

When the Bible Gets Weird – Elisha and the She-Bears

2 Kings 2

One day you're reading the Bible and you read something weird, and you do a double-take. "Wait. What?"

On Sunday the preacher said something about showing more boldness in sharing your faith, so on Monday you drop a little nugget of faith in one of your conversations. All of the sudden, one of your coworkers hits you with some crazy thing that happened in the Old Testament, and puts you on the defensive. "If God is so good, how do you explain that?"

One evening you've fallen down the rabbit hole of YouTube videos. One clip leads to another. This is when you find yourself watching a video of some guy ripping the Bible to shreds. He points out some ridiculous sounding story. "How can you take seriously a book that says such things?" he asks. A seed of doubt is planted.

There are some strange things in the Bible. You can go to church all your life and never hear a sermon on these things. If you grew up in Sunday School, there were some Bible stories you heard every year. David and Goliath? Yup. But you never heard about David cutting off 200 foreskins to win a bride. What sort of craft project do you do when you cover that story in Junior church. (show scene from the Lego Bible)

Over these next five weeks we're going to explore some of the stranger things in the Bible. The weirder, the better. We don't have to be ashamed of God's word. We don't need to keep some parts hidden. It's all in there for a reason. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.*"

Even the freakiest passages in the darkest alleyways of the Old Testament are included for our benefit. So, even if they're difficult or controversial, they are still God-breathed and useful. These stories stretch us. These verses spur us to dig deeper, to search for answers. They keep us from putting God in comfortable, convenient boxes. He's not a tamable God.

So, our first Stranger Things story is found in the book of 2nd Kings. It's a story about the prophet Elisha. **Quick little bio on this guy. Elisha was the understudy and successor of the prophet Elijah.** He served several years with Elijah as his mentor, and then at the end of Elijah's ministry, asked to inherit a double portion of his anointing. Elijah didn't just retire. He didn't die. God took him to heaven. If I get to pick how I go, this is it. So, when Elijah ascended into heaven, **God granted Elisha's request, and he picked up right where Elijah left off.**

Elisha served in the time of the divided kingdom when Israel split into two nations. His ministry spanned 60 years covering the reigns of four different kings in the northern kingdom. These were not good kings. They turned their backs on God. They built idols and places to offer sacrifices to false gods.

Elisha's message as a prophet was basically this, "Shape up, or God's going to ship you out. Quit worshipping false gods or the real God is going to send you into captivity."

And everything Elisha warned about is exactly what happened. 2 Kings 17:16-18 says,

(Two Slides) ¹⁶ *And they forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Asherah, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal.*

¹⁷ *And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.*

¹⁸ *Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only.*

(Advance Slide) Rarely did anyone in Israel ever listen to Elisha, but he faithfully served God and proclaimed the truth for 6 decades.

God also performed many miracles through Elisha. It's interesting the Bible records about 10 miracles of Elijah, but about 20 for Elisha, a double portion. Our story involves one of these miracles. It happens soon after Elijah is taken up into heaven and Elisha has taken up his mantle. This is where that phrase originated. Elisha literally picked up Elijah's cloak, his mantle, that was left behind when he was taken up to heaven.

This cloak or mantle was more than just an article of clothing to keep Elijah and Elisha warm. It was a symbol of his divine authority—kind a like a police officer's badge is a symbol of the authority of the law. Biblical prophets often wore a mantle to signify the divine authority with which they spoke.

Most of Elisha's miracles were acts of compassion and mercy. He multiplied a widow's olive oil, raised a dead son back to life, and even cured a Syrian army commander of leprosy. He helped and blessed people, but there is one miracle that stands out as a notable exception. This passage is listed as one of the eleven verses of the Bible that turn Christians into Atheists. It's found in 2 Kings 2:23-25.

²³ *From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. "Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Get out of here, baldy!"* ²⁴ *He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.* ²⁵ *And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria.*

Before we dive into the text here, whenever you're dealing with a difficult passage in the Bible, you have to watch out for four things, especially when Bible critics are trying to put you on the spot – what about this? Why did God do that? How could a good God condone such a thing?

First, watch out for misleading translations. Sometimes the words and language used in Greek

or Hebrew can mean more than one thing, and that gets lost in translation. Then, when we read it in English it incorrectly shades our understanding. Critics love to pounce on this to make their attack on Scripture. It can be useful to compare translations. And be sure to read the footnotes.

Number two, don't ignore the context. Don't take two or three verses and ignore the greater story and the overarching point. We all hate it when our favorite politicians have their statements taken out of context, and used against them to make them look stupid or mean or whatever. You can do the same thing to the Bible. You take a couple verses out of context and make it seem like the Bible is saying something it really doesn't.

Christians do this too. We will rip verses out of context, to make a point or win an argument, but if you put that verse back in its appropriate setting we see that it doesn't mean what we think it means. A good rule of thumb – A verse by itself cannot mean something different than it does as a part of a passage. None of this, “what it means to me is...” That's postmodern gobbledygook. The Bible isn't modern art It's dangerous don't do it.

Number three – Don't make the Bible say more than it actually says. It can be easy to mischaracterize what the text actually says. One atheist posed the question this way, “How can you believe in a God who would send bears to devour little children for such a minor offense like teasing a bald man?”

They have already framed the question in such way that puts you in the spot of defending the seemingly indefensible. Before you can even ask that question, you have to figure out is that really the story really says. Although the older and balder I get, the more sympathetic I am with Elisha. But a closer look shows that almost every assumption in that question is false.

Finally, be careful about reading modern perspectives back into Scripture. We are talking about a different culture in a different time 3,000 years in the past. Then we want to judge their actions based on our modern sensibilities. We know there were times where God made allowances because of the spiritual and moral conditions in a certain historical context.

Jesus points out in Matthew 19 that God never approved of divorce, but merely permitted it because of the hardness of their hearts. In Acts 19, Paul tells the people of Athens, “*In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.*” Just because God allowed certain things to happen, doesn't mean he approved of it. Another example would be how the patriarchs and the kings of Israel had multiple wives. God allowed it, but he never condoned it. His design was always one man and one woman.

I mention these things, because we have bit of all of this happening with this story. There's some iffy translation. There's some ignoring the greater context. There's some mischaracterization going on, and we also read some modern perspective back into the text.

So, let's dig in. Verse 23. *"From there Elisha went up to Bethel."* This is more than a GPS coordinate. Elisha is on his way to Bethel, and there is something significant about Bethel you need to understand. **It is one of the two primary sites for idol worship in the northern kingdom.** Here's what we read in 1 Kings 12:28-30.

28 After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." 29 One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. 30 And this thing became a sin; the people came to worship the one at Bethel and went as far as Dan to worship the other.

Bethel is home to a golden calf where people come and worship. It was built as a substitute temple. It sits up on this hill like a giant middle finger to God, and Elisha is on his way there. This isn't a social call. It's a confrontation.

Verse 23 continues, *"As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town."* We'll hit pause there. So Elisha is on his way to Bethel, and it says some boys came out of the town. So, they come out of false god HQ, home of the golden calf, to intercept Elisha before he gets there. This isn't a chance encounter. These "boys" came out purposefully to challenge Elisha.

Now let's talk about these "boys" for a moment, because this is the source of most of the controversy around this passage. *"They were just a bunch of innocent little children."* We've already gotten a clue that they may not be as innocent as we're led to believe.

This is where translation becomes key. The old King James, and this is the version you often hear quoted says, *"there came forth little children out of the city."* That makes it sound like the local preschool just let the kids out for recess. Other translations render it small boys, boys, lads, and youth. So, who are these kids and how old are they?

It's two words in Hebrew – *na'ar qatan*. *Na'ar* is often translated as children or boys, but it has a broad range of meaning. In the Old Testament it is used for everyone from baby Moses to a fully adult Absalom, the son of David. Joseph is called a *na'ar* at the age of 17. However, a *na'ar* can also mean a servant, or attendant. It's used for an armor bearer, a king's official, and also young priests. According the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, *na'ar* can be translated as "boy, lad, youth, servant, attendant, and also young man."

Qatan is an adjective meaning small, little or young. It can mean small in terms of status or importance, or small in terms of size, or small in terms of age. So, yes, *Na'ar qatan* can mean young children, but it also can refer to those much older. It is used for Hadad the Edomite in 1 Kings 11, who was old enough to oppose Solomon's ascension to the throne, to have his own house and a wife. Solomon calls himself a *na'ar qatan* when he took throne at the age of 20.

So, the possible age-range here is big. Instead of picturing a gaggle of preschoolers, picture a rowdy mob of college-aged young adults, and now you have a completely different picture. It's also likely that these aren't just a random group of youth coming out of the city to tease Elisha, but these are servants or attendants of the golden calf temple in Bethel. Look at them as acolyte priests of the false god coming out to torment the prophet of God.

This makes all the more sense when we read earlier in the chapter that Elisha had been accompanied and supported by his own band of young prophets. The NIV calls them a "company of prophets." The phrase is literally the "sons of the prophets." We know there were at least 50 of them. They are like young prophets in training. But now Elisha is alone, and he is opposed by a similar number of sons of the false prophets.

Verse 23 ends telling us that these youth, these young attendants of the golden calf are jeering him. They mock Elisha. *"Get out of here, baldy! Get of here, baldy!"* Literally, what they say is "Go on up, bald man. Go up." This is worse than telling him to get out of here.

First, let's talk about Elisha's baldness. Perhaps Elisha is simply bald. That's a possibility, but Elisha is not that old here. He no more than 30 tops. Probably not naturally bald. The context suggests a much stronger possibility. **The shaving of the head was a common expression of sorrow and mourning.** The Old Testament frequently mentions the practice of shaving the head for the dead. In Job 1:20, when Job learns that his children have been killed, he shaved his head. In Amos 8, the prophet announces the following judgment against Israel, *"I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads."*

Elisha is probably bald because he's shaved his head in mourning over the departure of Elijah. This isn't just little kids teasing a bald man, these are the enemies of God taunting a prophet because he has lost his mentor and has been left alone. Imagine showing up at someone's funeral and singing "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead."

"Go on up" also relates to Elijah. They are taunting him to go up, just like Elijah was taken up to heaven. "If you're such good prophet, then why don't you ascend to heaven just like Elijah did." The implication is – God isn't with you. You're on your own. You've got no one on your side.

Their intention is to threaten and discourage Elisha from his goal. This is nothing less than an attempt at stopping Elisha's ministry before it started. But Elisha will not be turned back. He continues on his journey but deals with this gang of youth by calling down a curse. Vs. 24 says, *"He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD."*

This isn't just Elisha getting mad and calling them a bunch of bad words. **This is Elisha calling for God to judge them for what they were doing. And the curse is probably something right out of**

the Law of Moses. In Leviticus 26 God promises blessings for obedience, but curses for rebellion. If their disobedience continues, more curses will come. Here's what it says starting in verse 21.

If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve. I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted.

Elisha sees this as a matter of hostility toward God. This is spiritual warfare. That's what this curse in the name of the LORD is all about. Ultimately, Elisha is not defending his own honor, but God's.

If Elisha was just being petty because he got his feelers hurt, God wouldn't have responded, but God did. Elisha asks God to do something, and God does. Vs. 24 ends with *"Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys."*

Understand this. Elisha didn't send the bears. God did. Bears win 42 – 0. That's not a football score. These bears are female in the Hebrew. Nothing is more dangerous than an angry mama bear. We get an idea here how big this gang of youth were. There were at least 42. It was probably a much bigger group than that.

It says they were mauled. The word here has to do with being ripped or torn. It's not clear whether they were killed, but they were at least ripped up pretty good. They were left with a good reminder not to attack God's chosen prophet.

What's clear from all this is that this isn't a story about Elisha summoning two bears to attack a bunch of little kids just for making fun of him. This story is not really about treating people with dignity, though that lesson is in here. This is not about respecting your elders, though you should. They earned their grey hair, or their baldness, whichever the case may be.

The tendency for younger generations to roll their eyes at the antiquated notions of their bald forebears is not healthy. It wasn't good when O and my generation did it. It's not good when the millennials do it, and it's not good when Gen Z does it. The problem is that now that I'm old enough to realize that my grandpa was right about a lot of things, there is now a new generation who thinks I'm an idiot.

But that's not why this story is in the Bible. Remember, Elisha is still a young guy here. Likely less than ten years older than these boys making fun of him.

There is a lesson in here about respecting those that God has placed in spiritual authority over your life. This doesn't mean that parent or preacher or Sunday School teacher or the church

elders are above the law and beyond question. But they do have a high calling and they have been entrusted by God with a noble task. They are to be respected and honored and listened to as they try to fulfill that high calling. When you disrespect them, you disrespect God. But still this is not the main point of this passage.

This is a story in the ongoing war between God and his worship, and false gods and their worship. This is a battle that goes all the way back to Genesis. It's the battle between light and dark, between good and evil, between truth and lies, between faithfulness and rebellion, between true worship and false.

This is not a bunch of little kids teasing a bald, old man. This is a story of Satan and his forces trying to stop a prophet of God before he even gets started. Elisha is one of the few people who will speak up for what is true and what is right. The future of the entire nation is at stake and Satan will stop at nothing to stop Elisha from fulfilling his calling. He will do anything, and he will use anyone.

It's no different today, and the stakes are no less in your life. Satan will do anything to stop what God is trying to do in your life. He will use anyone to discourage you, to distract you, and to derail you.

The question is will we see their attack for what it is? Satan wants us to look at this story and say, "It's no big deal. Elisha is just overreacting. And he wants us to look at what's going on in your life. What someone has said. What someone has posted online. A new policy at work. What's going on in our nation as no big deal. There's no reason to see this as a huge threat. Relax. Take it easy.

But what's really going on is that Satan has pulled out his big guns and he's taking aim at your life and your spiritual health with both barrels.

The moral of this story is not that you can call out bears to attack those who oppose you. Although, I know there are times you feel like it. Remember, it wasn't Elisha who sent the bears. That was God. What Elisha did was call out to God and ask him do something. We can do that?