# SERMON SERIES:

# PROBLEMATIC PASSAGES 2

**“Don’t Make Fun Of Old Bald Men”**

## *2nd Kings 2:23-24*

This morning we continue our sequel sermon series titled “Problematic Passages 2,” in which we’re exploring more of the confusing, peculiar, challenging and controversial passages that we struggle to understand. We began with verses from Genesis 1 about what it means to be made in the image of God. Last week we wrestled with the question of violence in the Old Testament, and came away with several perspectives and solutions that can help us understand it better. Each week we’ve also highlighted some tools that can help us when we come across problematic passages.

We’ve said that we should always let Scripture interpret Scripture. When confronted with a tough passage we should see if there are other passages that can shed light on what we’re reading. Find out if the verse, phrase or word can be found elsewhere in Scripture. See if those instances are clearer or easier to understand. And never take Scripture out of context! Always consider what comes before and after the passage we’re stuck on.

Second, we should consult commentaries, Bible dictionaries, historical resources, and other study aids. While the Internet is an indispensable source of helpful material, remember to only rely on trusted experts and authentic sources.

Third, keep in mind what’s at stake in your problematic passage. Is it something that’s vital to our faith? Or is it something that doesn’t carry as much emphasis and weight? Don’t get distracted or too worked up over things that aren’t critical to what we believe and how we live.

Fourth, consider all the evidence that surrounds the troublesome passage, such as the social, cultural, historical and political backgrounds. And fifth, we should always pray, stay humble, and maintain a teachable spirit.

Our Scripture reading this morning can be found in 2nd Kings 2:23-24 so let’s turn there.

***The topics of the past two weeks came from suggestions that two of you made during the first sermon series. I’d draw your attention to the insert in your bulletin today. If you have some troublesome, weird, hard to understand or head-scratching verses, stories or topics from the Bible, feel free to jot them down on the insert. You can leave it here on the altar or give it to me after the service.***

Today’s problematic passage is one that I’ve always wondered about. It fits well with last week’s subject because there seems to be a lot of needless violence and bloodshed. It’s a passage that appears to paint a servant of God in a cruel, vindictive, petty light―until we dig a little bit deeper.

*23Elisha left Jericho and went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, a group of boys from the town began mocking and making fun of him. “Go away, baldy!” they chanted. “Go away, baldy!”  24Elisha turned around and looked at them, and he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them.*

Elisha had been the protégée or understudy of the great prophet Elijah. When Elijah’s ministry was finished, Elisha stepped in and took over. Elisha had performed two miracles by the time we reach our Scripture reading. He had parted the Jordan River and had turned bad water into good, usable water. So contextually, we find Elisha following in his predecessor’s footsteps, carrying on the work and ministry of God. Then we run smack-dab into our problematic passage.

*23Elisha left Jericho and went up to Bethel.* ***The word ‘Bethel’ means “the house of God.”* Beth *is the Hebrew term for house, such as in Bethlehem―which means “the house of bread.” The Hebrew word* El *was another way of saying Yahweh or God.***

Historically and spiritually, Bethel had been a significant place for the Israelites at one time. Abram stopped there on his way to Egypt from his homeland of Ur. And Jacob spent the night there and had a dream. Genesis 28:16-17 says, *16When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”  17He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”* So it was a holy place, full of history and meaning. It was place where God was honored and feared.

But because of a succession of tyrannical and degenerate kings, Bethel had become a place of idolatry and corruption. This corruption festered in the politics, in the religion, and in the hearts of the people. It was so pervasive that it affected the whole city. And on this particular occasion, the corruption was revealed in some young people who came out of the city to confront Elisha. *As he was walking along the road, a group of boys from the town began mocking and making fun of him. “Go away, baldy!” they chanted. “Go away, baldy!”*

The King James Version says*…there came forth little children out of the city…* The New Revised Standard Version and the Holman Christian Standard Bible says*…some small boys…* The American Standard Version says*…there came forth young lads out of the city…* ***Let’s be clear about one thing: these were not “little children,” “small boys,” or “young lads.” The Hebrew word used here means “young people.” Today you and I would call them teenagers. These were eighth, ninth and tenth graders, not innocent kindergarteners.***

Why is that important?

There wasn’t a word like ‘teenager’ back then. But this is important because, based on word choice, we’re being told these weren’t small children just making fun of someone and calling him names. They were young men who had passed the age of accountability in Hebrew culture.

These boys would’ve already had their bar-mitzvahs when they turned thirteen years old. At that time they would’ve taken their place in the community as men, even though age-wise we’d still think of them as teenagers. In other words, they were viewed as responsible men and members of society. They should’ve known better.

But the corruption in Bethel was so bad that it had made its home in these teenagers. They were imitating what they heard the people around them saying. They were imitating what they saw the people around them doing. So they came out cursing and hurling insults at Elisha.

We shouldn’t be surprised by the actions of these teenagers. After all, our own young people are threatened by the corruption around them. Doesn’t much of their language and actions stem from what they’re exposed to on a regular basis? The youth coming out of Bethel were the direct result of the choices and lifestyles that surrounded them.

Now Elisha was a righteous man. He was anointed by God, already in the midst of a successful ministry. So what Elisha did in this passage troubles us. Even worse, it *offends* us. It’s not the kind of thing a “nice” person does. It doesn’t make sense and we don’t like it.

*24Elisha turned around and looked at them, and he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them.* Well, anyone reading this for the first time probably doesn’t see that coming! Was Elisha just in a bad mood? Did he get up on the wrong side of the bed? Was the convenience store out of his favorite coffee? No. What was happening here centered on the issue of holiness.

Our God is holy and he desires holiness from his people. Once in Exodus 19 and four times in Leviticus, God told the Israelites they were to be holy because he is holy. The New Testament continued this theme and applied it to the church. We’re to pursue ***“holiness of heart and life,” as John Wesley phrased it***, because that’s what God expects.

A holy God demands holiness. His presence calls for humbled reverence, obedience, worship. Bethel cared nothing for holiness or reverence. They weren’t interested in being obedient to God or worshiping him properly. The people were corrupt. The city was corrupt. And through Elisha, God was going to send them a message.

Elisha turned to the gang of young men coming toward him and…*he cursed them in the name of the Lord.* The Hebrew word for ‘cursed’ is *qalal* and it means to reduce in size, to diminish, or to be of little or no account. ***In our terminology, it would mean to cut them down to size, to cut their legs out from under them, or to consider what they say as of no account.***

In the Old Testament, curses―like blessings―were directly related to a person’s relationship with God. So someone who broke God’s law was “cursed.” These young men, living in the corrupted city of Bethel, were cursed because they had turned their back on God. Elisha didn’t shout foul language at them or curse like a sailor; he declared they were cursed because of their ruined relationship with God.

So while the echo of his words still hug in the air…*two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them.* ***Some biblical translations refer to them as “she-bears” or female bears. In other words, they were mama bears!*** ***You don’t mess with a momma, especially an angry one!*** It’s almost as if God was saying, “If the rightful mothers of these youth won’t discipline them, then I’ll use these bears to do the job!”

***The bears tore into the youth like paper through a shredder. Clothing was torn, flesh was ripped, blood was everywhere! It wasn’t a pretty sight. There was screaming, yelling, and weeping amidst the roars of the momma bears.*** Notice that the youth weren’t killed, just mauled. God sent a message that he would not tolerate corruption. He was still God and Bethel was still his city.

Note also that we now discover there were… *forty-two…*young men who came out to harass Elisha. It wasn’t just a couple of juvenile delinquents but a whole mob. They had started with name-calling. But that would’ve quickly escalated to threats and then to violence. But Elisha wasn’t having it. He recognized the wickedness and corruption of Bethel and made sure that the people were given a lesson that would remain with them―and especially with those forty-two young people―for the rest of their lives. They would carry scars on their bodies that would be permanent reminders that God is holy. He demands holiness from his people. He doesn’t tolerate corruption and wickedness. And you don’t make fun of old bald men.

**ASK: Now, before we conclude, does anyone have any questions that I might―or most likely cannot!―answer?**

*What happened to Bethel after this:*

*When the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms―Israel in the north and Judah in the south―Jeroboam, son of Nebat, was the first king of the northern kingdom. In order to keep his subjects from going south into Judah to worship and make offerings, he set up two golden calves. One of those was at Bethel. (In fact, when Old Testament writers wanted to highlight the wickedness, corruption and evil of kings, they compared them to “Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin.”)*

*Bethel remained a place of pagan worship for approximately 300 years until Josiah, King of Judah, led a series of spiritual reforms―one of which was to do away with the golden calf at Bethel.*

*The prophet Amos had a lot to say about Bethel.*