

# ELISHA

## THE MAN WHO CARED

### (2 KINGS 6:1–7)

Writers categorize stories according to length. Some are called “short stories.” If the tales are *very* short, they are designated “short short stories.” This lesson centers on a “short short story” about Elisha, one we find tucked between lengthy accounts of dealings with high-placed government officials. I have put it here in our series because it fits comfortably with the previous lesson. I called that study “The Man Who Shared” and this one “The Man Who Cared.”

Because of the brevity of the account and the seemingly “insignificant” problem it addresses, it has been called “the most trivial of the stories told of Elisha.”<sup>1</sup> Some volumes on Elisha’s life do not even bother to comment on the story, while others dismiss it in a sentence or two. However, as Burton Coffman pointed out, “It is actually one of the most important miracles performed by that remarkable prophet. Why? It emphasizes God’s concern for the problems pressing upon the hearts of the poor.”<sup>2</sup>

### A “TRIVIAL” PROBLEM THEN

#### What Man Can Do

As our story begins, Elisha was again with some “sons of the prophets,” perhaps those at the school at Jericho (see 2:5), which was near the Jordan River (see 6:2). The success of Elisha’s ministry is seen in the fact that the student body had outgrown their facility. “Now the sons of

the prophets said to Elisha, ‘Behold now, the place before you where we are living is too limited for us’” (6:1). Married students apparently lived in private dwellings (see 4:1–7), but the prophets who were single may have lived together. At least, they had a common meeting place and dining hall (see 4:38–44). The building was now too small for their number. This is a good problem to have, but it must be addressed at once if growth is to continue.

The prophet trainees had no funds to hire a contractor to construct a larger facility. How, then, could the problem be solved? They would build it themselves. They said to Elisha, “Please let us go to the Jordan and each of us take from there a beam, and let us make a place there for ourselves where we may live” (v. 2a). According to ancient writers, trees and shrubs were abundant on the banks of the Jordan River, notably willows, poplars, and tamarisks.<sup>3</sup> Note that these students did not think they were “too good” to do manual labor just because they had dedicated their lives to God. Many places of worship have been built by those who would use the buildings.

Elisha told them, “Go” (v. 2b), but one of the students urged him to go with them: “Please be willing to go with your servants” (v. 3a). The request indicates respect and affection. (There are teachers whose company their students would *not* desire.) The prophet answered, “I shall go,” and he “went with them” (vv. 3b, 4a).

<sup>1</sup>Robert C. Dentan, “Kings,” *Layman’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1964), 83.

<sup>2</sup>James Burton Coffman and Thelma B. Coffman, *Commentary on Second Kings*, James Burton Coffman Commentaries, The Historical Books, vol. 6 (Abilene, Tex.: A.C.U. Press, 1992), 77.

<sup>3</sup>G. Rawlinson, “2 Kings,” *The Pulpit Commentary*, vol. 5, 1 & 2 Kings, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 119. Rawlinson cited Josephus *Wars* 4.8.3 and Strabo *Geography* 15.1.2.41.

When they reached the Jordan River, they all began to “cut down trees” (v. 4b) to make a large log-cabin-type building near the river. Probably, Elisha worked alongside the students. In the past, when preachers held gospel meetings in farming communities, they often worked in the fields during the day and then preached at night.

### What Man Cannot Do

I can hear the thuds of the axes, and I can see the sweat pouring off the brows of the students. Suddenly, a cry comes from one of the men. “As one was felling a [tree to make a] beam, the axe head fell into the water” (v. 5a). This was not uncommon (see Deuteronomy 19:4, 5); normally, it would not even present a problem. When I was a teenager and had to cut trees for firewood, my ax head occasionally flew off. I would find the head, “set” it back securely on the handle, and resume chopping. On this occasion, however, the trainee was felling a tree near the river and the ax head flew “into the [murky] water” (2 Kings 6:5b) of the Jordan. The man cried out to Elisha, “Alas, my master! For it was borrowed” (v. 5c).

This may or may not seem a major problem to you, but look at the situation from the man’s perspective. He could not run to the nearest hardware store and buy another ax head to replace the one that was lost. Iron implements were in short supply in that nation (see 1 Samuel 13:22), and very costly. Further, the man almost certainly could not have purchased a replacement even if ax heads had been plentiful. It had been necessary for him to borrow the ax. The word translated “borrowed” means “begged.” The man had had to *beg* the owner before he would let him borrow the ax—and now it was gone!

Today some are careless with what they borrow, but the law of Moses took borrowing seriously. If a person lost what he had borrowed, he had to make restitution (see Exodus 22:14)—something the poverty-stricken student would be unable to do. He thus “faced the prospect of having to work off the value as a bondservant.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>J. Robert Vannoy, notes on 2 Kings, *The NIV Study Bible*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 533. The same idea is suggested

According to Amos 2:6, the ungodly citizens in Israel were not above selling “the needy for a pair of sandals.” This was a very real and very serious problem for this young man. Thus he cried out to Elisha.

Elisha asked the man, “Where did it fall?” (2 Kings 6:6a). Sometimes the Lord gave the prophet supernatural knowledge (5:25, 26; 6:8–12), and sometimes He did not (4:27). Evidently, the Lord did not give the prophet information he could secure by natural means. Thus Elisha asked the stricken student where the ax head had fallen into the water.

The man pointed at the spot where he had seen the splash. “And when he showed him the place, [Elisha] cut off a stick [from a nearby tree] and threw it” in the river at the spot indicated (6:6b). When he did, an amazing thing happened: The text says that the action “made the iron float” (v. 6c).

Skeptics have labored to find a rational explanation for what happened that day on the banks of the Jordan. They suggest that, in some way, Elisha “fished” the ax head out with the stick.<sup>5</sup> G. Rawlinson’s response is on target: “The sacred writers are not concerned to put on record mere acts of manual dexterity.”<sup>6</sup>

The language of the inspired writer is clear: The heavy, solid-iron head *float*ed. It popped out of the water and bobbed there like a cork! I have tossed a few rocks in rivers, and none of those ever floated back to the surface. I have even let a casting rod or two slip out of my hand and splash into the water—and I never saw them again. Do not doubt that this was a genuine miracle. It was a quiet, simple, unpretentious miracle to be sure, but nevertheless a miracle!

As was his practice, Elisha involved the recipient of the miracle. He told the young man, “Take it up for yourself” (v. 7a). That way the man would know that natural forces were not involved. The student waded out into the water and “put out his hand and took it” (v. 7b). After expressing his thanks and reassembling the tool,

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in J. H. Stek, “Elisha,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 2:71.

<sup>5</sup>Some of the “explanations” assume that the water was clear enough for Elisha to see the ax head. If that had been the case, the student could have rescued it himself.

<sup>6</sup>Rawlinson, 120.

the man surely went back to work, chopping another tree—but farther from the river this time!

### **“TRIVIAL” PROBLEMS TODAY**

Is it possible that you have felt your problems were too trivial to take before the Lord? Perhaps you reasoned, “He has the care of the entire universe and must deal with national problems and international crises. It would be presumptuous of me to bother Him with my trifling troubles.” Learn from our story that if something concerns His children, it concerns God.

As I write this, my wife and I are spending time with our daughter Angi, her husband Dan, and their newly adopted baby, Elijah. From time to time, Elijah cries (as babies will). Maybe he is hungry or needs his diaper changed—or maybe he just feels like crying. Do you think his mother and father scold him, saying, “That’s a trivial thing to cry about”? You know they don’t. They take him in their arms and comfort him and meet his needs, no matter how “small” those needs may be. “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God” (1 John 3:1a).

Look around at the world. God has taken as much care with the “little” things as the “big” things. The wings of a butterfly are as carefully crafted as the most magnificent star in the sky.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Adapted from J. G. B., *Short Meditations on Elisha* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, n.d.), 39.

Stop and think about it: Actually, no problem is “big” to the Lord, even those with global repercussions. A “trivial” problem encountered by a believer is of greater concern to Him than any “earthshaking” crisis faced by an unbeliever.

Passage after passage encourages us to bring *every* problem to Him, even those some might classify as “trivial.” Paul said, “In *everything* by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6; emphasis added). Peter wrote, “Casting *all* your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7; emphasis added).

### **CONCLUSION**

If you are a child of God, the Lord does not view any problem you have as “trivial.” God “will answer the most humble prayer for help and fulfill our smallest need if we will but love and trust Him.”<sup>8</sup>

God is especially concerned with our *spiritual* problems, no matter how “small” they may seem to the worldly-minded. If a spiritual problem is dragging you down, I pray that you will flee today to God in penitence and humility so He can lift you up. He who made an ax head float can make your sins “fly”—up and away, far away!

—David Roper

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<sup>8</sup>Elaine J. Fletcher, *Elisha, the Miracle Prophet* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1960), 43.