Elisha and the jeering youths

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev J.M.Macpherson

[0:00] Now I'd invite you to turn to the second book of Kings, chapter 2, reading at verse 23. Second Kings, chapter 2, at verse 23.

Now may I say for those who are not normally in attendance at our services here, but are visiting with us, that for the last few weeks we've been considering together as a congregation the life and ministry of God's servant Elisha.
And we've been taking, just as they come, the various incidents in Elisha's life. So that is why today we come to this very difficult incident, and we needn't hide that it is a very difficult passage in God's word, and that with particular reverence we have to come to it to seek to understand the message that God has for us in it.
So let me read from verse 23. And Elisha went up from thence to Bethel. And as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked them, and said to them, Go up, thou bald head, go up, thou bald head.
And he turned back and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tear forty-two children of them.
[1:19] And he went from thence to Mount Carmel, and from thence he returned to Samaria. Now in my study I have a book that bears the title, Visions of Glory.

The book was written by an American lady, who spent her childhood, and early, late teens, early twenties, as a very active member of the sect known as the Jehovah's Witnesses.
She eventually left the movement, not sadly, as one would read in the book, because of any real spiritual convictions, or any personal encounter with Jesus Christ, but for other very different motives, which led her not only away from the Jehovah's Witnesses, but from a great deal of the Scriptures, and of God himself.
But she tells in this book how her mother and herself became Jehovah's Witnesses, but her father, who was an Italian immigrant, resisted any attempt to incorporate him, either in that movement, or in a Christian church.
And every time they spoke to him of the Bible, this man, Grisuti was his name, he would turn to them and say, Why did God send the bears to rip up the children who mocked Elijah?
[2:45] Well, leaving aside the fact that he mistook Elijah for Elisha, this attitude is one that, perhaps in many ways, we can sympathize with.

We wonder why it is that something like this happened. And as far as this gentleman was concerned, right throughout his life, as far as the book goes, he maintained his hostility to everything to do with the Word of God.
And obviously, when you and I turn to a passage like this, especially the more sensitive one is to what is expressed here, and to the call to live as Christ lived, we ask ourselves now, what is the meaning of a difficult passage like this?
How is it that God, the same God of whom we read in the New Testament, how is it that this kind of incident could take place? And we perhaps wonder if there's some kind of contradiction between what you have here, referring to these children, and the words of the Savior, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.
Now I'd suggest that before we actually get into the story itself, we need to ask ourselves a particular question about our attitude to the Word of God, our attitude to the Bible, because that will color, inevitably, the way we understand this passage.
[4:16] When people come up against, particularly in the Old Testament, but not only there, come up against certain passages that they find difficult, that seem, at first at any rate, to present a picture of God that doesn't seem to be in accord with the view that they may have, I think that there

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

are three ways, three ways of dealing that people have with such passages.

Let me mention them briefly, because we need to understand this before we go on to study the passage itself. First of all, there is the way that I would call avoidance.
And that's the attitude of those who genuinely believe the Bible has come from God, who genuinely believe that in Jesus Christ we have a revelation from God, who do find much in the Bible that is helpful and of blessing to them.
But passages such as these, they find so difficult that they simply avoid them. In their own personal reading of the Bible, they would never turn to such passages.
If they were reading chapter by chapter, they would even skip over passages such as this. And they feel disappointed, to say the least, if ever in a church service or in a Bible study meeting, passages like these come to the fore.
[5:39] So that's the attitude of avoidance. Yes, God has spoken in the Bible, but there are parts of it that really we don't like and we prefer to forget about.

Then there's a second attitude. And the second attitude I would call rejection. It's not merely avoiding such passages. Saying, well, I know they're there, but I'm not going to read them because I don't like them.
This goes further. This attitude says, well, obviously such passages should never be in the Bible. They give us a picture of God that is not the true God.
They show us rather the attitude of vindictive men and women of other times. And we've got past that. That's not real Christianity. That's not the real message of God.
And so the attitude would be of a total rejection of all such passages. And as we'll see in a moment, those who would take that attitude may not always agree on how much of the Bible they would reject.
[6:42] Some would take some and some would take others. But that is basically the attitude. We can't accept it. It must be wrong. It's not in accordance with the way I think or I feel or even the way that it seems to me Jesus spoke and taught.

And so let's put these out. Let's consign them to oblivion. And then there is a third attitude that can be adopted when we come up against passages such as these.
And I'd call the third attitude that of acceptance and an attempt to understand. It's the attitude of the person who says, well, there are parts in the Bible that I find difficult to understand.
There are parts that sometimes seem to me to conflict with other parts. There are problems, whether they're moral or theological or whatever kind of problems. There are problems in the reading of the Bible and I must admit I don't always feel easy with these passages but I know that this is God's word.
And I know that God in his sovereign wisdom has given us his word and that he knows in his infinite wisdom far more than I know. And if, as yet, I do not fully understand, nonetheless, I reverently, submissively, come to God's word and seek help, the help of the Holy Spirit to understand.
[8:06] And if, as I read through one passage or another and I don't find answers to my questions, if I remain in ignorance, well, I'll simply say, God, by and by, as I reverently come to his word, as I reverently seek light and more light from the Spirit, God will show me and give me greater understanding.

So there I'd suggest our three attitudes and we have to decide which attitude we adopt. That of avoidance, that of rejection, or that of acceptance with a reverent attempt to understand.
Now of the three ways, the third way is by far the most difficult. It's very easy to avoid certain passages. It's very easy to say, I'll read the bits of the Bible I like and I'll forget about the rest.
And then you don't have the difficult questions to answer. It's even easier to take parts of the Bible and say, not merely will I avoid them, but I'll throw them out. Then you're not faced with a great many of the problems, not only of this type, but of many other types that abound in the word of God.
But to take God's word, to, by God's grace, to seek to accept and to understand, to wrestle with the scriptures, to ask, what is God saying in such a passage?
[9:33] What is the meaning of this part of God's inspired word? How am I going to apply it in my life? And how are we as a church going to apply it in our context? that is far, far more difficult.

So which do we adopt? Well, obviously, our response involves the whole view that we have of scripture and of the authority of God and of the authority of Jesus Christ.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

because the Lord Jesus Christ, for example, and we can't enter into this whole area of the doctrine of scripture. We've done so on other occasions, but there won't be time today.
But the Lord Jesus Christ, you remember, says this, the scripture cannot be broken. He tells us again and again that God has given the whole of scripture and he was referring to the Old Testament because the New Testament hadn't been written.
He says, God has given it all, every part of it. It cannot be broken. It is all inspired by Almighty God. It is all, and here the Apostle Paul supports what our Lord said in that famous verse that all scripture is given by inspiration of God, meaning literally breathed by God.
[10:50] It is as the very breath of God comes from God himself. All scripture, not parts here and parts there, but all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable.

And he lists the ways in which it is profitable. And so, if we were to take the way, particularly the second way of rejection, of deciding that this part or that part of the Bible, Old or New Testament, can't be true because it doesn't agree with the way we think things ought to be, then we are not merely adopting a certain viewpoint ourselves, but we are rejecting the authority of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.
And the great problem for those who would take that second position or the first one, the great problem is this. When you reject the authority of Jesus Christ, who accepts the entire scripture as the Word of God, what do you put in its place?
How do you decide what stays and what goes? How do you decide with your ordinary human wisdom? How do you decide that this is worthy of God, whereas that is not?
You are replacing the authority of God with a shifting sands of human criticism, mere human criteria for judging what is right and what is wrong.
[12:16] And so this morning we come to this passage of God's Word. Not, I would hasten to say, with the assurance that all the answers can be given.

These come from God Himself, although God is pleased to use the instruments of His choice. But reverently, and I trust on the part of all of us, with an earnest desire to come to this part of God's Word and to ask, what does God say here?
What is God's message to me, to us, through this portion of His Word? So let's pass on to the incident itself. I want us to notice in the first place the people described.
The people described in this incident. And first of all, you have those who, in our authorized version, from which I've read this morning, those who are described in verse 23 as little children and in verse 24 24, as children.
Now the word, and here I must go into just a little of the words that were actually used in the original language. The word that was used, it is used in verse 23, to describe little children is a word that you find many times in the Old Testament.
[13:34] Now it does sometimes mean very little children, even babies. When Naaman, the Syrian, washed in the river Jordan, we're told that his leprosy left him, and his flesh became as the flesh of a little child.

It's the same word. But you can't leave it there. Because you find as you go through the Bible, that this very same word is used in other contexts.
Take Joseph, for example. When Joseph was tending his father's flocks, we read that he was a lad of 17 years of age.
Now that is specifically stated in Genesis chapter 37. He was a lad of 17 years of age. And the word used is the very same word that you have here.
So here, as far as Joseph is concerned, it refers to a teenager. And then, when you turn again in Genesis, to the story of Abraham, where Abraham, had to go in defense of Lot, Lot was taken prisoner, along with the men of Sodom, on a raid on that city.
[14:42] We read that Abraham gathered round some of his men who worked on his farms and so on, and off they went and rescued Lot. And when they came back, Abraham talked about, he refused to take anything from the king of Sodom, but he said, the young men who were with me and who delivered Lot and the rest of you, let them have something.

And the word that he uses, young men, is exactly the same as the word translated here, little children. Now the point I'm making is that the word, as far as age goes, is indeterminate.
It may be a very little child. It may be someone a considerable amount older, certainly a late teenager, or even early twenties.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Now when you go on to verse 24, you have a reference again to children. You wouldn't know from our English Bible that it was a different word, but it is.
The writer uses a different term for child. And here again, it can be a very little child, it can be a baby. Remember when Pharaoh gave that order that all the men, children, as our version puts it, of the Israelites should be drowned in the river Nile.
[16:00] The word that is used is that same word that you have here, so it's a reference to babies. But then again, as you go through and find all the cases where this word is used, you find, and I'll just give you one example, you find that in the case of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, Solomon has died.

Rehoboam is just on the throne. And the people come to him, or the people's representatives, and they say, look, your father latterly was putting very heavy taxes on us.
Could you not reduce the tax burden? And Rehoboam said, well, let me consider it. And we're told that he consulted with the old men, and then he consulted with the young men, the young men who had grown up with him.
And then you come across the surprising thing a few chapters later that Rehoboam, when he began to reign, was 41 years of age. So the young men and it is exactly the same word that is translated here, children, where in this instance, young men, presumably in their 30s.
And so, I would suggest, not with any dogmatism, for I confess that I'm not sufficiently a scholar in these original languages to be able to say, but I would suggest that the translation that we have here is a most unfortunate one, and that the reference here is not to little children, but the reference is to youths in their late teens, perhaps even their early 20s.
[17:34] And very many of the modern translations translate it in exactly that way. If you have the New International Version, you'll find that it doesn't use the word children, but the word youths.

Well, there's the first section of people described here, the children, better translated as youths.
And then secondly, you have Elisha.
Now, many people, they read this passage and they say, well, that was a cantankerous old man, couldn't stand just a little joke from some little children. But if you read through the life of Elisha, you find that he wasn't an old man at this time.
He must have been called fairly young indeed because 50 years later we find Elisha on his deathbed. You can go through the kings and so on under whose reign he ministered.
And so you find that Elisha here, having served perhaps some 8 or 10 years as Elijah's servant, having been called, it may well be about the very age that these youths were when they insulted him on this occasion.
[18:40] Elisha may well have been a man just in his late 20s or early 30s at the most. And so the picture changes somewhat and the cantankerous old man is replaced by a fairly young man.

Now the baldness that's referred to here, go up, go up thou bald head, it may be that it was a premature baldness, as can happen. But it has been suggested that perhaps there was a particular insult, sarcastically directed at Elisha here, that he may have taken the vow of the Nazarite.
You remember the Nazarite who was set apart for God. And once that was done, no razor came upon his head. And the Nazarites were very well known. Their flowing locks, different from anyone else in Israel, or any male in Israel, were well known.
These men set apart for God. And it has been suggested that the insult is, by turning it round about, as it were, a particular insult at his dedication to God.
Well, whether that is so or not, what is definitely the case here is that Elisha is not what we would call a private citizen. He's not here just as Elisha. He is here as a representative of God.
[19:59] He is seen by these young men and by the people of Bethel, not just as any person who happens to be passing through, but as God's representative. And the insults directed at him are directed not at him, but at the God he represents.

And so finally, in this part about the people described, you have the townspeople of Bethel. Now, they're not mentioned. It just says he was going through Bethel and these youths came and insulted him.
But they have, undoubtedly, an important role. because Bethel was the center of pagan worship. Bethel, you remember, in the days of Jeroboam who separated the kingdom of the north from the kingdom of the south from the Davidic kingdom.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Bethel became the center of pagan worship. Jeroboam said to the people, you're not going to go to Jerusalem to worship Jehovah. You're going to worship here in Bethel. And he set up two golden calves. And while he said that it was for the worship of Jehovah, little by little it became evident that it was pagan worship directed against the living God.
And Baal, the false god Baal, had a center and a seat there in Bethel. And so what you have here are people, again, not just any old people, but the representatives, aggressive representatives of the old idolatry and immorality, throwing down the gauntlet against God and God's prophet.
[21:26] And it's highly likely, I'm not suggesting it's definite because I don't know, but it's highly likely that these youths were set up by the townspeople of Bethel deliberately as part of a plot in order to discredit God's servant Elisha.

And so we pass on from the people described to the issues involved, the issues involved in this story. Now Elisha, he's the prophet of God.
He's taken Elijah's place, but he's not yet fully established. He's been recognized in Jericho, as we've seen. But now he's heading for Carmel, where, as you read through the story, you'll find he made his headquarters.
And on the way, he's got to pass through Bethel. Now, as we've just pointed out, Bethel was the center of pagan worship, the center of idolatry, the great seat of opposition to the living God and the commandments and laws of the Lord God of Israel.
Elisha himself doesn't seek the confrontation. He's just passing through. It's forced upon him by these youths, behind whom, no doubt, are the townspeople of Bethel.
[22:39] And they seek a challenge. They deliberately challenge the authority of Almighty God. Elijah, he had forced them to lie low, the great victory of Mount Carmel, where the prophets of Baal were discredited.

And ever since, the prophets of Baal and the followers of Baal had had to keep quiet. The worship of God, of the true God, was being, in a measure at least, acknowledged and established.
But now they see their chance. Elijah has gone. Elisha, the new man who hasn't been proved, he won't have the same ability, no doubt, they're thinking, that Elijah had.
And so, out they go. Now it's significant that in Bethel there was also what was called a school of the prophets. You find the reference in verse 3 in this same chapter.
The sons of the prophets that went at Bethel came forth to Elisha. Well, you imagine it. What a time they must have had. These men of God in training for the ministry, as we would say.
[23:40] There they are in Bethel, in the seat of paganism, in the seat of idol worship, in the seat of immorality and hostility to the living God. There they are. And undoubtedly, they were mocked and scoffed and scorned continually.

Because as you read through the references in 2 Chronicles chapter 36, if you read through sometime there, you'll find that one of the criticisms that God gives of the Israelites, both north and south, why their nations were eventually destroyed, why Jerusalem one day lay in ashes, it was this.
God said that his people, they had mocked my prophets. Now, there are other things mentioned, but it was particularly the mockery of the prophets of God.
And therefore, we read, misusing his prophets, the wrath of the Lord rose against his people. So here you have it in Bethel. It's a focus of this conflict. And now Elisha comes and they set out to mock and reject Elisha and behind Elisha, Elisha's God.
And the issues were clear. If Elisha were not able to establish himself as God's representative, you'd be back to the days of Jezebel. Jezebel, the wicked king, she was still there, the widow of Ahab.
[25:03] She had slain hundreds, thousands of the prophets of God. Obadiah, you remember, had rescued some of them, but many had perished. The rights of ordinary people would be trampled on yet again, as in the case of Naboth, whom Jezebel had so cruelly slain.

Dark days were ahead for Israel if this Baal worship, if this idol worship were once again established. And so the issues involved are mighty issues, not just an irascible old man and a few ill-mannered children, but what you have here is the whole struggle between good and evil.
The whole struggle between light and darkness. Satan is casting down the gauntlet against almighty God. And the reminder, of course, comes to you and me that if we are Christian men and women, then we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

the forces of wickedness in high places and stalking this earth on behalf of Satan.
You remember the picture in the book of Revelation, the dragon seeking to exterminate the seed of the woman. It always was and it always will be, for Satan will never rest, seeking to overthrow the throne of almighty God.
These are the issues involved in this apparently insignificant little story that so often we find so difficult to understand. And so the final thing I want to notice, there's the people described, the issues involved, we've seen them, but what about the actions taken?
[26:41] I'd suggest that there are three actions that were taken here and that each one of them represents an aspect of God, of the God whom we worship.

And the first is this, the forbearance or the patience of God. Now you might say, surely that lesson doesn't come out of this story.
But read it again at verse 24. Elisha turned back and looked on them and cursed them in the name of the Lord.
But notice the phrase in the middle. He turned back and looked on them. Now I wonder if when Elisha looked it was a last mute appeal for repentance.
When they said go up, of course the reference was to Elijah. They were saying, Elijah, if it is the case that he went up into heaven, Elijah, go up. What about you?
[27:40] Do you think the God that Elijah served is your God? And so they went on insulting him. Elisha pauses and he looks. Now I don't know whether it was an appeal for repentance but it could well have been.

You remember the story in the life of Elijah how three army captains were sent by the king to apprehend Elijah and how when the first two with their men came and peremptorily said to the man of God, come down because the king says it.
Doesn't matter if you're a man of God. And we read that fire came down from heaven and consumed them. But the third captain, he came and he paused and he said to Elijah, he repented in effect and sought the sparing of his life and it was spared.
And so Elisha looks. There is judgment but Elisha pauses. He looks. He appeals for repentance but repentance never came. Our Lord, we read, when Peter denied him, he looked on Peter and there it was different because Peter broke down and wept.
the appeal to repentance found a response in the heart of Peter and God in his forbearance still looks in mercy on those who go on headlong in sin.
[28:56] He looks and he appeals for repentance. Turn ye, turn ye. Why will he die? There is the forbearance of God but there is also the vengeance of God, of a holy God and this of course is what you have in the coming of the bears and in the mauling of the young men.

It doesn't tell us whether they were actually killed or not. That point isn't made. One thing of course we have to say is that this power that God delegated to Elisha then and to others in Old Testament times has not been delegated to his church today.
God has not given to his representatives in the church on earth in this new dispensation and that is made perfectly clear through the progressive revelation of God's will from Old to New Testament. God has not given to us such authority as he gave then to men to delegate his wrath and his judgment. But having said that we must not make a contradiction between the God of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament.
We must never say that this the vengeance of God God's wrath and sin was only in those days and is no longer a reality. For if we do we tear out half of the New Testament as well as the Old.
[30:20] You remember Ananias and Sapphira. Remember the judgment of God falling upon them and that was only physical death. You remember the words of the Lord Jesus Christ that there is a day coming when all shall be gathered before the throne of Almighty God.

When all shall be judged and when there will be the separation of the sheep from the goats when some will pass to everlasting life and others to everlasting judgment.
These are words of the Lord Jesus Christ and so we cannot make a distinction between the God here and the God there. And you and I would be better better advised surely to seek a greater understanding of the blazing purity of a holy God a better understanding of the appallingness of sin a better understanding of the reality of evil and of God's call by grace to resist evil than to set up contradictions that the scriptures will not allow between the God of the Old and the God of the New Testament.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

There is a very striking parallel in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and I must draw to a close in a moment but for this I am indebted to Dr. Alexander Stewart of Edinburgh in his book A Prophet of Grace.
This is why I read in Luke chapter 4 where you have our Lord he performs a great miracle in Cana of Galilee changing of the water into wine.
[31:51] He goes from there to Nazareth he preaches mercy the spirit of the Lord is upon me he has anointed me to bring good tidings to the opening of the prison to the bound and so on and so forth but the people in Nazareth they mock him they scoff him the carpenter's son we are not going to listen to him they reject him not only that but we read that they actually sought to cast him down from the brow of the hill and to slay him.

What does the word tell us? That he passed out from the midst of them and as far as we know he never returned to Nazareth. There was never again the preaching of mercy there in Nazareth. Indeed what we find is our Lord preaching against the cities of the plain of which Nazareth was one and saying woe woe unto you better better for Sodom and Gomorrah these cities sunk in iniquity than for you who have seen the works of God who have heard the word of God and who have turned and rejected what God has said.
So you and I should be readier surely to tremble reverently before the holiness of almighty God not dare diminish the God who is so holy and at the same time so filled with mercy and grace as we have him in scripture.
And the last thing I want to say is this the actions taken show the forbearance of God the vengeance of God but also the support of God.
[33:23] Now again this may seem strange to you but it's not strange at all because Elisha is in the critical situation that we've seen. Here he is being challenged not just Elisha is being challenged but the God whom he serves he has set out in the service of almighty God God has called him to this great ministry to denounce immorality to denounce sin to denounce idolatry to bring the nation back to the living God he comes to Bethel and they say out of here we have no time for you we have no time for Elijah we have no time for your God and if Elisha had gone on from there unable to do or to say anything creeping out defeated by the ridicule of the men of Bethel then where would be the message that he proclaimed and the God he served and so he called upon God and he called upon God in confidence that God would vindicate his own justice and his own holy name and I find this thought summarized and with this

I close a quotation from Reverend Alec Motier who was an Anglican minister who has written recently about this incident and he makes this point as I wish to make it today that the people of God can call with confidence upon God whatever assaults are made upon the faith that they hold whatever assaults are made upon the God they serve and he says this do we want a God who stands by his people or deserts them when they need him most do we want a God who sees to it that his work can go forward and his commissions be fulfilled or a God who is like Baal great and glorious but always somewhere else that is the real issue to the believer it's the absence of the she bears which would constitute the insoluble problem a problem much much too severe for faith ever to survive that we would have a God who couldn't help us in our need who's not there when we want them powerless to act but such is not the God whom you and I serve and worship may God give us understanding of his own word now let's sing together to his praise in Psalm 118
Psalm 118 at verse 5

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host