

## "THE IRON DID SWIM"

"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." II Kings 6:6.

This message is based upon the words which are recorded in II Kings 6:1-7. This passage contains the first reference to a theological seminary. Such schools were established by the prophets in Israel for the teaching and training of the young men. Four of these schools were in existence in the days of Elisha the prophet, who was also a popular theological professor and one of the most intriguing characters in the Old Testament. Great prosperity seems to have attended his labors among these young men as he went from one school to the other for the purpose of teaching. What highly favored men these sons of the prophets were in being permitted to study under this great and famous teacher!

One of these schools which Elisha visited at regular intervals was located near Jericho. In spite of the defection and apostasy of one of its students, Gehazi, this school prospered greatly. Indeed, the number of students increased until the building they had was not adequate for their needs. When Elisha came to give them one or more of his lectures, the students, submissive to the proper authority, as well as in deference to age and experience, asked permission of him to build a larger seminary. They said, "Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee 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 a place there, where we may dwell." Such was their thirst for knowledge that these students thus proposed to build a commodious building. They did not want to be deprived of the instruction and inspiration of their illustrious teacher, so they were willing to help themselves in this practical way.

What a happy relationship must have existed between Elisha and his students! He was one of those teachers who had learned the secret of dealing with men. He showed confidence in them and made them feel that he trusted them implicitly. He promptly and gladly gave his consent to the proposal which they had respectfully submitted to him for his approval. When he sent them away on their mission, they requested him to accompany them to the banks of the Jordan River, where the trees were plentiful. They had agreed that each man would cut a beam and carry it to the place where the building was to be erected. Not one of their number sought to shirk his personal responsibility.

When they reached the Jordan, they began to engage in the work of chopping down the trees. Merry work it was, for none of them understood tree-cutting. They worked with great enthusiasm. The forest echoed with their joyous calls one to another, their shouts of mutual encouragement, the thud of the axes and the crash of the falling trees. We can thank God that down through the ages men of the right mettle have been found, who knew what was the right thing to do and had the pluck and purpose necessary to do it—men who were willing to roll up their sleeves and to shoulder their axes, and to toil and sacrifice for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Our attention is directed in particular to one of the students who had an unexpected and unusual accident. This unnamed young man was full of zeal and boundless enthusiasm for God. Everything about him was commendable. He was in the best company. He was in the company of young men who were being trained to be prophets, and who were being helped in their pursuit to discover the will of God and to do His bidding in their lives. He was also engaged in the best project possible, that of building extra accommodations for the training of the young prophets. Moreover, he was dominated by an excellent principle. Each of the young men was responsible for the cutting down of a tree that might be made into a beam in the new building. After looking around and scrutinizing numerous trees, he finally found one that suited his fancy. But there was one difficulty in connection with it. It grew in a rather dangerous position on the bank of the river. However, he was prepared to risk anything to get the best that was available for this much-needed building. He was diligent in searching for and getting the very best for God's work.

While chopping down the tree on the bank of the river, an accident befell the young man. As he was swinging his ax with great enthusiasm and strength, suddenly and unexpectedly his ax slipped off the handle, flew through the air and landed in the river below. He was completely nonplussed and bewildered, and did not know what to do. His work faced certain and obvious interruption. Of course, it takes but little imagination to see that he could not go on without the axhead. Even though he might have had a very strong pair of arms, and there might have been an excellent handle to that ax, he certainly could not cut a tree with a mere handle and a strong pair of arms.

This young man's distress was due in part to the fact that without his ax he could not further participate in erecting the new building for the school, and partly to the fact that his ax was borrowed. Axes were scarce and expensive at that time in Israel, so he had borrowed one, and now it was on the bottom of the river. He was in great distress because he would not be able to return what he had borrowed, and he did not have any money with which to purchase another. In his distress he called to Elisha who was not far away and said, "Alas, master! for it was borrowed."

Elisha was so sorry for his student in his distress that he said to him, "Where fell it?" When the young man indicated the place where the ax fell into the water, Elisha accompanied him to the spot, and with his own ax cut down a small sapling, made a stick and thrust it into the river where the ax had fallen. Behold, the iron did something which it had never done before, and, I suppose, has never done since! "The iron did swim." It was not the stick which brought the axhead to the surface, but rather the miraculous power of God. The stick was only the sign and symbol of the divine power which Elisha was permitted to exercise. At the command of the prophet, the young man reached out his hand and took the axhead out of the water.

One admires this young man's concern about the borrowed ax. He was troubled because it was a borrowed one. All of us have many things loaned to us. Home, with its care, love and many joys, is loaned to us. Our names, which we may honor or dishonor, are loaned to us. Life is God's great loan to us. Every day, like a polished axhead, is loaned to us by our Heavenly Father that we may do good work with it. The world, with its hills and valleys, trees and flowers, birds and butterflies, sunshine and shower, is loaned to us for a little while. Borrowed things have to be returned. What you buy you may keep, but what you borrow you must return. Sometimes people are careless about the things which they borrow. It is only little people who say, "Oh, it doesn't matter, it isn't ours." Borrowed things may be lost. Sometimes they are placed among our own things and we forget them.

Life in all its possessions, opportunities, talents and length is not our own, but is loaned to us by the Giver of all good and perfect gifts. In this life we are engaged in collecting materials and building a structure not for time, but for eternity. The tools with which we do this work are loaned to us only for a season. Frequently a person who has reached a certain milestone in life will say, "I am living on borrowed time," meaning that he has passed the Psalmist's allotted span. But the truth of the matter is, we are all living on borrowed time. Whether life is joyous or sad, delightful or wretched, time is ever marching with relentless and steady pace to its appointed end for each one of us. What are you doing with that portion of time which has been loaned to you? "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Psalm 90:12.

Our possessions are all loaned to us and one day the loan will be recalled. The great Moslem conqueror Saladin, who fought with Richard the Lionhearted about the walls of Acre, and whose tomb you can see at Damascus, left directions that he should be buried with his hands extending out of his coffin, so that those empty hands might teach men that they brought nothing into the world and certainly cannot take anything out of it with them.

Our opportunities are loaned to us. Our loved ones and friends are opportunities for the investment of affection, fidelity and loving service. Yet the tendency of too many is to take them for granted, not realizing that they are only loaned to us for a season. Then

suddenly, while we are "busy here and there," they are gone, and nobody has the power to call them back. Sooner than we expect, these loans will be called in. On a tombstone in an old cemetery in St. Augustine is this inscription placed there by bereaved parents: "We return to God our son who was loaned to us for a season."

Can all of this be a picture of you, Christian friend? Have you lost your spiritual axhead? Have you lost the edge of your Christian life and witness? Are you laboring with a mere handle? If so, one thing is perfectly obvious, you will never cut down a tree. The unfortunate thing about so many Christians is that when they lose the axhead they continue their work with the handle in their hands, and merely bruise the tree but never cut it. If you are laboring without the axhead, naturally you are inwardly disappointed. It is such turmoil and anxiety that the sins of jealousy and envy grow. When you are disappointed with your own work for Christ, what happens to you? You look at some other person. You observe that he is busy doing his Lord's will, and the Lord is blessing him; he is cutting down the tree. You look at him with a carnal eye and become jealous of him. Quite likely you will say that the tree you are trying to cut is a very difficult one. To yourself you say, "If only I was in another place, I could do much better than this; if I could only labor with those people over there, they are so much easier somehow." All too often we blame the trees. Now, the trees are hard. But in all probability your main difficulty lies not in the fact that the trees are hard, but in the distressing fact that you are laboring without the axhead.

If you have lost the axhead, there are certain things that you must do if you want it restored. You must make a frank acknowledgment of the loss which you have incurred. If in the place of the Holy Spirit there is self-energy, self-will and the expression of the self-life, then own up to the fact that you have lost the power you once had. But, where did you lose it? Was it when you made that unholy friendship with someone who was not of the household of faith? Was it some lustful habit that came into your life? Was it some bitterness, some jealousy or some criticism concerning another Christian; some questionable business transaction; or just the pure neglect of the reading of the Word of God and of prayer, and of obeying the Holy Spirit, that led to the losing of your axhead? Then, you must go to the place where you lost it before you can recover it. There God will bring before your vision the possibility of a life of victory and winsomeness. And what is more, He will bring it within your present reach. He will speak a brief word of command, "Take it to thee. I have done the miraculous--what you could not do; now it remains for you to put down the hand of faith and reclaim the lost axhead."

When unexpected troubles arise in your life, your home or your business, it is your privilege as a child of God to receive help from God. It is to be remembered that God's method of interposition in behalf of His people is frequently through human instrumentality. Elisha was the instrument which God used to help this young man out of his trouble.

A poor man was sitting at his open door, with heavy heart and eyes swimming in tears. Unfortunate in business and in debt, he was about to be brought into court by his creditor. He called upon God for guidance and help. Just then a little bird flew into his house and perched itself in an empty cupboard. He closed the door, caught the bird, put it in an old cage he happened to have, where it soon began to sing and feel quite at home. Suddenly, a knock at the door brought him face to face with the servant of a wealthy lady, who was inquiring about the bird. It was a very costly bird, which the lady prized very highly. The poor man gave him the bird, glad that he was able to cheer the lady so promptly. Ere long, the servant returned and said: "You have done my mistress a great kindness, so she has requested that you accept this trifle with her thanks." He took it, and to his great delight it proved to be the exact amount that he owed. Rationalism would call this only a singular coincidence, but faith tells us that it was a divine interposition. The fact that God worked a miracle to restore a lost axhead tells us that we can go to Him with the problems, wants and needs of our everyday lives.