

Two Bears and Some Gang Members

2 Kings 2:23-25

1. BACKGROUND:

- a. Elijah had been the great prophet to Israel.
 - 1) We remember him for Mt. Carmel.
 - 2) Discouraged, thought the entire nation had turned it back on God. (1 Kings 19:13-14).
 - 3) God still had 7,000 faithful Israelites who refused to bow the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18).
- b. Elisha was selected to succeed Elijah. Called when he was just a teenager, plowing his fields.
- c. About 7 or 8 years later, Elisha followed Elijah to the eastern banks of the Jordan and was there when Elijah was taken up to heaven.
 - 1) He returned with Elijah's mantle, parting the Jordan, and stopped for a short time at Jericho.
 - 2) This young successor to Elijah then went on up toward Bethel.

2. Now the question can logically be asked -- what kind of a place was Bethel?

- a. Bethel had been the center of apostasy in Israel throughout many generations. The degeneration of Bethel began in the reign of the wicked king Jeroboam.
- b. That king had pulled the 10 northern tribes away-- he made two golden calves to be worship, one of which he placed in Dan in the northern portion of his territory, and the other in Bethel, at the southernmost point, about twelve miles north of Jerusalem.

3. Who were the persons involved?

- a. Incorrect impression of the incident.
 - 1) A casual reading of the passage has often left an impression somewhat like this:

An old bald-headed prophet was trudging slowly up the main street of Bethel when he chanced upon some innocent little children merrily playing together. In the midst of their merriment they spy him and shout, more playfully than tauntingly, "Go up, you balk head; go up, you baldy!" Instantly the old prophet becomes enraged with their childish banter, and with eyes flashing in anger he whirls around and curses them in the name of the Lord. Suddenly, as if in direct according with his curse, two she bears rush out of the nearby forest and "devout" forty-two of the little children.

 - 1) But is this picture right?
 - 2) Robert Ingersoll, the renowned agnostic, said of this story ...

"I find in this Bible that there was an old gentleman a little short of the article of hair. And as he was going through the town a number of little children

cried out to him, “Go up, thou baldhead!” And this man of God turned and cursed them... And two bears came out of the woods and tore in pieces forty-two children! ... Now, just think of an infinite God [doing this] ... You hate a God like that. I do; I despise him.” [Ingersoll’s 44 Lectures (Chicago: J. Regan & Company, n.d.), p. 244.

- 3) Even Adam Clark remarked “But then, as they were little children they could scarcely be accountable for their conduct; and consequently, it was cruelty to destroy them.”
- b. Let’s consider the Age of these boys--
- 1) It is true that our English translations says they were “little children” but in a case like this we need to go back to the Hebrew.
 - 2) The two words translated “little children” are ketanaim and na’arim (plural of na’ar).
 - 3) Used in reference to Isaac in Gen. 22:12. (One commentary indicates that Isaac must have been around twenty.)
 - 4) The word is also used in connection with Joseph: “Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the law (na’ar) was with the sons of Bilhah” (Gen. 37:2).
 - 5) The word is used just a little earlier than the time of our text when Ahab and Benhadad, the king of Syria, were on the verge of war, a company of two hundred and thirty-two “young men” (na’arim) of the princes of the provinces” (I Kings 20:14-15) put to rout the Syrians.
 - a) So these young men were of age to go into battle.
 - 6) The word ketanarim (plural of qatan) Used frequently in the scripture to denote a younger son.
 - a) Genesis 27:42, where it is applied to Jacob at the time when he fled from his brother Esau--
 - b) “And Samuel said to Jesse, Are here all thy children (na’arim)? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest (qatan), and, behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse: Send and fetch him; for we will not sit down till he come higher. And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and, withal, of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look at (1 Sam. 16:11-12).
 - c) Here David is referred to as the “youngest” of Jesse’s “children.” Yet, down in verse 18 of the same chapter we are told that David, even at

this time, was "... a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters, and a comely person."

- 1) Certainly it can be argued that David was no mere child, but rather a strong young man well along in his twenties.
 - 2) [For further study of the occurrences of the two words together, see 1 Samuel 20:35 and 1 Kings 11:17.]
- 7) We now conclude that these "little children" were not primarily little children at all, but rather boys and young men whose age could vary anywhere from twelve to thirty.
- a) They were in that age group, apparently old enough to be married, but not yet married and established with a home of their own.
 - b) These persons were old enough to know what they were doing, and cannot be excused for their vicious behavior on the grounds that they were under-aged.

Besides the rude and insolent young men, there is only one other person involved in our story, the prophet Elisha himself.

4. How old was the prophet Elisha?
 - a. A hasty reading out of context one may get the impression that Elisha was getting along in years.
 - b. But actually "Elisha, when the incident occurred, was certainly not an old man. Very probably he was not more than twenty-five years of age; for he lived for nearly sixty years after the date of this event." []
 - c. As to the character of Elisha, he seems to have been very merciful, courteous, and completely devoted to God and the welfare of his countrymen.
 - 1) A true gentleman, merciful, courteous. -- 2 Ki. 4:9; 2Ki. 6 -- he is revealed as a man of gentle and noble character.
5. Why and How Did He Curse in the name of the Lord?
 - a. Did he lose his temper?
 - b. Why were the young men saying "baldhead"
 - 1) Perhaps Elisha was prematurely bald -- and used as a term of scorn.
 - 2) He may have cut his hair and was in mourning -- With the Jews artificial

baldness was a sign of mourning (Isa 22:12 Jer 7:29 16:6)

Jere 7:29 *“Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the LORD has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath.”*

3) Elisha may not really have been bald at all.

c. “Go up” =

1) Go on your way-- get out of town, or

2) It is most likely an allusion to Elijah’s ascension . “Why don’t you ascend also, and get out of Bethel”

They picked up the sentiment of Bethel and Israel against Elisha.

The sentiment was that Elisha, this new prophet leader, would be just as troublesome to their town and idolatry as Elijah had been.

One writer said on this passage: “It is readily admitted that teenagers reflect the views held by their parents. In this case, the parents were members of a wicked and corrupt society which was bound to influence their posterity.”

d. This doesn’t mean he cursed or swore, using the name of the Lord profanely.

1) The main reason, however, for Elisha curse was that as he, as a prophet of God was duty bound to do so.

2) The citizens of Bethel were walking contrary to the Law and were under the curse of God: *“If ye walk contrary unto me, and will not harken unto me, ... I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children and destroy your cattle; and your highways shall be desolate.”* (Lev. 26:21-22).

3) We might remember the story in I Kings 13, of the young prophet who came up to Bethel, and was told by the Lord not to eat or rest there, but an old prophet persuaded him to come to his house and eat, this young prophet was mauled and killed by a lion on the way back home.

4) We might say that Elisha was abiding in the law when he cursed the youths and was certainly in the will of God.

e. How did he curse? The Hebrew word has a twofold meaning. It can mean either to “revile” or “to pronounce judgment,” depending on the context.

1) Elisha, as a true servant of God certainly did not revile or abuse the boys, therefore he simply asks that God deal with them in a way that will show God’s judgment in the situation.

- 2) This is, after all, is the Scriptural way, for God says in Deut. 32:35 “To me belongeth vengeance and recompense.”
 - 3) Elisha did not curse in his own name, but “in the name of the Lord.”
- f. It was the Lord’s doing when two bears came out of the woods and mauled the young men, not Elisha’s.
- 1) It was the Lord’s affirmation of Elisha as his prophet, and God confirms his word spoken in Leviticus.

6. REVIEW OF THE SCENE

- a. Let us first remember that Bethel was the seat of Baal worship and headquarters of idolatry in Israel. Bethel in the time of Elisha was truly the focal point for the calf worship instituted by Jeroboam.
- b. It is quite possible that these “young lads,” (old enough to be married, but not yet married) along with some counsel and prompting from parents and the false prophets of Baal, planned to waylay Elisha and make him look ridiculous and contemptible, and discourage him and end his career at the very commencement of his work.
 - 1) We read in verse 23 that the young men “came forth” to meet Elisha. it appears as if this was a deliberately planned attack against him.
- c. Another indication that this was a premeditated assault is found in the number of persons “torn” or “mauled” by the bears.
 - 1) If two angry she-bears attacked a crowd of young people today so that forty-two of them were injured and some perhaps killed, how many would there have been in the crowd at the beginning?
 - 2) It seems logical to assume that the moment the bears appeared there would be a scrambling in all directions.
 - 3) It would be no exaggeration to say that two escaped for every one that was hurt, which would make the crowd of renegades who followed Elisha number at least one-hundred at the beginning.
 - 4) Why were there so many? Because this was a planned reception for Elisha.
- d. We read then that the young ruffians cried, “Go up, thou bald head,” which we have already pointed out to be blasphemy-- not only against Elisha but against the Lord Himself.
 - 1) They were saying in effect, “Ascend, you empty skull, just as it is pretended your master did! Get out of here-- we have no need for you! Ascend, you

empty skull!!

- e. Elisha turned and “cursed them in the name of the Lord.”
 - 1) This was not a lose of temper, but uttered as Divine judgment upon a disobedient and rebellious people.
 - 2) The Lord had warned the people in the law that if they walked contrary to Him that He would send wild beasts among them and rob them of their children (Lev. 26:21-22).
 - 3) In what way more clearly could God show the Truth of His Word than what befell the city. The very fact it is recorded indicates the lesson was not lost, if to Bethel, certainly it was not to the rest of Judah! Who could say, “Aha, God’s warning was true!”

- f. We can easily see now that this was not the revenge of an angry prophet, but rather the punishment of a righteous Judge.
 - 1) It was a judgment designed to walk the people up, lest a worse disaster befall them.
 - 2) A loving God, he warns and leads before His wrath descends.

- f. But Bethel and Israel persisted in the flagrant disobedience; they continued to walk in their own ways; they worshiped according to the evil imaginations of their own hearts; they sank deeper into idolatry and immorality, until the cup of God’s wrath was filled.
 - 1) In the closing chapter of the Second book of Chronicles there is the pathetic summary of God’s dealings with His chosen but rebellious people.
 - 2) *“The Lord God of their fathers sent to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending; because He had compassion on His people, and on His dwelling places: but they **mocked the messengers of God**, and despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy”* (2 Chron. 36:15-16, RSV).

“15 The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling-place. 16 But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.” (2 Chron. 36:15-16 NIV)

- 7. If I were to make my own amplified para-phase of this passage I would say:

And as Elisha laboriously worked his way up the steep and rugged road which led to Bethel, the seat of Baal worship and the headquarters of idolatry, a large mob of young hooligans, urged on by the townspeople, waylaid him. And they began to jeer and ridicule him saying, "Ascend, you empty skull-- just as you say your master did! Away with you-- you troublemaker! Ascend, you empty skull, if you can! Ha! Ha!" (verse 23)

And he turned around and looked at the offspring of apostasy and said, "May the Lord God reward you according to your deeds-- as Moses has written." And two vicious she bears rushed out of the nearby forest and mangled forty-two of the derisive young renegades, just as the Lord had warned would happen. (verse 24)

And he continued on his way to Mount Carmel for a time of spiritual refreshment, after which he went to his home in Samaria. (verse 25)

LESSONS:

1. Attitudes toward spiritual things are arrived at from parents.
 - a. "If this generation is 'going to the dogs' it is because of the training we gave them as 'puppies.'"
 - b. We need to bring our children to Bible Class., and worship, and see that they associate with the finest young people -- we are shaping their future.
2. Youth should not despise Sacred things.
 - a. Knew report of Elijah's ascension
 - b. Many of today's youth despise the Bible, think it old fashion, out moded.
3. Don't despise God's instructions for you on how to live pure lives.
4. Don't despise God's commands how you can find forgiveness of sins.
 - a. Hear the word of God --
 - b. Accept its message for you
 - c. Give your life to Christ.
5. Candle illustration --
 - a. Now-- a lot more time for you light to shine for Christ!!!