

Four Lepers in Samaria

I am an Israelite. We are a people chosen by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But we have been under evil rulers for generations. I have a name, but when the priest pronounced my diagnosis, I immediately became a “leper.” It is almost like a curse! Does that happen to people in your day? This story was preserved for you in writing, as a small part of a much bigger story.

We four were not friends to begin with, not even acquaintances when leprosy took over life for each of us. Over several years, we grew to an involuntary group of four. We met each other as exiles from the city, banished and treated as dead by family. It had to be our own fault that this had happened to us, so they all believed.

But we banded together for our protection and survival. We scavenged for food and listened for news.

Our camp was far enough from the wall that we were not bothered by the invading army of Ben Hadad. It was strange seeing a fully armed soldier recoil in panic when seeing me. My body was already discolored and grotesquely deformed by the visible effects of the disease.

After our location was made known to the rest of the besieging force, we were not in immediate danger. It was a funny feeling, being protected by our affliction.

When we heard that inside the walls, people were eating their children, I joked that they wouldn't come after us. “Of course, we could eat each other,” somebody mumbled. I couldn't tell who.

When our talk had come to that, I suggested that our supply of scraps, forage and garbage was low and disappearing. Maybe it was time to visit the enemy. They might throw us some scraps in exchange for leaving them alone. Of course, more likely they would just kill us far from the camp to be eaten by birds.

What we found as we entered the edge of the enemy camp was completely unexpected! Even though calling out, “Unclean,” we were not challenged and there were no warnings and no cries of alarm. There was not even the low buzz of human activity, just a few animal sounds.

The whole place was deserted! The first thing we noticed was food! It looked like they had run away just after preparing a meal. Some of their weapons were stacked in readiness and their animals were stabled and provisioned. We went from place to place, calling out the names of the foods as we discovered them. I ate, excuse the expression, like a pig and grabbed valuables I probably had no use for.

After the euphoria of feasting had begun to ebb, and I had vomited at least twice, it occurred to me that this was good news that had to be shared. There was far more than we could eat. We knew that the people in the city were also starving and eventually if it were found that we withheld this information, we would be punished for sure.

We called out to the gatekeepers, repeating it because they did not believe us. Then, after a delay, a mounted guard searched the camp and took off towards the Jordan. We heard later they did it expecting the army to be in hiding. They weren't. In fact, the search discovered discarded clothing and weapons all the way to the river. Then the people of the city started to come through the gate, first a trickle, then an intermittent stream of bolder groups, then suddenly a massive stampede.

The back story became clear as we gathered information. The LORD was dealing with both Samaria and Damascus in judgement and mercy. The king of Samaria should have followed the teachings of Moses. The danger should have convinced him to repent. Yet the LORD was also getting the attention of Ben Hadad, king of Damascus.

When Ben Hadad's army was previously preparing to invade and discovered that his movements were always known by the prophet Elisha, he went to see him, with a strong force, intending to behead him. Elisha struck the invading army with blindness and directed them into the city of Samaria where they were given back their sight, feasted and sent back to BenHadad. Should that have gotten the attention of a king?

Then came the invasion and siege that we were involved in, the king of Samaria, a son of Ahab, visited Elisha when he heard of people eating their children. He obviously exhibited more compassion for his people than his father Ahab ever did. But did he take responsibility and repent? No, he blamed the whole thing on Elisha.

Elisha had told the king that the next day food would be cheap, but he would not eat it. And it came true. He was trampled to death at the gate. Ben Hadad must also have been impressed with the way his second invasion was foiled – his army reported that they heard sounds of a large invading force and losing all military discipline, panicked and fled.

Ben Hadad previously had another experience that should have started the turn of his heart when his Commander-in-Chief was healed of leprosy! Eventually he did change his attitude towards the God of Elisha and when he became ill, he asked Elisha to inquire of the LORD. The answer was that he would recover but be killed by his official Hazael, who would take the throne.

The next king of Samaria had been softened by the experience of his predecessor because when Elisha asked that the property of the woman whose son he had raised from the dead should be restored after her 7 years of exile, the king promptly assigned an official to carry out the task.

So, we were stuck in the middle of a bigger story, bigger than a cure for our disease! Can you relate? The victory over the army of Ben Hadad was a miracle of the LORD, the God proclaimed by Elisha! Samaria, our town, did not deserve miraculous deliverance, but we were part of it. Both our king and the king of our enemy got dramatic evidence of the power of the Almighty, but in the long term, their kingdoms lapsed back into disobedience and disrespect for the Creator God Who holds the supreme power and authority.

2 Kings 6,7,8