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Resurrection: A Living Personal Reality

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And the sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell before thee is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make a place there, where we may dwell. And he answered, Go ye. And one said, Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servants. And he answered, I will go. So he went with them. And when they came to Jordan, they cut down wood. But as one was felling a beam, the axe-head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, my master! for it was borrowed. And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither, and the iron did swim. And he said, Take it up to thee. So he put out his hand, and took it" (2 Kings 6:1-7).

I confess that I used to wonder why this story was included in the number which we have of these acts of Elisha. What is its lesson? What has it to say? In thinking about it, several things have become clear to me, and I would like to pass on just one or two of them.

The Portion of the Firstborn

Of course, this, with all the other things that are recorded about the acts of Elisha, is included in the great beginning of his life. You recall that his master, Elijah, as he was about to be taken up into Heaven, asked Elisha what he might give him. Elisha said: "A double portion of thy spirit". This was, of course, the portion of the firstborn (Deut. 21:17). Elijah said: 'You have asked a hard thing; nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken up, it shall be.' And as they went on the other side of

the Jordan, the chariots of the Lord appeared and caught up Elijah; and Elisha cried: "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!" And the mantle fell from Elijah, and Elisha took it up. The sons of the prophets, who come into view in this chapter, and are mentioned so many times in this book, cried: "The spirit of Elijah doth rest upon Elisha", and they bowed themselves to the ground. (1 Kings 2:9-15).

Now that is where it all begins, for these various 'mighty works', or 'works of power', were the expression and outcome of that mighty anointing with the Spirit, that portion of the firstborn. So that what we have here in every one, and in this one of which we are thinking, is the real work of the anointing - that is, of the Holy Spirit operating in the power of resurrection. Every incident bears that stamp in one way or another.

It would be easy to show how this is but a foreshadowing of the ascension, or receiving up, of the Lord Jesus, whereupon the Holy Spirit descended on the Church; the 'mantle' of the firstborn, the portion of the firstborn, fell upon the Church. If we want to know what the 'portion of the firstborn' is, it is just this - the power of His resurrection.

'The Sons of the Prophets'

Let us then come to this story. The 'sons of the prophets' are again in view. Note what they represent: they represent the next generation, the generation succeeding, following on, to carry forward the prophetic testimony. They are the sons of the prophets. The heart of this whole thing, where they appear again and again in relation to these mighty acts of the Spirit through Elisha, is this: that these, called 'sons of the prophets', who were in the 'schools of the prophets', being educated and trained to carry on the work of the prophets, to fulfil their ministry in the next generation, were not just academic students; they were being brought, by these various ways, into closest touch with reality. You will at once see how true that was in the case of this man and the axe-head.

These 'sons of the prophets' expressed quite a legitimate desire when they said, "The place where we dwell... is too strait for us", and suggested building an extension. It was a perfectly legitimate thought; a right thing; nothing wrong with it at all. To desire to escape from straitness and limitation, to enlarge, to expand, for the work of the Lord: that is a good thing and a right thing. And so Elisha raised no objection, put no difficulty in the way, but encouraged. And when some of them said to him, 'Look here, we are not going on with this without you; we are not discarding the old generation; you come with us; we need you' - he said, 'I come.' There was a towardness in this whole matter, and rightly so. But even so, with a perfectly legitimate desire and ambition, a right quest, to which there is no objection at all, the thing has got to be kept very close to life; and that is what this story is about. Among the various lessons that it teaches, there are just two that I will point out here.

The Need for First-hand Experience

Firstly, that in our going on, or our desire to go on, in our quest for enlargement and increase, and escape from anything that is small, narrow, straitened and limited, all that is employed in the work of the Lord must be first-hand. It cannot be done with borrowed tools. Now there are many ways in which the testimony can be second-hand. For example, children brought up in a Christian home. There was such an occasion in our own midst not many years ago. When a very dear brother was suddenly taken home to the Lord, one of his sons passed into a very difficult phase, and he came to

see me. He said: 'I am having a very difficult time: I have discovered that I have been living on my father's testimony. I have just taken what he said, followed him, thinking that I was on the same ground as he; but I have discovered that it was his, and not mine, and now I have got to find it all for myself right from the beginning.' It was a difficult passage; he came through, of course, and is now on his own ground. It was a 'borrowed axe'.

Again, we may get it from our meeting, the teaching that we have received over years. We think we have got it in our hand, and then we imagine that we are going to use it in some way, that it is going to be a serviceable thing: and then something happens, and we find it does not work; the head comes off! It just comes off and lets us down. It was not ours; alas, it was a 'borrowed' one. It was someone else's - the 'fellowship's', or the meeting's, or the teacher's. In various other ways, too, it can be something borrowed - from the study and the library and the bookshelves, the commentaries and the translations, and all the authorities and godly men who have written them - and we think we have got it! And then it does not work - the head comes off! 'Alas, it was borrowed.'

Now these incidents, these accidents - which are no accidents at all - where the whole thing seems to let us down, where it does not seem as though it is working, are allowed by the Lord to happen. A crisis arises, such as arose with this young man and his axe, in order that the thing should pass through death on to resurrection ground, and become ours in the power of resurrection. When the whole head has come off, and we are left with just the shaft in our hand, which will not hew down any trees at all, will not accomplish anything: when we are left like that, standing, it is a painful time, a painful experience. We feel, perhaps, that we have been on the wrong road; we have been in some kind of illusion. Well, maybe. But the Lord is very faithful; and such experiences, which seem to be like disaster, and we cry, Alas, alas! - those experiences are in His very faithfulness, to bring that thing on to new ground, where it is ours by a miracle of God: it is ours because the power of His resurrection has come in. And when that has come in, there is no longer a question of a 'borrowed one' - it is yours.

Now, whilst the faithfulness of God sometimes necessitates on the one side the loss of the axe-head, leaving us standing, crying, 'Alas!'; all our power to do things has flown, has gone; we are stranded; on the other side, there is always the positive purpose of God in such experiences, that we shall know this portion of the firstborn. The portion of the firstborn secures the inheritance to the individual concerned. It is not something bought, paid for, earned, but a gift of grace. It is knowing the anointing in truth.

We will all agree, at least in theory, with the statement that we do not want borrowed experiences, or teaching; second-hand addresses, studied up things. We want people who know, and can speak out of a deep experience; who have been through the depth of Jordan. They have been into death, and have come on to resurrection ground. They know, on the one side, the bitterness of loss, of failure, of disappointment; on the other side, the wonderful strength of this miracle of resurrection life. We want 'sons of the prophets' who are in the good of the anointing, not just students of it. Everything has got to be established on the ground of a living, personal experience; not somebody else's, but our own.

That is the first lesson. It is simple, but it explains much, I think, concerning the Lord's ways with us.

Resurrection Reverses Nature

The other thing, which goes with it quite clearly, is that in this miracle of resurrection there was a complete and perfect reversal of the natural order. It is the nature of a piece of iron to sink: that is its nature; it will sink. For a lump of iron, an axe-head, to float, is contrary to nature. Now, by nature, we are all bits of iron. By nature, we are of the sinking kind! We know that. It needs little to push us under, to put us down: it is in us, and especially when there is some spiritual demand on hand. Here was the whole matter of enlargement, of expansion and increase in the work of the Lord. I wonder if you have noticed, whenever something more of the Lord is in view, how quickly we get down, we get pressed under. It just happens. When there is something of the Lord impending, you find people 'under' things: they have gone down; they have been caught in some way, and they have sunk. We really have to gird ourselves for anything that the Lord is going to do. That does not just 'happen'!

Well, we are made like that; naturally we are of the 'sinking' kind. Perhaps you may think that you are a very buoyant person! I venture to suggest that the most buoyant person, with the most optimistic natural temperament, coming right up against the forces that are set against the things of God, will find that they need more than natural buoyancy. We shall never swim, float, stay on top, without something more than our own strength of nature, our own constitution.

But the wonder of the anointing, the wonder of the Holy Spirit, the wonder of the portion of the firstborn, is this: that, although we are made of such sinkable stuff, although our natural tendency is to decline, to drop down under pressure or trial, the marvel is that you and I are afloat today! That is truly a marvellous thing. Perhaps you know that. Perhaps many times you think that you have sunk; but you are afloat today. Your heart may be sinking today, but you are not drowned yet; you are not at the bottom yet; you are not lost for good yet. We have all been there many times. We can say, with the prophet: "When I fall, I shall arise" (Mic. 7:8). There is some extra factor in the child of God, in the servant of God, called according to His purpose, that causes us to survive a thousand drownings. If the Holy Spirit is in us, there is a reversal of the way of nature. Nature declines; nature goes down; nature sinks: but the Spirit is always reversing that, and causing us to rise, to go on, again and again. There is something in us that is different from our own nature: it is the Divine nature - the power of His resurrection. The power of His resurrection is a wonderful thing!

So, the message of this simple story is, first of all, that we must be on true ground. Everything must be true and real, not borrowed and secondhand; we can do nothing really effective with tools that are not, as it were, a part of our own being, wrought into our own experience. We must be able to say, 'Now this truly is mine! I have been through death with this; this has brought me into life. This is mine. It is not something that I have heard, not something that I have got from someone else; I have this because I have gone through it with God on this matter.' It must be like that in order to carry on the prophetic testimony.

Secondly, it gives us this great assurance, this wonderful assurance, that we have the Holy Spirit: if we are the Lord's we have the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwelling in us. And that is something, not only more than nature, but contrary to nature. Though oft-times we may feel we are going to the bottom, or have indeed touched bottom, we shall come up again if the Holy Spirit is in us. The Holy Spirit is not going to die in the grave! "If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwelleth in you, He that raised up Christ Jesus from the dead shall quicken also your mortal body through His Spirit that dwelleth in you" (Rom. 8:11). Our body of death will be quickened by the power of His resurrection. 'And the iron - the iron - did swim.'