

**2nd Kings 2: 23 and 24; “The Curse of the Bears”, Message # 2 in the series –
“Elisha & the Prophets”, A Bible Study conducted by Pastor Paul Rendall
on April 18th, 2018, for those gathered at his home.**

There is a great spiritual battle which often attends the preaching of the word of God. In this text that we are studying tonight we see that this battle is taken up with the establishing of the honor which is due to God’s word as it is preached by His prophet. In our case and our times, it can be just the same as in Elisha’s day; that the honor which should be given to God, by the hearing of a preacher of the word of God, is not only not given, but the preacher himself is made fun of and mocked. This is what was happening here as Elisha came towards Bethel. Some youths came out of the city and they mocked him. And Elisha placed upon them the curse of the bears. This curse was God’s defending the honor of His prophet. And what I want to do tonight is to 1st of all – Explain the nature of their sin. Then 2nd – To explain Elisha’s look to these youths. And 3rd – To explain the curse that he pronounced upon them.

1st of all – I want to show you the nature of the sin of these youths.

Elisha was on his way from Jericho to Bethel; he was going up from the lower level of the plain where Jericho sits, next to the waters which Elisha had healed, to Bethel which was situated on a hill. He was probably going up to Bethel because there was a school of the prophets there, and he wanted to make an appearance to that gathered group to comfort them in the loss of Elijah, that it was really his triumphant ascension to heaven, and to assure them that the work of the preaching of the word of the Lord in the power and spirit of Elijah, would not diminish but continue to be blessed, even though Bethel had become a place where idols were honored and false gods were worshiped by many people there.

Turn with me over to 1st Kings 12, verses 25-33. “Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and dwelt there.” “Also he went out from there and built Penuel.” “And Jeroboam said in his heart, ‘Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah.’” “Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem.’” “Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!” “And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.” “Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan.” “He made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi.” “Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar.” “So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made.” “And at Bethel he installed the priests of the high places which he had made.” “So he made offerings on the altar which he had made at Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart.” “And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense.”

Now, the Jeroboam who is written about here, lived about 80-100 years before the Jeroboam who has been spoken about in our previous studies. The Jeroboam of our recent studies was a king in Judah who was contemporary with Ahab, and our prophets Elijah and Elisha. This first Jeroboam was king over Israel in the days of Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, when the kingdom became divided. And he is called the king who “made Israel to sin”. 1st Kings 14: 16 – “And God will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, who sinned and who made Israel sin.” So, the city of Bethel had greatly degenerated from the true worship of God by the time that Elisha approached the city, and it was a real indication of that degeneration that a whole group of youths came out to meet him from the city and to mock him. This whole group of

young people coming out to meet Elisha must have come having obtained permission from their parents to do so. Perhaps they were even sent out by their parents as a protest to his coming. The King James translation calls them “little children”; that is, the ones who came out and mocked. But this seems hardly possible. The word in the Hebrew is נַעֲרִים, negnarim. The same word is translated young men, or lads, in Genesis 22: 5. “And Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.’”

It is my conviction that these young people would not have gone out as a band, by themselves as a group, unless they had either received permission from their parents, or they had acted in concert because they knew that their parents did not approve of Elisha’s ministry which would mean his calling the people there in Bethel to repentance in connection with the already established school of the prophets there, over their great sin of idolatry in still worshipping the calf at Bethel. These lads knew of their parent’s disapproval, and they wanted them to go out and do what they could to confront Elisha with their united disapproval.

The commentator Joseph Benson says: “These youths, it appears, did not meet with Elisha by accident, but *they* went out with a design to insult him, knowing him to be a prophet of the true God, an advocate for His worship, and an enemy to the idolatry of the place; and having imbibed the prejudices of their parents against the true religion.” “They likewise went in a body, which showed that their motive was malice, and their going out not casual: from whence some think it probable that they went out, not only to deride the prophet, but likewise to prevent his entering into the city.” “They feared he would be as zealous against their idolatries as Elijah had been, and by this insult they intended to free themselves from his remonstrances.” I would apply this in this way. Parents need to be very careful what they say about those who are called to minister the word of God. If they are critical of him, his person, the way he looks, or what is worse, they are critical of his faithfulness to preach the word of God, and they speak against his ministry, they must understand that their children will take notice and they will act out these very criticisms before the minister himself.

When it says – “And mocked him” Benson further says – “With great petulancy and vehemency making game of him, as the word יתקלסו, jithkallesu, here used, signifies; deriding, (*that is making fun of him*) probably, both his person and ministry, and that from a profane contempt of the true religion, and a passionate love of that idolatry which they knew he opposed.” The point of the whole message tonight is that to dishonor the preacher of the word, is to dishonor the God who has raised him up to minister. This applies to both believers and unbelievers who need to be told that God will be looking out for the honor of his preachers, and in this case, the honor of His prophet. The honor of God is never easily established to unbelievers because people by nature are not given to listen to what the preacher says. But it ought to be taught by believing parents to their children if they would see the word of God have free course and be glorified in any church.

You see, it is not the job of the preacher to try to go about, trying to establish his own honor. But parents and others in the church can teach and promote this kind of honor being given. Leviticus 19: 32 – “You shall rise up before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the Lord.” You can see here that the fear of the Lord is something that parents need to teach their children, and if they instruct them when they are young to act in this way, honoring the elder man or the elder or pastor in a church, they will learn to do it. The sin of these lads in the text was something that came about because their parents never taught them to show such honor, and perhaps were actually guilty of promoting disrespect to those who preached to them the word of the Lord.

But giving honor to the prophet, preacher, or pastor is very clearly taught in the word of God. Look with me at 1st Timothy 5: 17 – “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of

double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. If it depended entirely upon the efforts of preachers to establish their own honor, unattended by God's help to establish it, it never would be established, or respected. But God has marvelous ways in which He can establish the honor of His prophet and gain respect for the hearing of His word if He so please. In this case a lesson was being taught for everyone to see or hear about, the lesson of the importance of respecting God's minister because He is the messenger of God, and the word of God is in his mouth. God was going to teach these lads the seriousness of His judgment upon the sins which they were committing. But He was just as importantly, teaching their parents, and indeed everyone at Bethel, and all in Judah and Jerusalem that this mocking of His prophet was a very great sin.

"Go up, you baldhead!" "Go Up, you baldhead!", was a statement which was taking aim in a sinful way at Elisha's receiving the mantle of Elijah to be the preeminent prophet in Israel, Judah, and all of the lands around them. It was mocking Elijah's ascension to heaven, as though he really did not ascend, and had indeed died and no one had found his body. It was in effect saying – If Elijah has gone up to heaven, why don't you go up to heaven, Elisha, so we will not have to hear your harangues against our gods and our worship of the Baals. It would be better for you to leave off before you even begin. Even so, in our own day, people mock our Lord's death on behalf of sinners, His resurrection and ascension to heaven in glorious victory, and His ruling over all nations and peoples. They will mock the idea of His return in great glory to judge the world and His coming to complete the salvation of all the elect of God, by their saying – "Where is the promise of His Coming?" The sin of these youths, therefore, was very serious, and God decided that it would be right for Him to make an example of them to all generations.

2nd – I want to briefly explain to you Elisha's look at these youths.

Verse 24a says – "So he turned around and looked at them." There are many places in the Scriptures where it is related to us that "a look told it all". Remember Lot's wife who turned back to look when the Lord rained fire and brimstone from heaven on sinful Sodom and Gomorrah? Genesis 19: 26 – "But his wife looked back behind him and she became a pillar of salt." Had not the angels told them – "Escape for your life!" "Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain?" Yes, they had. What about the apostle Peter when he denied our Lord three times after He was arrested? After Peter denied our Lord, it says in Luke 22: 61 – "And the Lord turned and looked at Peter." "Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.'" "So Peter went out and wept bitterly." But the men who held Jesus, it says in the next verse, "mocked Him and beat Him". The Lord's look at Peter was saying to him – Do you see how little spiritual strength you really had Peter, to stand by Me and confess Me before men?

I want you to see that the Lord's look at Peter was much different than Elisha's look at these young lads. Our Lord's look was a look of great concern, pity, and compassion for Peter. It was not a look of wrath or resentment, but it was a look of love and mercy. As John Gill says in his commentary, "It was not only a signal to Peter to put him in remembrance of what he had said, but it was a melting look to him, and a means of convincing and humbling him, and of bringing him to repentance." (end of quote) But Elisha's look at these young lads who were mocking was different. It was his faithful representation of how the Lord thought of the sinful actions, which these young men were so unashamed of. It was a look which should have caused them to leave off their mocking, but they just kept right on. It was a look of reproof, but it was also a look which said to them – Do you really treat the knowledge of God so lightly as to despise me, the one who could tell you about Him? Do you despise your own salvation from sin so lightly? Do you really despise God so much that you also then despise me, His servant, the one who could preach to you the gospel of faith in God and His great plan to save sinners by the work of the future Messiah? But no look, not matter how stern, could stop their mocking.

And so, 3rd – I would like to explain to you the curse that he pronounced upon them.

“So he turned around and looked at them, and pronounced a curse on them in the name of the Lord.” “And two female bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths.” “Then He went from there to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria.” Now, we see here the danger of being impious and profane. Webster’s 1828 Dictionary says that to be impious is not to “show reverence towards God, the Supreme Being”. It is to be “lacking in veneration and regard for God and His authority”. “The scoffer at God and His authority is impious.” To be profane is to “treat sacred things with abuse and irreverence”. We could also say that it is to treat God’s servants who preach His word with contempt and mocking. It is something that God positively hates. Turn with me over to 2nd Chronicles 36: 15 and 16. “And the Lord God of their fathers sent warning to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people, and on His dwelling place.” “But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people till there was no remedy.”

The Lord, in this case, saw that there was no remedy for the sins of these young men. Even though they were so young, still they understood what mocking meant, and they loved to do it. The Lord was not under any obligation to save them, but He was under obligation to punish them. He could punish them at that point, and thus help others to understand the great wickedness of mocking and how displeasing it is to God. These young lads had never been crossed by their parents, who did not see it as a wrong, deserving punishment. And so now, they thought there would be no consequences for this heinous sin. Ah, but there was something that God would have Elisha do. And that was to pronounce a curse on them in the name of the Lord. In other words, this was not just something that Elisha did because he was personally offended by them. He pronounced this curse because God would have him to do so; because God infallibly declared to him by His Spirit, that this was what His will was for these who were so disobedient.

This act of judgment upon them proceeded from Elisha’s words, but it was all God’s doing. Two female bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths, causing their deaths, I would assume. These bears tore them in pieces. That is what the original Hebrew indicates. Only God could have providentially ordered this at this particular time. But it was not a difficult thing for Him. Let us see that young people have no exemption from the judgment of God. When God shows kindness and patience it is meant to lead a person to repentance. But even repentance is something that must be granted by God. (Acts 11: 18) “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”

Another verse that goes hand in hand with this, is found in Psalm 50, verses 16-23. “But to the wicked God says: ‘What right have you to declare My statutes, or take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you?’ “When you saw a thief, you consented with him, and have been a partaker with adulterers.” “You give your mouth to evil, and your tongue frames deceit.” “You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son.” “These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes.” “Now consider this, you who forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver: Whoever offers praise glorifies Me; And to him who orders his conduct aright I will show the salvation of God.” You see with those who take a careless and profane view of God and act it out, God will come to them like a bear and tear them in pieces, and there will be none to deliver. But, on the other hand, if a person will repent of careless and profane conduct, and orders their conduct aright, the Lord will show them His salvation.

Sometimes people think that this is stuff of the Old Covenant, and that since we are no longer under the law and that Old Dispensation that there is no such curse used by apostles in the New Testament. But turn with me over to 1st Corinthians 16: 22. The apostle Paul says here in the closing of this mighty letter to the Corinthians – “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed.” “O Lord, come!” The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” “My love be with you all in Christ Jesus.” “Amen.” If find it very interesting that the apostle would talk in that way. I think that what Paul is trying to say is that the person who hears the gospel and despises it by thinking that he does not need to believe in it; Let him be accursed if he wants to take issue with it. Let him be accursed if he goes around stating that that no one needs to believe in because they think that they are saved by their own works.

It does relate to Galatians 1, verse 8 – “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” “As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” “For do I now persuade men, of God?” “Or do I seek to please men?” “For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.” But I think that to set a context for correctly understanding this apostolic curse better, we should look at 1st Corinthians 13, the chapter on Christian love. Verse 1 says: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.” “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” A person who has crept in unawares and under the pretense of a profession of faith comes into the church with an insincere faith in Christ could actually seek to undermine the faith of true believers with their not having a true love for the Lord Jesus.

Also, 1st Corinthians 16: 8 – “But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost.” “For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” This shows that there was much opposition to Paul’s preaching the gospel and many of these were people who did not love the Lord Jesus, and who really despised him as an apostle and those who were with him. And verse 10 – “If Timothy comes, see that he may be with you without fear; for he does the work of the Lord, as I also do.” “Therefore let no one despise him.” “But send him on his journey in peace, that he may come to me; for I am waiting for him with the brethren.”

I think that evidently there must have been a lot of brethren there in the church of Corinth that Paul was not sure of; that he felt that he needed to instruct the brethren not to let Timothy labor there in fear. The warning to the church there was to those who might think that they had the authority to look down on Timothy and might not be loving the Lord Jesus with a sincere love. If the letter was read publicly at Corinth then the persons who listening would be able to understand that Paul had the apostolic authority to be able to place a curse like that upon people who did not really love the Lord; in other words, they were not really sincere believers who loved the Lord, but were grasping for power or position in the church. We can see that with all of their miraculous gifts there at Corinth, that it might draw people into the church who really did not have the right motives for being there. This threatened curse of the apostle Paul is very much the same kind of curse which Elisha placed upon the young men who came out to meet him and to mock him. Paul was defending the church from false teachers and false believers, and Elisha was defending the honor of God in the preaching of the word by all true teachers from mockers. Both together have been the safeguard of the Church in both Old and New Testament times.