

Title: **“THE IRON DID SWIM”**
Text: 2 Kings 6:1-7
Subject: *God’s Intervention for His Elect*
Introduction:

(2 Kings 6:1-7) “And the sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us. (2) Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell. And he answered, Go ye. (3) And one said, Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servants. And he answered, I will go. (4) So he went with them. And when they came to Jordan, they cut down wood. (5) But as one was felling a beam, the ax head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. (6) And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he showed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast *it* in thither; and the iron did swim. (7) Therefore said he, Take *it* up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it.”

There are many who find this story incredible and laugh at those of us who believe that this Book is, indeed, the Word of God, verbally inspired and without error or misstatement of any kind. Yes, God says, “*the iron did swim.*” That means, “*the iron did swim.*”

Others, who vigorously defend the inspiration of the Bible, see nothing in this story but an evidence of miraculous power. They readily agree that “*the iron did swim,*” but they have no idea why it swam.

Certainly this story in the life of God’s prophet Elisha demonstrates God’s power, his care of and his provision for his people. But is that all we are to learn from these verses? Certainly not! There is more, much more to be gleaned from the passage before us.

Our Lord Jesus gives us the key that unlocks this and all the events of Old Testament history in two very important passages — Luke 24:25-27 and John 5:39.

¹ Date: Danville Sunday Morning — July 18, 2004
 Almont — (Thursday PM – 07/22/04)
Tape # Y-33 a&b
Reading: *Matthew 14:14-36*

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

In **Luke 24:25-27** our Savior is talking to two of his disciples on the Emmaus Road, opening the Old Testament Scriptures to them.

(Luke 24:25-27) “Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: (26) Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? (27) And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”

In **John 5:39** our Lord tells the Pharisees, who memorized large portions of Holy Scripture but understood nothing in the Book of God, that the whole Book is a revelation of him, his person and work as the sinner’s Savior.

(John 5:39) “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.”

The Old Testament Scriptures come to life and have meaning to our souls once we begin to read them in this light, realizing that they speak about our all-glorious Christ.

But what does a swimming axe head have to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Let’s look at the passage before us and see. May God the Holy Spirit, whose Word we have before us, be our Teacher.

VERSE 1 — *“And the sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us.”*

The first word in our text is a conjunction — “*And.*” It connects this passage with what has gone before it. **Idolatry was flourishing in Israel.** Covetousness and materialism were rampant. Even Elisha’s trusted servant, the prophet **Gehazi**, was taken in the flood of wickedness. He lived to get what he could out of life. His wickedness was outwardly subdued for a long, long time. But when he saw his opportunity, he ran after Naaman (the powerful, wealthy Syrian whom he considered unfit for such bounteous, free mercy as he had found in the God of all grace) and sought gain for himself, pretending that he was seeking a gift for God and his prophets. Like all self-serving false prophets, Gehazi’s god was his belly. He lived to get gain. Therefore he was cursed of God and banished from the school of the prophets as an unclean leper (2 Kings 5:20-27).

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

There have been many times in history in which idolatry has been so rampant, when ungodliness has been so universal that the cause of God seemed doomed for failure.

- **The children of Israel in Egypt** had given up all hope that God would indeed fulfill his word and bring them out of bondage into the land of promise. They had been in Egypt for four hundred years. — Then God sent Moses to bring them out, and Pharaoh was drowned with his armies in the Red Sea.
- Elisha must have recalled **the time when Elijah fled to Mt. Horeb** because Jezebel was determined to kill him. Mt. Horeb was the place where everything began. There God gave the law to Moses and the children of Israel. Elijah came back to Horeb a broken, dejected, morose man, to tell God that the battle was lost. But he was wrong. The battle had just begun, and the Lord God had reserved seven thousand faithful men in Israel by whom he would maintain his cause (1 Kings 19).
- **Those Jews who were carried away into Babylon** were convinced that God’s promises were broken, that his purpose had fallen to the ground, and that Israel would never again exist as a nation. — Then God sent Cyrus to bring them out of Babylon.
- **How dejected Elisha must have been** when he saw Israel engulfed in idolatry and beheld Gehazi’s fall. But the idolatry of the land and Gehazi’s deceit, greed, and unfaithfulness did nothing to hinder God’s purpose or injure his cause. Instead, the kingdom of God grew and the prophets of God increased, until they were forced to seek a larger place in which to meet. — *“And the sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us.”*

Hear me, my brothers and sisters. — **All is well in Zion!** The cause of Christ is sure. The purpose of God stands. — *“The foundation of God standeth sure!”*

- God will save his elect.
- The ransomed of the Lord shall come into Zion.
- Every chosen, redeemed sinner shall be saved.
- Christ is building his church.

THE PROPHETS SCHOOL

The phrase *“sons of the prophets”* is not intended to point us to who the parents of these men were, but to identify them as men taught by God’s

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

prophets. It refers to the school of the prophets. We are told very little about these schools of the prophets in Elisha’s day. In fact, we know virtually nothing about it except the fact that they existed.

- One at Bethel (2 Kings 2:3)
- One at Jericho (2 Kings 2:5)
- This One at Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38)

It appears that the prophets of God gathered about them companies of young men whom they instructed in the Holy Scripture and in the truths of Divine Revelation.

This was not a Bible College or Seminary, like those we have today. Not at all! This was a school of prophets. Elisha was the teacher. The prophet of God was the theology professor from whom these younger prophets learned the things of God. Elisha was not training young “preacher-boys” who wanted to become prophets. He was training men who were prophets.

Illustration: *The Mexican Preachers School*

The school of the prophets under Elisha had increased so greatly that they were cramped for space. They said..

VERSES 1-2 — *“The place is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make us fit place there, where we may dwell. And he answered, Go ye.”*

These prophets were ready to work with their own hands to build their place of residence. They were ready put their own shoulders to the work as believers should be when there is a work to be done for the cause of Christ. **But they would do nothing without Elisha’s direction.** It was not that he was worshipped by them, or feared by them, but that he was respected by them. He was the prophet God had given to lead and instruct these prophets. — Now, watch this...

ELISHA’S PRESENCE

VERSE 3 — *“And one said, Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servants. And he answered, I will go.”*

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

Not only did they seek Elisha’s permission to go, they would not go without him. When one of these prophets said to Elisha, “*Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servant,*” he was not simply being polite. He was expressing the deep sense of the entire band that they needed Elisha.

Elisha represented the Word and Voice of God to these men. They needed him because they needed to hear from God, and God sent his Word to them by Elisha. Walking with him they were in the path of blessing and blessedness, of peace and protection, and of instruction and direction.

Roger Ellsworth points out that “The desire of the prophets to have Elisha with them may very well have constituted a stinging reminder to the captives that their present plight was due to their failure to delight themselves in the Word of God.”

Blessed are those people to whom God sends his Word. His Word is the means by which he reveals himself to us; and his Word is opened to us by his prophets. When I hear this prophet say to Elisha, “*Be content, I pray thee, to go with thy servants,*” I cannot help thinking of Moses prayer to God. — “*If thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence.*”

“*And he answered, I will go.*” — Elisha was ready to go with them. God’s servants are men ready to serve, ready to help, ready to do whatever they can to assist God’s people and to assist other servants in their work. Faithful prophets hold up one another’s hands and strengthen one another’s hands. And they are not afraid to get their hands dirty when dirty hands are needed.

- The Apostle Paul picked up sticks to build a fire when his traveling companions (including his captors) were wet and freezing. — That man who wrote most of the New Testament was not too proud to gather firewood.
- Here is Elisha going out into the woods to fell some trees and build a school house for preachers. — This man through whom God worked stunning miracles did not consider himself too important to engage in the mundane activity of chopping down trees with an axe.
- Godliness and spirituality is not just reading your Bible, praying, singing hymns, and going to church. — Godliness and spirituality often involve sweat and labor and dirt! — Godliness and spirituality are far more often connected with common, ordinary things than most imagine.

“THE IRON DID SWIM”**A GREAT LOSS**

VERSES 4-5 — *“So he went with them. And when they came to Jordan, they cut down wood. But as one was felling a beam, the axe-head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed.”*

While engaged in the noble work of building a house in which God’s prophet would instruct other prophets in the things of God, this young man experienced a very great trial. He had borrowed an axe from another man. While he was working away, the axe head flew off the handle and was hopelessly lost in the murky, muddy waters of the Jordan River.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always thought to myself, when reading this story, “What was the big deal? Why was he so grieved?” That’s because I have never before stopped to consider the plight this man was now in.

- He was obviously a very poor man, or he would not have needed to borrow an axe.
- By the loss of this axe head he had now incurred a debt he could not pay. — Being an honest man, that was horrifying to him.
- But, most importantly, I think, his expression seems to indicate that he was filled with grief because though there was much to be done for God he was now useless. He had now lost all usefulness in the work to which he was devoted.

THE MIRACLE

How often we have been in this young prophet’s position! The situation looked hopeless, but it wasn’t. We thought things were bad and getting worse, and nothing could stop the snow-balling onslaught of trouble and sorrow. And, as far as we were concerned, nothing could. But our extremities are but opportunities for our God to show us his goodness.

As soon as the young man cried out to Elisha, the prophet of God cut down a stick and threw it in into the water. He threw it in at the very place where the axe head was lost. And the axe head swam to the surface. Read verse 6...

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

VERSE 6 — *“And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim.”*

It is written, *“With God all things are possible...Things which are impossible with men are possible with God...With God nothing shall be impossible.”* God can do whatever he will. He can make iron swim like a dolphin. We can’t, but God can and did.

Still, there was a man involved in the work. And the man did it by casting a stick into the water. Could God have made the axe head swim without Elisha? Of course! But what a great privilege Elisha had. God was pleased to use him to fetch the dead iron from the bottom of the river. — *“He cut down a stick and cast it in thither, and the iron did swim.”*

If you’re in great trouble my brother, my sister, be of good cheer. Our God is the God who can make the iron swim. It is not needful, or even best for us to know how to make the iron to swim. It is best for us, in utter helplessness to lift up our eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh our help — to look to him who made the iron to swim. Trust him, believe him, rest upon him and see if he doesn’t do it.

VERSE 7 — *“Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it.”*

What are we to learn from this story? What does God the Holy Spirit here teach us? — **FOUR THINGS**:

GOD’S SALVATION

1. **First and foremost, we have in this story a picture of God’s salvation, the salvation of poor lost sinners by the crucified Christ.**

You may be thinking, “Pastor, do you really believe that this story is intended to show us how God saves sinners by the sacrifice of his Son at Calvary?” Indeed, I do. In fact I am certain of it.

- The word “*stick*” (v. 6) is the same word that in Esther 5:14 is translated “*gallows*.” There it refers, of course, to an instrument of death. That is a

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

pretty good indication that it has at least some reference to the death of Christ. But I want you to turn to **Deuteronomy 21:23**.

(Deuteronomy 21:22-23) “And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: (23) His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged *is* accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee *for* an inheritance.”

The word “tree” here is the same word that is translated “stick” back in 2 Kings 6:6. Do you remember where this passage is quoted in the New Testament — **Galatians 3:13!**

(Galatians 3:13) “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that hangeth on a tree:”

Why did Elisha cut down a tree and cast it into the water to recover the axe head? — Because the only way in which God can save guilty sinners is by the sin-atonement death of his darling Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the sinners Substitute.

- Like the axe head we were lost.
- The place where the axe head was lost was the Jordan River, which is ever held before us in Holy Scripture as a symbol of death.
- As the axe head was lost in death, we were dead in trespasses and in sin.
- As Elisha cut down the tree and cast it into the water to recover the axe head, so I preach Christ crucified to you. — I cast into this river of death called “humanity” the cross of Christ.
- And by the blessing of God’s Spirit upon the gospel, as that Axe head was made to swim dead sinners are raised from death to life by the gospel (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23-25). — The iron did not “float” on the water. A dead corpse can float. The Book of God says, “*and the iron did swim.*” That which was dead was raised to life!
- Then, we read in verse 7 — “*Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it.*” The prophet’s reaching out his hand and taking it did not make the axe head swim. It was swimming already. Life was there. Yet, he was commanded to reach out his hand and take it to himself. So, too, our faith in Christ does not give us life before God. Life is given by the command of God.

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

Yet, we are commanded of God to take hold on eternal life (1 Tim. 6:19); and the sinner biorn of God does just that. Believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, we take hold on eternal life, we take the life God has given us in Christ.

GOD’S CARE

2. **The second thing this story is designed of God to teach us is that the Lord our God cares for us.**

Does God care for iron? Does he care for lost axe heads? When it has any connection with his people he does! His care for us is so minute, so detailed, so fully encompasses the whole of our lives that our Savior declares, *“The very hairs of your head are all numbered!”*

“The prophets sons, in time of old,
Though to appearance poor;
Were rich without possessing gold,
And honoured, though obscure.

In peace their daily bread they eat,
By honest labor earned;
While daily at Elisha’s feet,
They grace and wisdom learned.

The prophet’s presence cheered their toil,
They watched the words he spoke;
Whether they turned the furrowed soil,
Or felled the spreading oak.

Once as they listened to his theme,
Their conference was stopped;
For one beneath the yielding stream,
A borrowed axe had dropped.

Alas! it was not mine, he said,
How shall I make it good?
Elisha heard, and when he prayed,
The iron swam like wood.

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

If God, in such a small affair,
A miracle performs;
It shows his condescending care
Of poor unworthy worms.

Though kings and nations in his view
Are but as motes and dust;
His eye and ear are fixed on you,
Who in his mercy trust.

Not one concern of ours is small,
If we belong to him;
To teach us this, the Lord of all,
Once made the iron swim.”

John Newton

What is the case with you? What trouble presses you down? What heartache crushes you? Bring it to the throne of grace. Cast in the merit of Christ, your Substitute. Plead his name before your Father in heaven. The God of the prophets lives, and lives to help his people. Believe him. Trust the Lord of Hosts! Come to him pleading Christ’s name, and the iron shall swim. You too shall see the finger of God working wonders for his you.

PETER

Are your spirits sinking? Does your heart seem to fail you? Do you remember Peter? We read in Matthew 14:30, — “*Beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.*”—Matt. 14:30.

Sinking times are praying times for God’s elect. Peter had neglected prayer when he started across the water. But when he began to sink his danger forced him to pray. His cry, though late, was not too late. In our times of pain and trouble, we are driven to the throne of grace, as the wrecked ship is driven to the shore by the waves. The fox hides to its hole for protection; the bird flies to the wood for shelter; and even so the tried believer hastens to the mercy seat for safety. The throne of God is our refuge. The moment a storm comes on, it is wise for us to hasten to our refuge.

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

(Proverbs 18:10) “The name of the LORD *is* a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.”

Short prayers are long enough. There were but three words in Peter’s prayer. He simply poured out to the Lord his heart’s need. But those three words reached the Savior’s ear and his heart, and fetched the mercy and grace to help in his time of need.

C. H. Spurgeon once wrote, “If our prayers had less of the tail feathers of pride and more wing they would be all the better. Verbiage is to devotion as chaff to the wheat.”

As I said before, **our extremities are the Lord’s opportunities.** In desperation we cry out to our God. In great delight, he stretches forth his omnipotent hand. When we can do nothing, he can do everything. He will not allow us to perish. Cast all your care upon him, “*for he careth for you!*”

GOD’S INTERVENTION

3. **Third, this passage shows us God’s gracious, sovereign intervention in the affairs of this world for the sake of his people.**

Yes, our heavenly Father works all things together for the good of our souls; and he sovereignly intervenes to help us throughout the days of our sojourn through this world of woe.

- What was it that brought Lot out of Sodom? — God intervened!
- What brought Israel out of Egypt and across the Red Sea? — God intervened!
- What brought Ruth and Boaz together? — God intervened!
- What was it that saved Mordecai — God intervened!
- What preserved Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace? — God intervened!
- How was Daniel preserved in the lion’s den? — God intervened!
- What is it that separated you from all others and brought you into the family of God? — God intervened!
- What is the thing that has made great distinction in your life? — God intervened!

GOD’S RESTORATION

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

4. One more thing clearly taught in the story of the lost axe head is this — **The Lord our God graciously restores, refreshes, and revives his downcast children, again and again.**

Here is a young prophet, zealously engaged in the work of God. He is doing what is needed. He is doing it with great zeal. He is doing it for his God and Savior. — Then, all of a sudden, he is utterly useless. O my soul, I can relate well to this man!

- He did not lose the axe handle. He had that in his hand.
- He did not lose his knowledge of how to fell a tree. He knew just as much as before. _ Satan does not care if we keep our sound doctrine and increase in it. He only seeks to rob us of usefulness.
- What he lost was usefulness. He could do nothing without the axe head.

Once he saw his loss, this young prophet mourned it. He knew that what he had lost was that which belonged to another. He confessed the loss. He returned to the spot where he had lost it. And, as soon as Elisha cast in the tree he had cut down, the man’s axe handle was recovered. — I sure would like to have seen him chopping down trees after that. Wouldn’t you?

Have you lost your usefulness, my brother? Have you lost your edge? Come again to the throne of grace, ask God to cast in again the cross of Christ into your heart. He will restore your soul. He will revive your heart. He will be gracious to you.

(Psalms 138:7) “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me: thou shalt stretch forth thine hand against the wrath of mine enemies, and thy right hand shall save me.”

(Isaiah 57:15) “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name *is* Holy; I dwell in the high and holy *place*, with him also *that is* of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

(Hosea 6:2) “After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight.”

“THE IRON DID SWIM”

(Hosea 14:7) “They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive *as* the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof *shall be* as the wine of Lebanon.”

Martin Luther’s companion and fellow laborer, **Philip Melancthon**, was once in a desperate state. The depravity, coldness, and utter deadness of his heart was unbearable. He had taught many, reprovved evil, warned multitudes of judgment, called sinners to the Savior, and interceded for others at the throne of grace. But he felt himself utter useless. Old Adam was too much for young Melancthon, the stubborn spirit would not relent. Then he came in all his agony of soul to the throne of grace. Soon, looking to Christ his hard heart was broken, the iron did swim.

Spurgeon was mightily used of God as a very young man. Thousands came to hear him preach the gospel. The church he pastored rented the Surrey Gardens Music Hall, so that many more thousands could come to one place at one time to hear the gospel of the grace of God. On the first night of the meetings in the music hall, someone cried out, “Fire! Fire!” In the panic many were injured and two were trampled to death. The incident nearly destroyed Spurgeon. He could not bring himself to preach again. He sunken as low in his soul as the axe head did in the Jordan. Then a passage of Scripture came to him, “*and the iron did swim!*” The next Sunday the young preacher preached from the text that brought life again to his soul. I’ve read the sermon many times. I wish I could have heard it. Spurgeon’s text that day was Philippians 2:9-11.

(Philippians 2:9-11) “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: (10) That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth; (11) And *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”