

Floating Axe Head

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[0 : 0 0] In 1991 my dad was selling a brown Mini. It was a strange experiment in our house where we went to the smallest car in the market. I'm quite sure why we did that.

But anyway he was planning to sell that car and it had a for sale sign on the back of the car and that same year I passed my driving test and on the second night of passing my driving test I took this brown Mini which was for sale out for a drive. Ginmo stopped beating me to the line I'm saying. Just listen.

And I came up to traffic lights it was raining and being an inexperienced driver put on the brakes too late and swung gently into the back of the car in front. So it was a humbling experience and it could have been a lot worse of course but I was understandably rather fearful being driven home by the people whose car I'd pranged to the house to see the reaction from the home and my dad's reaction was it doesn't really matter. You're okay the car can be fixed. And I've never really forgotten that response of Grace that he gave at that time and I'll return to that at the very end of the story or the end of our sermon tonight because I think in a very simple and practical way I think it's it's relevant.

Grace at work in everyday situations. But this is an incident, it's a little story about the prophets, the school of the prophets, the seminary of prophets who Alicia was teaching and how they wanted somewhere to somewhere better to meet together and they were going to build somewhere on the Jordan and the cutting down trees and one of them swinging the axe and the axe head flies off and falls into the Jordan River and he's worried and Alicia throws in a stick and it floats and takes it back out. Unusual story. There's two basic ways of looking at a story like this from the Bible and I'm going to use just to show off I'm going to use two big words tonight that you all will know but they are helpful for us when we think about a text like this. We can look at this in two different ways.

We can look at it either in an anthropocentric way okay or in a theocentric way. Now you know what anthropocentric means don't you? Anthropos means man, mankind. Anthropology is the study of people, study of men and women. So if something's anthropocentric it means it's man-centered. So we can look at it, I could have just said that, we look at it in a man-centered way or we can look at it in a theocentric way, theos being the word for God, theology, the study of God.

[3 : 25] So the theocentric is God-centered. So we can look at it in both these ways and if we look at it in a human man-centered way, this passage like this, we can respond in two different ways to it. I guess maybe more, at least two different ways. One is we can read a passage like this from a man-centered point of view and just think this is ridiculous and disbelieve it. It's silly, you know it's just a parable, it's just a story, it's not real, it don't you know we're much, we know much more than that, now it doesn't happen. Iron axe heads don't float and if even if they did what's the point of this story? It's a myth, there's a, we can at best we can take, we can spiritualize it and see that there's some something else happening or we can look at it with different eyes and see that really there was another explanation for what happened and a lot of the miracles in the New Testament for example people will say well they weren't really miracles, certain things were happening, it's just the way they were written and they're trying to maybe even scientifically explain it away, so disbelief and that would maybe be our natural tendency to look at a passage like this and find it difficult to believe or we could look at it from a man-centered point of view yet with the eyes of faith but still being kind of man-centered so that we're looking at this passage and saying what is it saying for me? What can I get from it? What's in it for me? What's a passage like this got to do and what can it teach me for my life? Maybe I shouldn't borrow things because this was an axe that was borrowed and maybe it's something about it's not right to borrow maybe it's about how we look after someone else's tools, someone else's equipment, maybe it's if I had the faith of Elisha that God will do magic in my life and we can look at it from a kind of human human-centered point of view but with faith if you see what I mean, I don't know if you see what I mean with that but almost always just looking at what I can what can change my life or what could moral ethics can I learn or gain from something like this but I think it's important to remind ourselves that the purpose of scripture is not primarily as a guidebook on how to live it's not like a highway code for living although there are elements of that in the teaching of Christ and of God it's much more than that it's a revelation so it's a revelation of God so it's telling us primarily first even that what we would regard as maybe a rather insignificant story like this is telling us something about God it's not primarily telling us about ourselves but it's telling us something about God and it's revealing God and so we look at scripture and even passages like this in a theocentric way in a way that is asking what does this tell us about God how can we learn more about God through a passage like this so very briefly to put this story in its context which will always help now we're not told very much here and we don't have much detail therefore there's not much we can say in many ways about the story but we do need to understand that the context is culturally and contextually very different from our own obviously it's a different day different generation different issues we've seen already that the prophets the school of the prophets were living in a massive kind of political and religious maelstrom and that was going on all around them and

God was dealing with his own people and judgment in many ways and for the turned against him and the prophets themselves were poverty stricken they were living in really difficult days for them in terms of the standard of their living and they were surrounded by Canaanite worship worship of idolatry and so God was being sidelined and ignored and they were worshipping Canaanite gods particularly Baal god of fertility who interestingly saw that people around who worship Baal recognized that there was they thought there was other gods of the rivers like the River Jordan and the seas who were almost enemies of Baal and so we've got this little story of an axe head ending up in the water ending up in the river and we can immediately begin to see that there would have been a spiritual significance of God dealing with that dealing with even for the Jews water and the river and sea was was divisive and was seen as a bit like death and going you know going down into the sea was seen as going down into death and there was there was something quite sinister about the water so there's something here that speaks of God's power and God's authority even over these elements natural elements but also in terms of the context for us we would have just say well you know what's the problem just head down to be in Q and buy another axe go and get another one and replace it and give it back but we recognize and know that the prophets were were really poverty stricken and also an implement like this was pretty rare and pretty expensive iron at this time and in this place was expensive and was rare and it was a kind of quite a high quality piece of equipment and to lose an iron axe head like that would have meant that the prophet would probably have spent many many months having to work to repay it and it would have it would have cost a great deal to do it would be like today maybe the equivalent of to go back to the car crash analogy at the beginning wrecking a borrowed car that you were driving and you had no insurance and no cash to pay back the car that had been damaged you know it was a real cost and they'll be a long-term repayment so that puts a little bit in context and it begins to make it seem a bit more real I hope and a bit more significant in terms of Alicia's and God's intervention here or

God through Alicia so what does it teach us briefly about God for ourselves because in Hebrews 138 we're told God is the same yesterday today and forever I think we saw that briefly this morning and we see that all of scripture speaks about God and there's a developing insight understanding about God in scripture now a very basic level it's the speaks of grace okay in other words God redeeming not not full-blown grace but God redeeming a bad situation there's a bad situation for the prophets and God redeems it by working a miracle through Alicia and that kind of that motive of redemption that motive of God intervening to help to setting his people free and to working on their behalf is all the way through the Old Testament right up to Jesus Christ where we really see Jesus coming as we saw this morning to set his people free we find it in Egypt we find it in Mount Carmel we found it in Isaiah 61 right through to Christ and to the work of Jesus and even little miracles like that are pointing towards God's gracious intervening on behalf of his people he he redeems his poor servants here through this miracle in similar ways very down-to-earth ways that he does previously in the miracles that Alicia is involved in and it's tremendous to remind ourselves that these miracles were pointing forward to a personal God who loves us and who has intervened massively and powerfully against our greatest enemy sin and death on our behalf speaks of his grace it also speaks of his power you may not think there's a great deal of power expended here in making an iron axe head float but nonetheless it would have spoken powerfully to these prophets particularly in the context of water which was seen as such a powerful and strong and kind of uncontrollable element and we see it God working in power and the throughout the Old Testament and the plagues and the Red Sea and Jericho and Mount Carmel and even in the different miracles we've already looked at in the life of Alicia and that power over natural elements and his power again and on behalf of his people does point us forward to Jesus and to the ultimate revelation of God's power in

Romans 1 verse 16 you know I'm not ashamed of the Gospel because it's the power of God it's a revelation of the power of God for the salvation of everyone who bleeds first for the Jew and then for the Gentiles so all of these micro miracles and micro events in the Old Testament are pointing towards a power that is much greater and a power that's much more significant and it's the power of the Gospel of which the New Testament Apostles were not ashamed and Paul was not ashamed because it's the power of God for salvation so it's the power to transform not just situations but hearts and our lives and hearts to transform them for good so there's grace and there's power and I think in terms of it being taught about God here I think we're also taught about his interest his interest in our lives you know when we think of a miracle we usually think of something massive in a world-changing type of event maybe we don't but you can think of it miracles coming into to make a huge difference to the way society is moving and yet so often in the New Testament and in the Old Testament the miracles were for everyday people for ordinary people were for widows were for orphans were for sick people were for isolated people were for people who were rejected by society and God came and Jesus came and he showed himself to be interested in their everyday lives and we've seen it already haven't we in different miracles that have happened in the life of Alicia it's ordinary people that are helped so you've got this great big massive macro kind of picture going on with idolatry and with God in the covenant and political intrigue and worldwide kind of events happening and yet God is involved in this tiny little way in this very ordinary situation which you know is neither here nor there in terms of the the direction or movement in which the world is going and it speaks about a personal God who cares about the little things in our lives who cares not just about the massive issues of life but also our lives cares about our problems cares about our needs and who works into our situations so that sometimes the small problems we have nonetheless very real to us and could be really very important as is obviously was the case here for the prophets when he answers our prayers and when we plead to him and he answers our prayers with regard to them these problems become an opportunity for praise and they build their confidence in a God who cares you know the New Testament talks about

Jesus in these terms and God our Father in these terms you know he's a loving father you know when his children asked for bread will he give them a stone you know and there's this sense in which it is ludicrous to think that the Father wouldn't be interested wouldn't be concerned about the small things in our lives that's just some times you know what I can't pray about that you know God's God's ruling the universe you know he's got bigger things he's got bigger fish to fry but the reality is that the living God doesn't think like that and when we have our trust in him through Jesus Christ there's not a corner of our lives that he's unconcerned about there's no a part of our lives that we could say well I'm not gonna pray about that because that isn't something that God will be interested in or will deal with is that's not the kind of God he reveals himself to be he reveals himself to be a personal loving powerful gracious God who has an interest in our day-to-day lives so when we are struggling with issues when we're struggling with problems and when we're struggling with it may be very mundane issues of health or of finance or of relationships or of workplace issues or whatever it might be in our struggles we take it to God in the same way that the prophet here cried out or the prophets cried out to Elisha to invoke his help and in invoking his help we're invoking the help of God so very briefly we learn a little bit about God through a passage like this but also we we learn about God through Elisha himself and his kind of grace at work in the situation and this might be just stretching the application a little bit but I think is nonetheless significant for us Elisha was a you know a patriarchal figure he was a prophet it was a really honorable position that he had to be a prophet and it was regarded as really significant and valuable and you wonder if he was just too holy to be interested or to be concerned about building an extension to the seminary that this men of God were looking to do and maybe he could have just said yeah you go on out on you go you go and do that I'll just sit back here and I'll pray about things and I'll get God God's involvement in it at a different level but they they wanted him you know he was he wasn't a distant figure and he gave them the willingness to go and then they said but they wanted him to come as a leader they wanted him to be there to be involved and he acquiesced to that request he went to be with them and then you would think maybe when the axe head falls into the water he had every right to say well oh you fool what are you doing it's hugely expensive we're never gonna get this seminary built now we're gonna spend ages paying these things back how could you be so foolish can you condemn them but no we find that he is used in this situation as an instrument of grace and of God's redemptive at work in their lives and it's like just a simple I think but a great example of how we react react and respond both as leaders and as Christians grace gives us an interest in

[21 : 04] people around us and in their everyday needs so that holiness and the list is an example of a holy man of God is not monkish it's not separatist it's quite the opposite it's a recognition of who we are by grace and therefore how we respond to others in the way that God has responded to us if we understand the touch of God in our lives as Elisha clearly did the wreckage of our own lives then we will respond to others in an equally gracious and loving way there isn't any paradox between his beliefs and his understanding of God and then his willingness to be involved in their lives and in even their mistakes grace sees the problems of others with different eyes and he is used here and sees the opportunity under God to use this situation for God to work for God to take a bad situation and redeem it to develop a sense of love and grace and power and goodness he doesn't use it as an opportunity to condemn them for their foolishness or to criticize or to withdraw and to ignore them we see him taking this problem and applying God and applying grace and therefore applying miracles to that situation and God then intervened and acted on their behalf in a miraculous way and it gave them confidence and it gave them belief that

God cared that God was gracious and God was kind and in a very simple way I that returns me to my father from the beginning of sermon that that a simple act of grace like that is often one that's never forgotten I'm sure you're you can you know that in your own lives the simple things that people have done have lasted in your memory for many many years when they are an act of grace in a practical situation as and for him it was a reflection of the grace that he had in his own heart and the kind of God we have will be reflected in the kind of way we respond to troubles and difficulties and oppositions and problems in our lives if we see problems as an opportunity to cry out to God and to enable him to deal with an impossibility and also to enable us to deal with one another in grace then we've got a picture we've understood a little bit about God's dealings God's character and our being servants of God and the kind of God we have will be reflective of the way we respond to one another and we respond to impossibilities and to difficulties when we know who God is when we know him as a loving father and we know him as a God who is powerful and gracious and interested in us then that will determine how we respond to problems and difficulties and impossibilities and troubles in our lives and that is significant as we learn about God because it will transform these situations and it will also transform our relationships with one another and that is always important grace at the core of who we are and of what we do and how we respond to one another.

Let's just pray briefly together. Father God we pray that you would help us to understand a little bit more about your grace even in a passage like this which does seem distant from us and we wonder how such a small story can become part of your revelation of your character and yet when we unpack it we begin to see consistent pictures and consistent characteristics of God who is both gracious and powerful and interested in the lives of his people and so we know that it points us to the ultimate expression of that in Jesus and we pray that we would put our trust in Jesus as believers as people that we would depend as we saw this morning on this miraculous revelation of a judge who becomes judged the Creator who takes on flesh and who rises to the dock in our place who dies for us in order to redeem us. May that give us hearts praise and many many thousands of reasons to rejoice in you and help us as we go from here to put our understanding of God into practice not just when things are going well but when everyday troubles hit that we would respond with grace because we know that that will sometimes have a powerful effect a more powerful than a hundred sermons on people's lives around us when we respond with a perspective that is both dependent on God and recognises a bigger picture and a greater reason behind events in our lives so help us and guide us and bless us with your presence as we sing together in conclusion for Jesus' sake. Amen.