

“Not Just Another Bear Story”

I’ve shared my bear story before. It happened on a summer night at around 2AM. I heard rustling sounds on the back porch. No one else woke up but me. My curiosity got the best of me, so I got up to see what the noise was. I opened the back door only to discover a huge furry shadow on the other side of the screen door. I turned on the porch light to see a 250-300 pound black bear staring at me from the other side. Not thinking I opened the screen door slightly and petted the top of that bear’s head. It just looked at me confused and probably just wanted to keep looking through the empty coolers left out to dry from the day before. In hind-sight that was not too smart. It quietly wandered off after that and went back to bed.

Now before you wonder if this happened at college or at home you will need to have the rest of the story. It happened while working in Yosemite National Park in California between my junior and senior year of college. I wanted to see a bear all summer and finally did. My roommates didn’t believe me because they somehow slept right through it. I didn’t care. It was an experience I will never forget. I share my bear story is to prepare you for another bear story in 2 Kings 2:23-25 which definitely needs context to understand the whole picture. The point for today is to make sure you have the whole picture.

Let’s read the passage and you will see what I mean.

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.

On the surface it appears as though Elisha is passing by an elementary playground and getting teased by little boys on the playground and then sends a bear to attack them for being so disrespectful. Tell that one to the kids in Sunday school. “Don’t misbehave or God is going to send some bears after you.” But as we look closer we will see that there is much more to this bear story.

First, let’s get back to the Hebrew. The word used for ‘boys’ is na‘ar. The NIV translates it “boys,” the KJV uses “little children,” and the ESV “small boys.” But na‘ar is much more broad in its possible meaning. It can designate more than just children or boys. It can also be a servant (Gen. 22:3), a king’s official (2 Kings 19:6), or even a priest (1 Sam. 2:17).

The other Hebrew word is an adjective, qatan, which means small, little, or young. When Solomon takes the throne at about the age of twenty, he describes himself as a na‘ar qaton (1 Kings 3:7). It is the belief then that these na‘ar qatan are more likely priests in training, or servants from Bethel where Elisha was passing through.

So, what? Well, add the next piece of information, Bethel. Bethel was a central place of worship in the Northern Kingdom founded by Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:25-33) when the kingdom divided. This is where Jeroboam set up the false religion of golden calves in order to keep the Israelites in the North from going back to Jerusalem to worship. In short, it was designed to keep King Jeroboam in power over the people by distinguishing his kingdom from Judah. The fake religion had its own priests and holidays. Eventually, it just became part of Baal worship which ultimately ruined the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Bethel, ironically translated, “House of God” became a capital of a false religion.

When Elisha passed by these na‘ar qatan were likely young men tied to the false priesthood from Bethel. And there are a lot of them. We are told 42 were mauled by two bears. There may have been many more. Like bullies often do they traveled in a large group, no doubt in order to intimidate and perhaps bring harm on Elisha as their victim. To reject God’s prophet is to reject God. To reject God’s Word is to reject God. These men are enemies of God as much they are enemies as Elijah. These are not innocent little children but more like a gang threatening harm to Elisha. And like the demons of Jesus’s day who always ran to Jesus in order to yell at Jesus these men seem to deliberately go out of their way to harass this prophet of God and mock Him. “Go up you

baldy.” Basically, “Get Lost!” “Go away like Elijah!” Instead of welcoming the prophet of God as Israelites should they were basically trying to curse the guy. In truth these young priests in training had already cursed themselves in their false religion and rejection of the Lord. Elisha in effect only pronounces a judgement day of sorts in his curse. God sends the bears and they maul 42 of these na‘ar qatan.

Interesting point of fact here is Leviticus 26:22-23 for Israelites who reject the Lord. “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. ““If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me...”

So, we see quickly that there is much more to this event. It is not God being cruel but God pronouncing judgement upon young men, Israelites who have condemned themselves in their rejection of God. And it’s nothing new. People curse themselves with bad financial disasters, bad marriages, venereal diseases, broken bodies, and much more because of some bad lifestyle choices. The worst is the curse of being separated from God in a lifestyle that mocks God, belittles Christians, and rejects His Word.

Today, many secularists want to talk about Jesus as flippantly as the young men in Bethel. The impression of too many in our day and age is Jesus as a Hippy preaching a summer of love. Jesus is painted as a mere friend who will accept any lifestyle, doesn’t really care about sin, and pushes the latest social justice cause to show some love. But Jesus is God, Creator of all things, God in the flesh who died for our sins, rose from the dead, and will come back to judge the living and the dead, each according to what they had done; Not because what we do saves us but because what we do reveals what’s in our heart.

The whole story is relatively simple to understand but is often not believed any more than my room mates in Yosemite believed I petted a bear. Believe it or not, it happened. Likewise, to live in sin is to live in a separation from Jesus. Jesus has come in the flesh to save us from that separation. People cannot save themselves from death, but they can condemn themselves to an eternity absent of Jesus. We need Jesus. We need those like Elisha who represent the Lord. Jesus simply says in John 15:14, “You are my friends if you do what I command.” A heavy emphasis is laid on following the Word of God with the point that we get the whole picture. We are sinners who are lost without Him. However, because of Jesus, sin is overcome, and eternal life is given to those who remain faithful to the end. We will all answer to the Lord (Philippians 2:9-11). By the grace of God this is not just a bear story. It is the future reality.

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John 3:30