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Resurrection: A Living Personal Reality

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcribed from a message given in April 1959. The spoken form has been retained verbatim. Words which were not clear are in [square] brackets.

The second book of the Kings, second book of the Kings, chapter six: "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 us 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. When they came to the 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. 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. He said, Take it up to thee. So he put out his hand, and took it."

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

Of course this, with all these other things that are recorded about the acts of Elisha, this, with them, is included in the great beginning of his life. You recall that as his master Elijah was about to be taken up into heaven, he asked Elisha what he might give him. Elisha said, "A double portion of thy spirit". More literally: the portion of the first-born. Elijah said, "You have asked a hard thing, nevertheless if you see me when I am taken up, it shall be." And as they passed through the Jordan,

onto the other side, the chariots of the Lord appeared and caught up Elijah. Elisha cried, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!" The mantle fell from Elijah and Elisha took it up.

The sons of the prophets, who come into view at that point and are mentioned so many times in this book, find the spirit of Elijah does rest upon Elisha and they bow themselves to the ground. Now that is where it all begins, for these various, shall we call them stories - they are more than stories, works of power - were the expression and outcome of that mighty anointing with the Spirit; that portion of the first-born. So that what we have here in every one, and in this one of which we are thinking this morning, is the real work of the anointing. That is, the Holy Spirit operating in the power of resurrection. Every incident, as you notice, there's that stamp in some way or another, in some form or another: it is the mighty working of resurrection power by the anointing, by the Holy Spirit.

It would be easy, and we have done it before, we will not take the time to repeat this morning; to show how this is but a foreshadowing of the ascension or receiving up of the Lord Jesus whereupon the Holy Spirit descended upon the Church. The mantle of the firstborn, the portion of the firstborn, fell upon the Church. We want to know what the portion of the firstborn is. It is just this: the power of His resurrection. Seeing that, let us come to this story.

The sons of the prophets, again in view, and note what they represent: they represent the generation succeeding, following on, to carry forward the prophetic testimony, the next generation, 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, the heart of the whole thing 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, by these various ways, brought into the closest touch with reality. And you will at once see how true that was in the case of this man and his axe-head. For these sons of the prophets expressed quite a legitimate ambition or desire when they said the place where we dwell is too strait for us and said let us have enlargement; perfectly legitimate ambition or desire, a right thing, nothing wrong with that at all. To desire to escape limitation and straitness and to enlarge and to expand for the work of the Lord; that's quite a good thing and quite 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're not just going on with this without you, we're 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 quite rightly so. But even so, with a perfectly legitimate desire and ambition, a right quest in which there is no objection at all; the thing has got to be kept very close to life. And that's what this story is about.

Amongst the various lessons that it teaches, there are just two that I will point out this morning. But in our going on, or our desire to go on, our quest for enlargement and increase and escape from anything that is small, narrow, straitened, limited... all that is employed in the work of the Lord must be first-hand. It cannot be done with *borrowed* tools. And there are many ways in which the testimony can be second-hand. It may be children brought up in it in their home. I wonder if I might refer to such an occasion in our own midst several years ago. When our brother Patterson was taken so suddenly to the Lord, his son John, who was with us at the conference time recently, passed into a very difficult phase and he came to see me. He said "I'm 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. I've discovered that it was his, and not mine and I have got to find it all for myself right from the beginning." It was a difficult passage. He came through of course, he's on his own ground. It was a borrowed axe.

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

Now, the Lord allows these incidents - if you like: these accidents, they're no accidents at all - these things to happen where the whole thing seems to let us down, doesn't seem as though it's working. He does that. A crisis arises, such as arose with this man and his axe, in order that the thing should pass through death onto resurrection ground and become ours in the power of resurrection. When the whole head has come off and we are left just [with a handle], with a shaft in our hand which won't hue down any trees at all, won't accomplish anything, left like that standing... it's a painful hour, a painful time. We feel that perhaps we've been on the wrong road, that we've been in some kind of illusion. Well, maybe, but the Lord is very faithful, the Lord is very faithful. And such experiences may seem to be like disaster and we cry alas, alas. Those experiences are in the very faithfulness of God to bring that thing onto new ground where it's ours by a miracle of God. It's ours because the power of His resurrection has come in and when that has come in, it's no longer a borrowed one, it's yours. I'm quite sure you've seen more than is necessary for me to say.

No, dear friends, the very faithfulness of God necessitates on the one side the loss of the axe-head sometimes to leave us standing crying "Alas!". All our power to do things is flown, it's gone, we're 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. You get the firstborn portion, you know, if you'd like to go back to the book of Deuteronomy you'll see what that is and where that arose. The portion of the firstborn is something which secures the inheritance to the individual concerned. It is not something bought, paid for, earned, but a gift of grace. The portion of the firstborn. It is knowing the anointing in truth. We will all agree, every one of us here this morning will agree at least with the theory, with the statement, that we don't want borrowed experiences or teaching, second-hand addresses, studied up things; we want people who *know* and can speak out of a deep experience. They have been through the depth of Jordan, they have *been* into death and have come onto resurrection ground. They know it by the bitterness on the one side of loss, failure, 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. Well, that's the first lesson, simple it is, but it explains a lot I think, of the Lord's ways with us, that everything has got to be established upon the ground of a living personal experience and not be somebody else's, but our own.

The other thing which goes with it, of course, quite clearly is that in this that happened, this miracle of resurrection, it was a complete and perfect reversal of the natural order. It is the nature of a piece of iron to sink. That is nature. It will sink. For a piece of iron, a lump of iron, an axe-head to float, is contrary to nature. I only need hint at things, you see much more than I need say. Dear friends, by nature we are all bits of iron. Let me put that another way: by nature we are of the sinking kind. We

know that. It wants very little to push us under, to put us down; it's in us. And especially when there is some spiritual demand on hand, for here was the whole matter of enlargement, expansion and increase in the work of the Lord, and I wonder if you have noticed that whenever something more of the Lord is in view, how quickly we get down, we get pressed under. I have noticed that it happens, it just happens with something of the Lord just coming on, you'll find people under things, they've gone down, they've been caught in some way and they've sunk. We have to really gird ourselves for anything that the Lord is going to do, it just doesn't happen. Well, we're made like that, naturally we're of the sinking kind.

Perhaps you may think that you're a very buoyant person. I venture to suggest that the most buoyant person in this place this morning, with the most buoyant and optimistic natural makeup, coming right up against the forces that are set against the things that are of God, will find that they need more than natural buoyancy. We are not going to swim, to float, to stay on top, without something more than our own strength of nature, our own constitution. And the wonder of the anointing, let's say it quickly and close, 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 so sinkable, we are such sinkable stuff, naturally it is decline, it is to drop down under pressure, under trial, but the marvel is that you and I are afloat today. It is a marvelous thing that we are afloat today! Many of you know that, perhaps you think that you've sunk many times, but you're afloat today! Your heart may be sinking today you think, but you're not drowned yet, you're not at the bottom yet, you're not lost for good yet, we've all been there many times, we can say with the Psalmist "Though I fall, yet shall I rise, though I fall, yet shall I rise". There is some extra factor in the child of God and in the servant of God called according to His purpose, that causes us to survive a thousand drownings: the power of His resurrection. It's a wonderful thing and this simple little story just says to us that if the Holy Spirit is in us, there is a reversal of the way of nature; nature declines, nature goes down, nature sinks, but here the Spirit is always reversing that and causing us to rise, to rise, to go on again and again. It's like that, there is something that is different from nature in us, it's the divine nature: the power of His resurrection.

So, for the moment, the simple message is we must be on *true* ground. Everything must be true and real; not borrowed and second-hand. We can do nothing really effective with tools that are not a part of our own being, wrought into our own experience, but of which we can say "Now, this truly is mine, I've been through death with this. This has brought me into life! This is mine, this is mine, not something that I've heard, not something that I've got from someone else. I have this because I've gone through it with God on this matter." It must be like that to carry the testimony on, the prophetic testimony. And then this great assurance, this wonderful assurance: 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. And although oftentimes we may feel we're going to the bottom, we may feel we have touched bottom, we're going to come up again if that 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 be in *you*, He that raised up Christ Jesus from the dead shall quicken your mortal body by His Spirit dwelling in you, your body of death quickened; the power of His resurrection. And the iron... the iron did swim.