

The Floating Axe Head

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to go back to that passage that I read at the beginning. It's so short, I'm just going to read it again. The company of the prophets said to Elisha, Look, the place where we meet with you is too small for us.

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. So he said, Go. And one of them said, Won't you please come with your servants? I will, Elisha replied.

And he went with them. They went to the Jordan and began to cut down trees. As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron axe head fell into the water. My Lord, he cried out, it was borrowed. 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. Lift it out, he said. Then the man reached out his hand and took it.

Well, for one thing, this is such an intriguing little passage, isn't it? It's very easy to read. It's a lovely story. But it's not just a story. It's a historical account.

[1 : 04] This is part of the history of Israel. And just because something deeply unusual takes place doesn't mean it's not true. God is the God of the unusual.

He's the God of the miraculous. The whole Bible is filled with a miraculous. Because the miraculous is when God intervenes and breaks our norms, the norms of the world.

So I have no difficulty believing what I read here as truth. But I want to understand it a little bit better. I want to understand its message in the context, first of all, of the people that we're reading about here.

And also in the context of the whole Bible, the Old and the New Testament. So first of all, I ask myself, well, who were these people?

Friends of Elisha. But it was more than that. They were the company of the prophets. Remember that a prophet in the Old Testament was simply a person who was responsible for delivering the message of God to the people.

[2 : 14] And he would hear that message typically by listening to the voice of God. And his job would then be to go to the people and to deliver that message.

He would stand in front of the people in the towns and the villages and tell the people what God wanted them to hear. But the prophet was in company with others.

It's quite clear that by this stage in Israel's history, that the work of taking God's message to the people was a collective one, rather than just one person who was responsible for the entire kingdom.

It was obvious that by that stage, there were a few prophets. And they acted as a fellowship, as a brotherhood. And they all, I suppose, supported each other in the work of, and that work was not easy.

Remember that the children of Israel at that time were not very receptive to what God had to say to them. There were times in their history where prophets were persecuted by people for whom the last thing they wanted to hear was what God had to, because they knew within themselves that God was calling them out for their own sin.

[3 : 38] And they didn't like to hear that. Nobody does. Nobody likes to be told they're wrong. But the important thing is whether we have sinned against God.

And God wanted his people to be absolutely clear and to understand where they stood as far as he was concerned. And so that was why the job of the prophet was so important.

But I can't help thinking of it in the light of the entirety of the Bible. Remember, this is the Old Testament. It was written and it took place hundreds of years before Jesus came.

But it was all in preparation for the great ultimate plan of God that one day he would send Jesus into the world. Remember that the prophets operated amongst God's covenant people.

And the covenant looked forward to the day when Jesus was going to come into the world. And the word of God was what kept the people right with God.

[4 : 49] It was what made clear to the people where they stood before God. And it was what reminded them that even although they had strayed, God was a forgiving God.

A God who was going to be faithful to his covenant and his promise. And I can't help but noticing that the similarity between the company of the prophets or the fellowship of the prophets at this time of Elisha.

And the company who were with Jesus when he started his ministry. We read in Mark chapter 3 how just at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, first thing he did was he called together men who were going to be his special friends.

Who would share in his ministry. And to whom he would give the responsibility of going out and making known Jesus to an unbelieving world.

A world that needed to hear about what God wanted them to know about themselves. You remember that that company of disciples were the ones who were sent out by Jesus after his resurrection and his ascension.

[6 : 11] And to them was given the task of taking God's message to the whole world. In other words, the church.

So I believe that the company of the prophets was an Old Testament foreshadowing of the work of the church.

Which is to take the message of God in the New Testament. The message of Jesus Christ to the world. And to deliver it faithfully and steadfastly and clearly.

Leaving no one in any doubt. And so with that in mind. There are so many similarities between what's happening here.

And how the church operates. You and I are part of the church. That's what we're doing this evening. Even though we're online. We would love to be together. But the next best thing is to come together like this.

[7 : 15] To hear God's word. What binds us together is the church. We belong to the same church. And it's part of the one church of Jesus Christ. That arose out of and developed from those few disciples that Jesus left on the earth.

Who started the work of the word. And so in this little chapter. I see so many helpful pointers. As to how the church operates in its work.

I see first of all. That there's a construction program going on. They're building a house. They're building a house.

To live in. As a base. It was to be the headquarters. The place where God's word was sourced. It was a location in Israel. That would become identified with the word of God. Because that's where all the prophets were going to live. And so there's a sense of excitement about this little passage.

[8 : 23] Just the same way as there is with any construction program. You remember at Bon Accord when you decided to do the refurbishment. You remember the sense of excitement. Yes, it was difficult being decanted into another building that wasn't familiar to you at that time.

But it was worth the wait, wasn't it? You remember when you came back and when all the work was finished. And it was all worth it. It was such a beautiful construction.

It was so satisfying. But the most satisfying thing of all was not its architecture, its color, or the painting, or the design, or anything lovely as these were. But the greatest thing of all this is a testimony.

A location for the glory of God. A place where God is worshipped. And a place that will mark the worship of God for the future.

So here is a construction program going on. Now, here's the strange thing. It was hugely unusual to expect a construction like this to take place.

[9 : 35] Because all the signs were that Israel was wandering away from God. Elisha lived just after the horrendous reign of Ahab and Jezebel, who had turned the hearts of the people away from God.

So nobody was in the mood for listening to God. It's quite the reverse. It's the last thing they wanted to hear. And yet, there's a sense of excitement.

There's a sense of optimism. There's a sense of future blessing in this. Even although none of these men can see it. What gives them that excitement is that they know God for themselves. And that they are so thrilled with their relationship to God. With their covenant relationship to God. And with all that he is.

They are going to commit themselves 100% to what he wants them to do. And to his message in Israel. So there is a construction program going on.

[10:49] Now, I don't know about you, but there is something always exciting about construction. Near where I live, just up the road, I'm building a whole bunch of new houses.

Hundreds of them. And the place is a bit of a mess. You know, there's lorries coming in and out. There's piles of bricks and sand. And there are people going in and out. And for all the world, for a few weeks, you think, Oh, what's going to come of this?

And then you go up the road and you see the finished product. And you think, wow. It's all worth it. It's all so beautiful. And it provides for a future generation their accommodation. The same message is in Revelation chapter 10.

You remember John in Revelation. He was so discouraged. He was on his own. He was on the Isle of Patmos. It looked for all the world as if nothing was happening in the church. And God says to him, he showed him the temple.

[11:53] And he says, go and take a measuring rod and measure the temple. That was God's way of saying to John, I have a future for the temple. Even although physically it's destroyed, what the temple represents is my church.

And my church will never be destroyed. I have a great, glorious, spectacular future for my church. And you know what?

God still has that great, glorious, spectacular future for the church. You know, you might say, oh, you know, this pandemic, you know, all the odds are against us.

Everything is stacked up against us. So what? God is more powerful by far than any pandemic. And this is a testing time for us. To remind us, first of all, of how vulnerable we are and how changeable life is. But it also reminds us that there is only one place of safety and security in the whole universe.

[13:00] And that is in Jesus Christ. So I hope that tonight we take a refuge in Jesus. And I hope that that makes us excited, not just for today, but for the future.

I don't know what God is doing in this pandemic. I don't know how he's using it, but I can't help believing that people are being reached in this pandemic who would never have been reached before.

And so just like all the odds were against the company of the prophets in the day of Elisha. And just like all the odds are against us today, we're living in a secular society.

It appears that nobody wants to listen to the gospel. Let's give ourselves to the future of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus says heaven and earth will pass away.

My words will never pass away. Second thing that I notice here is that the work of the message of God, the work of taking the message of God is collective.

[14:02] It's a brotherhood. It's a fellowship. It involves collective responsibility. They all have a part to play. They say, look, the place we meet with you is too small for us.

Let's go to the Jordan. Each of us, each of us can get a poll. Each of us. Every person counted. Now, I'm quite sure that some of them were more skilled than others. And they probably divided themselves into skill groups. And one person did one thing, another person did another. But nonetheless, it took all of them working together to construct this house.

Things have not changed. The work of the church is a collective responsibility that requires all of our input. Doesn't matter who we are.

God wants all of us as part of his building program. And it even involved Elisha himself. It appears that Elisha was regarded as the leader, the most prominent of the prophets.

[15:16] That's quite clear from the context. So when one of them says, well, you know, come with us. I think it's really telling that Elisha says, yes, I will go. I'm one of you.

I'm on the same level as you are. Even if some are more prominent than others, we're all in this together. And so he goes with them. What an example of leadership.

That's what church leadership is all about. It's servant leadership. And so what an encouragement that must have been to the rest of the prophets when the great man himself decided to roll up his

sleeves and get his hands dirty, to hold the tree while somebody hacked away at it. And then for him to carry whatever he had to carry and all the rest. He was one of them. We're all in this together. The old AV says, every man a beam.

I think that's a great motto for any church. Every man a beam. So as we look forward, see what I'm saying in all of this is let's look beyond this pandemic. Let's look beyond to how Bon Accord is going to progress and develop.

[16:27] Let's not get tied up with the here and the now. And certainly let's not retreat into the past. But let's look to the future. Because God has a future if we remain faithful and obedient to him.

Let's pray that God will do great things in the future in Aberdeen through Bon Accord. Third thing I notice is the commitment of the company of the prophets.

They were in this for the long haul. This was a place where they were going to stay. Because the work of the word is permanent.

It's long term. Come what may. It's not something that you give yourself to this week and then do something else next week. We're in this together for the future.

Now what brings about that sense of commitment? There's only one thing that brings about that sense of commitment. And that is when our eyes are opened to what God has done for us on the cross in his son Jesus Christ.

[17:42] As God opens our eyes to the wonder of the cross. And to the depth of our salvation.

When we're awakened to our wretchedness and our condemnation. What we deserve. And when we're awakened to the amazing love of Jesus Christ.

Who gave himself for us on the cross and rose again on the third day. So that our lives could be changed. Then how can we give any less than our everything to him?

Love so amazing. So divine. Demands my life. My soul.

My all. The company of the prophets were committed to the work of God. Because of what God was to them.

[18:48] But then lastly. There was a catastrophe wasn't there? It was a very simple thing. It was the kind of thing. It was nobody's fault. One man took his axe.

Don't think he hit the wood too heavy. Something wrong with the axe. I don't know what it was. But the axe head flew into the water. The problem was. It was borrowed. And that was a very expensive replacement.

These men had nothing. And there. The little thing they did have. Which was an expensive tool. It was lost. A catastrophe. What's more.

The work couldn't go on without it. And so. There was one of these obstacles. One of these. One of these.

Events that take place. And that take place so often. Even in the work of the church. That make you think. Why does God let that happen?

[19:48] If this is God's word. And if this is God's work. Why doesn't he just ensure. That things go to plan. Well if you read the Bible.

And if you read the history of the church. You will find that often things. Do not go to plan. And that. And that events happen. Like this.

That. Nobody expected. That may or may not be someone's fault. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it's more catastrophic than this.

But events that eventually. God will transform into his glory. You think.

You think. You think of the New Testament. Think of the feeding of the 5,000. Where. They had omitted to take enough. Well. How could they take enough food for 5,000 people?

[20:44] That would have cost them a fortune. And there they were. They were landed in an isolated place. The people were starving. They were hungry. They were too weak to go home. What were they going to do? The disciples said to Jesus.

We don't have. We have no idea. How to feed these people. What are we going to do? Jesus' message was that. To them was. It's in hand. What did he do? He transformed.

This. Calamity. Into. The occasion. Where he was glorified. Think of the coming of the sea.

We read it in Mark chapter 4. They're crossing the sea. An ordinary event. They're crossing the sea. And a storm rises. Their lives are in danger. How can God allow this to happen?

Don't you care that we drown? Said the disciples. Jesus woke up. It was taken care of. And sometimes he operates by way of a miracle.

[21 : 48] Sometimes he doesn't. And sometimes he retrieves a situation at no loss. But other times there is loss.

Like for example when James the disciple was put to death by Herod. He lost his life. And yet it was all in the plan of God.

Because everything. God works all things together for good to those who love him. And that's what's important.

Whether it's a miracle. Or not. Sometimes we get to understand why things go wrong. Because we're able to see them.

Look back and see how God has woven our mistakes or our accidents into his plan. Sometimes we get to see that. Sometimes we don't.

[22 : 48] But that doesn't mean that it's not there. It doesn't mean that God's not working. He is. He always does. And so at times like this.

We're brought closer to God than we are when things go well. This was the moment when the man cried out.

And he came to Elisha. He came to the person who represented the word of God. This was the moment when the company of the prophets were shown their vulnerability.

And sometimes that's necessary. Because if we're not shown our vulnerability. Then we become too dependent on ourselves. And we become less dependent on God.

And that is the biggest danger that we can face. Tonight, as we look to the future.

[23 : 48] Our efforts will be imperfect. We will make mistakes. We will fail. We will run into difficulty. The question is, what will we do when we fail and when we run into difficulty?

Will we try to rely on ourselves and try and sort the problem out in our own strength? I hope not. But I hope that we come to the Lord and depend on him and his strength and his power and his guidance.

The God who can transform calamity into glory. So, I hope that as we look forward into the future and see these little green shoots of hope over the horizon.

That we too are excited by what God can and will do in the future. And I hope that we're up for our involvement in his work at Bon Accord.

Whatever the future may be. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word that blesses us so much and that encourages us so much.

[25 : 01] We pray that you will gather us around it. Forgive our failure. Forgive our faithlessness. May we take encouragement from these men and women of old who loved you.

And who had nothing in this world and yet who loved you and devoted themselves to your work. May it be so with us. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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