



## WHEN AXES SWIM

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In all my years of eating breakfast, I have found that the second to last bowl of cereal is the best one of the box. I grew up on Life cereal. I'd eat the more sugary stuff like Captain Crunch and the more boring stuff like Wheaties. But Life was always my favorite. There is a limited window of time for when it's good to eat, though. It has to have been thoroughly soaked in the milk, but not for too long, or it gets soggy. So I have learned to time my bites just right.

The problem with Life cereal, though, is that when you get to the bottom of the box, it's just nothing but little shreds. You don't want to get stuck with the very last bowl because all you'll get is a pile of dust. But the second to last bowl – that's always fun, because you know you got the last of the good stuff and you don't have to be the one to eat the scraps. There's a double pleasure in the second to last bowl. You can savor the sweetness of your devious triumph.

This morning is our second to last bowl of Elisha. We've only got one more week with him, because we're wrapping up our study of his life next week. Of course, the analogy breaks down a bit, because next week's story is a really good one, too. It's no pile of dust. There's a lot of terrific stuff left in the box. But this second to last bowl is a good one and I want to just savor it with you this morning as we near the end of this series.

### **2 Kings 6:1-7**

*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."*

*And he said, "Go."*

*Then 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 axhead fell into the water. "Oh, 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.*

Does the word “random” come to mind? It’s like a scene out of Monty Python. “And now for something completely different: A floating axe head.” The story of Naaman last week had such clear, strong, easy-to-identify themes. But what are you supposed to do with an incident like this?

Honestly, I almost skipped over this story. It’s so short and so bizarre that initially it didn’t seem like it made sense to spend much time with it. But if you read the rest of I and II Kings, you discover this isn’t the only story of its kind from Elisha’s life. There are other random-sounding miracles. And as strange as it is, there are many more stories like this one sprinkled all throughout the Bible.

That got me thinking that it would probably be worth stopping and looking at this story – not just for its own value, but also for a bigger discussion about the way we approach the Bible in general. What do we do when we find material in here that’s harder to process? How do we get something out of it?

Maybe we should back up a moment first to talk about **the importance of Scripture**. We’ve said before that we place a high value on Scripture here at New Day. Listen to what our affirmation of faith says on the subject:

*We believe God inspired the Old and New Testaments. They completely reveal God's plan for the salvation of humanity. The Scriptures bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ and are the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct for the Christian.*

There are a lot of books in the world that say profound things. There are a lot of books in the world that say very helpful things. As Christians, we believe the Bible stands apart from all other books as a point of reference for everything in life. A key verse that shapes that view is found in Paul’s words to Timothy:

## **2 Timothy 3:16**

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...*

All of Scripture is like life-giving breath straight from the mouth of God. It was written in a very human process – we’re not saying it was created magically. To say that it is God-breathed means that God directly inspired and worked through the people who wrote it. He had a hand in what they said. He is ultimately the source, and that’s what gives it its importance. There is something in it for us that is vital on a level other books don’t possess. No part of it is extraneous. Every last little bit of it, including stories about floating axe heads.

That's our operating premise, that no matter what section of the Bible we're talking about, if we're paying attention and open to the Holy Spirit who inspired it in the first place, we can gain something from it, even when on the surface it seems completely random and unrelated to our lives. So we try to take each page seriously and not just dismiss something as being unimportant.

But how many times have you just stared at a passage for a while and said, "I'm not seeing it." No matter how much we may believe it's important and no matter how much we may WANT to find something to take from it, there are certain parts of the Bible that are just more work than others to wrap our minds around.

This week's story is a case in point. One commentator I read said, "The story has no particular merit or significance apart from the fact that it emphasizes the supernatural power which the man of God possesses." He couldn't really find anything meaningful in it. I don't think we should be satisfied with that conclusion. To me, that underestimates the depth of Scripture.

At the same time, I don't want to overanalyze every word and imagine hidden meanings that aren't really there. That can be equally bad. Author Juan Carlos Ortiz had a great way to illustrate this. He said,

*Suppose I am in Rome and write a letter to my friend Bob Mumford. It opens, "Dear Brother Bob, I write this letter to you from Rome. I have arrived with my wife and children and we have seen this and that..." And I write a long letter.*

Bob then took the letter to church to study it with people. *"The letter starts like this, "Dear Brother Bob." 'Dear' in the Greek means a person who is loved. So when Bob is very dear, he means loved one. Dear, dear. I can imagine my brother Juan taking the pen and saying dear. His heart is overflowing with love. His wife is beside him joining him in love. How do you write your letters? Do you put dear in your letters? Come on, all of us must start saying dear. Let us say it in unison. Dear. Dear. Dear. But wait, there is more. 'Dear Bob.' Bob, he calls me by name. He knows me. He really means it when he writes it because he says Dear Bob. Do you say dear, and do you call people by name."*

*Yet after three or four months spent picking apart the Epistle of Juan Carlos, nobody knows what that letter really said. That's the way we teach the Bible. I imagine that when we get to heaven, Paul will call most of us Bible teachers over one side and say, "Listen, I never said what you taught."*

Ouch. Please forgive me if you catch me doing that. I love getting at the nuggets I find in the Bible, but it's easy to fall into that trap of searching out meaning that isn't there, and in the process lose sight of what God really is wanting to communicate. So how do we stay on track?

We need to keep in mind not only the importance of Scripture, but also **the purpose of Scripture**. Why did God give us the Bible in the first place?

I've heard many preachers refer to the Bible as being our owner's manual – God's instruction book for how to live this life. If that's your view, then the primary question to consider in every passage is "How does this apply to my life?"

Go back to our story this morning for a minute. What kind of life applications could you draw from the passage? "Don't build waterfront property." Or you could conclude that the story contains a warning against borrowing, since there are a couple verses in Proverbs along those lines. But really – if the Bible is an instruction book, you won't find a lot of instruction here.

Preaching is almost always about application. I want you people to change how you live because of what you hear me say! And there is definitely plenty of instruction in the Bible. But that's not the central purpose of Scripture itself. The reason we have it, the reason it exists is to show us more of God and his character. The Bible isn't primarily to give us a plan for our lives – it's to reveal God's plan, the way he is working in history. It's all about him.

Raymond Dillard says we need to switch from an anthropocentric approach to the Bible (one that centers on people and their needs) to a theocentric approach (one where God is the central issue.) He says,

*If we do that, our first question will not be "What's here for me?" but rather "What do I learn about God from this passage. Very different information comes into the spotlight with this question than with the former one.*

Much as I hate to admit it, I'm not the central character in the Bible. And as great as it is to find things that apply to my life, what's more important is that I see how it shines a light on God. It's not a "to do" list – it's a portrait. We'll see in a moment what that looks like for our text. But I want to add one further note about what shapes the way we look at the Bible, and that is **the destination of Scripture**. Where is the big story headed? Everything in the plot is moving forward, climbing toward the cross.

Twenty five hundred years ago, Israelites reading about Elisha would have interpreted events differently than we might sitting on this side of the resurrection. And that's how it should be. Our reading of the Old Testament will now always be in light of what Jesus did for us.

The commentary writer Peter Enns puts it this way:

*The Old Testament is not an ancient text with which we have to struggle somehow to find creative ways to bring its timeless principles into our world. God has already "interpreted" the OT by raising Christ from the dead.*

Does anybody need a spoiler alert if I talk about the Sixth Sense? At the end of the movie, when Bruce Willis' character finally knows that he's dead, he has flashbacks to all these different scenes from the movie. Only now he interprets each one completely differently. They make a new kind of sense than they did before he knew the whole truth.

The same is true when we know what Jesus did. It changes the way we read everything else. It all makes a different kind of sense in light of him.

Those three principles – that Scripture is vitally important, that it is intended to reveal God and that it is ultimately headed toward Christ – those are guiding ideas for making sense of things like floating axe heads.

Speaking of which, let's go back to the story itself. The local school of prophets was growing by leaps and bounds, which was great, but it was busting at the seams. There just was no way to continue in their cramped quarters. So they come up with the dream of a new campus down by the river. There are enough prophets so that if each of them goes and fells a tree, they should be able to make pretty short work of this business.

Elisha gives the boys permission, and they say, "No – we want you to come with us!" So he does. Which ended up being a very good thing. Because if Elisha hadn't been there, there wouldn't have been a miracle.

Already, before there's a crisis, we can see our first glimpse of the character of God. Because he is **a God who prepares for the future**. He is orchestrating events to ensure that Elisha will be in the right spot to do what's necessary when the time comes.

### **Psalm 139:16**

*All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*

It's staggering to think that God is so involved in our lives. He anticipates needs and outcomes and guides our steps accordingly.

So the band of merry men heads toward the forest. Of course, these are prophets and not lumberjacks. Perhaps a little bookish. Not really sure how much construction they've done before. In any case, they don't even have all the tools they need for this project, so one guy borrows an axe from a friend. I'm sure he was pretty excited about it. That's how I felt when I borrowed a nail gun and compressor – I had a power I'd never had before. There's nothing like a new toy to play with.

So he's enthusiastically chopping away and gets a little TOO enthusiastic. He puts all he's got into one super big swing and the axe head goes on its first and last flight – through the air and right into the Jordan River. You can see the horror in his eyes as he watches it splash down and sink to the bottom.

A lost axe head doesn't sound like a very big deal to us today, but iron tools back then would have been extremely expensive. It would have been the equivalent of borrowing

someone's caterpillar tractor today. Most of the prophets would not have had any disposable income to speak of, so there would have been no way to replace it. He would most likely have had to sell himself into slavery in order to make good on it. Literally. Trying to work off that debt would mean losing his freedom.

You can hear the despair in his cry. "Oh no! That wasn't even mine! What am I going to do?" He calls out to Elisha, not even so much to get Elisha to act as to make him aware.

Elisha can hear the anguish in the man's plea. He asked where the axe had fallen in, and the man shows him. Then Elisha does a strange thing: He cuts down a tree branch and throws it in the water. Somehow, that act caused the iron axe head to rise to the surface.

We'll talk about what Elisha did. But first I'd like to pause long enough to think about the man who asked for help. He's a lot different than the man who asked Elisha for help last week. Naaman, the man with leprosy. Naaman the powerful general from Syria. Healing him was an internationally important act.

This little prophet didn't really impact much of anyone. We don't even know his name. What's more, it was his own fault he was in this predicament. At least Naaman had no part in causing his own disease, whereas if this guy had just taken the time to check the axe before he started swinging, he could have seen that it was loose.

But Elisha doesn't ask, "How did this happen?" He just got to work fixing it. I'm sure he figured out pretty quickly who was to blame, but he didn't dwell on that.

And it didn't matter to Elisha that the prophet was a nobody. In fact, he gave him more face time than he did Naaman, despite the high profile nature of his case.

We have **a God who cares about small things and small people**. God is all powerful and master of the universe. But sometimes we mistake the bigness of God for distance. If God is so big, I can't bother him with my little problems. God has more important things to worry about than me. Especially when I've created my own mess.

Or I think God is too big to hear my tiny voice. Remember in Horton hears a Who, when all those microscopic people were shouting at the top of their lungs, "We are here! We are here!" And still nobody could even hear them? That's how we can feel in comparison to God, like he's got far more pressing and important things to pay attention to and we'll just get lost in the shuffle.

One of my favorite stories in the New Testament is when Jesus is on his way to the home of Jairus, an important, high profile man whose daughter was dying. The situation was urgent. And the woman who has had this nagging, chronic bleeding problem tugs on Jesus' robe. He could have blown her off. Why stop for such a minor problem of a nameless stranger who had no influence? What could slow him down from getting to that much more critical need?

But Jesus DID stop. He took the time. He cared for that woman and healed her up. And he still had time for Jairus and his daughter. There was no conflict – Jesus was there for the small things as well as the big. He still is. God sees the details of your life and he cares when you are in despair over what may seem insignificant to other people. That's a key difference between God and the world. In society and culture at large, if you're not in a position of power or influence, you're just a statistic. You're just a speck in a teeming mass of humanity. That's all you can be.

But with God you have significance and value. Your pain matters.

### **Psalm 145:18**

*The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.*

You have the attention of the Lord Almighty. He stands ready to act on your behalf, just the way Elisha did.

And what exactly did Elisha do? He grabbed a stick and threw it in the water, and the iron axe head floated to the surface. Now depending on your point of view, this could be three things:

- A. A completely made up story to make Elisha look good.
- B. A slight exaggeration of Elisha fishing the axe head out of the water with a stick.
- C. A genuine miracle that defied the law of gravity.

In the text, there's nothing to support the exaggeration theory. The wording doesn't support it, and neither does logic. The writer wouldn't have seen any value in remembering how Elisha fished something out of the Jordan. So we can throw out B.

And I'm not all that sure option A makes much sense either. Surely if they wanted to make Elisha look good they could come up with a more impressive miracle than this. This is small potatoes compared to some of the other things we've seen him do.

The most straightforward explanation is that what the story says happened actually happened. It's highly unusual – but that's why they wrote it down. You record these kinds of events because they're so far out of normal human experience.

It comes down to a central issue of what kind of God we believe in. Is he bound by the same laws we are, or is he in control of them? This story would suggest he is a **God who knows no limits**.

The first verse of the Bible is, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." I once heard someone say if you can accept that premise, you can accept anything else in the Bible. That's probably very true. If it is conceivable in your mind that God is the source of the laws that govern us, rather than subject to them, then stories of miracles pose no problems. He can do anything he wants to.

We tend to put God in a box – a box that is more defined by our unbelief than his actual abilities. We don't ask him for certain answers because we don't think there's any way he could do it. We've all got a few axe heads in our lives that have sunk so far as to feel they could never be recovered. But we serve a God with no limits.

**Isaiah 50:2**

*Was my arm too short to ransom you?*

*Do I lack the strength to rescue you?*

*By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea, I turn rivers into a desert.*

We should not be surprised when God overrides the natural order of things to do his work. He's fully capable and fully in control.

That in and of itself is enough reason for this little story to be in the Bible. But I see one thing more in this miracle. Something falls in the water and sinks with no power of its own to rise to the surface again. A great debt will be owed that no one can pay. What could be more in keeping with the heart of God than Elisha stepping in, doing the impossible. Against overwhelming odds, he won the battle with the water and brought the axe head back from the depths. What was lost has been found. The debt has been wiped away.

Could it be any more clear? This is a story of **the God who rescues**. Sometime take a few minutes to look at the use of water throughout the Bible. Moses is lifted out of the river. Noah is saved through the flood. The people of Israel cross the Jordan on dry land. Jesus walking on top of the water, pulling Peter up out of it. In the rite of baptism, people are submerged in the water and brought back up.

There is an ongoing imagery of water representing all that is chaos and death and evil, with God reaching down, grabbing hold of us and snatching us out of it.

**Isaiah 43:1-3**

*"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have summoned you by name; you are mine.*

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;*

*and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you...*

*For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

When we have sunk so low that our feet are caught in the miry clay, God rescues. When we're drowning in the flood of our own problems, God rescues. When our heart is heavy and dropping like lead, God lifts us up again. When we're like that prophet, watching our future disappear before our eyes, God does the impossible and resurrects us, giving us new hope, erasing our debt.

When Elisha sees the axe head surface, he turns to the man and says, "grab it." And the man reaches out and takes hold of the miracle axe for himself.

Are you grabbing what God is offering this morning? In Philippians, Paul wrote,

**Philippians 3:12**

*...I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*

Are you taking hold of what God has done for you? He won't force himself on anyone. Despite his ability to do anything, there's one thing he won't do, and that is to make you grab the opportunities he gives. He leaves that up to each one of us.

I need a God who makes axes float – a God who cares about small things and small people, a God who knows no limits and a God who rescues. But is that the God I'm praying to?

This story challenges us to ask some hard questions. First, do I recognize my own predicament? Have I gotten to the "Oh no?" It was really easy for that prophet to know his situation. Are we aware of ours? Have we seen our own sin and said "Oh no?" Have we felt how desperate our condition is? If it feels like God is far away and like Scripture makes no sense, sometimes what we need, the key to seeing Jesus is to say, "Oh no!" about the sin in our lives. We need to recognize the predicament of our sin and confess it, to repent of the huge burden of debt we can't pay and sin we can't fix. Spend some time with God lamenting the situation, saying "oh no" and letting him resurrect your spirit.

What else is sinking in my life? What am I watching go down? Maybe it's a relationship, maybe it's my finances or my emotional state. Maybe you're saying, "I'm what's sinking. I'm the axe head." Maybe you feel like you're going down for the third time and you're needing someone to notice. God does notice and it's in his nature to rescue and put your feet back on a rock.

What is God asking me to grab hold of? Have I been letting his work go by without claiming it for myself? Is there a promise of his that I need to hang on to?

Praise God for random stories in the Bible. I'll take every single one that can show me more of him and challenge me to believe it.