

## 2 KINGS 2: 23 – 25; A BALD HEAD, BOYS AND BEARS

Last week we dealt with the story of Elisha healing the “evil” waters of Jericho. The whole story is just a few verses long, but a great deal was said in those few verses. The same goes for the section of scripture we are dealing with this week. In order to get at what was being said last week, we had to dig a little deeper than we normally do. And once again, this is what has to be done this week. We have to pay attention to detail, look at the meanings of the proper nouns involved and pay close attention to the ancient context, in order to mine this passage for all its value.

Elijah and Elisha journeyed from Gilgal, to Bethel, to Jericho, and then further Eastward in order to cross the Jordan. Once they had crossed the Jordan, Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind. This was witnessed by Elisha and 50 sons of the prophets. In doing this, God confirmed that Elisha was Elijah’s successor.

Elisha then reversed course, crossing back over the Jordan, never getting his feet wet. He crossed back over in the same miraculous manner as Elijah had done. This was confirmation that he had taken Elijah’s mantle. Once across the Jordan, Elisha spent some time in Jericho, where he healed the “evil” waters that had plagued the city since it had been rebuilt. The water problem was a result of the curse pronounced on the area by Joshua, at the time of the conquest. Last week we went through what that whole ordeal meant, as Elisha, “God is salvation,” took a new vessel and salt, pouring the salt into the water source, healing the waters. There was Edenic imagery, as Jericho was known as the, “place of fragrance,” and had also been compared to the, “garden of God.” But that garden had been cursed. “God is salvation” had both pronounced the curse, (Joshua – God is salvation,) and then, as Elisha, healed the curse. And that is the only way that the curse of sin can be remedied – through faith in Jesus. The men of the city readily did what was asked of them, though they were asked to do what seemed pointless and maybe even too easy. But that is how we are saved. We do something that is relatively easy, and some may seem pointless – we believe in the work and person of Jesus Christ. I’m rehashing this story because it is directly related to the story we are dealing with today. As I have told you many times, the bible, and the stories in it, are arranged with a purpose. There is a reason these two stories are placed one behind the other. They are connected, and play off each other. We need to learn to spot these things. Now, let’s get to today’s passage.

*2Kings 2:23 He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at*

*him, saying, “Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!”<sup>24</sup> And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys.<sup>25</sup> From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria.*

Elisha has left Jericho and headed back to Bethel. Bethel means, “house of God.” He is now on a trek West and North, that will eventually take him back to Samaria, where the ongoing battle for the soul of Israel will continue. While on his journey, a rather large group of boys from Bethel, who are apparently hanging around the outskirts of town come out and begin to mock the prophet. Remember, the prophet is a spokesman for God. In a manner of speaking, for narrative purposes, he is to be seen as God – typologically that is.

This story tends to freak people out, due to the fact that a prophet, a godly man, seems to lose his temper and have a large group of young boys killed just because they make fun of his lack of hair. We have a couple of options here. We can take the story at face value and say that it, “is what it is,” and then believe Elisha has a serious character flaw and anger issues, bringing the character of God into question. Or, we can see what may be going on, what is being said that isn’t quite so obvious to us, being so far removed from the language and culture of the day. This is a weird story. Therefore, we need to remember our rule: If it is weird, it’s in there for a reason. And once again, we need to ask ourselves why this weird story is placed right behind the one concerning Jericho and its water problem.

So, let’s deal with the issues,

- Young/ small boys – Heb. naar qatan – used of young men, as well as young adults old enough to know right from wrong. These weren’t 6, 8, 10 or 12 year -old boys. They were at least in their teens. They were old enough to be outside of the city by themselves.
- What’s up with the bald jokes? Was Elisha bald? We can’t necessarily be sure. It is thought that he isn’t that old, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Most people have the idea that prophets were vert hairy men. But the truth is that while most of them are depicted as wearing hairy

garments, and while beards were very common, we can't infer that being hairy was a requirement for being a prophet. So, Elisha may have been bald, but there is another option.

- “Bald head,” or more literally, “baldy,” was a term of derision. It was akin to saying, “empty head.” Think of something along the lines of “knucklehead, stupid, or idiot” – something along those lines. So, it may be that Elisha had a full head of hair but was being called stupid.
- “Go up!??” Why are they telling Elisha to, “go up?” And where are they telling him to go?
- Remember what has recently happened. Elijah was taken “up” in a whirlwind. This was common knowledge. The sons of the prophets in Bethel were aware of that it was going to happen before Elijah and Elisha left the city. Everyone knew it had happened. Now we know what they meant. They were jeering at Elisha, telling him to, “go up,” that is, they were telling him, in a mocking way to do the same thing Elijah had done.
- Bethel was the center of calf worship in Samaria. These boys had been raised in this climate.
- So, what do we have here? We have some young men who are mocking the prophet of God. Why are they mocking him? They do so because they do not respect him, his office, or the God he serves. They worship Baal.
- More perspective. They are mocking Elisha, whose name means, “God is Salvation.” They are mocking God, Himself, typologically speaking. They are calling him an idiot and doubt His power. If Elisha is who he and the others say he is, then why can't he go up in a whirlwind as Elijah did? Does this ring any bells for you?

#### **Mt. 27: 39 – 44**

<sup>39</sup> And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads <sup>40</sup> and saying, <sup>b</sup>“You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” <sup>41</sup> So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, <sup>42</sup> <sup>c</sup>“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. <sup>43</sup> <sup>d</sup>He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he

desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”<sup>44</sup> And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

The same challenge made to Jesus, while hanging on the cross, is being made to Elisha, whose name, once again, means, “God is Salvation.” So, these young men are mocking the, “God of Salvation” in the same way Jesus was being mocked at His crucifixion. The mocking of Elisha is really being aimed at God. As the young men followed him, deriding him, they believed that neither he, nor the God he served, was capable of harming them in any way. There was no fear of God or His judgement.

What was Elisha’s response? He turned around. (turned – Heb. panah, to face.) Elisha turned and faced them. I imagine he took it for a while, but eventually he couldn’t take it anymore. Does this ring a bell for you?

### **Acts 16: 16 – 18**

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.<sup>17</sup> She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”<sup>18</sup> And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

Paul listened to the taunting for a while, but then turned, facing the girl and cast out the spirit. Elisha faced them and then uttered a curse. Forty-two young men were mauled by the two bears.

- Why 42? We will get to shortly.

APPLICATION: What does all this mean?

- Elisha, (God is Salvation – Jesus) goes to Bethel, (House of God). This is a picture of Messiah ascending to the throne, His rightful place.

- However, the young men, raised in the epicenter of Baal worship, don't recognize His place or authority and mock Him, just as some did Jesus, while He was here on earth. They didn't believe He was the Messiah. They also mocked Him while He was on the cross and told Him to save Himself if He was really the Son of God. They are the naysayers concerning His position and work. They don't believe He really is who He says He is, or that He is capable of doing what He says He will do. Do you see the parallel?
- "Go up!" The unbelieving young men are telling Elisha to "go up" like Elijah, in the whirlwind. This is an attempt to get Elisha to repeat the miracle and also an accusation that Elisha had usurped the office which he held. The taunting of Jesus by the unbelievers of His day is the same – a denial that He was who He said He was – a denial that He had a right to that office.
- Elijah = YHWH is God. Elisha = God is Salvation. The religious establishment of Jesus' day said that Jesus was usurping who YHWH was.
- For their unbelief, the boys were cursed. What does Paul have to say about this?

**1Cor. 16:21** I, Paul, write <sup>o</sup>this greeting with my own hand. <sup>22</sup> If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be <sup>p</sup>accursed. Our Lord, come!<sup>5</sup>

Specifically, of Judaizers who reject the gospel and want to reinstate the Law, he says:

**Gal. 1: 8,9**

<sup>8</sup> But even if we or <sup>q</sup>an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, <sup>r</sup>let him be accursed. <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, <sup>r</sup>let him be accursed.

The curse, in the name of the Lord rests on anyone who rejects the truth of Christ – God is Salvation. The pronouncement is made and the curse stands. In order to show this is true, a specific number is given – 42. Forty-two young men are mauled by the bears. The number 42 is used in the book of Revelation for a time of tribulation, such as had not been seen previously. Forty-two is a number referring to judgement.

- We also have the fact that bears were used in this curse. In the book of Hosea, where the prophet is speaking of Israel and her idolatry, her leaving YHWH for pagan gods, we see this:

**Hosea 13: 8 – 11**

<sup>8</sup> I will fall upon them <sup>l</sup>like a bear robbed of her cubs;  
 I will tear open their breast,  
 and there I will devour them like a lion,  
<sup>s</sup>as a wild beast would rip them open.

Hos. 13:9 He destroys<sup>2</sup> you, O Israel,  
 for you are against me, against <sup>t</sup>your helper.  
<sup>10</sup> “Where now is your king, to save you in all your cities?  
 Where are all your rulers—  
 those of whom <sup>v</sup>you said,  
 “Give me a king and princes”?  
<sup>11</sup> “I gave you a king in my anger,  
 and <sup>x</sup>I took him away in my wrath.

- Here is another hyperlink. When Hosea uttered these words, the people would have linked back to this story of Elisha. The people would be torn for their flagrant idolatry.
  - **Bears – dubbim – “flows gently.”**
  - **Though God is slow to anger and long-suffering, like the slow gait of the bear, “flows gently,” we do see the anger and aggression directed at those who have rejected Elisha – God is Salvation, (Jesus).**
  - The demeaning of Christ, who has come and gone to His rightful place in the house of God, Bethel, can only carry a curse in the name of the Lord. Once judgement comes, it is final.
  - There is a contrast in the two accounts of Elisha since Elijah was taken away.
- 1) “God is Salvation,” Jesus was at Jericho, the “place of fragrance,” the garden of God, which was under a curse that put forth only death and miscarriage, yet He became an instrument of life and healing.
  - 2) On the other hand, at Bethel, the house of God, where one would expect to find life and blessing, instead there is a curse leading to judgement and death – specifically the loss of children. (Miscarriage reversed in the first

story). Remember Jesus was rejected in Jerusalem, at the temple, the house of God, on earth.

What is the difference in the two outcomes? In the first story, the people looked to Elisha for their healing and salvation. They then complied, in faith, when he gave them the simple, yet “pointless” instructions for the jar and salt. The result of their faith was healing – the reversal of the curse.

In the second instance, the young men mocked and jeered, questioning if Elisha really was, who he said he was. They denied his office and did not fear judgement. They mocked the only one who could deliver them. Thus, the curse was given. Where there was a curse, it was reversed through faith. Where there was no curse to begin with, one was pronounced – and the result was judgement and death. Look at how Paul puts this:

**2Cor. 2:14 But <sup>j</sup>thanks be to God, who in Christ always <sup>k</sup>leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads <sup>l</sup>the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. <sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among <sup>m</sup>those who are being saved and among <sup>n</sup>those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> <sup>o</sup>to one a fragrance from death to death, <sup>o</sup>to the other a fragrance from life to life. <sup>p</sup>Who is sufficient for these things?**

Do you see the use of the word, “fragrance?” Remember, Jericho means, “place of fragrance.” We are a sweet fragrance to those who are being saved. To the unbeliever, we are the fragrance of death. And this is what we have seen these past two weeks, in these strange and to some, insignificant stories.

We have both sides of the same coin in these stories. God can pronounce blessing and life to the believer, but to those who mock, jeer and walk in unbelief, there is a pronouncement of judgement and death. One day, the world will see the same thing we have seen through these two stories of Elisha – God is Salvation.

Jesus can heal the waters, bringing life to that which is dead, and even sweeten the most bitter waters. Will we be like the people of Jericho or the young men of Bethel?