

“Forgive Us Our Debts: A Sermon on 2 Kings 6:1-7”¹

Problem in the Text World²

This is certainly a peculiar story. You could even say it's gratuitous. Just another prophet showing off, right? Well, maybe. Maybe the presence in our canon of miracle stories like these is simply to point up the power of the prophets and therefore the power of God. Yet each miracle has its own story to tell. Each miracle has a particular context. And each miracle solves a particular problem.

This story, like any other, invites us to probe its particulars. It invites us to ask questions. For instance, who are these “sons” or “company” of the prophets? What are they like? What are they up to? Well, we know for sure that they pop up again and again in the Elisha stories. A group of about 50 prophets are in Jericho when Elisha takes over for Elijah. Afterwards, they complain about some bad water in their well. Miraculously, Elisha fixes it. Later on, one of them dies. He left his widow with a debt that threatens her the enslavement of her sons. Then Elisha saves the day. A group of them in Gilgal are about eat some poisoned food. There again is Elisha to purify the food. By that time there were about a 100 gathered together. They have to rely on gifts for food, but it still is not enough. Once again, Elisha miraculously helps them by multiplying the food.

There seems to be two things we can say about this group of prophets. First of all, they are growing. There's 50 in one place, 100 in another. Who knows how many we have here. All we know is that they can no longer fit into their gathering spot. So we can see that they are growing.

But they are also struggling. They are struggling to get by. Even charity from others is insufficient. Elisha's miracles must repeatedly make up the deficit. They live on the outskirts – by the Jordan River. They are not up in the centered capital city of Samaria. They are not on the up and up.

In this story, they set out to solve practical problems that come with growth. They ask to move, chop down some trees and build a new place. Elisha says yes. They ask him to come along. He comes. But in order to chop all those trees down they need axes. Lots of axes. Now an ax has two parts: the handle and the iron head. Most folks these days wouldn't think anything of this. But back in those days an iron head would be hard to come by. Iron had only been around for a few centuries. And it was particularly scarce in Israel. Those who *did* have iron lying around were probably using it for battle axes against the Arameans, not for chopping wood down by the Jordan River.

So at least a few of these prophets would have had to borrow their ax heads. Just picture it – a prophet comes to some soldier's house asking for an ax head. “What do you want my iron ax

¹ This sermon was composed with my field education church in mind. It is a 100 member Nazarene church on the edge of Trenton. Although located in a suburban area, it is not entirely well to do. There are a lot of socioeconomic, emotional, and spiritual needs there. However, there are strong forces of honor and reputation that deter open cries for help.

² The following format is inspired by Paul Scott Wilson's “Four Pages of a Preacher” method. I find this form useful because (1) lends itself to a narrative flow, (2) it helps me structure analogies between the text and congregational life, (3) it encourages proportional attention between past and present, problem and solution, and (4) it is compatible with the Law-Gospel homiletic tradition of which I am a part.

head for?” “To cut down some trees and make a gathering spot for me and me mates – we’re prophets, you know”

But their little solution hits a little snag. While swinging an ax, one of the prophets swung his ax head right into the river. And not just any ax head, but one of the borrowed ones. “Oh no, it was borrowed!” He knows this means trouble for the whole gang. He knows this means a big debt to pay off. We saw that these prophets weren’t so well off. He’ll probably have to become a slave to the owner till he can pay it off. Who knows, the powerful owner may even get angry and run these weirdo prophets out of town.

Now some of you may be inclined to think this prophet was just messing around. Maybe he was “flying off the handle” just like the ax head. Maybe he was angry. Or maybe he just wasn’t paying attention. Well, if you think that, you are probably an older sibling. I have an older brother, so I know all about your impatience for irresponsibility. It’s understandable – we younger siblings are so clumsy and flippant. But I can speak from my Indiana farm days, that losing an ax head is common. It’s a downright epidemic for ax swingers. Ax heads would always slip down the handle and pinch my hand, which hurts like nothing else. And sometimes they would fly right off the end of the handle if it were not made just right. And that would hurt a bystander like nothing else. And if that bystander happened to be my dad, well, it would end up hurting me too.

So this prophet – not by messing around, but by simply working – loses his ax head. And for him, losing an ax head was almost like losing your life.

Problem in Our World

Have you lost an ax head lately? What precious thing of yours has fallen in the water? What sudden occurrence has threatened your security? Maybe your property value is as low as your basement. Maybe your investments have dropped through the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Maybe you had to spend your life savings on medical bills, and now have nothing to fall back on if you lose your job. Maybe you have lost your job. Maybe you have had to take out a loan to keep up on your loan payments. Maybe you just realized your college loan will triple by the time you finish paying it. Most of us have had to borrow an ax head. And most of us have watched it fly into the water.

If you are anything like me, the last thing you want to do when you lose your ax head is ask for help. Sure, you might think about it. But then those butterflies start flying around in your stomach. Why is that? Why is there so much dread surrounding a request for help?

A few months ago I composed one of the hardest emails I ever wrote. It was to my father. And I was asking for money. I had good reasons. I had an understandable problem. I had no reason to doubt my father’s generosity. But it took me months to finally sit down and write it. And there was that feeling of horror when I pressed the “send” button.

Why such fear? Such dread? Such terror? Such ... *shame*? Shame. At bottom, that is what holds us back from a simple request for help. Shame. We are ashamed. It’s understandable. Ben Franklin has been telling us all our lives to ‘let neither a borrower nor a lender be.’ No wonder those stomach butterflies start flapping at even the thought asking for help

Grace in the Text World

Who can save us from this shame? Who can solve our problem? Who can lift the ax head out of the water? Enter the “man of God.”

For our aspiring prophet, there was a master prophet nearby. He could simply call out to him. He could explain his trouble, and he would fix it. Of course, Elisha might not have been there. He could have been somewhere else. He could have been up in Samaria, dealing with kings and kingdoms. But no. He was with them. Why? Well, one of them asked him to come along. He politely asked that he would accompany them down to the River. So when trouble struck, they had a man of God nearby to lend a hand.

I wonder. Could the one who asked Elisha to join them be the same one who lost his ax head? Maybe he knew the kinds of problems he might face. Or maybe he just loved the presence of the master prophet. But even if he wasn't the one who asked Elisha to come, he did ask him for help. When trouble hit, he spoke up. He knew *whom* to ask. He knew he *could* ask. He knew he *should* ask. Yes, he was dismayed over the debt. Yes, he dreaded the dishonor. But he knew no shame would come from Elisha. With Elisha, he would be free from debt. Elisha would not ask anything in return. Elisha would freely help.

And Elisha did help. He had a plan for the problem. He had a solution for the sinking. There was, of course, a bit of magic surrounding it. It was a miracle. Not something you see every day. And yet, it was a practical miracle. The ax head wasn't just floating. You see, the text says that before Elisha threw the stick in the water, he had sheared it. What was he up to? He was probably whittling a new handle for the ax head – one that would fit better. He was not just giving the prophet an ax head. He was making sure the ax head wouldn't go flying again. He wasn't just giving fish away; he was giving fishing lessons. The presence of Elisha meant not only a powerful but a *practical* solution.

But Elisha did not do it alone. The novice prophet did not just stand by and watch. He did not sit quietly on the bank of the river. He was involved. He was invited to get involved. Elisha asked him where the ax head fell. And Elisha sent him in to get it out of the water. Part of the good news is that it *includes!* It includes the problem-maker into the solution. It includes the needy one in the help. It includes the victim in the victory. Elisha, the man of God did not work alone. He included the very one who needed his power.

Grace in Our World

Maybe you do not see miracles every day. Maybe you are like me and have never seen an ax head float. It's not that you don't believe it could happen. You just know it hasn't happened lately. And you might not care too much if it did. On the other hand, you would love to see your investments float up to the top. You would love to see your debts miraculously disappear. You would love for city planning to surprisingly benefit your property this time. You would love to get your job back – plus a raise. You would love to put your card in the ATM and suddenly have a robust savings account again. But we do not see miracles like these everyday either. They may seem possible, but not probable.

And yet we come here week after week, bow our heads, close our eyes, and ask God to forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Sure, our debt to God is that he created us and still loves us even though we sin against him. God forgives that great cosmic debt. But what about these other debts? The debts that pile up on our desks in the form of letters stamped “payment

overdue.” Does God have anything to say about these? Could our Lord’s prayer have anything to do with them? Well, Jesus would certainly say it does. Debts were all the rage at the time of Jesus – just as much as today. And they were ruining people’s lives – just as much as today. It was into *our* kind of world that Jesus came and told us to ask God to forgive us our debts.

How can we make this petition meaningful? How can we coherently pray the Lord’s Prayer? This little story tucked away in the book of kings may hold the clue.

First, it reminds us that **God is here**. The passage emphasizes that God’s very mouthpiece, Elisha, was in the midst of this struggling community. And they had the guts to ask him to join them on a trip to the Jordan. God is here. God is among us. Do we have the guts to ask God to be near to us? Have you asked God to be with you?

Second, this story tells us that **God is listening**. Having been asked to accompany them, Elisha was now within earshot of the prophets when disaster struck. Do we know that God is listening? Do we believe it? Do we live like it? Will you call out to him? Will you tell him about your debts and worries and instabilities? Will you speak them aloud in this community? For I promise you, God will not be ashamed of you. You can ask God for help. God asks nothing in return. And God is forming a people into the image of God. They will not be ashamed of you either. The church is not a place of shame. Places where you are shamed in the name of God are not the church. They are social clubs. May it not be so here.

Third, **God has a practical solution**. God has a way out. God is creating it right now. God will not leave us hanging. Are we looking for it? Will it find us? Are our eyes peeled for it? Was it that advice that someone just gave you? Or was it that generous friend from whom you are afraid to ask a favor? Will this church dare to make practical solutions available to the needs of the community? Will we dare to care, and do it in the name of the Lord?

Finally, **God has invited you to participate in the divine solution**. God works for us. But God also works *with* us. Do we hear God’s call? Do we know what to do, and just need to do it? Do we sense the power of grace stirring in our lives? Will we do our part? Will you do yours?

© John Drury