

He Will Make the Iron Float (2 Kings 6:1-7)

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I have often wondered why the writer of Kings sandwiched this story of the floating iron between the accounts of the curse of Gehazi and the chariots of fire. It is a short story in the middle of two long stories. It is so short and simple, leaving readers wondering why it is there.

There seems to be a contrast between the stories of Gehazi and the lost iron. One is concerning Elisha’s servant, Gehazi and the other, Elisha’s students. The first is about money, and the second, ministry. In one is faithlessness, and in the other, faithfulness. One is for personal gain, and the other, for everyone’s benefit. The first is action without approval, and the other, with permission. In one, something is gained by lying, and in the other, by borrowing.¹

But the story stresses the writer’s recurring theme of Yahweh’s protection of His servants. Two threads tie this story with the stories of the widow’s “bottomless” oil, life in the pot, and the feeding of one hundred (cf. 2 Ki. 4:1-7, 38-44). Each of the stories involves prophets. Each portrays Elisha protecting them from financial trouble (the widow and axe head) and physical need (the stew and 100 hungry prophets).²

Yet the writer seems to stress a larger theme with this story. That theme is Yahweh’s preservation of His prophets, and hence, the preservation of the worship of Yahweh. At this time, Israel has fallen in apostasy (cf. 2 Ki. 3:1-3). Yahwist spirituality was at an all time low. Idolatry in the form of calf and Baalist worship was widespread in the land. We find Elisha busy devoting his time to training a new breed of prophets. These prophets will keep alive the worship of Yahweh.

Thus, Yahweh is more than merely demonstrating His care for His servants. He is really preserving His prophets and thus, maintaining a Yahwist testimony in apostate Israel.

We note four key elements in this brief but fascinating account.

The Disciplined Prophets

In v. 1, the student prophets presented a problem to their seminary president, Elisha. Their dorms are too small for their number. The verb, “small” (Heb. *tsar*) means, “be (too) narrow, cramped” in the Qal perfect.³ The seminary students were growing in number. But their facilities remained the same. There were now too many people in small rooms. The result is narrow and cramped rooms.

They then suggested a solution in v. 2. They will go to the Jordan and a build a new dormitory there. They will launch a building project. Everyone must chip in. Each one will cut a tree for the new building.

That they will go to the Jordan indicates that they were somewhere near, most likely in Jericho—about five miles (eight kilometers) away from the Jordan river.

I note two qualities of these student prophets.

First, they were disciplined students. They will not do anything without asking permission first. By their disciplined behavior, they honor God and project a good testimony to the people around them.

Are you preparing for ministry? Are you now in ministry? Follow your godly leaders. You may not agree with them. But the Lord has put them there to teach you. He put you there to learn from them.

Disciplined leaders are disciplined followers. You will never become a disciplined leader if you are not a disciplined follower today. Also, if you are disciplined in the small things, you will be disciplined in the big things.

¹ Arthur Pink, “Gleanings From Elisha, His Life and Miracles.” Cited June 3, 2011. Online: http://www.pbministries.org/books/pink/Gleanings_Elisha/elisha_20.htm.

² Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings* (NAC 8; ed. E. Ray Clendenen; Nashville: Broadman, 1995), 275.

³ Holladay, s. v. צר, 7366.

Second, they were diligent students. In v. 4, they themselves cut down the trees. They did not allow their lack of money to stop them. They did not ask for donations or borrow money. Instead, they used available assets—labor and lumber.

What do you have right now? You may not have much money. But you have some money, some time, and some abilities. Use that to build something for the Lord!

These sons of prophets did not hire other workers to do the job. Rather, they performed the manual labor themselves. They never saw it as beneath their dignity to do a dirty job.

Do you despise those who do manual labor? Elisha did not. Jesus grew up doing hard labor in carpentry.

But there is more to that. These sons of prophets worked hard probably because they believed in the expansion of the prophetic ministry. It is possible that some of them will relocate to the Jordan and set up a seminary extension there, while the rest will remain in Jericho. Thus, a new seminary near the Jordan means a new place for the worship of Yahweh.

God works through the diligence and hard work of His people. He could have created the seminary by just saying the word. But He operates through the work of consecrated people.

I remember going with a group of 10 men and women every other Sunday afternoon on evangelistic trips. They were evangelists, trained in the SOWERS method of preaching in the open air. We'd pull out around 2:30 PM, go to a target place, and set up our equipment. For a 16 yr. old like me, they looked old, though they were only in their 40s and 50s. They have been doing it for years. They were not pastors. They worked their jobs from Monday to Friday. On Sunday, they worked as an evangelistic team. Because of their hard work, two churches were planted over the years.

God works through the church that works hard for God. If our church should grow in numbers, we had better work hard in bringing people to the Lord. Some churches work hard to bring other members from other churches to their fold. We work hard to bring unbelievers to Jesus.

Some of us will fall like Gehazi—greedy for gain. Some of us will fall like David—out of lust for women. Some of us will fall like Demas—enamored by the world. But do not be discouraged by these people. Most of us still work hard for the Gospel.

God shall bless our church if He finds diligent people here. God shall bless you if you work hard for His glory.

The Decisive Leader

We note two things here about Elisha's leadership. First, he listens. In v. 1, the prophets tell Elisha their problem of space. They suggest a new building project in Jordan. Then Elisha answers, "Go."

Here we see the character of this man of God. We see his humility—his willingness to learn from others. He sees the problem and agrees with their solution. A proud man would resent any suggestion from his people.⁴ But Elisha sees the wisdom of their plan and supports it.

A mark of a good leader is that first of all, he listens. I covet your wisdom. I am not like other pastors who prefer to do what they like to do without asking the wisdom and approval of church leaders. I value team leadership and team effort. If you have some idea there that promotes the Gospel and honors God, let me know. Prov. 15:22 says, "*Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.*" A know-it-all leader is a leader who knows less. But in the counsel of many is much wisdom.

Are you a wise leader? Do you listen to any good ideas from concerned people?

Second, he acts. In v. 2, to the suggestion that they should go to the Jordan, Elisha answers, "Go." Then in v. 3, when one of them asks Elisha to go with them, Elisha answers, "*I will go.*" Finally, in v. 5, when one loses an axe head in the water, Elisha asks, "*Where did it fall?*" In all three instances, the writer of Kings portrays Elisha as one who instantly and decisively meets the needs of the prophets.⁵

We find this feature in the multiplying widow's oil. Elisha saves the widow, a prophet's wife, from financial crisis, by the miracle of the "bottomless" oil. He saves a deadly meal by cooking a miracle mix in it.

⁴ Pink, "Gleanings," Cited June 3, 2011. Online: <http://www.pbministries.org>.

⁵ T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC 13; ed. John D. W. Watts; Dallas: Word, 1985), 73.

He feeds 100 hungry prophets by multiplying the bread. In the story of the lost axe head, he spares the hapless prophet from financial crisis by making the iron float.

We should not overlook the purpose of the writer here. His note of decisiveness is not primarily meant to teach us lessons on leadership, for Kings is not a book of leadership. Effective leadership should be decisive. It should not dilly dally. But decisive leadership is not the purpose of the story here. Rather, the intent is to point out God's decisive attention to His needy servants in a time of crisis.

Elisha is Yahweh's representative prophet in Israel. His miracles are Yahweh's miracles. His miraculous acts of deliverance are Yahweh's deliverance. Elisha's miracles with the prophets therefore encourage them. It reminds them of their holy calling. It tells them not so much that they are working for God, but that God is working for them. Evidently, their lack of resources shows their lack of financial support from the people. But through the supportive ministry of Elisha, they are now confident of the full support of God.

The Desperate Cry

In v. 4, we see the prophets busy cutting trees. As one of them did so, "*his axe head fell into the water*" (v. 5). Actually in the Hebrew, it literally reads, "the iron fell." The words, "axe head," are supplied by translators to give the logical meaning. The tree must have stood near the water.

Then, he cried out, "*Alas, my master! It was borrowed*" (v. 5). Why is it a desperate cry when it seems to be a small thing?

What? Did you lose an axe? Well, buy another one! You lost a cell phone? Get a plan and get a free cell. You lost your girlfriend? There are many girls in our church! What's the big fuss over a lost axe head?

I see two reasons why it was such a big deal to lose the iron. The first reason is that the axe was borrowed. That means the poor prophet must pay it. But iron in Elisha's time was expensive. And the junior prophet was very poor.⁶ He was so poor that he could not buy his own tool. He had to borrow one.

It's like losing a borrowed cell phone today. Where did you lose your borrowed cell phone? It fell inside our toilet bowl. When you do not earn much and you lose a P6,500 (\$150) cell phone—that's already a financial crisis.

That's what we have here. The helpless prophet did not only lose an axe head. He just got himself into a financial crisis.

There is a second reason for the problem of the lost iron. It was bound to affect the finances of the seminary. Most of the students, if not all, were very poor. The seminary lacked the support of the majority of the people. There was a famine in the land. Whatever money they have would go to food expenses.

The poor student could not pay for the borrowed axe. It means that the rest of them may have to chip in. But their contribution would not amount to much. How then can they possibly pay the debt? Hence, the loss of the axe head plunged the prophetic community also into a monetary crisis. That is why the loss of a small thing is really a big thing for them.

But that is not yet the end of the story. God will yet do a wonderful thing through the man of God, Elisha.

The Delightful Miracle

In v. 6, Elisha is now called, "the man of God," which indicates the writer's emphasis on Elisha as the man sent from God to implement the will and the ways of God. In vv. 6-7, the student prophet brought the man of God to the place where the axe fell into the water. Then Elisha did something intriguing. He cut off a stick and threw it into the place. Then the iron floated on the water. What a fascinating miracle!

We raise two issues. First, why did Elisha ask, "*Where did it fall?*" To some, it betrays ignorance.⁷ But it is no different to the question which he asked the Shunnamite woman, "*Is all well with the child?*" (2 Ki. 4:26). Apparently, the LORD did not tell Elisha the location of the axe head (cf. 2 Ki. 4:27).

⁶ R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *First and Second Kings* (EBC; Chicago: Moody, 1991), 157.

⁷ Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 73.

But ignorance is no excuse for an impending miracle. The LORD can still do a miracle through people who do not know all the details. You may not know everything in the Bible. But if you are consecrated to God, He can do a miracle through you!

Second, why did Elisha get a stick and throw it into the water? Elisha has a habit of doing something before a miracle. In the poisoned waters in Jericho, Elisha throws salt in it (cf. 2 Ki. 2:19-22). In the poisonous pot, he throws flour in it (cf. 2 Ki. 2:40-41). In the lost axe, he throws a stick in the water.

There might be some symbolism. Salt is a symbol of covenant preservation (cf. Lev. 2:13). Flour may be taken also as a symbol of healthy food. The stick on the water then may be a symbol of the floating iron.⁸ In any case, God used natural means to do a supernatural work.

Conclusion

What is your desperate cry today? Are you facing a crisis today? Do you carry a load in your heart that you cannot unload?

If God can make the iron float for a poor prophet, then He can certainly make your iron float today. Come to God and He will make your iron float. Call on the God who made the iron float. He can do the same for you.

What is impossible to you is possible with God. God lives to help the one who trusts Him! Trust the God who can make the iron float. According to your faith, it shall be done unto you.

⁸ Russell Dilday, *1,2 Kings* (PCS 9; ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 291.