

## Cure For America

2 Kings 5:1-15  
10

Psalm 30

Galatians 6:1-

July 4, 2010  
Hurley

Independence Day

Dr. Edwin Gray

I have in my study this painting which I love, and I love it for two reasons. I love it first because it is a painting of a scene captured in a snapshot by my wife Gayle on one of our very first dates, July 4, 1976, which was also a Sunday that year. The first reason I love it is because Gayle painted it capturing that memory from our courtship. This is an early Hurley. The second reason I love it is that it so beautifully and joyously captures the hopeful spirit of the United States of America on the occasion of our 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. The painting is a scene of the Bicentennial July 4 celebrations along the Potomac River near Washington, D.C. Children of all races playing, older folks seated in lawn chairs picnicking, enjoying the peaceful beautiful lush serenity along the Potomac looking across from the Virginia side to the Lincoln and Jefferson and Washington Monuments in our nation's Capital.

The painting is a scene of the America we hope for and work for and dream of, that day when, "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid;"<sup>i</sup> It is the America of that "City set upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon," as puritan Governor John Winthrop said to the courageous voyagers on the Arabella just before they stepped onto the unexplored shores of the New World in 1630 for the very first time. It is the America that Langston Hughes described as, "O let America be America again – the land that never has been yet – and yet must be."<sup>ii</sup>

But set against that hope and dream and vision for a peaceful land, and people content with self and neighbor, set against that the challenges we face at present with out-of-control government debt, extreme polarization between wild eyed liberals and tightlipped conservatives, massive unemployment, a stock market gyrating wildly and southernly, a war in Afghanistan whose ending is unseen, and the continuing belching of oil into the Gulf wrecking lives and environment.

A young man was here in worship last Sunday wrestling with whether to drive down to the Gulf afterwards to visit with the family of a fisherman who had taken him and his family out to fish on his boat in the Gulf a number of times and who after enduring Katrina finally snapped over what the oil spill had done to destroy his whole way of life. The fisherman had just a few days before taken his own life.

Set against that hope and dream and vision, the blunt assessment of America today described by Lee Iacocca, former head of Chrysler. He said,

"You don't have to be a genius to see that with a nation full of overeating, pill-popping TV watching, I-pod-wired, shopaholic, attention-deficit-disordered

people you're not going to make it. We could be headed for extinction if we don't watch out. And if we really do aspire to be great again, we've got our work cut out for us.<sup>iii</sup>

America, America, strongest and I think, still the greatest nation on earth, but we are sick and we need a cure. The cure is simply this, my friends; repent and return to God, come to Jesus Christ. Offer your whole being to him and ask God to heal you, wash you, purify you, renew you, and then make you useful in bearing fruit, as Paul tells the Galatians. "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."<sup>iv</sup> Do this, and ask God to do this for this nation.

Do you remember how the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to observe what he came to call "The American Experiment in 1831?" He described his findings in his landmark work, Democracy in America.

"I searched for America's greatness in her matchless constitution, and it was not there. I searched for America's greatness in her Halls of Congress, and it was not there. I searched for America's greatness in her rich and fertile fields and teeming potential, and it was not there. It was not until I went into the heartlands of America and into her churches and met the American people that I discovered what it is that makes America great. America is great because America is good; and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

That sort of goodness is the fruit of faithfulness. That sort of goodness is the byproduct of a work of God within us that begins with God's wondrous grace in Jesus Christ. We are a more diverse nation today than ever before, and marvelously accommodating that diversity, if you compare the United States to any other nation in terms of religious freedom. We understand the wisdom of the separation of church and state, though not faith from state. "We still pledge to be one nation under God." How does it go? "As long as there are math tests, there will still be prayer in public schools." Yet, in spite of all our diversity, the cure which we who follow Jesus Christ alone can offer for the healing of this nation, is to return to God, to come to Jesus Christ and stick with him for the long haul. Or to summarize it – exercise faith in God through Jesus Christ and practice good works which such faith fosters. That is the cure!

The story of Naaman is a powerful parable of this cure in action. Naaman was a Syrian General, a mighty man, highly favored by the King of Syria, but a leper. His main claim to fame through the ages is that Jesus mentioned him 900 years later in a sermon, "There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."<sup>v</sup> We see in both the Book of Second Kings and the Gospel of Luke how God is at work welcoming the outsider and working in and through them. That welcome of the alien, your tired, your poor, your hungry, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, has been the gift America has given the world from our beginning.

Naaman is an outsider, a foreigner, a rival power, who is welcomed into the nation of Israel and brought down a peg or two as he finally heeds the message of the Prophet Elisha to strip down, expose his leprosy-pocked body, and go down into the

muddy waters of the Jordan seven times. On the seventh dip he comes up clean, skin soft as a baby's, and professing belief in the God of Israel on his lips. Naaman discovers the real source of healing and of power is not with the King, but with the Lord. There is much for us to learn from this text on our Nation's 234<sup>th</sup> Celebration of the signing of that noble Declaration of Independence. While we call this Independence Day, it is really Dependence Day – Dependence on God – by which alone we are cured.

## I

First to be cured, the great Naaman has to **COME OVER**. Come over to God. Naaman is in obvious distress with his socially ostracizing leprosy which causes him to cover his whole body, shun crowds and avoid parties. Despite his favor with the King and his powerful position with the army, he is done for if he cannot somehow be cured of this fatal disease. One day a Jewish slave girl, who is maid to Naaman's wife, had been captured by a Syrian raiding party going down into Israel. She passes word to the great man that he might want to go for a cure from the prophet who is in Samaria in Israel. (Just so you will be reminded, the feuding between Israel and her neighbors did not start with Hezbollah and Hamas. This practice of kidnapping Jews goes back nearly 3000 years.)

Naaman goes to his King who OK's the field trip and sends a letter of recommendation along to the only person he thinks would be significant in Israel, the King. You know power talks to power. Naaman loads up lots of his gold and silver and lavish garments to pay for the cure he is hoping to receive, and with his large traveling party sets out. He arrives in Israel and goes straight to the King.

When the King of Israel reads the letter from the King of Syria, "I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy,"<sup>vi</sup> he is enraged. He tears his robes and cries, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?"<sup>vii</sup> The King at least recognizes what far too many political rulers fail to recognize. There is a God and I am not him. That is an important first step in this cure for America: come over to where we can receive help from God. Come over to where God can be found.

## II

Then second to be cured Naaman has to **COME DOWN**. The great man has to humble himself and come down. God's prophet, Elisha, hears the General is over at the King's and gets word to the King to send the man over to him, "that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." The General comes. With full pomp and circumstance, he arrives with his horses and chariots outside the prophet's door. "Tum ta ta dum." "Tum ta ta dum." No action at the door of the Prophet. In fact Elisha doesn't even bother to stick his head out, but sends a little boy to tell him to go take a bath in the nearby Jordan River, dunking down seven times.

The General is incensed. He feels insulted. Here he has come, great powerful leader that he is, with much fanfare and he expects a big show of healing. Something really flashy, dramatic, you know like on TV. Why, he says, I could have stayed home and gone to far better rivers in Damascus, and he turns away in rage. His servants have a word with him and say, now wait master, if the prophet asked you to do something

really hard you would have done it. You would do anything, go anywhere, and pay any price to be healed of this disease. Right? Right, he says. So he goes down.

He goes down to the muddy river. He removes his robes. He carefully peels off layer after layer of bandages around his wounds, standing there nearly naked, nothing on but his shorts and all these people staring, the great man goes down humbly into the waters and washes. He has to come down. “Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord and he shall lift thee up.” James says. “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,”<sup>viii</sup> Jesus says. “For you deliver a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down,”<sup>ix</sup> the Psalmist says. It is true of people, it is true of nations, and we must become humble if we would be cured of our disease. At our best the United States has maintained strength through humility.

### III

Third to be cured Naaman has to come **OBEDIENTLY**. He has to do what God through the Prophet says. Seven times under the water. Well, he does it. He obeys God. About the fifth or sixth dip with no change observed he may have been about to rush back up the river bank, throw his clothes back on and head home. But instead he follows the instructions of God’s prophet, seventh time under and that does it. He comes up fresh and clean and new.

The cure we need for our national debt, for balancing our care for the environment with our need for energy, for taking care of the poor, for providing a fair and adequate health system, all these cures are not quick fixes. They require us taking the long view and patiently going through step after step. Obedience means following God for the long haul.

### IV

The fourth step in Naaman’s cure is his coming to **PROFESSION**. He professes boldly his newfound faith in the God of Israel. “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”<sup>x</sup> Naaman comes up clean and he professes that it is this God who is the real power in the world.

I love that scene in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, where the Scotsman Eric Liddle, refuses to violate his conscience and will not run the Olympic Race in Paris on Sunday, because it is the Lord’s Sabbath. In a wonderful scene, Eric stands in the pulpit of a Church in Paris that Sunday morning reading from Isaiah, as images flash back and forth from the runners at the race, to the organizers of the Olympics, to the British prince and high government officials who tried to pressure him to put his King above his God. Eric reads from Isaiah, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. It is he who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Yet, he gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”<sup>xi</sup>

It is faith in this God we must profess if we wish to see America cured, made whole and remain part of that cure for a broken, troubled world. It is this faith we must be all the more clear and up front about, not vague, fuzzy, and politically correct about, confident that our help is in Jesus Christ the Lord, who is Lord of all the world. In an increasingly diverse nation and world, we who follow Jesus Christ must lovingly make him and the help he alone offers clear and compelling. 1 Peter tells us, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”<sup>xii</sup>

On July 4, 1776 a band of planters, lawyers, businessmen and one Presbyterian clergyman affixed their names to a document pledging their lives, their freedom, their fortunes and their sacred honor for the equality of all men and women, endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, to follow no king but the Lord. There was a sun carved into the then vowed headrest of the speaker’s chair at the gathering in Philadelphia Independence Hall. Someone asked, “Is the sun rising or setting?” Ben Franklin answered, “Let us pray, sir, that the sun is rising.” With the help of God, placing our lives, our church, our country, fully under his care and keeping, we may pray and hope and work to see that sun rise for many generations to come. We may yet see a scene, such as this 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnic painting become more a reality than a dream.

To that end, let us heed Lord’s word to Solomon the night after he dedicated God’s Temple in Jerusalem,

“If my people which are called by my name humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Micah 4:4.

<sup>ii</sup> Langston Hughes, quoted by Forrest Church in The American Creed,

<sup>iii</sup> Lee Iacocca, Where Have All the Leaders Gone? P.205.

<sup>iv</sup> Galatians 6:9.

<sup>v</sup> Luke 4:27.

<sup>vi</sup> 2 King 5:6.

<sup>vii</sup> 2 Kings 5:7.

<sup>viii</sup> Luke 14:11.

<sup>ix</sup> Psalm 18:27.

<sup>x</sup> 2 Kings 5:15.

<sup>xi</sup> Isaiah 40:28-31.

<sup>xii</sup> 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>xiii</sup> 2 Chronicles 7:14