

The Foolishness of God

M. W. Bassford

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Introduction.

- A. I'm no anthropologist, but I would suspect that everywhere in the world, it is considered rude to call someone else dumb. When I was growing up, it was a spankable offense for me to call anyone a fool, and I know that there are many parents with similar opinions about the word "stupid" today. For a variety of reasons, we shy away from using language like that, even if the person in question quite obviously deserves it.
- B. And yet, where we shy away from describing other human beings as foolish, the Bible comes right out and calls God foolish. We see this on the screen behind me, in 1 Corinthians 1:23-25. Now, if I heard just about anybody talking about how foolish God was, I would find that both shocking and offensive, yet here we read it in the pages of Scripture. I can't imagine that it would have been less shocking in the first century, either.
- C. So what's going on here? Is God really calling Himself dumb? Not exactly. In context, Paul is talking about the things that God says and does that seem foolish to people, and folks, there are an awful lot of things in Scripture that people react that way to. Every time we see somebody who claims to be a Christian who's doing something different than the Bible, it's because he thought God's way was foolish and that he could improve on it. People think God is foolish for not setting up a denominational structure for His church. People think God is foolish for not instructing His people to use instruments of music. Perhaps most of all, people think God is foolish for coming up with a plan of salvation that requires sinners to get wet to get saved.
- D. Of course, when we confront this so-called foolishness of God, the problem isn't that God isn't smart enough. The problem is that we aren't smart enough. God does things His way for His reasons. Sometimes, God is gracious enough to explain those reasons to us. Sometimes, He isn't, but just because we don't see the reason doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Regardless of whether we get it or not, though, one thing is constant: If we obey God, things will turn out all right. For an example of how this works in practice, let's look at a story from the Old Testament. Let's look at the story of Naaman, and what it tells us about the foolishness of God.

I. The Subject and the Messenger.

- A. This story begins with **A STRANGE SUBJECT**. We see why in 2 Kings 5:1. This is the story of one of the most famous miracles that the prophet Elisha ever works, but look at the beneficiary! In the first place, Naaman isn't one of God's people at all. He's a Syrian. He's one of the enemies of God's people. Even more than that, he is the commander of the army of Syria. It is his job to lead soldiers into Israel, kill some, and take the rest captive. Naaman's not just an enemy; he might be Public Enemy #1 at this point! So Public Enemy #1 has leprosy. Most people in Israel might not have thrown a party once they heard the news, but they wouldn't have been broken up about it either. "Leprosy?" they would probably say. "Serves him right." They knew what leprosy was. There were thousands of lepers in Israel at this time, and yet, rather than healing one of them, God's providence leads to Naaman the Syrian getting healed. That, folks, is strange.
- B. And yet, when we look at the subjects whom God is willing to heal spiritually, we must confess that they often seem equally strange. Look at how Paul describes himself in 1 Timothy 1:15. Back when he was Saul, Paul wasn't just some guy who had lied a couple times and maybe coveted once. Saul was convinced that the way of Christ was the most evil thing he'd ever heard of, and he dedicated his life to wiping it off the face of the earth. He arrested every Christian he could catch, he threw them into prison, he beat them, he tortured them to try to compel them to blaspheme Jesus, and he voted for them to be put to death. He was Public Enemy #1 for the first-century church. And yet, this man whose hands were stained with the blood of Christians was someone to whom God sent the gospel. Paul might have been a stranger subject than Naaman.
- C. Folks, since that day, God hasn't changed a bit, and He's still willing to save and heal just like that. That means that we shouldn't reject anybody on our own whom God is willing to accept. That might be the trashy girl at school. That might be the divorced co-worker who lives with his girlfriend in incredible squalor. It might be anybody. It might even be us. I know there are people out there who are convinced that they're too wicked for God to save, that they've done too much evil. Friend, if that's what you think, get rid of that thought right now, because no matter what you have done, God has saved someone who has done more. Salvation is not about what we have done or haven't done. It's about what God can do for us. It's about the spiritually heights to which He will raise us, if only we will trust in Him and obey His gospel.
- D. Just as the subject was strange, so too God sent His word by **AN UNEXPECTED MESSENGER**. We see the story in 2 Kings 5:2-5. It isn't some awe-inspiring prophet of God who gets the ball rolling. It's a little servant girl, probably the least important person in all of Naaman's household. And yet, alone of all the people in Naaman's house, she's the only one who knows how to help. She tells Naaman's wife about the prophet Elisha, and Naaman at this point is so desperate, so ready to grasp at any straw, that he goes to his king, and sets out on a cross-country journey with a considerable fortune, on the word of what this little girl says.

- E. Brethren, if this little girl could lead mighty Naaman to be healed, any one of us can lead a sinner to be saved. Consider with me, for instance, what one of our young folks back at Margaret St., named RJ, did . RJ is not by any stretch the most mature Christian there. I'm not all that old, but I've been a Christian for longer than RJ has been alive. I don't think RJ knows everything about the Bible. And yet, he knew enough to invite his friend to church, and to talk with him until he decided that he wanted to obey the gospel. Let's be honest, friends. If RJ is capable of doing that, then every one of us is capable of doing the same thing. Remember: it's not about us. It's not about our eloquence or our cleverness in conning people into listening to the gospel message. It's about the word of God that has the power to transform the heart that receives it. We can't judge the hearts. Only God can. All we can do, then, is to give everyone we know the chance to obey by telling them what we know. If we do that, God's word will find the good hearts for us.

II. The Request, the Command, and the Result

- A. Next in the story, we see **A BIZARRE REQUEST**. This shows up when the king of Syria's letter reaches the king of Israel in 2 Kings 5:6-7. Basically, here's what this must have sounded like to the Israelite king: "We've been at war for years. I've been winning. I've been killing and enslaving your people and plundering your land. Now, I want you to take my commander and heal him from this incurable disease." Is it any wonder that the king of Israel thought the king of Syria was trying to pick a fight? It was a crazy thing to ask!
- B. Even so, if we just think about it for a moment, we see that when we ask God to save us, we are making a request that is every bit as bizarre. Look at how Paul describes us in Colossians 1:21-22. It's not some accident of chance that has separated us from God. It's the sins that we willingly chose to commit that have marked us as His enemies and launched us into rebellion against His kingdom. I think some people have the sense that they'd be doing God a favor by becoming Christians. In fact, the very opposite is true. We are the opposite of deserving, and the wonder is not that God sets terms on our salvation, but that He saves at all.
- C. This foolish story that God is weaving continues in the same vein with **AN OUTRAGEOUS COMMAND**. This portion of the story is recorded in 2 Kings 5:8-12. The prophet Elisha sends word to the king of Israel that he can help Naaman, so Naaman, in his big fancy chariot, goes and waits expectantly at Elisha's door. Elisha won't even see him. Instead, he sends a messenger to tell Naaman to go dip seven times in the Jordan. This makes Naaman furious. In the first place, he's this big important commander of the Syrian army, and this Hebrew prophet won't even give him the time of day! In the second place, he's insulted by what Elisha asks. Naaman has already decided in his head that Elisha should heal him by waving his hand over him, probably while muttering some mystic mumbo-jumbo, and when Elijah tells him to go take a bath in a dirty river, he thinks that's the dumbest thing he's ever heard. If he's going to go dunk in a river, can't he at least do it in a clean river like the ones back home? And so Naaman stalks off in a rage because of Elisha's command.
- D. Not surprisingly, there are people today who are just as outraged by the very similar thing that God asks of them. Naaman thought that dipping in the Jordan was ridiculous; they think that being baptized for the forgiveness of sins is ridiculous. Can't they just believe, or say the sinner's prayer, or something nice and tidy like that? Failing that, can't they just get sprinkled or maybe poured on a little? That way, they can keep some of their dignity, instead of coming up out of the water soaked to the skin and looking like a drowned rat! They read the Bible, but they're insulted by it, because it's not the way they think things should be done.
- E. As one of my old Bible-class teachers used to say, that's what you get for thinking. Folks, this is God's game, and we have to play it by God's rules. We have no bargaining power, no leverage. Salvation is a take-it-or-leave-it offer. It doesn't matter if we like God's way. It doesn't matter if we think God's way is quite frankly dumb. We need to stop thinking, shut up, and do it. Otherwise, we're like the drowning man who refuses to put on a life preserver because he doesn't like the color. That attitude, not God's plan, is what's foolish.
- F. Finally, though, after all of those strange threads woven together, we see **AN AMAZING RESULT**. It's described in 2 Kings 5:13-14. Naaman, despite his fury, is talked into obeying Elisha by his servants. Not surprisingly, once Naaman does what God's prophet said, he gets the results he wanted. All the doctors in the world could not have accomplished the cure worked by dipping seven times in a filthy river that, in our terms, would be little more than a creek with delusions of grandeur. Naaman is healed, completely and forever.
- G. Baptism looks just as silly as dipping seven times in the Jordan must have, but it is capable of a transformation even more amazing. We see it described in Romans 6:4-6. When we go into the water, our old spiritual self dies and stays in the water just like Christ died and was placed in the tomb. When we come up out of the water, it is with our new spiritual self, that rises from the dead just like Christ rose from the grave. The lifetime of sin that we had accumulated stays in the water with the person we used to be. Of course, it's not the water that does all of this. We aren't saved from our sins every time we dunk ourselves in a swimming pool. Instead, we are saved by our full and willing obedience to the commands of God, who then saves us through the blood of Jesus. It might seem foolish that God set things up the way He did, but we aren't in any position to argue with the plan, and we certainly aren't in any position to question the results. The foolishness of God is wiser than we are, and the weakness of God is stronger than we are. That's what we rely on.

Conclusion. Baptism saves everyone who obeys, and it will save you if you obey right now.