

2 Kings 6:1-23 A Floating Axe and a Foiled Army

In this text, we have two stories of woe. Two of the main characters in the story—the student and Elisha’s assistant—use the same words when confronted by trouble. They both say “Alas” (cf. vss. 5, 15), an exclamation indicating pain. Something unexpected has happened that is causing anxiety and concern, and there does not seem to be any solution.

In the case of the student, he’d lost something valuable that he’d borrowed. The concern for him was that this loss would cost him a lot of money that he didn’t have. In the case of Elisha’s servant, the concern for him was the potential loss of life. The Syrian army surrounded the city, and it looked like the end was near.

So the concerns here are the loss of money and the loss of life. Do these things ever concern us today? Have you been watching the news lately? Do we have any reason to fear the loss of money or the loss of life? Certainly. Many people have recently lost either money or life or both. We live in perilous times, and during such times it’s easy to become worried or anxious over events that we cannot control.

This passage shows us that God provides solutions for both personal accidents and public emergencies. God intervenes directly to help individuals and to help entire communities. God is with us and will help us solve our problems, whether they are fairly mundane ones or issues of life and death. God is both powerful and compassionate to work on behalf of those who fear him.

Elisha’s servant said, “Alas, my master; what shall we do?” This passage shows us what to do when accidents and emergencies happen to us. In such times, we trust God, obey his word, and we look to him for deliverance. God is powerful and can provide unusual solutions to our problems.

Let’s see what we can learn about God’s provision for our problems from these two episodes in the life of Elisha.

I. .1-7 A floating axhead—Trust God to provide solutions to your personal problems.

A. .1-2 The “sons of the prophets” were a group of students who were studying with Elisha. In spite of the fact that this occurred in the northern kingdom, where most people had forsaken the Lord, the school of the prophets was growing. The space was too small, so they decided to expand their facility.

B. .5 They go out to get some materials, and in the process of cutting down a tree, one of the students lost an axe head; it fell into the water.

In those days, iron implements were more valuable than they are today. I don’t think you could just visit the local hardware store and get a new axe head. You’d probably have to go to the blacksmith to have one made, and it would be fairly expensive.

This would be similar to borrowing someone’s smart phone and losing it—replacing it would be a significant expense, especially if you were a poor student.

C. If the student could not recover the borrowed axe head, he’d likely be facing a debt he could not pay. So this was a genuine problem.

D. .5-7 The student called Elisha, and he performed a miracle that caused the axe head to float, defying the laws of nature.

App: So here’s a good man trying to do the right thing, and what happens? Not exactly a catastrophe, but a significant problem. In the middle of trying to do something good, accidents happen. They happen all the time. That’s the nature of the world in which we live. Accidents happen even to those who are serving the Lord and doing good. We have no reason to expect that God will shield us from the common, typical problems of life. We’ll lose things; we’ll break things; we’ll make costly mistakes.

Some people might call this “bad luck.” But if you believe in the sovereignty of God, you don’t believe in luck, whether good or bad. This accident was within the providence of God. When accidents happen, we should remember that they happen under the providence of God. From a human point of view, this was an accident. From a divine point of view, this was an opportunity for God to display his power and his compassion.

In this case, the solution came in the form of a miracle. Iron normally doesn’t float. An axe head would immediately sink to the bottom. But God is not bound by the laws of nature. The laws of nature are God’s laws; he established them, and he can suspend them if he wants to. God created everything out of nothing; he can certainly cause a chunk of iron to float if he wants to.

We don’t depend upon miracles to solve our personal problems. It sure would be nice if we could simply call the preacher to do a miracle to solve our problems. I’m not able to do miracles. Miracles are very rare, and there are no prophets or apostles around today to do miracles like we find in the Bible.

God generally won’t bend the laws of nature to help us solve our problems, but he will usually provide solutions through normal means—through providence.

Today, maybe God would provide for someone who has lost an axe head through somebody with a metal detector. Axe heads are not very expensive these days. For those who are ill, God might provide through a doctor or through medicine. The people of the church may provide for a needy member. So there are lots of ways that God might provide our needs without using miraculous means.

Sometimes God *does* intervene in the lives of his people miraculously, but more often he provides for us in other ways.

The first step in finding a solution to our problems is prayer. Do you ever pray that God would help you find something you’ve lost? We should have the kind of relationship with God that we would pray and ask for God’s help to find lost things. God is concerned about the small details of our lives.

Trans: No concern of ours is too small to for God or too small for prayer. It is our great privilege to bring to God every concern that troubles us. We can trust God to provide solutions to our personal problems.

II. .8-23 A foiled army—Trust God to provide solutions for larger emergencies.

The scene now shifts from one man's embarrassing accident to an emergency that affect thousands of people. God again shows his concern and his power by providing an unusual solution to solve this problem.

A. .8-12 God provides through granting special knowledge.

1. God grants Elisha insight into the plans of the Syrians. Everywhere the Syrians prepare an ambush, the Israelites avoid that place.
2. The king of Syria thought there must be a traitor among them, but someone (Naaman?) pointed out that Elisha knew even the most private conversations of the king.

App: We don't expect God to tell us things like he told Elisha. God doesn't tell us the future. He doesn't tell us where our enemies are going to ambush us.

How does God communicate to us today? Through his Word, the Bible. The Bible reveals God's will to us, and it's our responsibility to obey God's commands and apply godly wisdom to our individual situations.

As for knowing what to do in difficult situations, we can strive to be like the men of Issachar.

1Ch 12:32 the sons of Issachar ... had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, ...

We can and should pray for common sense wisdom to know what to do when emergencies happen. We solve our problems by applying biblical wisdom to our situation.

And our nation would be much better off today if our leaders applied the wisdom of the Bible to the emergencies that face us as a nation.

God provides wisdom for us to apply in times of crisis.

B. .13-18 God provides through granting angelic presence.

1. .13-14 The Syrian king understood that as long as Elisha was free, the Syrian armies would never be successful. Therefore, he sent his horses and chariots to capture Elisha.

Elisha obviously would have known about that as well. Had he wanted to escape, he obviously could have. But he decides to let the situation play out.

2. .15 Elisha's assistant is worried because the Syrian army surrounds the city of Dothan. "Alas, what shall we do?" He's worried that they are about to be captured or killed.
3. .16 Elisha doesn't seem to be disturbed by the presence of the Syrian army. He says, "fear not." He assures his assistant that *they that be with us are more than they that be with them.*
4. .17 Who is *with* Elisha? The hills around the city are full of fiery chariots and horsemen, just like those who came to pick up Elijah. The servant couldn't see that, but Elisha did.

The presence of the angelic host shows that God is present and prepared to protect his people.

App: We all experience times when we are tempted to say "Alas!" We encounter terrible circumstances and can't see a way out; we don't see any solutions. These things happen all the time. What is your natural response to such things?

We should trust that God has all things under his control. Whether we are talking about huge national problems or smaller personal problems, we believe that God has the situation under his control. He can intervene in the affairs of man at any time. Even military and political events are under his control.

We believe that God is at work in the world, usually behind the scenes in an unseen way, for the ultimate benefit of his people. We often don't understand how it all fits together, but we believe that God is working for his glory and for our good. Rom 8:28.

And when you know that, it should give you a sense of peace and comfort in the midst of trials. God is there, and he will provide solutions to our problems. We don't need to worry when we know that God is with us. God is mighty to save.

Open your eyes of faith and be confident of God's presence. You can deal with the problems of life when you are confident of God's presence with you.

One other remark about God saving his people: Sometimes, God does *not* rescue his people miraculously or even providentially. Many examples, both in the Bible and in history, show us that often, when armies surround a city, the people there die, including believers. God chooses not to intervene directly. We have to admit that within the providence of God, good people suffer pain and death.

Illus.: On June 11, an independent church in India's Tamil Nadu state was burned to the ground by unknown individuals, leaving over 100 Christians with no place to worship. ... 'I was so distressed and pained in my heart,' said Pastor Ramesh of Real Peace Church. 'It was hard labor for 10 years to build the church. All the hard work and sacrificial donations from the poor congregants were brought down to the ground. All that is left is ash. In the last ten years, I have been told numerous times by radicals to close the church,' Pastor Ramesh said. 'By God's grace, I was able to endure all these hardships and abuses, but this time it is total devastation.'¹

E.g., accounts of believers in Africa being killed by militant Muslims. Thousands of Christians have been killed there.

The reality is that sometimes God rescues his people and sometimes he doesn't. That's part of God's providence as well. Sometimes the story does not have a happy ending.

¹ International Christian Concern, quoted by David Cloud, *Friday Church News Notes* July 10, 2020 - Volume 21, Issue 28

5. This text brings up a couple of important questions.
- a) Are there angelic armies stationed around us? Frankly, we don't know. Many of the things that happened in Elisha's life were rare and unique to him. The fact that angels surrounded Elisha doesn't necessarily mean that they surround us. But they could.
 - (1) The AH calls angels "ministering spirits, sent forth to serve" God's people (Heb 1:14). Normally, we would never know that angels are present. But they may be.
 - (2) I'm rather skeptical when I hear stories about supposed angelic encounters. I'm not sure how you would know for sure if you were visited by an angel.
 - (3) But it's kind of comforting to consider that the angels of God are on standby, ready to help us in a time of crisis. And perhaps they do help us.
 - b) Will God ever grant us a vision of angels?
 - (1) We should realize that visions like this are very rare, even in the Bible. Prophets and apostles occasionally had these kinds of experiences, but not most everyone else. If you are not a prophet or an apostle, then you shouldn't really be expecting to see a vision of angels.
 - (2) The Bible tells us to walk by faith, not by sight. We should not expect that God would grant us a vision of the unseen realm. We believe that things are happening in the unseen realm, but we don't expect to see that realm.
 - (3) Whether we see evidence of it or not, we trust that God is with us, working for our benefit in the unseen realm.

- C. .18-23 God provides through altering human perceptions.
1. .18 Elisha had just prayed that the eyes of his servant would be *opened* (vs. 17), and now he prays that the eyes of these Syrians would be *blinded*, and God grants his request.
 2. This text is not talking about *physical* blindness and sight. The soldiers could see just fine. But their understanding of reality was changed; their perceptions were altered. God veils the understanding of the Syrian army so that they do not recognize where they are. God gave them a form of mental blindness.
 3. .19-20 Once Elisha brings the Syrian army to Samaria, the capital of Israel, about 12 miles away from Dothan, then he opens their eyes and they understand where they are.
 4. .21 The Israelite king asks if he should kill the Syrian soldiers, but Elisha tells him to feed them and send them home.
 - a) In that culture, if you eat together with someone, you no longer consider him to be your enemy. You don't retaliate against someone who feeds you. Extending hospitality was a way to extend friendship.
 - b) .23 So this feast amounted to a peace treaty of sorts between the two nations. The Syrians stopped raiding the bordering Israelite towns. This act of hospitality brought peace to the two nations, at least for a while.
 5. Two timeless principles here
 - a) God has total access to human minds and perceptions.
 - (1) I'm not going to speculate as to how or why God might control human perceptions. I don't think this kind of thing happens very often; this is the only case recorded in the Bible. So this is a unique event.
 - (2) The point is that nothing, not even the human mind, is beyond God's control. God can open eyes or he can blind them. He can cause people to understand or prevent them from understanding.

- (3) Some people are deeply offended by the idea that God might intervene directly in the human mind. They don't want to consider the idea that God might actually control or change how a person thinks.
 - (4) But God can do whatever he wants with his creation; he's the potter and we are the clay.
- b) .21-23 When you have your enemy at your mercy, be kind to him. The Israelite army could easily have slaughtered the entire Syrian army, but Elisha tells the king to feed the Syrians and let them go. Being kind and compassionate solved the problem; the Syrians stopped their raids on the Jewish communities near the border.
- (1) There may be times when it would be easy to retaliate against an enemy. But the biblical thing to do is to be kind and compassionate.
Pr 25:21-22 If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the LORD shall reward thee.
 - (2) Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us and abuse us (Mt 5:44).
Kindness is a very powerful force. It can convert enemies into friends, or at least it can defuse a tense situation. So be kind to others.

Vs. 16 is as true today as it was 2500 years ago: *they that be with us are more than they that be with them*. As the NT puts it, *If God be for us, who can be against us? Or Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world*.

God is at work behind the scenes, often in invisible ways, to provide for his people. As God's people, we should be aware that God is with us and will provide for us and defend us. He'll provide solutions to our problems. We may not experience miraculous solutions like we see in this text, but God can still help us solve our problems in other ways. Therefore, we can follow Elisha's command—"fear not." With the resources God provides, we can deal with the problems we encounter in life.

God's care for his people is both personal and global. He cares about both the minor accidents of life as well as national crises. In small things and large things, God's people can trust him to provide for them, whether miraculously or through the ordinary providences of life.

Our responsibility is to trust God, obey his word, and look for the solutions that God provides. Elisha told his servant, and he tells us this morning, "fear not" (vs. 16).