

2 Kings 6:1-7

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[0 : 00] So in the great and grand narratives of one and two kings, in the moments of national crisis, foreign affairs, military engagements, the rise and fall of governments.

! What on earth is a story about someone losing a piece of chopping equipment doing here? It is a miraculous event, isn't it? Elisha raising a piece of iron to float on some water.

And I want to look at the kind of miraculous side of that, not today, but soon, hopefully in the future.

But what I want to do this evening is to work out what this is saying about God, what he is like.

Because why on earth does this story matter to anyone? Why does it matter to God? There are plenty of theories about this passage that we heard earlier.

Some commentators kind of look for a deeper spiritual meaning. It must mean more than just somebody got their axe head back, so they kind of allegorize it and look for some deeper hidden meaning.

[1 : 13] So the axe head is like our soul that has gone down into the depths of sin and God comes and raises it up. Well, that's true, isn't it? But I don't think that's what this passage is saying.

If you can't break this passage by looking at cryptic clues, it just feels so trivial, doesn't it? Why is it here? But I think it's here for a more simple reason, really.

It's simply here to show us that in the big events that we get in 1 and 2 Kings on the world stage, God still has time for the little problems of his people.

That God's greatness consists in his rule over the small things like this, the small things of life. That God is interested in our daily needs.

And this wasn't planned, but it's kind of an extension of this morning's passage, isn't it, and sermon. That he's interested in the daily necessities of our little lives. So I want us to say a couple of things tonight in this short passage.

[2 : 21] Number one, God provides in our emergencies. God provides in our emergencies. So look with me. Chapter 6 verse 1 to 7. These guys, sons of the prophets, are building some wooden houses like the river Jordan, when the top of someone's axe accidentally flies off and splash into the water and it's lost.

And in the grand scheme of things we wonder, well, what is this to God? And even we think, well, big deal. Can't we just go and buy another axe head?

Well, it's worth knowing that iron then was way, way more expensive than it is now. And an iron axe head like this was like the equivalent of a sort of brand new transit van for a working man.

It was the key means of livelihood. So it doesn't seem like a big deal, does it, in the grand scheme of things. But it is an emergency for this guy.

And even worse, verse 5, he says to Elijah, Alas, my master, it was borrowed. So it's not even his transit van, is it? He's accidentally trashed it without insurance.

[3 : 35] And so what looks like a minor thing on the world stage, and even in our eyes, for this guy is a personal emergency. No one else backs an eyelid, do they?

But it is his problem. He's had to borrow someone else's equipment to work. This is a guy who is trying to make ends meet. And this could take his business down for good.

This is a minor emergency in all of history. But it is a real emergency for him. It's not going to get on the front pages, but it is significant to him.

And it is a real need for him. And so it is significant to God. And that is really surprising. Because when it comes to greatness, and great gods, great people, we normally link that exclusively with bigness.

Let me kind of try and explain that. If you are great in the world, then you are only interested in great big things, aren't you? You only want to get involved with grand things.

[4 : 49] I wonder if we think of God like that. Like a sort of CEO who is at the top of the ladder. And as you get to the top of the ladder, as you get higher and higher, the less you have to deal with the minutiae of your company.

With the dinky little details. Normally, part of greatness is when a person doesn't have to attend to the little things, isn't it?

When I don't have to choose my toilet paper or carry out my own rubbish, isn't that rubbish? Or cook my own meals. Or even drive my own car.

If I can be chauffeured everywhere, that is greatness, isn't it? So I can concentrate on the big things. But haven't we seen God is not like that? We've seen in these little vignettes over the last few weeks.

That God is not great just because he only attends to the great things. The kings of Israel, the ambassadors, the military generals. He's great because he attends to mothers and widows.

[5 : 57] Little girls and hungry soldiers and manual labourers. His greatness is not seen in the way that we see greatness in the world. By avoiding the little problems.

But precisely as he provides and is involved in the little problems. His rule concerns the whole spectrum, doesn't it? He deals with the falling and the rising of empires and governments.

And the falling and rising of stock exchanges. Of putting food in a person's mouth. Of bringing someone out of employment.

So he's not like us, is he? He's not pressured and stressed. So preoccupied and distracted and overworked.

And so tired of the big things of the world. That he can't spare time for you in your minor emergencies. Last Sunday we had the hymn from Walter Chalmers Smith.

[6 : 58] Where he writes that God is unrelenting. He never has to take a break. Unrelenting. He never has to rush things. And silence is light.

Nor wanting, nor wasting. Thou rulest in might. His greatness is found not in avoiding the little things. But in excelling in the little things.

Of all of our lives. I don't know if you've seen those images. By Alan Tretik of John F. Kennedy. Sat at the Resolute desk in the Oval Office.

Black and white photos. He sits reviewing important documents on his desk. There's one of him pointing a finger. With a commanding look on his face.

Commanding one of his staff to do something. He sits and governs the largest and most powerful nation in the world. He is President of the United States. But in those photos, when you look again.

[7 : 58] Underneath the Resolute desk sits JFK Jr. Who quietly plays at his feet. And it was an image that boosted John F. Kennedy's ratings.

Because actually, we all want and crave a ruler who has time. And an interest in the little things.

And the little people. In his children. In our emergencies. However minor they may be to everybody else. And in the grand scheme of history.

They matter to God. And when there is a sudden and a genuine need. In an emergency. God often does provide in mighty ways. That's what he does here.

And our emergencies can often be the props. For his finest acts. Sovereignty. So he gives this man his livelihood back.

[8 : 57] In a miraculous way. The weight of the problem. The weight of the problem. Is lifted, isn't it? Literally. By some miraculous intervention. You know the next section in 2 Kings.

Is on God's handle on war in the Middle East. You see then. How God's focus of attention. Can shift dramatically. And seamlessly.

From the critical world problems. Up to the trivial. Individual emergencies. From the micro problems. To the macro problems.

The Lord provides for it all. He flits from international relations and worldwide terrorism, international pandemics, to your little emergencies seamlessly and effortlessly.

So he provides in our emergencies. Secondly, God prepares for contingencies. God prepares for contingencies. And the other thing that we see in this episode is that the miracle of this floating act said wasn't just a reactionary stunt.

[10 : 12] God wasn't just reacting to something that surprised him. There was a contingency plan already in place before anything went wrong.

There was a plan of providence in place to cover what felt like to the people on the ground in unforeseen crises. Because this guy didn't know that morning that this would happen, did he? No one did. He didn't know that today was the day that he could get fired. Or he would lose an investment. Or he could be made redundant. But I think there are hints in the passage that prior provision had already been made by God for this emergency.

Elisha is the one who acts on behalf of God, isn't he? And brings this axe head back. But the question is, why was Elisha there in the first place?

Why was he there? Well, we're told that in the details. And it came about through what looks like a completely incidental conversation.

[11 : 23] So Elisha and the sons of the prophets are talking. They talk about their accommodation problem. So they decide to go to the Jordan and chop some trees down to build some better houses.

And then verse 3, look there. Then one of them said, Be pleased to go with your servants. Elisha answers, I will go. Now verse 3 is hugely significant because it is so insignificant.

In the passage, 2 Kings chapter 6 verse 3 is not going to be one of your memory verses for the year, is it? That's a lovely year. Then one of them said, Be pleased to go with your servants.

And he answered, I will go. That is not a kind of groundbreaking calendar, Christian calendar verse, is it? There is nothing more going on there than a simple and courteous conversation.

And we wonder why the narrator even bothers to put it in, don't we? Do you want to come down with us, Elisha? Sure, I'd love to. This isn't groundbreaking theology, is it?

[12 : 36] Or is it? It is a routine invitation that we think nothing of. Elisha thinks nothing of it. But as a result of that little conversation, Elisha is there when the axe head emergency strikes.

And he can deal with it there, on the spot. So in God's kindness, the right man was there at the right time. It was a pre-planned provision, a contingency plan, if you like.

And so God doesn't just react to our little emergencies when they happen. That's what we do, isn't it? Something goes wrong.

We didn't expect it. We kind of scramble and pray and pull our resources together as events unfold in our lives. But God doesn't do that. He doesn't even just foresee things and react to them, but he predetermines and decrees what is going to happen in all and every situation and makes the appropriate provision for it.

The provision God gives for our little emergencies, it doesn't always come after they happen or when they happen. But it can come in a hidden way beforehand.

[13 : 55] Perhaps given in a secret and in a routine and incidental way that no one thinks anything of at all. And we've known that in this church, haven't we?

That God has sent to us people and gifts and skills and knowledge to prepare us for something that has yet to happen. people who come into their own when a crisis hits.

So our emergencies are the stage for his providence too. And perhaps more often than that, it's in the things that we've never known, isn't it?

The things that seem so trivial and so incidental to us that we've never realised what provisions and protections God has given. God's provision is there when the disasters are averted way before they happen.

When we don't even realise what emergencies we've been spared from. When we've been completely oblivious to what disasters could have been. And Spurgeon in a sermon says, I've often told you the story of a good old Puritan man who met his son from travelling and when the young man came in and came home he said, Father, I had a very special providence as I rode here today on my horse.

[15 : 15] Providence, it's about the way that God provides, isn't it, in our daily life. Providence. He says, I've had a very special providence. My horse stumbled three times very badly and yet amazingly I wasn't thrown down.

My car skidded on the road three times really badly and yet I didn't crash. It was a really special providence. And the father said, that's great.

I've had an equally special providence in riding here. The providence was that my horse never stumbled not even once all the way so I won't train.

Now that's providence. God's providence the way he provides in the emergencies is not just when we have a close shave and we go a few.

Not only when we just about dodge the worst but also in the times that we don't even have to dodge anything. When we're obviously going through life and the Lord surrounds us with what seem like totally insignificant details but are all the outworkings of his masterful greatness and the greatness in the little things of our lives.

[16:33] He's not just reactionary. He acts upon all of history upon all of creation. He doesn't just provide in the moment or after the moment but he provides beforehand with a contingency.

So God in the emergencies God in the contingencies. So lastly what are the guarantees? What are the guarantees in a passage like this?

Does God give us guaranteed provision in every emergency? I just want to explore that with you finally because this is the last of five or six little episodes that we've seen of God's miraculous provision for individuals like the Shunammite woman remember or the woman with the oil or Naaman and the leprosy?

So God is telling us all throughout these passages that he is interested in our minor emergencies and he has the power to provide but does that mean that he always will?

Can I be sure that my needs will always be met? Is God going to intervene in a miraculous way to bring back my axe head from the bottom of the river?

[17:56] Is he going to intervene miraculously to bring back my job or my livelihood? Can I take Psalm 23 seriously? The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want or Psalm 34 young lions suffer want and hunger but those who look to you lack no good thing is that real?

It's a really important question at the moment isn't it? Because are there going to be times coming up in the near future times ahead where emergencies like this like a man losing his livelihood emergencies of putting food on the table become more real for some of us maybe it could end up like that for some of us couldn't it?

If some of us lose jobs and income or security because of this virus I think one thing we should say first of all is that my definition of need and God can be very different actually this man had an essential need for God to intervene in a mighty way because as we've seen the axe head was his basic means of provision really was basic so when I ask for daily provision when I pray for daily bread I might not be thinking of what God is thinking of with needs I ask for daily bread and I'm praying as someone who can afford to let my children throw moldy bread away to the ducks at Cucardins it's so easy isn't it to confuse need with abundance to confuse the basics with excess and God hasn't guaranteed abundance in this life what I think I need might only be that I'm used to having more than I need and I might be asking for things that I shouldn't ask for and I don't need to ask for maybe that's most of us in this room a lot of the time we redefine need as abundance don't we but what if I really am in need what if I lose my job or I trash someone's transit van we are to ask for our daily bread and the assumption in that is that God's consistent way and his usual practice is to provide for our daily needs Jesus says look at the birds of the air they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns yet your heavenly father feeds them are you not of more value than the birds so don't be anxious about your life what you'll eat or about your body what you'll put on Jesus is saying ordinarily!

He does feed his people through different needs whether it's getting furloughed or through the giving and generosity of the church or through savings or getting retrained and so if you fall on hard times it is a wonderful provision that there are ways you can provide for yourselves and in emergencies God has made provision through the generosity of others but is that always a guarantee!

[21:34] It's true that whilst that might be the norm there will be Christian people in the world today who have empty bellies there are Christians who become painless or lose their crops or face real needs real emergency it could be any of us couldn't it?

When we have a real need we're forced to ask some pretty big questions we begin to ask what is it that really gives me life?

What is my deepest need? If I hit rock bottom what needs do the demands of my hungry body point to?

And I think what these episodes that we've seen are doing is to get us to look behind the sustenance that we crave daily to the one who provides it to the one who is underneath that sustenance There's another little story that I said last week that we come back to and we haven't got time to see it in detail but just look with me at a couple of verses back in chapter 4 chapter 4 verse 42 to 44 let me read those verses a man came from Baal Shalishah bringing the man of God

bread and the first fruits twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack and Elisha said give to the men that they may eat but his servant said how can I set this before a hundred men so he repeated give them to the men that they may eat for thus says the Lord they shall eat and have some left so he said it before them and they ate and had some left going to the Lord of the Lord now what I want you to see there is that God provides bread and he provides the basic need of human life by his word that story is unique in this collection of stories because there's no symbolic action that Elijah does to bring the blessing of God there's no flour poured out into a poisonous stew there's no praying over a dead body or sticks thrown in a river or dipping in some water all that is given to provide food and sustenance is a word we're told that twice chapter 4 verse 43!

[24 : 13] Thus says the Lord they shall eat and have some left and they ate according to the word of the Lord we don't know how that happened we don't know the means of that just that God spoke and it happened what we're seeing there is that underneath our bodily physical needs is a deeper need for God to speak for God to decree life for us so we go on living not just because we eat bread but we live by the power of God's voice we are upheld by his word of power and we die ultimately when we are removed from that word when we're separated from his voice when we turn away from it man because man doesn't live by bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God so it's worth asking the question if you're in an emergency as you seek help and provision and it comes in many ways actually what do I need to live properly what is my most basic need that if I didn't have that thing I would die let me say it's not food it's not clothing it's not even a well paid job although those things are important and they are given to us by God my most basic need is the voice of God it is God speaking life into me it is the life giving speech of God is his word of power that upholds me so there are no guarantees that you will always have a well stocked fridge are there

God doesn't guarantee that Christians do get hungry but as you do open the fridge tonight for your supper when you go home as you pour milk on your wheat and eggs tomorrow morning whether you're eating manna in the wilderness and you're in dire need or you're eating wagamamas in great abundance with whatever you have God has decided and spoken thus says the Lord eat and live you live because God says live and the needs we have in life are delivered by his command all the time so in our emergencies even when it gets really dire for his people we learn to hunger for him and to thirst for him the psalmist writes who do I have in heaven but you oh

Lord and I desire nothing on earth beside you Lord you are my portion sovereign Lord so he does provide emergencies wonderfully sometimes miraculously and often in ways that we never expected and we never even noticed and whilst there are no guarantees of material abundance now we have the assurance that come plenty or hunger we live because of what proceeds from the mouth of God and so when young lions suffer want and hunger when we have him we can truly say we lack no good thing let's face it