-24)

(a) **A misplaced zeal** (II Kings 5:21)²¹ *So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. When Naaman saw him running towards him, he got down from the chariot to meet him. 'Is everything all right?' he asked. Is this the first reference we have to Gehazi voluntarily doing something in a hurry! There is a reference to Elisha urging him to run to attend to an urgent situation with the Shunamite boy (II Kings 4:29), but the text is ambiguous as to whether he complied fully with Elisha's instructions to run to the house. There are plenty of warnings in the Bible about people who are quicker to do things that are wrong than alternative choices that are right. In a context advising readers about choosing their friends wisely, Proverbs 1:15-16a states: *my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; ¹⁶for their feet rush into evil...* How easily in a crowd someone can feel pressured to consent to say or do something that they would never have contemplated let alone done on their own. On the day I am writing this sermon one of the main stories on the BBC News was about teenage girls seriously regretting allowing boys to pressure them into inappropriate sexual activity or to send revealing pictures. There are so many contexts where we need to take care and challenge inappropriate requests to us. In a list of things that God hates, listed in Proverbs chapter six are the following: *a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil...* (Proverbs 6:18). Sometimes we are on our own as here where there was no-one who could have challenged Gehazi about what he was planning to do. It is important that we create our own boundaries to ensure that we are accountable both to the Lord and where appropriate to other people. If there is an area of particular weakness we identify in ourselves then we may need to ask another person to hold us accountable on a regular basis to check how we are getting on. If only Gehazi had identified someone who could have challenged this attitude earlier –but at the end of the day we are all responsible for the choices we make. Is there any issue you need to address to prevent you making a major mistake?*

(b) **One sin leads to another** (II Kings 5:22)²² *'Everything is all right,' Gehazi answered. 'My master sent me to say, "Two young men from the company of the prophets have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two sets of clothing."' Sin is not simply a one-off attitude, speech, or action problem. One sin very quickly requires others to cover it up or to bolster its credibility. Gehazi is greedy, but needs to justify his materialistic aspirations and his underlying racist attitude with a cloak of religion. It is interesting in the very recently published biography of Charles Darwin, *Victorian Mythmaker*, by A.N. Wilson, an authority on the Victorian era, the author argues that Darwinism became very popular because it suited the needed of a significant proportion of the Victorian middle classes who wanted to enjoy their superior status and growing wealth without any feelings of guilt about exploiting the poorest members of society. Here Gehazi lies bringing in the prophet Elisha, for whom Naaman has the highest regard, and this blatant lie which he knew would not be challenged will ensure the potential success of his mission. In society it is well known that many criminals would not commit crimes if they knew they were going to get caught. However, they convince themselves that they are cleverer than other criminals and smarter than the police; therefore, they are unlikely to ever have to pay for their misdeeds. This attitude of invincibility, of not being accountable for our attitudes, speech and actions, is incredibly dangerous. A verse that in my childhood was often quoted to children, but is equally applicable to adults, is very appropriate to quote here. It comes from Numbers 32 and in context is a challenge to certain of the tribes of Israel to honour the promises they have made about their future conduct: ³ *'But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out* (Numbers 32:23). To acknowledge that, for example, if I do something that I know is wrong –eventually I will be found out and have to*

face significant consequences for my sinful choices. It will come out in time – to acknowledge that ahead of time is a significant deterrent and a challenge to us to keep ourselves right before the Lord. In any case, the Lord sees everything so I cannot hide anything from Him. Is there an issue I need to address and turn from today? Is there an area of my life where I have been leading a double life which is inappropriate for me as a Christian?

(c) **A guilty conscience was inevitable** (II Kings 5:23-24) ²³ *‘By all means, take two talents,’ said Naaman. He urged Gehazi to accept them, and then tied up the two talents of silver in two bags, with two sets of clothing. He gave them to two of his servants, and they carried them ahead of Gehazi. ²⁴ When Gehazi came to the hill, he took the things from the servants and put them away in the house. He sent the men away and they left.* Naaman is incredibly generous and insists that Gehazi takes even more of a gift from him than he had requested, but the quantity is so heavy that he needs two of Naaman’s servants to carry the stuff for him. How many people would have seen the men walking along the road towards the house where Gehazi lived? The more people saw it, the greater the likelihood of his master finding out. I have a feeling that this man had an increasingly guilty conscience- it was not enough to cause him to question what he was doing because his desire to get his hands on these goods was greater still. Yet he would know that his attitude was at variance with his professed convictions. Just think about the implications if, for example, Elisha had not challenged him later that day; when could he wear those expensive Syrian clothes without someone asking how he could have afforded them. Where in the district could he exchange his high value silver talents without giving revealing the source of his wealth? Gehazi hadn’t thought of that! He had thought of the potential pleasure and apparent gain of his actions, but failed to consider the misery and pain that might follow discovery of his actions. When your conscience raises the alarm concerning something you or someone else wants you to say or do, don’t ignore it! God has given it to you as a precious gift and a boundary marker. Is there an issue your conscience has drawn attention to in your life at the moment that you need to address?

3. **The punishment for Gehazi** (II Kings 5:25-27)

(a) **An opportunity for repentance** II Kings 5:25a) ²⁵ *When he went in and stood before his master, Elisha asked him, ‘Where have you been, Gehazi?’* The challenging question that has echoed down the ages was first heard in the Garden of Eden when God called out to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:9-10a: *But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ ¹⁰ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid...’* Our sin separates us from God and has done so for humanity across the centuries. God calls men and women, boys and girls to come and follow Him, but on too many occasions people choose not to respond because there are issues that need to be addressed that they do not want to face up to. Elisha who had a gift from God to discern things knew exactly what Gehazi had done, but in a wise approach chose to ask an open question to see if this man was willing to face up to what he had done and start to put things right. It appears he was genuine in wanting his servant to admit to what he had done and then begin to address the problem that needed to be faced. The problem for Gehazi, and for many people down the ages, is that he thought he had got away with what he had done and could continue to do so, despite the absurdity of such a perception! Our sins can blind us from seeing our circumstances as God sees them. It is exactly the same with respect to salvation. The greatest sin of all is not giving God His rightful place in our lives. There are a good number of people who over the years have said I will put my trust in Jesus, but not yet, because the changes in lifestyle they know will be required are too inconvenient for them. The problem is keeping putting off making right choices make it unlikely that such a person

will ever face up to acknowledging their need to come to God on His terms rather than their own. II Peter 3:9 states: *The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* However, that does not mean we have indefinite opportunities. A time will come when God withdraws the opportunity. It is an act of folly not to respond to God's invitation while we have an opportunity to do so.

(b) **An obstacle to blessing** (II Kings 5:25b-27) *'Your servant didn't go anywhere,' Gehazi answered. ²⁶ But Elisha said to him, 'Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money or to accept clothes – or olive groves and vineyards, or flocks and herds, or male and female slaves? ²⁷ Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants for ever.'* Then Gehazi went from Elisha's presence and his skin was leprous – it had become as white as snow. What did Gehazi say when challenged? *Your servant didn't go anywhere...* He loved his sin too much to admit it. Sometimes as Christians we have failed to acknowledge that people sin, and continue to do so, because they actually enjoy it. They live in denial of the painful consequences of being found out or consequences of it. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 6:19-21: *'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* What is your treasure? What is most important to you and to me? This can be a most difficult question to answer honestly. Our culture is based on materialism - the idea that getting more 'things' will make you happy and fulfilled. The problem is that going after more possessions or more thrills or more whatever it may be will never ultimately satisfy. It is the lie of the devil that has entrapped so many people. Too many people have made a mess of their lives going after other relationships that cause such heartache to those affected; too many others affected by the materialistic culture around us for the sake of wanting more money have taken inappropriate employment that has cost them quality time with their families or seriously damaged their relationship with God and time worshipping and serving in His Church. Where is your 'treasure'? Or in other words, what is most important in your life and mine? Are you investing your life most in things that will not last? Or in something that will last for eternity? Jesus leaves with us this challenge in Matthew 6:34: *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things [that we need] will be given to you as well.* I pray each one of us will heed Jesus' words and put Him first and invest most in that which will last for eternity, for Jesus' sake, Amen.