



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

Does the Ax Raise Itself Above the One Who Swings It?

Isaiah 10:15

The Short Answer

Isaiah 10:15 uses an intentionally absurd picture. Imagine an ax boasting that it is greater than the person swinging it, or a saw bragging against the person using it. That is how God describes Assyria. Assyria had become extraordinarily powerful, but it began treating borrowed power as independent power. The same warning reaches far beyond ancient Assyria. Scripture does not teach that human ability, effort, planning, discipline, or accomplishment are meaningless. The ax really cuts. The saw really works. People really develop skills and accomplish meaningful things. Biblical humility does not require pretending otherwise. The question is whether the instrument remembers the One from whom life, ability, opportunity, strength, and every good gift ultimately come. The problem is not being useful. The problem is forgetting whose hand holds the ax.

Isaiah 10:5-15 · Deuteronomy 8:11-18 · Daniel 4:28-37 · 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 · 1 Corinthians 4:6-7 · James 4:13-17 · Philippians 2:5-11

Opening Memory Anchor

The problem is not being a useful instrument. The problem is forgetting the One who holds the instrument.

PART ONE BEGINNER GUIDE

START WITH THE PICTURE

Isaiah 10:15 asks a question that almost answers itself. Can an ax boast against the person chopping with it? Can a saw make itself greater than the person moving it? Of course not. An ax may be sharp and accomplish exactly what it was designed to accomplish, but it does not pick itself up, choose the tree, supply the arm, or create the strength behind the swing. The tool is real. Its usefulness is real. But its usefulness is dependent. Isaiah uses that picture to expose the pride of one of the most powerful empires in the ancient world.

1. WHY IS GOD TALKING ABOUT AN AX?

Read Isaiah 10:5-15. The ax represents Assyria. During Isaiah's lifetime, Assyria dominated much of the ancient Near East. Its armies conquered kingdoms and threatened both Israel and Judah. Isaiah describes Assyria as an instrument God would use within His judgment. But Assyria did not see itself that way. Its king looked at military victories and concluded that his own power and wisdom explained his success. In Isaiah 10:12-14 the king repeatedly emphasizes his strength, wisdom, understanding, conquests, and ability to gather the wealth of nations. Then God responds with the picture of the ax.

2. WHAT EXACTLY IS WRONG WITH THE AX BOASTING?

The ax has confused two things: usefulness and ultimate source. An ax really does cut wood, but its ability to cut does not make it independent of the person wielding it. Assyria really had military strength. Its soldiers really fought battles, its rulers really planned campaigns, and its empire really conquered cities. Isaiah does not deny those facts. The problem was Assyria's conclusion: "My power proves that I am ultimately responsible for my greatness." Assyria treated dependent power as self-created power.

Memory Anchor

Pride takes a real gift and forgets where it came from.

3. DOES ISAIAH ONLY USE THE AX PICTURE?

No. Isaiah stacks several images together: the ax and the one who chops with it; the saw and the one who wields it; the rod and the one who lifts it; the staff and the person holding it. The images make essentially the same point. The instrument does not become greater than the one using it. Imagine a hammer announcing that it built the house without the carpenter, a paintbrush claiming it created the painting without the artist, or a pen congratulating itself for writing the book. The tool may be excellent. But the tool is not independent.



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4. DOES THIS MEAN ASSYRIA HAD NO REAL POWER?

No. Assyria was genuinely powerful. Its military strength was terrifying and its victories were real. Isaiah's argument is not, "Assyria is actually weak." His argument is, "Assyria's power is not ultimate." Human beings may possess real ability, authority, wealth, intelligence, influence, strength, skill, and opportunity. Biblical humility does not require pretending those things do not exist. It requires remembering that none of them makes a human being self-sufficient.

5. WHERE DID ASSYRIA'S PRIDE BEGIN?

Read Isaiah 10:12-14 again. The king speaks as though his power produced everything, his wisdom explains everything, his victories belong entirely to him, and nothing stands above him. Success became evidence of self-sufficiency. That pattern appears throughout Scripture. People receive something good, then slowly forget the Giver. The gift remains. Gratitude and dependence disappear. Eventually the person begins living as though the gift originated entirely within himself.

6. DOES THE BIBLE WARN GOD'S OWN PEOPLE ABOUT THIS?

Yes. Read Deuteronomy 8:11-18. Moses warned Israel about what could happen after they entered the Promised Land. They would experience food, good houses, growing possessions, wealth, and security. Prosperity itself could become spiritually dangerous. Moses warned that Israel might eventually say in its heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." The problem was forgetting God.

Memory Anchor

Success becomes spiritually dangerous when gratitude becomes self-congratulation.

7. DOES DEUTERONOMY 8 SAY HUMAN EFFORT DOES NOT MATTER?

No. Israel still had to work, farm, build, manage, plan, and live responsibly. But Moses reminds them that God is the One who gives them power to obtain wealth. Scripture can recognize real human effort while still identifying God as the deeper source of life, strength, ability, opportunity, resources, and provision. The biblical picture is not God works OR people work. People genuinely work, and remain dependent upon God while working.

8. IS IT WRONG TO BE PROUD OF SOMETHING YOU WORKED HARD TO ACCOMPLISH?

There is an important difference between grateful satisfaction and arrogant self-exaltation. Scripture does not require someone to look at years of faithful work and pretend, "I did nothing." A person may appropriately recognize: "I worked hard. I practiced. I studied. I made sacrifices. I developed this skill." The problem begins when those statements become: "I owe nothing to anyone. I made myself. My success proves I am better than others. I do not need God." Biblical humility tells the truth about effort without forgetting grace.



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9. WHAT IS BIBLICAL HUMILITY?

Humility is not pretending to be worthless. It is seeing yourself truthfully before God. A humble musician can know she plays well. A humble craftsman can know he is skilled. A humble leader can recognize leadership ability. A humble student can recognize intelligence. The question is what happens next. Does recognition produce gratitude or superiority? Does ability become stewardship or identity? Does success produce generosity or self-exaltation? Humility does not deny the gift. Humility remembers the Giver.

10. WHAT DOES DANIEL 4 ADD TO THIS PICTURE?

Read Daniel 4:28-37. King Nebuchadnezzar stood on the roof of his royal palace and looked over Babylon. He said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power...?" The resemblance to Isaiah 10 is striking. Babylon was magnificent, but his conclusion was distorted. He interpreted greatness as proof of self-sufficiency. God humbled him dramatically. Later Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged God's sovereignty and recognized that earthly rulers exist beneath the authority of heaven. Daniel 4 turns Isaiah's ax illustration into a human story. The king looked at the city and saw himself. God taught him to look higher.

11. WHY DOES SUCCESS SO EASILY PRODUCE PRIDE?

Because success can hide dependence. Failure often reminds people that they need help; success can create the illusion that they never did. A person may gradually forget the health that allowed the work, the mind that allowed learning, the people who opened doors, the teachers who developed skills, the family that provided support, the circumstances that created opportunity, and ultimately the God who gave life itself. Effort matters. Choices matter. Discipline matters. But none of those things makes a person self-created.

12. WHAT QUESTION DOES ISAIAH 10:15 ASK EVERY READER?

Essentially: "Have you started acting like the ax?" The question reaches career, money, intelligence, physical ability, leadership, and ministry. "Look what I built." "My financial wisdom guarantees my security." "I understand things other people cannot." "This organization succeeds because of me." Even good things can become fuel for pride when the instrument forgets the hand.

PART TWO

WANT TO GO DEEPER? — INTERMEDIATE

13. WHAT IS THE FULL CONTEXT OF ISAIAH 10:15?

Isaiah 10:15 appears within a larger prophecy concerning Assyria. God describes Assyria as an instrument used within His judgment, yet Assyria acts from its own proud ambitions. The king boasts about his conquests and attributes success to his own power and wisdom. God then announces judgment upon Assyria's arrogance. The larger sovereignty-and-responsibility questions are treated more fully in 3Nails Studies #224, #225, and #226. Study #228 focuses specifically on the pride of the instrument.



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14. DOES CALLING PEOPLE "INSTRUMENTS" REDUCE HUMAN DIGNITY?

Not when Isaiah's illustration is understood within the larger biblical picture. Human beings are not literally objects. Genesis 1:26-27 describes humanity as created in God's image. People possess moral responsibility, relational capacity, creativity, and meaningful agency. Isaiah's ax is an analogy making one particular point: Assyria was not ultimate. Isaiah is not teaching, "Human beings are lifeless objects without meaningful choices." He is teaching, "Human power must never boast as though it exists independently of God."

Reader Safeguard

The ax is an illustration of dependence, not a complete description of what human beings are.

15. DOES THIS WARNING APPLY ONLY TO PAGAN KINGS?

No. King Uzziah provides an important covenant-insider example. Read 2 Chronicles 26:3-21. Uzziah became powerful. He strengthened Judah, built defenses, expanded military capability, developed agricultural resources, and his reputation spread widely. The text repeatedly emphasizes that God helped him. Then comes the turning point: when Uzziah became strong, his heart became proud. His success changed the way he saw himself.

Uzziah entered the temple and attempted to burn incense - something God had assigned to the priests. When confronted, he became angry. The issue was not simply that Uzziah possessed authority. Success had expanded his sense of entitlement beyond the boundaries God had given him. Assyria shows the pride of a powerful pagan empire. Nebuchadnezzar shows the pride of a Gentile king. Uzziah shows that the same danger can grow among God's own people. Spiritual privilege does not make pride impossible. In some cases, success may make pride harder to recognize.

Memory Anchor

Strength is safest when it remembers its limits.

16. IF GOD GETS THE CREDIT, DOES HUMAN EFFORT MEAN NOTHING?

No. Scripture repeatedly praises diligence and condemns laziness. Human effort is meaningful. Paul gives an especially helpful example in 1 Corinthians 15:10. He speaks of God's grace toward him and then says he worked harder than the others - yet immediately adds that it was not ultimately he alone, but the grace of God with him. Paul does not choose between "I worked" and "God's grace worked." He says both.

Memory Anchor

Grace does not make effort meaningless. Grace keeps effort from becoming self-worship.



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17. WHAT DOES PAUL SAY ABOUT MINISTRY SUCCESS?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-9. The Corinthian church had begun attaching itself to human leaders. Paul responds by putting ministry leadership into perspective. Paul planted. Apollos watered. God gave the growth. Paul's work mattered. Apollos' work mattered. But neither man could produce spiritual life independently. The workers were servants. God was the source of the growth. That makes 1 Corinthians 3 one of the clearest New Testament parallels to Isaiah's instrument imagery.

18. CAN SOMEONE REALLY BE USED BY GOD AND STILL BECOME PROUD ABOUT IT?

Yes. Usefulness does not automatically produce humility. A person may genuinely possess spiritual gifts, leadership ability, biblical knowledge, teaching skill, generosity, influence, organizational ability, or ministry effectiveness and still become proud. Being useful to God is not proof that every attitude in the person's heart is pleasing to God. A growing ministry can tempt a leader to think, "This happened because of me." Large audiences can become identity. Knowledge can become superiority. Influence can become entitlement. The instrument begins admiring itself.

Pastoral Safeguard

Pride and abusive leadership are not the same thing, but they can reinforce one another. A leader who begins treating gifting, influence, or success as proof of personal superiority may become less open to correction and more likely to justify controlling or exploitative behavior. Spiritual gifting never places a leader above biblical accountability.

19. WHAT DOES 1 CORINTHIANS 4:7 SAY TO THAT?

Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive?" Then: "If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" What do you possess that is completely self-originated? Intelligence? You did not create your brain. Health? You did not create your body. Opportunity? You did not control every circumstance that produced it. Talent? You may develop talent, but you did not create yourself. Time, life, and grace were given. The Christian response to giftedness should therefore be gratitude rather than superiority.

20. DOES THIS MEAN EVERYONE RECEIVES THE SAME GIFTS OR OPPORTUNITIES?

No. Scripture recognizes differences in gifts, circumstances, responsibilities, resources, and opportunities. Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 describe differing gifts within the body of Christ. Humility does not require pretending everyone has received identical opportunities. Instead, humility asks: "What has been entrusted to me, and how should it be used faithfully?" The biblical emphasis shifts from ownership to stewardship.

21. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OWNERSHIP AND STEWARDSHIP?

Absolute ownership says, "This is mine. I answer to no one." Stewardship says, "This has been entrusted to me. I am responsible for how I use it." Scripture repeatedly presents time, money, ability, influence, possessions, knowledge, opportunity, and authority in stewardship terms. A steward may work extremely hard, but remembers that the entrusted thing is not ultimate proof of personal superiority.



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22. WHAT ABOUT WEALTH?

Deuteronomy 8 speaks directly to this. Wealth can create the illusion of independence. A person begins with "God has provided," then moves to "I built this," then "I am secure because I have this." Jesus repeatedly warns about trusting wealth. See Luke 12:13-21 and 1 Timothy 6:17-19. Money can be useful, wisely stewarded, provide for families, and bless others. The danger is allowing resources to replace dependence upon God.

23. WHAT ABOUT PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE?

Read James 4:13-17. James describes people confidently announcing where they will go, how long they will remain, what business they will conduct, and what profit they will make. The problem is not planning. The problem is presumptuous certainty. His correction - "If the Lord wills" - describes a posture: plan carefully, work diligently, but remember that tomorrow is not under human control.

24. IS SELF-CONFIDENCE WRONG?

Not necessarily. Confidence can mean: "I have prepared. I know how to do this. I have developed this skill." Those statements can be appropriate. The problem is self-confidence that becomes self-sufficiency. Healthy confidence recognizes ability. Pride treats ability as independence. A Christian can say, "God has equipped me well for this, and I intend to use that ability faithfully."

25. HOW CAN SOMEONE TELL WHEN CONFIDENCE IS BECOMING PRIDE?

Useful diagnostic questions include: Do I become angry when someone else receives credit? Do I need people to notice what I accomplish? Do I quietly believe success proves I am better than others? Do I become less prayerful when things are going well? Do I treat people with fewer resources or abilities as inferior? Do I receive correction poorly? Do I assume past success guarantees future success? Do I believe this ministry, business, family, organization, or project cannot succeed without me? These questions can expose whether the instrument is beginning to admire itself more than the One who gave it usefulness.

26. CAN FALSE HUMILITY ALSO BE A PROBLEM?

Yes. Someone may receive a compliment and immediately deny obvious ability: "No, I am terrible. I did nothing." That is not necessarily biblical humility; sometimes it is simply inaccurate. Humility does not require lying about what God has given. The goal is neither "Look at how great I am" nor "Pretend God gave me nothing." The healthier posture is: God has given something. I have a responsibility to develop and use it well. The glory ultimately belongs to Him.

27. WHY IS PRIDE SO SERIOUS IN SCRIPTURE?

Because pride distorts reality. The proud person begins putting the creature where the Creator belongs: "I am the source. I am sufficient. I determine my own greatness." See Proverbs 16:18, Daniel 4:37, James 4:6, and 1 Peter 5:5-6. At its deepest level, pride forgets dependence upon God.



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28. HOW DOES THIS POINT TO JESUS?

Isaiah 10:15 is not a hidden prophecy about Jesus. Its immediate subject is Assyria's pride. But the larger biblical contrast between self-exaltation and Christ's humility is powerful. Read Philippians 2:5-11. Assyria reaches upward; Jesus humbles Himself. Assyria boasts in power; Jesus takes the form of a servant. Human rulers frequently use power to elevate themselves; Jesus uses His position in self-giving obedience. Assyria exalts itself and is brought low. Jesus humbles Himself, and God highly exalts Him.

This is not merely a lesson in being nicer. Philippians points to the unique humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ. The eternal Son took the form of a servant, became obedient to death - even death on a cross - and was exalted by the Father. The Christian answer to pride is therefore not merely, "Think less of yourself." It is, "Look at Christ."

29. HOW DOES THE GOSPEL UNDERMINE PRIDE?

The Gospel tells every Christian: You could not save yourself. You did not earn grace. You did not create the cross. You did not raise Jesus from the dead. Salvation is received. See Ephesians 2:8-10. Yet the Gospel also gives believers meaningful work to do. Grace does not produce uselessness. Grace produces grateful obedience. Christians work, serve, build, lead, create, give, and use gifts - but as people who know they have received before they achieved.

WHAT DOES ISAIAH 10:15 TEACH ABOUT GOD?

GOD IS SOVEREIGN. Human power exists beneath His authority.

GOD IS THE GIVER. Life, ability, opportunity, and every good gift ultimately depend upon Him.

GOD OPPOSES PRIDE. He does not surrender His glory to human self-exaltation.

GOD VALUES FAITHFUL WORK. Dependence upon God does not make human effort meaningless.

GOD CALLS PEOPLE TO STEWARDSHIP. Gifts are meant to be developed and used faithfully.

GOD HUMBLER THE PROUD. Assyria, Nebuchadnezzar, and Uzziah demonstrate the danger of treating dependent power as ultimate power.

GOD EXALTS CHRIST. Jesus reveals true greatness through humble, obedient, self-giving love.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. **NAME WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN YOU.** Recognizing gifts is not pride; identify them with gratitude.
2. **WORK HARD.** Dependence upon God is not an excuse for laziness.
3. **GIVE THANKS WHEN THINGS GO WELL.** Success is an important time to remember God.
4. **WATCH THE LANGUAGE OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY.** Notice when "I worked hard" becomes "I did this entirely by myself."
5. **SHARE CREDIT GENEROUSLY.** Most accomplishments involve contributions easily forgotten.
6. **RECEIVE CORRECTION.** Pride struggles to admit weakness.
7. **HOLD MONEY AND SUCCESS AS STEWARDSHIP.** Ask what you are doing with what has been entrusted.
8. **REFUSE MINISTRY CELEBRITY THINKING.** God gives the growth.
9. **PLAN WITH HUMILITY.** Tomorrow belongs to God.
10. **LOOK TO JESUS.** True greatness is humble obedience and self-giving love.



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REVIEW AND RETENTION

1. What is the primary verse? Isaiah 10:15.
2. What does the ax represent? Assyria.
3. What mistake did Assyria make? It treated power and success as ultimately self-generated.
4. What other images appear? A saw, rod, and staff.
5. What warning does Deuteronomy 8 give? Prosperity can lead people to forget God and credit their own power.
6. Which Gentile king provides a narrative example? Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4.
7. Which covenant king provides an insider example? Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26.
8. Does humility require denying real ability? No.
9. Does God receiving glory make human effort meaningless? No.
10. According to 1 Corinthians 3, who planted and watered? Paul and Apollos.
11. Who gave the growth? God.
12. What does Paul ask in 1 Corinthians 4:7? "What do you have that you did not receive?"
13. What is healthy confidence versus pride? Confidence recognizes ability; pride turns ability into self-sufficiency or superiority.
14. What does James 4 teach about planning? Plan with humility because we do not control tomorrow.
15. Who provides the ultimate biblical contrast to self-exaltation? Jesus Christ.

THINK IT THROUGH

16. IF THE AX REALLY CUTS, WHY SHOULD IT NOT BOAST?

Because real usefulness does not mean independent existence. The ax has genuine ability as a tool, but that ability remains dependent upon the one wielding it. Human accomplishment can be real without making human beings self-created or self-sufficient.

17. WHY IS DEUTERONOMY 8 ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT FOR SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE?

Because Moses warns Israel before prosperity arrives. Success can make dependence less visible. The danger is that gratitude slowly becomes self-congratulation and people forget the God who gave them the ability to produce.

18. HOW CAN SOMEONE ACKNOWLEDGE HARD WORK WITHOUT BECOMING PROUD?

By telling the whole truth. "I worked hard" may be true. So may: "God gave me life, ability, opportunity, people who helped me, and circumstances I did not create." Biblical humility does not erase effort. It places effort inside grace.

19. WHY IS MINISTRY SUCCESS ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE TO THIS PROBLEM?

Because something genuinely spiritual may happen through a person's service, making it easy to confuse being used by God with being indispensable to God. Paul corrects this in 1 Corinthians 3: servants plant and water; God gives the growth.

20. WHAT DOES JESUS SHOW THAT ASSYRIA DID NOT?

Assyria used power for self-exaltation. Jesus willingly humbled Himself and used His position in obedient, self-giving service. Philippians 2 directs Christians away from self-exaltation and toward the mind of Christ.



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FINAL MEMORY ANCHORS

- The problem is not being a useful instrument. The problem is forgetting the One who holds the instrument.
- Pride takes a real gift and forgets where it came from.
- Success becomes spiritually dangerous when gratitude becomes self-congratulation.
- Strength is safest when it remembers its limits.
- Grace does not make effort meaningless. Grace keeps effort from becoming self-worship.
- Humility does not deny the gift. Humility remembers the Giver.

A SCRIPTURE PATH FOR CONTINUED STUDY

Deuteronomy 8:11-18 - Do not say, "My power... has gotten me this wealth"

1 Samuel 2:1-10 - God humbles and exalts

2 Chronicles 26:3-21 - Uzziah becomes strong, then proud, and crosses boundaries God had established

Psalms 75:4-7 - Exaltation ultimately belongs to God

Proverbs 16:18 - Pride before destruction

Isaiah 10:5-15 - Assyria and the boasting ax

Daniel 4:28-37 - Nebuchadnezzar's pride and humiliation

Luke 12:13-21 - The rich fool and false security

1 Corinthians 3:5-9 - Paul plants, Apollos waters, God gives growth

1 Corinthians 4:6-7 - "What do you have that you did not receive?"

1 Corinthians 15:10 - Human labor and the grace of God

Ephesians 2:8-10 - Saved by grace and created for good works

Philippians 2:5-11 - Christ's humility and exaltation

James 4:6, 13-17 - Humility and planning beneath God's will

1 Peter 5:5-6 - Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand

RELATED 3NAILS STUDIES

#224 - God's Use of Assyria - Isaiah 10: why God calls Assyria the rod of His anger, why Assyria remains accountable, and how Isaiah 10 leads into Isaiah 11.

#225 - God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: the broader theological question of divine sovereignty and meaningful human responsibility.

#226 - God Can Use Human Actions Without Approving Human Motives: pastoral and moral application of providence without excusing evil.

#227: power, leadership, and accountability.

#228 - Does the Ax Raise Itself Above the One Who Swings It?: pride, stewardship, dependence, and the danger of the instrument forgetting the Giver.

THE BIG PICTURE

Assyria was powerful. Its victories were real. Then Assyria looked at everything it had accomplished and drew the wrong conclusion: "I did this." That is when God asks about an ax. Can the ax raise itself above the one swinging it? Isaiah exposes the absurdity of created power pretending to be ultimate power.

The passage becomes personal when the picture moves from Assyria to ordinary life. A person can develop a skill and forget who gave the mind capable of learning. A business owner can build something impressive and forget the opportunities, people, health, timing, and abilities that made achievement possible. A ministry leader can watch people grow spiritually and slowly begin thinking, "This happens because of me." The ax starts admiring itself.

Scripture does not answer by telling people to become useless. The worker should work. The student should study. The leader should lead. Paul planted. Apollos watered. Those actions mattered. But God gave the growth. Biblical humility says: "My work matters, but my work happens within grace." Nebuchadnezzar, Uzziah, Deuteronomy 8, James 4, and Paul all warn against forgetting dependence.

Then Scripture points toward Jesus. Jesus possessed authority beyond every human ruler, yet Philippians 2 shows Him humbling Himself, taking the form of a servant, and becoming obedient to death. God highly exalted Him. The Christian life does not require becoming less useful. It calls believers to become faithful instruments who never forget the hand from which every good gift comes.

Final Memory Anchor

Be sharp. Work hard. Use the gift. Steward it faithfully. But never forget: The ax does not hold the hand. The hand holds the ax.

ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE - POINTING TO JESUS