

The Miracle of the Floating Ax Head

2 Kings 6:1-7

2 Kings 6:1-7 – *“And the sons of the prophets said to Elisha, “See now, the place where we dwell with you is too small for us. Please, let us go to the Jordan, and let every man take a beam from there, and let us make there a place where we may dwell.” So he answered, “Go.” Then one said, “Please consent to go with your servants.” And he answered, “I will go.” So he went with them.*

And when they came to the Jordan, they cut down trees. But as one was cutting down a tree, the iron ax head fell into the water; and he cried out and said, “Alas, master! For it was borrowed.” So the man of God said, “Where did it fall?” And he showed him the place. So he cut off a stick, and threw it in there; and he made the iron float. Therefore he said, “Pick it up for yourself.” So he reached out his hand and took it.”

Background Notes

The sons of the prophets were the seminary or Bible school students of the day. There were several “schools of the prophets” in different locations, and Elisha would travel around and minister to them. Apparently the school in 2 Kings 6 was in Jericho, because the Jordan River was nearby. Elisha was visiting with them at this time.

The Jericho school of the prophets was growing because Elisha’s ministry was very effective, but their quarters were cramped and they needed to expand. So the Jericho school decided to build new quarters down by the Jordan River. Elisha approved the plans and went with them. While they were cutting down trees, the ax head of one of the students flew off the handle, and sank in the Jordan River. A little background: iron ax heads were very costly tools in that day. And the student had borrowed that ax (v5)!

We might expect something like this would happen when a bunch of theological students and their professors try to do some manual labor, like building a new facility. After all, theological people are not known for their expertise in the use of tools! [Laughter]

When the student called out that his borrowed ax had flown into the water, the man of God asked, “Where did it fall?” When Elisha was shown the place, he cut a branch off a tree, threw the branch in the water, and the iron ax head came to the surface and floated! This was no trick. Elisha didn’t cut a stick and use it to fish the ax head out, as you would retrieve a golf ball that’s dropped into the water. No! This was a miracle!

Doctrinal Points

1. God cares about the needs of His working people.

The school of the prophets at Jericho was expanding. They needed more room. Did God care about that need? Of course He did. The fact that God's spokesman, Elisha, approved the project and went with them is an indication that God cared about this need. But notice that God expected them to work. They weren't just sitting around having prayer meetings. I'm sure they were praying about this pressing need - but they were willing to work as well!

God cares about our needs, too. We should pray about these needs, and God will answer prayer. But He does expect us to work on those needs as well! I know of a couple of Christians who are currently out of work; they have families, and they are praying – but they are also out looking for new jobs. Does God care about their needs? Of course He does. And God will meet these needs. Philippians 4:19 tells believers who (in the context) are handling money wisely that *“my God will supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”*

God does care about the needs of His working people. He will answer prayer - but He does expect us to be willing to work. He may even expect us to take a lower paying job or less prestigious job.

Whether you have personal needs (and I'm sure some of you are facing personal needs), or whether you have family needs (and I know some of you have family needs), or needs of the church or a ministry you're associated with - God cares about those needs, and He will meet them. But He does expect His people to be willing to work to the best of their ability. God cares about the needs of His working people.

2. God cares about the “ax head” of His willing people.

What do we mean by “God cares about the ax head?” We mean that God cares about the small problems of life, the incidental things, the little problems that happen in life. At least they're little to the onlooker, but they may be very significant to us! Sometimes small things are very important, as in this case – the borrowed ax head that was lost.

Is God concerned about the “little” problems that happen in our lives? Yes, He is - and I think this miracle proves it. But notice - the man who lost the ax head wanted to do what was right. The ax head was borrowed, and according to God's Word, in the Law, the person who borrowed an ax was responsible to return an ax to the person who had loaned it (Exodus 22). That student would have to buy a new ax head – a major financial burden.

Notice the student didn't say, “It was only borrowed. I don't have to worry about it.” And he didn't say, “It was part of the ministry, so I'm not responsible.” No, he was willing to do the right thing. That's what we mean by “willing people.”

God cares about the “ax heads” of His willing people, as He cared about this poor seminary student. Maybe if the man had been wealthy, God wouldn’t have done the miracle. If the man were wealthy he could easily have bought another ax head. But he was a poor seminary student, and the Lord provided a miracle. The ax head was retrieved.

But I want you to notice that after the miracle and the ax head came to the surface of the river, Elisha didn’t have the ax head jump out of the water onto the land. He expected the man to retrieve it. *“Pick it up for yourself.’ So he reached out his hand and took it” (v7).*

“God helps those who help themselves.” Is that a Bible verse? No! But there’s a biblical principle there. God expects us to be willing to do what we can to “recover ax heads,” or work on our problems. He doesn’t do for us what we can do for ourselves. He expects us to be willing to do what we can. God cares about the ax heads of His willing people. If you’re willing to do what’s right, and willing to do what you can, and you can be sure that God will help you - even miraculously answer prayers at times.

Do you have any ax heads in your life that need to be fixed? Maybe a little problem that might seem insignificant to everyone else? But it’s significant to you, particularly because you want to do what’s right. Maybe it’s literally something that you borrowed and lost or damaged and you want to make it right. God cares, and He can help you do what is right – if you’re willing! God cares about the ax heads of His willing people.

Practical Applications

1. Be careful about borrowing stuff.

It’s not wrong to borrow - but if you do borrow something, you’re responsible to return it, undamaged, and as good as when you borrowed it. Let’s say you borrow a book and lose it, or borrow a tool and damage it. What should you do? You should replace that borrowed book with a new book, if at all possible. And you should buy a new tool, or pay the repair bill for the damaged tool, even if the owner says, “Don’t worry - it’s all right.” Biblically, you need to make it right. Let’s be careful about borrowing stuff.

2. Be careful about “spiritualization” of Scripture!

What do we mean by that? “Spiritualization” is taking the items of a biblical text and drawing a spiritual picture from them. Spiritualization of Scripture is legitimate, such as recognizing the “types” or pictures in the Old Testament that illustrate biblical truths. For example, we spiritualized the event of the ax head in this passage. We said the ax head could represent the small problems in our lives. That’s spiritualization - drawing a spiritual picture from an item in the text. It’s not wrong to spiritualize - but we have to be careful about spiritualizing Scripture, because we can go too far and “over-spiritualize.”

For example, in a sermon I once heard on 2 Kings 6:1-7, the preacher said that the ax head flew off the handle and dropped into the river because it wasn't sharp. If the ax head had been sharpened, he said, it wouldn't have fallen off. The accident wouldn't have happened. Then he went on to say that we Christians are like that ax head. If we would sharpen ourselves up, study the Bible more, get involved in more service, we would be sharper, and accidents wouldn't happen. However, if they do happen, the biblical solution is to go to the people of God who, like Elisha, who know the Word. They can help bring restoration into your life.

Now that's not an "unbiblical" sermon, but I think it's over-spiritualization of this passage. Why? Because there's nothing here about whether or not the ax was sharp, and nothing about why the ax head flew off the handle. So we have to be careful about over-spiritualization - even when it makes a nice sermonette! Even though your talk may not be heretical, and even if it's in line with the teaching of the Bible, you've got to be careful not to over-spiritualize a Scripture text.

As we've said before, all the miracles in the Bible have spiritual meanings associated with them, including the miracles in the life of Elisha. For example, look at the wonderful picture of salvation that we saw in the healing of Naaman.

What's the picture here? I think there may be a spiritual picture here of the Lord's resurrection power at work in our lives - and I don't think this is over spiritualization. In the Bible, the Jordan River is often a picture of death. We, like the ax head in the Jordan, are useless, and we cannot do the work of the Lord in our own strength. But through His death and resurrection the Lord gives us His power - resurrection power. We are raised from the place of death to "*walk in newness of life*" (Romans 6:4). We can now do the Lord's work - in His strength.

And this is only possible because the Lord Himself went to the place of death for us. Elisha didn't do this miracle by snapping his fingers. He cut off a living branch, and when he threw the branch into the water the miracle took place. I believe we may have a picture of Jesus Christ in the living branch. He went to the place of death for us. As a result, we who were dead, and who need to die to self, are raised to "*walk in newness of life.*"

We can only do the work of the Lord in the right way - not in our own strength, but in His resurrection power. And that miracle can only take place in our lives if we're willing to die to self and let Christ work through us in His resurrection power. He'll provide us with His strength.

So I don't think this is over spiritualization. However, the practical application stands: we've got to be careful about the spiritualization of Scripture, because it's possible to over-spiritualize. So let's be careful about the spiritualization of Scripture!