

Elisha and the Floating Axe Head

“Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee.”

—II Kings 2:9,10

THE FIRST MENTION OF Elisha in the Bible is in I Kings chapter 19. In verses 8-10 we find Elijah dwelling in a cave at Mount Horeb, hiding from his enemies. It was here that God commanded Elijah to go into the “wilderness of Damascus” to accomplish certain things. (vss. 15-18) Verse 19 states that, on his way through Canaan toward Syria, Elijah found Elisha engaged in plowing a field with twelve yoke of oxen.

Upon meeting him, Elijah cast his mantle upon Elisha. This would indicate that he was the one whom the Lord had chosen to become the prophet of Israel to succeed Elijah. The

account states that Elisha then bade goodbye to his family, disposed of his goods, including his oxen, leaving all that he had. He then “went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.” (I Kings 19:20,21) To Elijah and Elisha, the mantle literally represented the office of a prophet, as given by the authority of God. In this case, however, Elisha was not to assume the official duties of a prophet until the death of his predecessor, Elijah.

ELIJAH’S MANTLE A PICTURE

The mantle of Elijah, which he conferred upon Elisha, his successor, was made of animal skins. “He wore a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins.” (II Kings 1:8, *Revised Standard Version*) A lesson for us is that this mantle, being made of animal skins, is a fitting picture of the “robe of righteousness”—that is, the merit of Jesus’ ransom sacrifice, made available for us to cover our sins and imperfections.—Isa. 61:10; Rom. 4:7; 13:14

We might also think of Elijah’s mantle as representing the anointing of the Holy Spirit. This association is made by David, who, in the Psalms, alluded back to the anointing of the priesthood of Israel. There we see that the anointing oil was poured upon the head of Aaron the high priest, and it ran down upon his garment. (Exod. 30:25-31; Ps. 133:1,2) Thus it is that the anointing of the Holy Spirit that we have received has come to us because we are under the robe of Christ’s righteousness. We see, then, that both the covering merit of Jesus’ sacrifice and the anointing of the Holy Spirit seem to be represented in the mantle of Elijah.

ELISHA'S MINISTRY BEGINS

Following the event of the calling of Elisha by Elijah, we hear nothing more of Elisha for several years. Following the death of Elijah, in which he was miraculously separated from Elisha by a "chariot of fire," Elisha began his ministry as God's anointed prophet. (II Kings 2:11-15; Heb. 11:13) Elisha lived a long and productive life in the service of the Lord, doing even greater works than that of Elijah. As stated in our opening text, Elijah had promised him a double portion of God's spirit, which Elisha faithfully used in the performance of many miracles.

Elisha's first miracle was the purifying of the waters of Jericho recorded in II Kings 2:18-22. Some of the other outstanding events in his life were the restoring of the Shunamite's son to life and purifying the deadly pottage at Gilgal. (II Kings 4:8-41) Elisha was also used as an instrument of God in the healing of Naaman, the chief captain of the armies of Syria, whose leprosy was cleansed by washing in the waters of the Jordan. (II Kings 5:1-14) The only mention of Elisha in the New Testament, found in Luke 4:27, is a reference to the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian.

Although he performed numerous miracles, Elisha's primary ministry was that of a reformer, teaching the people to turn from sin and idolatry and to be obedient to the God of Israel and to the Law. In examining these experiences, not so much as types, but as object lessons for us, we believe that God intended the events of Elisha's life to provide us valuable lessons concerning our conduct and development as spiritual Israelites.

THE FLOATING AXE HEAD

In II Kings, the 6th chapter, we have the very interesting account of Elisha and the floating axe head. We wish to look at this particular event carefully and see what lessons the Heavenly Father may have in this experience that can be of benefit to us. The brief account is recorded below.

“The sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, 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. And he answered, Go ye. And one said, Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servants. And he answered, I will go. 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. 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. Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it.”—vss. 1-7

“SONS OF THE PROPHETS”

Who are the “sons of the prophets” referred to in the first verse of this account? The sons, or “company of the prophets,” were a religious fraternity which began in the days of Samuel. (I Sam. 19:18-20) This group, instituted by Samuel in his old age, was formed to school young men in the teachings of the Law so that they could watch over the religious and moral interests of the people. Over a period of many years these groups were set up in

some of the major cities in Israel. Those who attended them lived in a communal arrangement, separating themselves from the rest of society, so far as their religious training was concerned. However, they also mingled with the people in fulfilling their mission of religious and moral uplift.

A similar situation has been true of the followers of Jesus during the present age. Just as Samuel instituted the school of the prophets, so Jesus came at his First Advent and established what has often been referred to as the “school of Christ” for his footstep followers. Jesus is the “Master” teacher, and each of his followers is a “disciple,” in this symbolic school.—Matt. 4:23; 10:24; 11:1; Luke 20:21; John 3:2

The first school of prophets was set up at Naioth in Ramah. Naioth means “residence,” and Ramah means “elevated.” How true it is that, as spiritual Israelites, our prospective “residence” is in heaven, and even now we dwell together with Christ in “heavenly places.” (Eph. 1:3; 2:6) As these groups were established in many cities throughout Israel, so it is that the Lord’s people have been established in little groups throughout the earth. We come together so that we may sit at the feet of our great teacher Jesus, and to be taught of him concerning the Word of God. We are not “sons of the prophets,” but rather “sons of God.”—Rom. 8:14; Gal. 4:6; I John 3:1,2

TRAINED IN THE SCHOOL OF CHRIST

Just as the sons of the prophets separated themselves from the people at large in receiving their religious training, so we also must come apart from

the world if we are to be taught of the Lord. Yet we are still in the world, and we, like the sons of the prophets, must be light-bearers and examples to mankind. (John 15:18,19; 17:11-16; Phil. 2:15) The Prophet Isaiah informs us of our work in the world, that we have been anointed with God's Holy Spirit to "preach good tidings unto the meek; ... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Isa. 61:1,2) Thus, if we are being taught in the school of Christ, we must also be faithful ministers of the Truth, by word and by conduct, in our daily contact with the world.

As time went on in this group of the sons of the prophets, established by Samuel, the authority over this arrangement was passed down through several of God's prophets until the latter part of the period of the kings. Elijah became the overseer of this arrangement and then, finally, this authority was passed on to Elisha. Returning to chapter 6 of II Kings, let us consider the experiences of the sons of the prophets, and draw certain lessons related to our discipleship in the school of Christ.

GOING DOWN TO THE JORDAN

In the foregoing quote from II Kings 6:2, we see the sons of the prophets going down to the Jordan River for the purpose of building a house to dwell in. Similarly, at the outset of our Christian experience it was necessary for us, symbolically speaking, to go to the Jordan. There, by faith, we presented ourselves in consecration to God and were cleansed by the precious blood of Christ. (I Cor. 6:11; I John

1:7; Rev. 1:5) Our offering to the Lord was lean and poor, and did not appear as much in the eyes of men, but God saw in the heart of each one of us a sincerity, a devotion to his will, and he valued this more highly than gold and silver.

The name "Jordan" means "descending" or "downward." It is a fitting description of the general downward course of mankind resulting from the effects of sin. As the Jordan River ended at the Dead Sea, so also the human race, since man's fall, has streamed downward to its end result, the condition of Adamic death. We recall that Jesus, at the age of thirty, came to the Jordan and there gave expression to his complete dedication to the will of the Father in consecration. There John baptized Jesus in the downward flowing waters of that river. (Matt. 3:13-17) Jesus, of course, was sinless, but his baptism in the Jordan was a fore-gleam of the fact that three and one-half years later, on the cross, he would take Adam's place in death, allowing for the release of mankind from the curse and its downward effects. In due time, at the start of the Messianic kingdom, the waters of the symbolic Jordan will be smitten and rolled back, as it were, and mankind will be made free from Adamic condemnation.—John 1:29; Rom. 5:18,19; I Tim. 2:5,6; I John 2:2

However, before that can take place the work of the Gospel Age must be completed. Now, the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice are applied on an individual basis, according to faith. Going down to the Jordan can be likened to our voluntary consecration to God and the subsequent cleansing we receive by the merit of Jesus' sacrifice, which is the basis of our justification. Thus, by Christ Jesus we are lifted up from

our previous downward course, and we begin to walk in “newness of life.”—Rom. 3:24-26; 6:4; Eph. 2:8-10

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

After coming to the Jordan River the sons of the prophets, under Elisha’s supervision, were each to take a beam, or log, and together construct a building to dwell in. So it is that we, having come to the Jordan in consecration, then set out on the lifetime work of preparation for a place in the spiritual house of the Lord. Each one of us is represented as a beam in God’s house, and we are reminded of our Lord’s words, “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God.”—Rev. 3:12

The record states that Elisha accompanied the sons of the prophets and instructed them in this building work. Christ Jesus is likewise present with us as our High Priest and Advocate, our exemplar and our teacher. We look to him for instruction regarding this work of preparation going on in the life of each one of us.—Heb. 4:14,15; I John 2:1

OUR STEWARDSHIP—PICTURED BY THE AXE HEAD

Let us consider closely II Kings 6:5-7, quoting these verses again: “As one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. 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. Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it.”

We know that in building a house made of logs such as the one referred to here, the only tool that was generally necessary was an axe. It was used to

cut down the tree, then to skin the bark off the log. The axe was also used to notch each end of the log so it would be properly fitted and interlocked with the logs from the other walls at right angles. The axe did everything in preparing each of these beams that was to go into the house. It well represents everything over which we have been made a steward for the purpose of preparing ourselves as New Creatures so that, in due time, on the other side of the veil, we might have a place as a beam in the house of the Lord—as a “pillar” in the temple of our God.

We notice in our text that it was a “borrowed” axe. It did not belong to the one who was using it. With us, all that we have belongs to the Heavenly Father—it does not belong to us. We turned everything over to him when we made a consecration. However, he gave these things back to us and appointed us stewards over them. We must use all that we have received from the Lord—our talents, abilities, time, energy, even material possessions—in a way that would be in our best interest as God’s spiritual sons, and to his honor and glory. All of these things over which we have been made stewards, if used properly, will contribute to the work of preparation of ourselves as a “beam,” or pillar, in God’s house.

In this narrative, we see another lesson. When one of the axe heads fell into the water and began to sink, Elisha caused it to come up from the bottom of the Jordan and to float or “swim” on top of the water. Elisha took it out of the water and gave it back to the one who was using it. In our case, natural abilities, talents and worldly possessions may all look more or less the same as those of our neighbors, coworkers and friends in the world.

However, the difference is in the fact that our axe head “floats” and theirs does not. That is, what has been given to us by the Lord to be stewards over has been lifted up from the waters of the Jordan, out from under the generally degraded conditions present in the world today, and sanctified for our use.

STEWARDSHIP IS ALL-INCLUSIVE

The Apostle Paul tells us, “It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful,” and “do all to the glory of God.” (I Cor. 4:2; 10:31) These words indicate that the “axe head” that the Lord has loaned to each one of us for our preparation as New Creatures involves more than merely our natural talents and temporal possessions. Along this line, the Apostle Peter states, “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (I Pet. 4:10) The knowledge of the Truth is a gift given by the “manifold grace of God,” over which, Peter says, we have been made stewards. The apostle further explains that to fulfill our stewardship in this respect means we must “minister” one to another, and thus build one another up in our most holy faith.—Jude 1:20

Indeed, we must recognize how all-inclusive our stewardship is. Everything that has to do with our lives, temporally as well as spiritually, has been provided by our Heavenly Father. It is all sanctified for our use in preparation as a beam in the spiritual temple of the Lord, whether it be talents, time, abilities, possessions, or the grace of God that has been shed forth to each of us as one of his prospective sons. Let us see to it that we use our axe properly—

cutting off the bark of dross, getting rid of the rotten spots, trimming off the little branches of sin and smoothing out the sharp corners and rough edges of our character.

LABOURERS TOGETHER

A final lesson that may be drawn from this incident in the life of Elisha is that referred to by the apostle in I Corinthians 3:9, "We are labourers together with God." We see the sons of the prophets under the leadership of Elisha bending all their energies to the work at hand, each of them shaping and preparing their individual beams for the building of their house. While the primary concern of each one is their own beam which they are preparing, they could never finish the construction if they were not working together all the way through the building process.

We learn from this that our present work is primarily an individual responsibility. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," we are told. (Phil. 2:12) Yet we must also keep our spiritual eyes set upon the building as a whole and its final assembly as a glorious spiritual temple on the other side of the veil. The Lord is pleased to have us manifest interest in all of the preparatory work of this house of the Lord. What a blessed opportunity we have to come together in meetings and conventions, and of cooperating with our brethren around the world in disseminating the message of truth and the Gospel of the kingdom.

We are reminded of the apostle's word in Ephesians 2:19-22, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the

saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.”

Just as Elisha was there to oversee the construction of that house for the sons of the prophets, so our Lord is with us. With us, too, are all those who are similarly engaged in this work of preparation for a place in God’s spiritual house. Our Elisha, Jesus, has given us the blueprints and specifications in his Word, and we must follow these carefully. If faithful, this symbolic spiritual house, of which we will be a part, will be the means by which the entire world of mankind will be restored to life, to dominion over the earth, and to earthly sonship with God.

We recall the words of John the Revelator in which he speaks of the time when all the willing and obedient of mankind will likewise become the symbolic dwelling place of God on the earth. “I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. ... He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.” (Rev. 21:3,4,7) May the Lord help each of us to be faithful in our individual and collective work of preparation for this glorious time. ■