

Episode-215

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. Joining me today, Jeff, the Managing Editor of BibleRef.com, and Kevin, the Managing Editor of GotQuestions.org. We're going to be continuing our series in difficult passages in the Bible. So far we've covered, why did Abraham sacrifice Isaac? Why did God order the Israelites to basically exterminate the Canaanites? And we're going to be doing a whole bunch more of these because there's a lot of difficult passages and at Got Questions over the years. We've been asked questions about these passages again and again and again. So this is going to be an interesting series.

Shea Houdmann

Today, we're actually going to be talking about the account of Elisha and the bears and the kids. Let me go ahead and read the passage so you know exactly what we're talking about here. It's in 2 Kings 2, verses 23 to 24. The text reads, from there, Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some youths came out of the town and jeered at him. Go on up, you baldhead, they said. Go on up, you baldhead. 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 42 of the youths.

Shea Houdmann

So I've actually heard of people who have said, based on this passage, they basically denied their faith. That the idea that God would call down or allow a curse on these youths and would send bears to maul a group of children caused someone to lose their faith. Well, when you look at a passage like this, and there's truly some people who interpret this passage as Elisha got his feelings hurt because they were making fun of the fact that he was bald, therefore he called a curse down on them and God sent two bears to maul a group of small children. And if that sounds ridiculous to you, I don't know which biblical interpretive principle this is, but if an interpretation sounds utterly ridiculous, maybe you should re-evaluate that interpretation. So let me start by saying that is not what is going on in this passage, but to dive into specifics, Jeff, why is that not what's happening in this passage?

Jeff Laird

Well, you know, there's a lot of times where people say you have to take things in context, and that's easy to say. And there are times where people say that, and there is no context that really justifies or excuses the things that are going on. This is one of those where what's happening is not necessarily pleasant, but we also have to remember, and as we've said before, we're not

in a position where we're trying to be God's defense attorney. The Bible says what it says and what happened is what happened, but we do need to recognize what's actually said. Translation makes some of this difficult. Not knowing what's going on in the passage is difficult.

Jeff Laird

When you look at the actual language that's used and what's happening in this passage, this happens very soon after Elijah, and I'm sure we'll verbally typo that a couple of times, but Elijah has just been taken up to heaven and Elisha is taking over as a prophet. And Elisha is emotional about the idea that Elijah is now gone. And there's a possibility that some of what's happening here is that these boys are mocking Elisha over what's happening. The idea of having your head covered in Hebrew culture refers to having an authority figure or something like that over you. So they may not necessarily have been making fun of him being bald.

Jeff Laird

He probably wasn't actually bald. The phrase that they use for baldy or bald head was sort of a generic insult that was used back then. So we're not sure if they were just picking on him or making fun of him. They may not even have known what happened with Elijah and they were just being snide.

Jeff Laird

But probably what these were, these were probably teenage boys who were part of the cult of Baal that was operating at that time in and around Bethel. So these were probably a group of trainees who came out, saw Elisha and were clumped together in a group, mocking him, making fun of him, possibly even threatening him or intimidating him. The actual Hebrew words that are used in there, there's two words for the phrase that's interpreted as youths or some translations say little boys. And that's where people get confused.

Jeff Laird

But the words that are used do not literally mean that these were toddlers. One of the words, the one that means little, is often used to mean something that's not important or it's insignificant or it's easy to see. Solomon used some of the same terminology that's applied to these boys when he was praying to God for wisdom. And so Solomon referred to himself using some of the same phrases when he was 20 something, had already arranged a political marriage and he was asking God for wisdom to rule the people. There's another king, Rehoboam, he decides he wants to listen to people who are more in his generation. And it refers to his counselors with the same terms for young. So if we were going to phrase this in a modern sense, we would probably say something more like immature, you know, acting in an

immature way, jerks or something like that. And that's more than what we have. There's other points we can make on that. But I want to leave room to look some more at what scripture is saying here. But when you read what's going on, you do not have a group of little children who are singing some sing song schoolyard chant. And so Elijah snaps his fingers and casts his summon bears spell. And the two bears show up and eat all the kids up.

Jeff Laird

More likely what's happening is as he's traveling, he's being mocked, maybe even threatened by a very large group of teenage boys who are from an opposing, very hostile faith. He turns around and says something in the terms of the curse. And then at some point after that, not necessarily immediately, two she bears come out and they attack the group. And 42 of them are actually hurt, which means there were probably a lot more than that.

Jeff Laird

I mean, bears are quick, but you always tell people when you're camping, you don't have to run faster than the bear. You just have to be the second slowest in order to get away. So if there was 42 hurt, there was probably a lot more teenage boys than that. So when you put all these things together, yes, it's still disturbing. It'll still scare you to think that something like that could happen. But it is not just this petty, almost random act that somebody does just because they have their feelings hurt.

Kevin Stone

Those are all good points, Jeff. And I think especially important is the fact that this was a large group of young men that were, it seems like an organized protest almost. This was an uprising against Elisha as he's coming into Bethel. The scripture says there that he's on his way to Bethel and while he was on the road, they came out of the city, this mob of young men. And like you said, Jeff, this is very likely or is very possible that the young men were part of an organized false religion, the worship of Baal. Bethel was known for to be a hotbed of idolatry and Hosea and some of the other prophets spoke against Bethel.

Kevin Stone

And so Elisha is going there and it looks like this contingent of Baal worshipers are coming out to oppose him, to keep him out of the city, saying, you know, get out of here, you're not welcome here. And they use this insulting language. Elisha had a school for prophets that he ran. It's very likely that there were some false prophets that were running schools as well. And this very well may have been a class project for one of these schools of prophets, these young men that are coming out to oppose Elisha.

Jeff Laird

So protest as part of a school demonstration is not a new thing is what you're saying.

Kevin Stone

That's right. The more things change, the more they stay the same. And here we've got it again. But when they, when they say go up, oh, bald head, yes, he may have been losing his hair naturally or whatever, but not absolutely that that's not a given in this particular context, Jeff, as you were saying, he may not have been bald at all. This may have just been a term of derision.

Kevin Stone

I ran into one commentator who said that this was, you know, baldness was considered to be a curse in some ancient cultures and that baldness would show it was a symptom of leprosy. And it was also in some places considered to be a sign of a lack of virility. So according to this commentator, what these young men were saying to Elisha was tantamount to saying, get out of here, you effeminate leper. This is very insulting language. And as you mentioned, Jeff, this may have included threats against his person. Don't know how long they were following him along the road as they were taunting him and, and mocking him.

Kevin Stone

You know, they may not have even believed that Elijah was taken up in the whirlwind and the chariot of fire. They may have, they heard the story and they may not have even believed that their references to go up to Elijah, maybe were just a skeptical mockery of that miracle. They may not have even believed it themselves. This is God's man on God's mission with God's message. And the, I think the seriousness of the crime is indicated by the, the seriousness of, of the consequence that God meets out.

Shea Houdmann

Thank you, Kevin and Jeff. As I studied and prepared for this, reading different commentaries and reading other articles, there's so many things we're not entirely sure about what's going on in this passage. But as I said at the very beginning, to take it how some people take it, that God sent bears to maul children for making fun of a man, because his bald is so ludicrous that you have to have an actual agenda to understand the passage that way. I mean, it makes way more sense, especially the passage says that they came and mauled 42 of the young men, indicating there were far more than that. This is not a group of children at a playground making fun of a bald man who happens to be walking by. This is some sort of organized demonstration. I mean, I like the idea of this possibly being a group of prophets of Baal or Baal prophet trainees who are engaged in this because of the connection with Bethel.

Shea Houdmann

Even how they were insulting Elisha, not just a making fun of him because he's bald, but accusing him of having leprosy, accusing him, it could have been a cultural insult that we're not particularly aware of, that calling someone a bald head and that could have meant so much more. So rather than how some people interpret this passage of saying, God sent bears to maul a group of children for making fun of a bald man, instead, no, God sent bears to maul a group of false prophets who had taken part in a formal demonstration against his chosen prophet, Elisha. We're insulting him, we're opposing him, we're possibly even threatening him. That's a whole different context than how this passage is often interpreted.

Shea Houdmann

I think that's important for us to remember. And again, let's call it the interpretative principle of craziness, that if an interpretation sounds ridiculous, that may be a good reason to second-guess that interpretation. I think that's key here. There's more going on in this passage than what's—it's two verses, there's so many details that we're not given. But to assume that God would send bears to maul toddlers for making fun of a bald man, it contradicts so many things about God's character, about his love, his mercy. God is not in the business of mauling children for not knowing that it's impolite to make fun of someone for being bald. So to be careful in how we understand this passage and other passages. And again, if someone is viewing a passage, interpreting it in a way that just seems crazy, absurd, then that couldn't possibly be what is going on. That is a very good reason to look for an alternate interpretation.

Jeff Laird

And that's something that we should be doing when we're looking at other faiths also, is using that good faith attempt. We can make mistakes with this in a lot of things, whether it's politics, religion. If you're looking at something that many, many people believe, many people think, many people actually invest faith in, and you're telling yourself that just looks absolutely stupid, it's crazy, it's insane. No person with two brain cells to rub together would ever actually believe that. Well, then probably whatever it is you think they believe is not actually what they believe because yeah, we as human beings are inclined to believe some strange things, but if it was that ridiculous, then nobody would actually have that view. So we do want to apply this outside.

Jeff Laird

I think one of the things that's helpful in this is once we've got this context of it being teenagers, more insulting to remember that you do have Elijah who'd had plenty of conflicts with the religious leaders and with government. He's

now gone and there is continuing religious tension between idolaters and the people who worship God. That's part of what's happening when Elisha is showing up. So God's response to this has a lot to do with that, that this is part of establishing that Elisha is in fact God's prophet and that what he is teaching and preaching is the message that's supposed to be happening. There's other times where God does things to annihilate prophets of Baal to make that exact same point to tell the people that this is where they're supposed to put their faith and put their trust. So when these youths come out and mock Elijah or possibly threaten him, the statement about go up, go up.

Jeff Laird

I've heard some people refer to the idea that that might be a reference to Elijah who was taken up in a whirlwind into heaven, which I don't think is likely. I don't know if they necessarily knew that many details about it. He was walking up into the city of Bethel. So the go up may have more to do with just saying, yeah, go ahead. Come on in, you know, come on in and see what happens. Something to that effect. But this falls more into that category of God taking a moment to make a dramatic statement. He did the same thing with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts where you had two people who did something that was not right. They lied. And you go, wow, they just dropped dead because they lied. Yeah, it's pretty serious. It's pretty severe. But God was making a point. So I don't think this has as much to do with somebody being vindictive as just understanding that this is part of God establishing who he is in that era.

Kevin Stone

And I see the actions of this mob of young men as Satan's opposition to the work of God in the world. And Satan's tactics often involve deriding the messenger, trying to discredit the messenger and discourage the messenger. And that's what we see here with this group of youths, this large group in an organized protest, it looks like, against Elisha. They are trying to discourage him and discredit him. And so, I mean, these types of attacks can focus on physical characteristics or personality issues, but it's always trying to get the message to be tarnished somehow through some secondary attack like this.

Kevin Stone

These young men are doing the exact opposite of what God wants for the people of God. 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, Paul says that we should acknowledge those who work hard among us and that we should be holding them in the highest regard in love because of their work. So, think about that. Those who are ministering the word of God in our lives are worthy of the

highest regard in love simply because of their work. Regardless of personality, regardless of other types of issues, physical appearance, we honor them in love. And this group of young men in Elisha's day is doing the exact opposite of that as they taunt and attack him. Definitely a tactic of Satan that they are playing out here.

Shea Houdmann

So, Kevin, are you saying I should stop making fun of my pastor for being bald?

Kevin Stone

Yes, I would watch for bears. No, honor him.

Shea Houdmann

I live in Colorado and there are bears here. So, yeah, I think I probably need to be careful. I remember the time I heard about the person who, based on this passage, basically denied his faith in Christ. If God is a God who could do something like this, maul little children for making fun of a bald man, then I'm not going to follow that God. It's like, well, honestly, let's go back to the ludicrous interpretation principle. For God to do something like that would contradict his character. And so we know that's not what is happening in this passage. Jeff, Kevin, I have been saying repeatedly that's not what is happening. God did not send bears to maul little children for making fun of a man who is bald. No, God sent bears to attack an organized protest that had arisen against a true prophet of God. They were insulting him, possibly opposing him, possibly threatening him. This is a large group of people. We have one man seemingly walking alone, being attacked, at least verbally, by a large group of people, saying insulting things about him, opposing the work of God. That's what's happening in this passage. Children are not the focus of it. As Jeff said, it could be teenagers. It could be, as in the case of Solomon, Rehoboam, people in their 20s, or it could actually be not a statement of age at all, just saying basically a bunch of nobodies came out to try to oppose God's prophet.

Shea Houdmann

So it is so important in passages like this, when you read it, it's like, wow, that's difficult to understand or difficult to reconcile with what we know about God and his character. Well, then maybe the first glance interpretation is not the correct one. I think that's very important in this passage, that what's going on here, God is sending judgment upon a group of men who were opposing the work of God, who were attacking his prophet, who were saying insulting things, not just making fun of him for being bald, but insulting him in some derogatory manner. That's what's happening in this passage. So still, the idea that God would send bears to attack people, I don't think that's a common

thing. I can't even, off the top of my head, I can't think of another example in Scripture where God does something exactly like this. So what was going on in this passage was something really bad, something that justified a severe penalty from God.

Jeff Laird

I also, I look at it sometimes, and I can't help but look for the very practical sorts of aspects to it. I want to come back to this idea that it says that 42 of the youths were torn, which is the word that's used. And that, in theory, could mean that they died. But usually when it's used that way, it doesn't mean that 42 were eaten. It meant 42 were injured, mauled, hurt in this sort of attack. And you think to yourself, Scripture does refer to the idea that bears, especially she bears, are very, very intense. They're ferocious. Even today, we use mama bear as a reference to somebody who's being ferocious. But you try to think, how do two bears manage to injure 42 young men, even if they were toddlers?

Jeff Laird

So my mind goes to things of thinking, maybe they're crowding around Elisha. They're blocking off the road on either side to Bethel, and there's a pair of she bears, and all of their cubs somehow wound up on the other side of the walkway or something of that nature. They're all so packed in there together that when the bears attack, they scatter. We don't necessarily have to look for things like that. But it's also, again, we're not saying that when Elisha said this, that he cast his spell and rolled his dice for his D&D check, and poof, there appeared two dire bears, and they ate the kids up. So exactly what happened and how it happened.

Jeff Laird

The other thing we don't know is exactly when it happened. The whole thing is just a couple of verses through. It says that Elisha delivered the curse, and then it says the two she bears came by and tore 42 of them. But we don't necessarily know that that happened in that instant or right then and there. Elisha may have gone about his business, and it was minutes, hours, a day later when something like this happened. We're really not sure.

Jeff Laird

So exactly what we're saying, this idea that if something seems ridiculous, it's more sensible to look for a reasonable kind of a thought process and say, look, the important things that I'm being told here is that Elijah is gone. Elisha is going to Bethel. He's met by this big group. They say nasty things, and then this happens. The lessons that are coming out of that are not necessarily all going to be given deep, detailed instructions or descriptions. So we want to be careful not to draw more out of this than it actually says. But we also can say,

look, there's a lot here I'm not being told that may make this make a little bit more sense.

Kevin Stone

There are several things that Elisha did not do that I think are important. And then one thing that he did do, which is very important, but what Elisha did not do, he did not run away from this confrontation, from this problem. He did not argue with the mob. He did not confront them. He did not try to reason with them or engage them really in any way. He did not compromise or change his message. I think this is significant. It did not deter him from doing God's work, the work that God had sent him to Bethel to do. He didn't complain.

He didn't quit the ministry. And he did not act out of selfishness. He was not trying to avenge himself over a personal slight. He was not acting out of pride.

Kevin Stone

But what Elisha did do is very important. And what the scripture says is that he turned around, looked at them, and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. And so in doing that, Elisha let the Lord handle it from there. Elisha said, and I believe it was just like a general cursing, something like, may the Lord reward you according to how you deserve. Something just generic. God then brought the bears. That was God's choice, God's method of dealing with this situation. But Elisha just turned it over to the Lord.

Kevin Stone

I think there are three things that I pull out of this passage that we can have as takeaways. One is it's a serious thing to mock the word of God, and it's a serious thing to hinder the work of God in the world. This was a staunch opposition against Elisha and God's work. God took that seriously. Also, as servants of Jesus, and taking a look at the other side of the issue here, as servants of Christ, we should expect opposition. It's going to be there.

There are people in the world who hate the light, John 3 says. 2 Timothy 3, verse 12 says, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. So, there's going to be opposition. We should expect that. We should be prepared for that, have our armor on, spiritual armor that God gives. And then third, we need to stand firm in what is right and leave the results to God. And I think that's what Elisha did. He didn't change his course. He didn't change his message. He stood firm. Let God handle the problem. The results were left completely up to God.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin, thank you for the application points. Often, you study a passage like this, and spend so much time explaining, okay, it doesn't mean this, doesn't mean this, doesn't mean this. But no, this passage does have an application.

And even as I was looking through it, the whole vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I like that Elisha said, he called out a curse in the name of the Lord. He didn't curse them himself. He didn't curse them. Basically saying, God, you know what these people are doing is evil. I'm trusting you to take care of it. And God did. So I think that's a powerful reminder to us. When we face opposition, we need to allow God to be the one to take vengeance. Vengeance is His. He will take care of it, and He will do so justly and rightly. And that's an area where we so often fail when we try to take justice into our own hands.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Questions podcast on what in the world was going on in 2 Kings, where the interpretation is God sent bears to basically break up a large demonstration of young men who had arisen to oppose the ministry of the prophet Elisha. That's what's going on. It's not bears mauling children for making fun of a bald man. And I think that's very important for us to understand.

Shea Houdmann

So I hope our conversation today has helped you understand this passage better. And that's our whole goal in this Difficult Passages, Difficult Topics series. And take some of the questions we get over and over and over again, that there's a lot of misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and try to point to, here's what this passage is really saying. So thank you for tuning in to the Got Questions podcast. Got questions? The Bible has answers. And we'll help you find them.