

The Axe Head that Swam

II Ki 6:1-7

1 The company of the prophets said to Elisha, "Look, the place where we meet with you is too small for us.
 2 Let us go to the Jordan, where each of us can get a pole; and let us build a place there for us to live." And he said, "Go."
 3 Then one of them said, "Won't you please come with your servants?" "I will," Elisha replied.
 4 And he went with them. They went to the Jordan and began to cut down trees.
 5 As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron axe-head fell into the water. "Oh, my lord," he cried out, "it was borrowed!"
 6 The man of God asked, "Where did it fall?" When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron float.
 7 "Lift it out," he said. Then the man reached out his hand and took it.
 (NIV)

1 Wanted - A Holy Frustration

Rom 15:4

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. NIV

The obvious teaching here is that if we lose an item which is important to us we have a miracle working God who can return it. Sometimes people testify to that sort of thing and we ourselves have experienced what can only be described as a miraculous appearance in our home of something which was lost - even though we had searched the house high and low for it.

There are also lesson to be learned which may not be so obvious and God's word is like that. It seems to be in layers, the first of which is the page on which the words are written and the other lessons are underneath and need to be extracted like buried treasure. This event took place at a time when a training school for prophets was getting overcrowded. The prophets liked to be close to Elisha - who wouldn't because the Spirit of God rested on him and to be close to Elisha was, for them, like being close to God. Somehow it was as if cramped conditions were crowding him out and it was getting frustrating. It happened in the life of Jesus where sometimes people were stepping on each other just to get close.

It's possible to allow things in life, – even really worthwhile Kingdom activities – to crowd out times of closeness with God. The full time minister can easily find that church “stuff” consumes what could otherwise be times of intimacy with God. When life gets like that, what we need is kind of holy frustration which rises up and challenges us to move to a fresh place with God not crowded with things which get in the way of intimate times. A kind of holy frustration which cries out “Oh God I want to experience more of you than I do at present”.

Now that doesn't mean moving church – unless the church is positively discouraging that kind of thing. It's all about personal walk and is not out of reach if that's what we want. It is largely down to what our hearts desire because if we have a desire to draw close to God and develop a hunger for it, if we see ourselves seated in heavenly places with Christ Jesus and long for the heavenly view that we should enjoy from such a place, we can have it – but it won't just happen. We need to make time to do it and, to encourage us, the Lord wants to meet us there. We'll look below at what we can do.

We see from the passage that Elisha was all for the proposed move it as it would facilitate the prophets meeting with him and he wanted that as much as they did – and if we want to draw closer to God and spend more time just enjoying Him God will draw near to us.

In fact, the Lord longs for us to draw closer to Him. Even though Israel had turned away from God at times he longed to have them return. In Hosea God bares His heart to Israel who had turned away to other things and forgotten Him and says:

Hosea 2:13-16

13 I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewellery, and went after her lovers, but me she forgot," declares the LORD.

14 "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.

15 There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.

16 "In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master'.

And in revelation 22 we read:-

Rev 22:17

17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (NIV)

When we find that life has just become too crowded, may the Lord grant to us a **holy frustration** which will cause us to look at ways in which we can move from such a place to a place where we are living closer to Him and spending more time just enjoying Him.

2 The work

Well, the prophets could talk about the crowded conditions; say how they needed to move but to make it a reality it was down to them to do something about it. They didn't suggest that Elisha should do it. It was something that they had to do themselves. Do we want to experience freshness and a more intimate closeness with God a close walk with God? It will involve action on our part.

It will mean setting a time aside – it needn't be long – where you simply focus on the Lord, His love for you and ask Him to draw near to you and let you have a taste of Heaven and His presence during the time you have made for Him to do so. Just let Him draw near and even ask Him to open your spiritual eyes to see things from your seat in heavenly places. You won't find the Lord unwilling to do it. Soaking in His presence, say with worship music playing, is one way. Meditating on the scriptures is another and just being quiet in His presence asking for a fresh infilling of His Holy Spirit is yet another.

Resources.

Now we come to another lesson. Going back to the story, one of the prophets was low on resources. He needed an axe to do the job, he didn't own one and his only option was to approach someone who had what he needed and ask for it. So, he asked and received and now he needed to do something useful with it.

Now there is among some Christians the feeling that they have little to offer God compared to others and what they are able to do isn't very great. Unfortunately, that easily translates into thinking that God has a low opinion of them and it simply isn't true. Each one of us is a servant of the Lord and anything we do for Him is a result of abilities He has placed in our hands and He has given all of us certain abilities all of which have worth. It's simply down to us to use them. For example look at some of these:-

Rom 12:6-8

6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.

7 If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach;

8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

(NIV)

Actually, in that list there are some things that most Christians can do but it's more than that, God has actually **given** various Christians - including some who are hearing this message - the gifting and abilities to do such things. Before coming to Church on Sundays, Jean and I pray that the Lord will help us to **encourage** people that we meet and we ask Him to lead us to people that need encouragement. It isn't difficult to do and it's surprising how many people need it. Interestingly, churches aren't always the best places to get encouragement even though they should be. In that respect, sometimes it can seem like people do the opposite to the instructions in the above verses. For example "If a person's gifting is criticism, let him criticise. If it is discouraging, do it diligently. If it is being served, let him grumble about the delay". Jean and I are always grateful to people who take time to encourage us. One doesn't have to do it so that it's obvious to all but if you are a person who can encourage others then, as stated in to the above passage in Romans 12, you should do it.

Peter tells us:-

1 Pet 4:10-11

10 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

11 If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

(NIV)

"Well", some might say, "I don't think I have any gifts." Well I'd find that hard to believe in the light of these passages but if any Christian really feels he or she has no gift, God is a generous God and will give freely if we ask.

There is a range of supernatural gifts too.

1 Cor 12:7-11

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

8 To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit,

9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,

10 to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.

11 All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.
(NIV)

We can all use the gifts which God has placed in our hands but, going back to the axe, problems can sometimes arise:-

So, back to the Jordan.

All was going well until a calamity occurred. The prophet was swinging the axe when suddenly the handle felt much lighter and there was a quiet whistling sound followed by a splash as the axe head fell into the water - well out of reach.

I wonder what happened next? I wonder what the prophet really said? I wonder what a non-Christian would have said in such circumstances? I wonder what we would have said?

If we'd got time it would be interesting to discuss if there are such things as allowable "Christian" swear words or "exclamations". Do we even need to use such words? You never hear a sermon on it. Just imagine if the pastor says during the notices "Thank you Myrtle for telling us about the forthcoming ladies meeting. Now Roger is going to read out a list of Christian swear words which the leaders have approved for use by members of this church"

To which Roger replies:

"Oh bother, pastor, I've left the flipping list at home". "Well blow me, Roger, that's a blooming nuisance" replies the pastor "We'll have to send the jolly thing by e-mail now!"

After that I could well imagine the pastor saying "You've all gone quiet on me, church"

We know what the man said when he went to tell Elisha about it. Before then we don't know if the prophet jumped up and down, shouted Aaagghh!!! and kept hitting the ground with the handle. Maybe that gave rise to the phrase "he flew off the handle".

Now he had a problem because it was borrowed. In fact, it could have given rise to a legal difficulty for him under the law of Moses which reads:-

Exod 22:14-15

14 "If a man borrows an animal from his neighbour and it is injured or dies while the owner is not present, he must make restitution.

15 But if the owner is with the animal, the borrower will not have to pay. If the animal was hired, the money paid for the hire covers the loss.

(NIV)

Well he might have thought "It's a good job I didn't have a hamster on the end of the handle or I'd be in trouble here" However, some clever lawyer would soon make out a case for restitution of the axe and it could have given rise to all sorts of self inflicted judgements on the poor prophet at Jordan such as:-

"Why does this sort of thing always happen to me. I'm no good. Everything I try always fails. Everyone can see what happened. Why me? Why did it have to be a borrowed axe? Why did it have to be a poor quality one? I never seem to do things right. I'll never do this kind of thing again."

Application

Do you ever get the sense that you've just blown it. "Lord, I've **failed** again! Lord I've **done it** again, I **said it** again and I said I wouldn't. I **did it** again and I said I wouldn't. Lord, I'm just hopeless. You are so good to me and yet I always seem to fail".

We know of people who have felt that they've "lost" the spiritual gifts which they used to operate in and how they wanted them back. We'll return to that below.

God specialises in using in His kingdom individuals who perceive themselves to be weak, of little use or failures. People who are failures are rarely proud and God loves to use the humble because they lean so heavily on Him for help and He loves that. When writing to the church at Corinth, Paul states:-

26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world

and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no-one may boast before him. 1 Cor 1:26-29 NIV

God takes considerable risk in putting spiritual power into the hands of such people. Fortunately for us, He's willing to take such risk. Basically, people with their weakness are the only people He has. Bearing that in mind, we shouldn't be too heavy on Christians who fall at times in their walk as we too are weak and are prone to do things wrong at times.

Failure

In fact all people, including Christians, will experience failure from time-to-time. However, a failure makes no difference to God's love for us and we should not let our true worth be affected by perceived failures. If we want an example from scripture, we only have to look at Peter's denial of the Lord Jesus on the night of the trial. Even years later during moments of weakness, one could imagine Peter re-living the experience in his mind and wishing it had never happened. Yet Peter was received by the Lord Jesus after the resurrection and re-heard the words "Follow me" (John 21:19). Just a short time later on the day of Pentecost, Peter made it clear that it was possible to repent...for the forgiveness of sins. Despite his "failure" Peter knew he was still loved by God, totally forgiven, and fully accepted by Him and that can be our experience too.

3 The Restoration

This prophet wanted the axe back but I guess as far as he was concerned it was gone for good. He just saw Elisha and it all poured out. Master,and it was even borrowed. Whatever can I do?

Where did it fall? Let's go back to where it went wrong and see what we can do. God is in the restoration business and He does it very well. But sometimes you have to be prepared to go back in your mind to the time that loss occurred and specifically repent for letting something rob you of what you lost.

Sometimes loss can be traced back to some sin or issue which overcame the person at one time – and sometimes just as things seem to be picking up it gets the better of us again and so it goes on. It might be painful to think about it but God specialises in dealing with such issues.

The issue leading to loss – say loss of peace - it can be something about which condemn ourselves and take on guilt because we think we ought to but which could be dealt with in a very short time - if only we had the courage to talk to someone about it.

Sometimes it can be an imaginary thing, maybe some negative belief about ourselves which pulls us down, causes loss of joy and keeps us from walking in our full potential. Whatever it is, the Lord is good at restoring and setting us on track.

Down at the Jordan, Elisha cut down a stick, threw it in to the river where it went wrong, the axe head rose up and the man reached out his hand and took it.

Going back to people who felt they'd "lost" spiritual gifts, they were helped on both occasions by prayer and the gifts returned. However, it was not only the prayer, it was changing their perception to see that it was not so much loss in their cases but simply a case of allowing the gifts to become dormant and it was now time to fan them back into flame. Time to pick up the gifts again and use them just like the prophet picked up the "lost" axe head and used it again. In each case they repented of allowing the gifts to become dormant, asked the Lord for forgiveness, they were prayed over and encouraged to use the gifts right there. In each case they began, there and then, to operate the gifts again - God specialises in restoration and demonstrated it.

Jesus is known as Jesus the Nazarene. Branch.

Isaiah 11:1 says And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.

Jeremiah 33:15. In those days, and at that time, will I cause the Branch of Righteousness to grow up unto David

The cutting down of the branch is a picture of Jesus being cut off from life as he died on the cross but He is alive today and Elisha's act of throwing the branch into the place where the axe head fell is a picture of the Lord coming into the place of your failure or loss right at the very spot where you went wrong and show you that He never left you at that time and He is even prepared to forgive you for any sin at that time which contributed to the way you feel now. Just ask. He wants you to be free of the care of it. He wants you to draw close to Him and He wants to receive you and loves to bring restoration. Jesus the Nazarene wants to come right to where we are and remove our sense of loss whatever that might be, and enable you to pick up and move on.

It really does work.