

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

God of Big and Small Things II Kings 6:1-23

Intro: We start off with a short story that seems just out-of-place. In **ch5** we had an international incident involving Syria and Israel that nearly came to war, at least that's what the king of Israel thought. The very next story in **ch6** involves another international incident and the 3rd story in this chapter goes well beyond "incident" to an out-right military siege of Samaria. Yet, here we have this little teaser of a story about a sinking axe-head. Why is this story in Scripture? Of course, it shows the power of Yahweh working through the prophet. That's true but it seems so trivial, so senseless, so unnecessary...so weird! What substantial teaching can we get from this little blurb?

Well, there are several approaches one can take with this passage but we must be careful not to head off in the wrong direction. Many a theologian and commentators has done just that. Some try to rationalize the story. They say that it all comes down to the fact that Elisha just poked around in the water with that stick until he stuck it into the socket of the axe head and lifted it up into waiting hands. Or, he just scooted the axe head with his stick into shallow water where the guy could pick it up for himself. Never mind that the text doesn't say or even imply any of that. Others don't even bother to rationalize it; they simply attribute the story to prophetic legend, exaggerated by fans or followers of Elisha.

Still others try to allegorize it: that is, the text means something other than what it says. The axe-head represents man's soul, the Jordan represents judgment. Man's soul is hopelessly lost beneath the waters of judgment. The stick is wood – and so is the cross. When the cross of Christ enters the situation then man's soul is rescued. Still, faith is necessary: the man had to reach out his hand to take it. I can't tell you how many sermons I've heard that follow this line of thinking. The problem with allegory, unless it is purposefully written into the text, it seldom works.

You wouldn't allegorize your wife's shopping list: noodles= use your noodle = use your head = head of lettuce. Marshmallow = soft = she wants something soft = supper soft toilet paper. Chicken = lack courage = yellow =

wants something yellow: cheese or butter? If that's how you interpret a shopping list, just hop in the car and drive off into the sunset and don't bother going home. There is no place for allegory here: the axe-head is a chunk of iron, the Jordan is just a river; the stick is just a stick.

Others, with more reverence for the Scriptures, try to moralize the text: they find a nice lesson they think it teaches. The problem with this approach is that the imagination can run wild. Is it a rebuke for borrowing another man's tools? Is it a proverb against cutting wood near a river? Is it a warning against entering into a building program without proper preparation? Should we license axes or ban the borrowing of them? Clearly some of these are ridiculous but when you start moralizing, it's hard to determine which morals are the best to lean on. Actually, rationalize, allegorize and moralize are just fancy names for unbelief.

What to do? Well, we'll just take the story straight as it is written. What happened at the river is exactly what happened. So, with that settled, what does this text intend to teach us?

The first thing we should notice in this story is God's concern for a simple need (5a). This poor guy is just trying to do his part in gathering the necessary lumber and his axe-head falls into the river. That axe-head seems to be the weightiest part of the story so before we dismiss it as just another lost tool we need to put this axe-head into context.

Here we have both a simple and an individual need. As you may recall from ch5, Naaman had an individual need but it had major political ramifications (just ask Israel's king). Besides, Naaman was somebody, as he well knew. As I mentioned at the beginning, after this story we'll have stories about military engagements between Syria and Israel and a devastating Syrian siege of Israel's capitol city. So here are a bunch of stories about international politics, foreign affairs, military strategy and national crisis – and right in the middle of all that, God takes the time to float a measly axe-head? So, in the middle of all that's going wrong in the world today (plenty) does God have an interest in the minor details of my life that trouble me? Isn't His agenda already full?

If that's your way of thinking then you misunderstand the greatness of God. God's greatness, in large part, consists of the fact that He is faithful in the

little things. We are mistaken when we confuse God's greatness with bigness. If your concept of God is of the CEO type, He's so busy, so preoccupied, so distracted that He couldn't have time for my petty problems then you have carved a graven image of the living God and shaped Him in your own image. That's not the God of the Bible, that's not our God. Part of His greatness is revealed in the fact that He does pay attention to the small problems, the little details, the individual and mundane needs of the believer's life. God does care about your axe-head!

While this truth may seem elementary, if we don't believe correctly here, then the little problems, the small details, the seemingly insignificant matters will start to pile up and we won't cast them onto the Father because He surely can't be bothered. So we continue to dwell on them, brood over them, worry about them – all because we're too proud to go to God and say, "My axe-head has fallen into the water!" Do you realize the immensity of the God you have? Heaven is His throne and the earth is His footstool – and your axe-head matters to Him.

Next, we can see God's power revealed for a genuine need (5b). The man sounds heartbroken! This text clearly shows the poverty in which these men lived. This guy didn't even own his own axe, he had to borrow one. Thus, he despairs when it sinks because meals, tools and pennies couldn't be taken for granted. Such an iron tool would be quite expensive: it's the equivalent of wrecking a borrowed car...that wasn't insured! Ah, now we understand his dilemma. We might say, "Just go down to the hardware store and replace it." And he would say, "With what?" No, this miracle wasn't just done for kicks, or to show off. There was a genuine need for God's help and when there is a genuine need for it we shouldn't be surprised if He brings it in a wonderful way.

The text seems to imply that you can expect God's provision for a genuine need. Having said that, it is also true that the majority of the time, we need God's wisdom to reveal to us what our real need is. This is particularly true in Western Christianity where we have an inflated idea of what the word "need" means. "I need a windfall of cash so I can buy this thing." No, what you need is to learn how to curb frivolous spending so you can save money in order to have it when you really need it...like everyone else does. But, when there is a genuine need, we must know that God may supply it in either a marvelous or a mundane way (Curt & MJ brakes). Our text teaches

us that our destitution is the arena for God's help and our emergencies are opportunities to see His finest acts.

There's another principle here that doesn't quite jump out at us but it just as encouraging as the previous 2. Notice God's providence providing for a future need (3-4a). Providence means God's fascinating and unguessable way of working out situations for the good of His people. It's right here in the text. Notice something basic: the presence of Elisha, the man of God, turns out to be a very crucial factor in the story. What if he hadn't been asked to join them? What if he had refused to go? What if he hadn't been there? Then the Jordan wins and the axe-head loses. Good on the guy who specifically asked Elisha to go along (3a). What critical words those turned out to be!

Now, there's no way either the student or Elisha could have guessed how critical the request and response would turn out to be. We should understand from this that there are certain circumstances that God often arranges in our lives before we ever know we'll need them. God's providence was already at work before anyone knew it. The request and consent seem like such a routine piece of courtesy that we think nothing of it, and yet in that tiny bit of trivia God was already at work providing for a need that was yet unseen and unknown.

The story is told of how close Ronald Reagan came to dying when he was shot by John Hinckley. One of the bullets hit the President in the stomach muscles. Years before this, Reagan had worked out so often that his doctors told him to ease off because his chest and stomach muscles were so developed, they were afraid this would lead to a hernia later in life. But those over developed stomach muscles helped slow down the bullet – it stopped an inch from his heart. A "provision" had been in place long before a need came along.

Most of you can probably tell your own stories of God providing the necessary experience, circumstance or chance encounter that happened well before the need arose that it was meant to address. It may have been some seemingly insignificant occurrence that never fazed your mind but later you recognized it as the catalyst of God's immense goodness to you. This is just God's wonderful way of being for His people in the smallest of circumstances for their good and deliverance. How can we not but worship

and adore a God like this? Here's a God who's present & mighty for His people in every sort of emergency. Here's a God who's available to you! You can have Him for your God!

8-13 – We've come to a bigger story that is both fascinating and a little humorous and it has a slightly different focus. The entire advertising industry thrives on appealing to our sense of security. You don't want your family to struggle financially if you kick the bucket (life, health, auto). Our car has the newest safety features; our tires have the highest safety rating; our denture cream holds tighter, deodorant last longer, etc. Clearly, this appeal to security can be manipulated, twisted and corrupted but the fact remains that one of the appealing elements of biblical truth is the testimony that no one is as safe as the people of God, even when they live in the most frightening of times.

Although this story is longer, there's a lot here that we don't know. Like, is this in chronological order; how Elisha knows all the plans of Syria's king; the names of the kings of Israel and Syria. All the characters are anonymous but Elisha. We don't even know how the Syrian officer in **v12** knows what he knows about what Elisha knows. We may surmise that this takes place somewhere around 845 BC but there are a lot of unanswered questions. All we can say is that this story stands as a literal exposition and visible demonstration of **Ps 125:2**

The first thing we see in this story is God's uncanny protection in sparing Israel from Syrian attacks. It's uncanny because we don't know how He informed Elisha; was it by dreams or visions; was it by direct communication? There is no telling but that's not the most amazing aspect of this protection. The most amazing thing about God's sparing of Israel is that it was a gracious provision. It was gracious because Israel was in direct rebellion against God at this time in her history! We know this is true because the northern kingdom of Israel was in direct rebellion against God for her entire existence. The nation as a whole was wholly given over to cultic idolatry and/or pagan Baal worship. But, even in their rebellion, they were still God's people and the sober truth being expressed here is that no one can touch or harm God's people unless their Defender allows it. There have been untold multitudes of times God's people have praised Him for what He has not allowed the world to inflict upon His people.

14-17 – Next, notice how God’s servants enjoy His unseen protection. Our fears take over when we don’t see the unseen. At least that was the case for Elisha’s servant. He walked outside with his coffee to grab the morning paper and got the shock of his life! Oh, he’s awake now! “What are we gonna to do?!?” Elisha’s blithe response (16) must have been maddening to him but he’s just stating the truth. It was a big truth but was lost on the young servant so Elisha prays for the servant’s perception of that truth (17). It’s one thing to hear the truth of v16; it’s another thing to be consciously and vividly impressed by this reality (17). Elisha prayed that God would show his servant the forces arrayed in their defense. As in Exodus, the fire here signals God’s presence. These are the Lord’s legions. They surround Elisha and his servant. It’s good to hear this truth but it’s so much more consoling to be held by this truth.

Of course, the experience of Jesus teaches us that the unseen protection is present even if it is not “activated.” Remember His rebuke of Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane in Mt 26:53. Just think of it, 72,000 angels chomping at the bit to intervene on behalf of Jesus! But all of those legions were held back because the cross was the will of God for Jesus. But there in the Garden, Jesus instructs Peter that He didn’t lack for resources. This means Jesus knew and lived under the unseen protection of our text.

But what if God doesn’t show you the horses and chariots of fire? Then you must go on, leaning on the fact of v16 even if the sight of v17 is denied to you. How we need those unseen legions. When the boss tells you they no longer need your services; when the doctor says you need to go see an oncologist; when the landlord says their not going to renew your lease; when a loved one dies... It’s alright to ask God to show you a glimpse of the horses and chariots of fire but the fact that you’re asking means you believe they are there and that belief is really all you need. That’s the difference between spiritual immaturity and maturity. The mature believer stands on the truth they know.

18-23 – Finally, in the immortal words of Pfc. Gomer Pyle, “Surprise, surprise, surprise!” Lo and behold, the enemies of God receive His unexpected protection. Elisha does a bit of praying in this story: 1st he prays for his servant to see the unseen; then he prays for the Syrians to not see what is clearly before their eyes. This wasn’t complete blindness but rather some visionary befuddlement. They were able to follow Elisha on a ten-mile

excursion to Samaria (after he assured them he would take them to the guy they were really looking for). Elisha then prays a 3rd pray and...Guess where, fellas? The king of Israel required a bit of restraint. He was thinking more along the lines of a bloodbath, not a banquet. Elisha directs him to the latter and they all strap on the feed bag then send the enemy on their way full of food...and grace.

Do we see how this is a story of grace and hope? What was this strange turn of events meant to display, especially to the Syrians? They had fallen into the hands of God's prophet (to whom they meant to do harm) and God, through His prophet had spared them. Who would have guessed? Spared by the enemy: it's unheard of; it wasn't supposed to happen. When their eyes were opened and they saw they were inside Samaria, they knew it was curtains for them. And yet they were spared.

If the Syrians really had eyes to see they would understand that they had come under Yahweh's protection; it was offered even to the likes of them! Here, Yahweh not only protected Elisha and Israel by disabling the Syrians but He also protected the Syrians by restraining Israel's king. Not just Israel but even unwashed gentiles can have Yahweh as their sun and shield. What an opportunity this was for these Syrians if they only had the eyes to see it! This story is glad tidings that we can bring to everyone – the shelter of the Lord is not just for churchy people – it's open to anyone who will avail themselves of it.

Now, while our text may show us the how of God's grace upon these pagan Syrians, it doesn't give us the why. For that we need to look at [Ez 33:11](#). This is why God was gracious to the Syrians, this is why God is gracious to anyone who will come to Him in repentance and accept His gift of salvation. The NT testifies of this very same principle in [II Peter 3:9](#). God is not willing that any should perish but a multitude of people still will. The only requirement is that you must to Him in true repentance. This means salvation does not come through religious ceremony, ritual or edict. You're not saved by repeating a prayer or attending a certain denomination or being listed on the membership rolls.

You are only saved by God's grace through the exercise of faith when you come to the Lord in true repentance and accept His offer of the forgiveness of sin and eternal life through Jesus Christ His Son. 😊