

Session 6

Naaman and the Waters of Cleansing

If the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers in Naaman the perennial human objection to God's humble means (surely not *that* water), watches obedience to a simple appointed washing accomplish what greatness could not, and hears Jesus himself hold up Naaman's cleansing as a sign of what God does for outsiders.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism marvels that God saves through water, *so humble and wonderful a creature* (CCC 1218), and teaches soberly that God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, while he himself is not bound by his sacraments (CCC 1257). Naaman's story holds both truths in one narrative: the appointed water matters, and the God who appoints it remains free.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study meets its own objectors inside the Bible, and discovers that Scripture got there first. Naaman is a great man: commander of Syria's army, a victor, *but he was a leper* (2 Kings 5:1). The Hebrew narrative is a masterpiece of reversals: the mighty general learns of his cure from a captured servant girl; he arrives with silver, gold, and festal garments to purchase a miracle, and is told to wash; he expects the prophet to come out, wave his hand, and perform something dramatic, and Elisha does not even come to the door. Everything in Naaman that is offended, the group will recognize, because it lives in us: if grace is real, surely it comes through the impressive, the costly, the difficult. *Behold, I thought...* (5:11) is the whole carnal theology of religion in three words.

The instruction is almost insultingly simple: *Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean* (5:10). Naaman rages: are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? In his own estimation, certainly. And that is precisely the point his servants see: *if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, Wash, and be clean?* (5:13). Pride would have climbed a mountain; pride balks at a bath. The humble means is not incidental to the cure; it is the surgery on his pride that accompanies the surgery on his skin.

Then the verse the whole session turns on: *So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean* (5:14). Slow the group down over every clause. He obeyed the word; the appointed water, not the better rivers of Damascus; the appointed number, seven, a number that to biblical ears can evoke creation's completed week; and he came up with the flesh of *a little child*. The commander's scarred, diseased skin is not merely repaired; he is given a child's flesh, as though newly born from that river. File the phrase; do not preach it tonight. A man in Jerusalem will ask in Session 10 how a man can be born when he is old, and tonight's verse is the Old Testament's down payment on the answer.

And the New Testament anchor is spoken by the Lord himself: in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus says *there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian* (Luke 4:27). The group will find this themselves. Notice what Jesus does with the story: he makes the outsider's cleansing a sign of the Gospel's reach, and it nearly gets him thrown off a cliff. Grace through humble means, offered beyond the borders, offends twice.

Tonight's steelman is the sharpest form of the anti-sacramental instinct, and Naaman's story seems at first to feed it: obviously the Jordan's water had no medicinal power; God healed, and God could have healed with a word from any distance (he does exactly that for another foreign officer in the Gospels). So water is dispensable scenery, and requiring a rite confuses the instrument with the Actor, even adds a work to grace. The answer must concede everything true in this (no river magic, God's absolute freedom) while showing what the story actually teaches: God freely *binds his promise* to an appointed means, and the cure comes through obedient reception of that means, not around it. Naaman is not saved by water in general; Abana and Pharpar, the rivers he thought finer, carried no promise. He is cleansed by the word of God received in the water God appointed. Word plus element, promise plus washing: the group is looking at the shape a sacrament will fill. And the Church completes the balance with CCC 1257: God has bound salvation to Baptism, and God himself is not bound; his freedom (the baptisms of blood and of desire, CCC 1258–1260, and the hope the Church holds beyond them) is treated with full honesty in Session 14. Tonight establishes the other half, the half our age forgets: that his binding is real, and humility receives it.

Pastoral care, and this matters tonight more than most nights: Christian tradition has long read the leprosy in this story as a figure of sin; but suffering never licenses the inference to personal guilt, and your room may hold people with chronic illness, disability, or a child who is sick. Say the distinction out loud, unprompted, kindly: Jesus himself refused the inference from a man's suffering to his guilt (John 9:3). The figure runs from leprosy to *sin*, not from sickness to blame. Handled well, this session comforts the sick rather than wounding them: the God of Naaman stoops to bodies and touches real skin.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

My father, if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?

2 Kings 5:13 (RSV2CE)

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

2 Kings 5:14 (RSV2CE)

And the Lord himself canonizes the story as a sign of grace reaching the outsider:

And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Eli'sha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Na'aman the Syrian.

Luke 4:27 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose of Milan • *On the Mysteries*

St. Ambrose, whom the group met at the waters of creation, sets Naaman before the newly baptized

and teaches in substance that the story exposes the eye's poverty: Naaman saw ordinary water and doubted; he obeyed, and was cleansed. Not every water heals, Ambrose insists, but the water that carries the grace of Christ; what matters at the font is not what the eye sees but what the word of God does.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

A fragment under the name of St. Irenaeus • *Fragments (no. 34 in the Ante-Nicene Fathers collection)*

An ancient fragment handed down under the name of St. Irenaeus reads Naaman as the Christian's own biography, teaching in substance: as Naaman the leper was cleansed of his leprosy by washing, so we, lepers in sin, are cleansed of our old transgressions by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, being spiritually regenerated as newborn babes.

Leader note: Honesty about the source: this survives only as a fragment attributed to St. Irenaeus in later collections, so we present it as the tradition handed down under his name rather than as certain Irenaeus authorship. The fragment's wording is verified against the Ante-Nicene Fathers text (Fragment 34), and it presses on to the very verse this study is named for: being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, *even as the Lord has declared: Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.* Save that ending for Session 10; it is waiting for the group there.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church's Lectionary • *Monday of the Third Week of Lent*

Each Lent, on a single weekday morning, the Church sets tonight's two texts side by side at Mass: the first reading is Naaman's cleansing in the Jordan (2 Kings 5), and the Gospel is Jesus at Nazareth holding Naaman up as the sign of grace reaching the outsider (Luke 4). The pairing this session builds is not the study's invention; it is the Church's own lectionary, praying the two scenes together over her people.

Leader note: If your group meets during Lent, check the calendar: you may be able to send them to the very Mass at which the Church reads tonight's session.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1218's phrase does tonight's heavy lifting: water, *so humble and wonderful a creature*. Naaman stumbled on the humble and was saved by the wonderful. CCC 1216 gathers the early Church's names for Baptism, the bath that washes and enlightens; Naaman's story is why bath is not a belittling word.

CCC 1257 states the balance the steelman demands, and you should quote it precisely if the discussion needs it: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments. Tonight leans on the first clause; Session 14 gives the second clause its full, honest treatment (baptism of desire and of blood, and those who never had the chance). If someone in the room is carrying grief about an unbaptized person, do not make them wait eight weeks for comfort: give them the second clause tonight, gently, and promise the fuller conversation.

Paragraphs for this session: 1216, 1218, 1257

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread, final week before the unsealing): tonight's datum is humility. God chooses the element anyone can get, that costs nothing, that offends the proud precisely by being available to everyone. Next session the guesses are opened; tonight, if anyone tries to answer aloud, smile and say: one more week.

Like the flesh of a little child (planted tonight, resolved Sessions 10 and 13): the study's most delicate plant. Read 5:14 aloud twice and move on. When Nicodemus asks his question in Session 10, this verse should rise in the room's memory on its own.

The Jordan again (developed, resolved Session 9): third session running at this river. The group should feel the gravitational pull toward the event that gives the river its meaning.

God binds and is not bound (planted tonight via CCC 1257, resolved Session 14): plant both clauses; develop neither.

Seven (light touch): seven washings, a number that can evoke creation's completed week; many readers hear a new creation. One sentence; do not build a numerology.

Session Goals

1. The group can retell Naaman's near-miss: what almost kept him from cleansing was not the difficulty of the command but its humility.
2. The group has read 2 Kings 5:14 closely: the appointed water, the appointed number, according to the word, and flesh like a little child.
3. The steelman (God could heal without water, so water is dispensable) has been given at full strength and answered with both CCC 1257 clauses in view.
4. The group has found Luke 4:27 and heard Jesus make Naaman a sign of grace for outsiders.
5. The distinction between leprosy-as-figure-of-sin and real illness has been stated aloud, kindly, unprompted.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

20 min • Build: 2 Kings 5:1–14 read as drama; Q1–Q3

10 min • Build: verse 14 clause by clause; Q4

10 min • Live discovery: Luke 4:24–30

15 min • Steelman: is the water dispensable scenery?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer; remind everyone to bring their sealed My Guess page next week

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: The Dig Deeper box, and Q1 can be absorbed into the leader's retelling. Never cut the pastoral distinction about illness or the verse 14 close reading.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, you resist the proud and give grace to the humble. We come tonight with our own ideas of how you ought to work. Wash our expectations in your word, heal what we have stopped believing you would touch, and give us the obedience of a second thought. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Have you ever almost missed something good because it came in a plainer package than you expected: a job, a friendship, an answer to prayer? What finally got you past the packaging?

QW2. Naaman heard about his cure from a captured servant girl, the least powerful person in his world. Who is the unlikely messenger God has used in your life?

Build • into the text

Read 2 Kings 5:1–14 as the drama it is: assign a narrator, and pause after verse 12 to let Naaman's fury hang in the air before the servants speak. Then work backwards through what almost went wrong.

Q1. Verse 11: *Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper.* What exactly is Naaman offended by? Make the list.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

By everything except the cure. No personal audience (Elisha sends a messenger), no ceremony (no standing, calling, hand-waving), no worthy venue (the muddy Jordan instead of the crystal rivers of Damascus), no price worthy of his silver and gold. Naaman wanted a miracle proportioned to his importance. He is offended by grace's humility, which is to say, by grace. Before we smile at him: this instinct has a modern accent. *Surely God works through the profound spiritual experience, not through a parish font and a few words.* Naaman's *Behold, I thought* lives on in all of us.

Q2. The servants' question in verse 13 is one of Scripture's quiet masterstrokes: *if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?* Why is the humble command actually harder for Naaman than a great one would have been, and what is the humble command doing to him?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A great task would have fed the very thing that is sickest in him: his sense that healing must be earned and proportioned to greatness. He could have conquered a mountain and kept his pride. The bath he can only receive. The command's humility is a second surgery: while the water works on his skin, the obedience works on his heart. God's humble means are not God being unimpressive; they are God being a physician who treats the disease under the disease.

Q3. Verse 14, clause by clause: *he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.* What do you notice about which water, what number, what authority, and what result?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Which water: the Jordan, the appointed one, and not the rivers he thought finer; the promise was attached to this water. What number: seven, which to biblical ears can evoke creation's completed week; many Christian readers hear his cleansing styled as a little new creation. What authority: *according to the word of the man of God*: the washing works as obedience to God's word, word and water together. And the result overshoots repair: not the restored skin of a general but *the flesh of a little child*. He does not merely get better; he comes up out of the river as if newly born. Hold that phrase in your memory. Weeks from now, someone in the Gospels will ask whether a man can be born when he is old, and you will think of Naaman dripping on the riverbank with a child's skin.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: this story mattered so much that Jesus himself preached on it, in his hometown synagogue, and the sermon nearly got him killed. Find it: **Luke 4:24–30**. Read it aloud and answer: what point does Jesus draw from Naaman, and why does it enrage the room?

Jesus makes Naaman (with the widow of Zarephath) proof that God's grace has always reached past Israel's borders to the outsider. The hometown crowd hears their special claim relativized, and grace for the foreigner offends them to the point of violence. Grace's humility and grace's reach: offensive twice.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at full strength, and Naaman's own story seems to hand it to us: the Jordan's water obviously had no power; leprosy is not cured by rinsing. God healed Naaman, and God could have healed him with a bare word from any distance, no river involved: in the Gospels he does exactly that for a Roman centurion's servant. So the water is dispensable scenery, useful for testing obedience, nothing more. (Its stronger Christian form concedes that Baptism is commanded, a sign and even seal of grace, and still insists the water is sign only, never instrument.) Apply it to Baptism honestly: God saves; God can save without water; therefore the water rite is not where the action is, and insisting on it confuses the scenery with the Actor, even smuggles a human work into salvation by grace.

Q4. First concede: what in this objection is simply true, and where does tonight's own story prove God's freedom?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede freely: there is no river magic, and God is absolutely free. The story itself strips away every prop: no prophet on scene, no ceremony, no payment, nothing but a word and water, precisely so that no one could credit the scenery. And the Church says the freedom part in her own catechism, in

one sentence you should hear in full: *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments* (CCC 1257). Whoever the objection is defending, the man healed at a distance, the unbaptized person of good will, God's arm is not shortened, and Session 14 will honor that clause without flinching.

But now read what the story actually says about the water God appointed. If water as such were the point, Abana and Pharpar would have served; in his eyes better water, but carrying no promise. If obedience as such were the point, any arbitrary task would have served; climbing a mountain barefoot tests obedience splendidly. What Naaman received was neither water in general nor obedience in general: it was the word of God's promise attached to a particular washing, received in humility. The cure came *through* the appointed means, according to the word: word and element together, promise and washing together. That is not scenery; that is the pattern of a sacrament drawn in advance, and it is why the Church has never described Baptism as our work climbing toward God. In a sacrament the direction of travel is downward: God binding his own promise to humble matter so that grace has an address, a place where the poorest and simplest can reliably find it. A God who only ever acted unpredictably, without appointed means, would be free; he would also be impossible to find on purpose. In his mercy he is both: free beyond his sacraments, and faithful within them. Naaman's flesh testifies to the second, and our hope for those outside testifies to the first, and the Catholic faith refuses to amputate either clause.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: 2 Kings 5:15–19. Cleansed Naaman confesses the God of Israel, asks for two mules' burden of earth (to worship Israel's God on Israel's soil back home), and receives Elisha's *Go in peace* regarding his complicated official duties. Interpreters debate how much that answer concedes; what is certain is the new confession and the peace. Ask: what does the aftermath teach about conversion in an entangled life? (Grace begins where you are, and the newly cleansed carry holy ground into compromised places.)

Send • out of the room

QS1. Where is your Abana and Pharpar: the more impressive way you keep wishing God would work, while his humble appointed means (a Mass, a confession, a font, a rosary in a coat pocket) sits available and unglamorous?

QS2. Naaman's healing began with a servant girl's word to her captors. Who in your life needs you to be that servant girl this month: one humble, hopeful sentence about where healing can be found?

Live It This Week

- Go to Confession this week if you are able: the humblest appointed mercy in your reach. If it has been years, tell the priest exactly that; you will be received like Naaman at the river.
- Each day this week, pray the servants' question over one resistance of yours: *if he had commanded some great thing, would I not have done it?*

- Find your parish's baptismal font before or after Mass, put your hand on it, and thank God that grace has an address.
- Bring your sealed My Guess page next week. We open them together.

Memory Verse

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

2 Kings 5:14 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord God, healer of Naaman, we bring you our leprosy: the ones we hide, the ones we have given up on, the ones we think deserve a grander cure than the means you have appointed. Give us the humility to go down into the water you choose. Restore in us the flesh of your little children. And send us home, like Naaman, carrying holy ground. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

2 Kings 5:1–14 • The whole drama: the servant girl, the rage, the washing, the child's flesh

2 Kings 5:11 • Behold, I thought: the carnal theology of the impressive

2 Kings 5:13 • The servants' question: the humble command harder than a great one

2 Kings 5:14 • Close reading and memory verse

Luke 4:24–30 • Live discovery: Jesus preaches Naaman at Nazareth

John 9:3 • Pastoral anchor: Jesus refuses the suffering-equals-guilt inference

2 Kings 5:15–19 • Dig Deeper: Naaman's entangled conversion