

- We changed gears last week. If you're like most people though, you are a little tired of listening to, talking about or hearing all the news and opinions on the crisis.
 - We began a short little series of some lesser known stories from Scripture. The stories that maybe you haven't read, or when you did, you thought, "What was that all about?"
 - I'm calling in "Unusual Encounters" and last week we looked at a story from Acts 20 about a young man named Eutychus who fell asleep during a late night service and fell to his death from a third floor window.
 - If you haven't listened to it, go on back and take a look.
 - But today, we are going back almost 1000 years before Eutychus to the heyday of the Israelite nation. I want to look at a gentleman named Elisha.
- There is a story from the old Soviet Union of a time when there was a wave of petty theft in a certain area of the country.
 - To fix it, the authorities put up guards around some of the factories.
 - At one timberworks in Leningrad, the guard happened to know the workers in the factory very well.
 - The first evening they were guarding, out came Peter Petrovich with a wheelbarrow and, on the wheelbarrow, a great bulky sack with a suspicious-looking object inside.
 - "All right, Petrovich," said the guard, "what have you got there?"
 - "Oh, just sawdust and shavings," Peter replied.
 - "Come on," the guard said, "I wasn't born yesterday. Tip it out." And out came nothing but sawdust and shavings.
 - So he was allowed to put it all back again and go home. When the same thing happened every night of the week the guard became frustrated. He knew Peter must be smuggling something.
 - Finally, his curiosity overcame his frustration. "Peter," he said, "I know you. Tell me what you're smuggling out of here, and I'll let you go." "Wheelbarrows, my friend," said Peter, "wheelbarrows."
 - The guard was consumed with one thing and missed the obvious.
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 - It is so easy for this to happen in our lives. We get distracted by things that take us away from what we are supposed to be doing.
 - It can happen at work, during a movie, while working on a job. It can even happen in the middle of a conversation when the person you are talking to starts to look away from you and you notice they are completely distracted from what you are saying.
 - Distractions! As we look at Elisha this morning, I want you to keep this question in mind: "What is your biggest distraction from living life as Jesus desires?"
 - There was a story that stuck out in my head from the life of Elisha. A story I loved as a child. The kind of story anyone who has ever been an underdog who suffered at the hands of another person would love.

2 Kings 2:23 From there Elisha went up to Bethel.

- Elisha was traveling from Jericho to Bethel. He was fairly newly appointed a full fledged prophet.

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!"

- Baldy (or baldhead) could have been either a form of personal scorn and derision, because baldness was undesirable in that culture, even used as a sign of God's judgment. Or, it

could have been worse because they might be alluding to the undesirables in their land, like lepers, who were required to shave their heads.

- Have you ever been teased? Made fun of? Mocked by others?
- As I have shared before, I was teased and mocked a lot when I was younger. I was either too small, too pimply, too goody two shoes, not cool, take your pick.
- Those of you that have been the receiving end of those know that they can create scars.
- There were many times that I wanted to see those people have something bad happen to them in that moment.

24 He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD.

- What happens?

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.

- There is something deeply satisfying about this story.
- There's a sense of "Hah!" to this.
- But at the same time, is there anything troubling about this story to you?
- Does it seem like Elisha is maybe a little vindictive. A bit sensitive.
- Then there is the whole idea that he cursed them in God's name and God appears to go along with it. Isn't that mean? Kind of despicable?
- Let's leave all those questions hang there for a bit. We will come back to them.

- As I thought about this, it made me go through the rest of Elisha's life as recorded in the bible and try and get a broader sense of what is going on during his life.
- He was a prophet in Israel for over 50 years, so he had a long ministry.
- Who was Elisha? He was the successor to Elijah. Elijah was considered one of the most powerful prophets ever in the history of Israel. We actually talked about Elijah a couple of months ago. He confronted the king and queen of Israel head on. He did miraculous things. He raised a child from the dead. Called down fire from heaven. All in an effort to bring the nation of Israel back to God.
- Then, God told him to groom Elisha as his successor, so he did. When he reached the end of his life, he was taken to heaven in a whirlwind.
- Elisha is now God's main spokesperson to Israel.
- The situation is not good. The nation of Israel is still a divided kingdom. North and south. The north, where Elisha was, had a series of evil and wicked kings and it wasn't getting better.
- They led people to move further and further from God. They not only did not follow God's commands and lived against the law of God, they increasingly turned to the local god Baal, who was the God of fertility and the harvest. They would make idols, sacrifice to Baal and increasingly rejected the real God.
- Elisha is dealing with kings who don't want to lead well, people who have no desire to follow, and a small group of people who are trying to follow God.
- And so there are a whole bunch of crazy stories about Elisha.

- *(2 Kings 2:19-22)* One time, there was a city where the water from a major spring had gone bad. It was now such that it was killing the crops instead of watering them the way it was supposed to. It was undrinkable and unusable and it made the entire city at risk.
- Elisha had them bring him a new bowl, and he put salt in it and threw salt into the water, which typically would make water worse, but the water was cured and remained cured forever.

- The whole object lesson was that Elisha was like a new bowl, and salt symbolized preservation and purity, called the people away from their unproductive alliance to another God that made them spiritually barren. They needed God's power and his preservation to heal their barrenness, something Baal could never do.
- *(2 Kings 4:38-41)* Another time there was a famine in the land. Elisha came to the place where the whole school of prophets were meeting. Elisha wanted to have a feast with all these people in training for God and so he told them to make a large stew.
- It was a famine, and apparently, one of the people simply picked something that looked OK that tasted terrible or was perhaps even harmful.
- It was already in the pot and they cried out that there was death in the pot.
- Elisha called for some flour (even though flour would be in short supply because of the famine) and threw it into the pot and the food immediately turned edible and nutritious.
- This was a lesson that the people were spiritually hungry, and to satisfy this hunger they turned to Baalism, which might have looked harmless, but was disgusting and deadly.
- The prophets were there to counteract this and steer people back towards God.
- *(2 Kings 4:42-44)* There was a time where a man brought his offering to Elisha. It was some barley bread baked from the first of this man's grain. It was his offering to God.
- Elisha told his servant to give it to all the people to eat.
- They objected. They said "How can I set this little bit of bread before 100 men?"
- Elisha's response? Give it to them because not only will they eat their fill but there will be some left over (sound familiar?).
- God was showing again that he could multiply limited resources that were dedicated to him
- Baal, who was known as the "lord of the earth" had no such power.
- *(2 Kings 6:1-7)* Another instance, just to prove that God could supernaturally provide for the needs of those that depend on him, happened when the the prophets were building a new meeting place. More and more people were turning their lives to God and so they needed a bigger meeting place. In the process, one of the men was cutting down a tree and as he did so the iron axe head (which was quite valuable) flew off the axe and into the river and sank to the bottom.
- It was lost.
- The man panicked. It was a borrowed axe and he had to return it or pay for it and he was not set up to do that.
- Elisha asked him, "Where did it fall into the water?"
- When the man showed him, Elisha cut a stick and threw it in the water and the iron axe head floated to the surface where the man could reach out and grab it and so be able to return it to its owner.
- We do not have time to talk about how he raised a widow's son from the dead, foiled an enemy kingdom's plans by knowing ahead of time everything they were supposed to do, how he saw the chariots of fire of God, parted the Jordan river and healed leprosy.
- Even after he died, the miracles did not stop.
- *(2 Kings 13:20-21)* In one crazy last hurrah, some men were going to bury someone and they saw a band of Moabite raiders. They were fearful for their life, so instead of finishing their burial, they just took the man and tossed him into a tomb that was already there. It happened to be Elisha's tomb and as soon as the man touched Elisha's bones, he came back to life.

- This miracle certainly got back to the king as a sign to both encourage him that God's power could work even through a dead man and a rebuke for his lack of faith.
- Throughout all of his ministry and all these miracles, God was using Elisha to train a next generation of prophets to trust in God and follow him.
- He was using Elisha to get the attention of the kings who were ignoring God and dealing with life in every way but God.
- He empowered Elisha so that when he spoke, the people would not dismiss him as God's emissary. He was God's spokesperson and carried the weight of God's words to repent, to change, to come back to God.
- With all that in mind, let's go back to our original story.

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.

- This is young men, not children. They could conceivably be false prophets of Baal although we don't know this.

"Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Get out of here, baldy!"

- Not only were they scorning Elisha for his bald head, the phrase "get out of here" could be also translated to go on up, that if he were a great prophet of God he should go to heaven as Elijah had reportedly done.
- Bottom line is that they regarded God's prophet with contempt.

24 He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD.

- The curse was not a defensive response in pride about his appearance, but their disrespect for the Lord as reflected in their treatment of his spokesman.

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.

- The fact that 42 men were mauled suggests that this was a larger demonstration that had been organized against God and Elisha.
- So this is not an irritated prophet or a vengeful God.
- God was telling the people to "Pay attention!" "Listen to what Elisha has to say." "He is calling you back to me and it is serious. This is not a laughing casual matter."
- You keep dismissing me and trying to find satisfaction where there is not satisfaction to be had.
- You are chasing idols and putting your energy everywhere but the pursuit of me.
- You are going with what everyone else is doing and what is easy over what is best.
- You are distracted and I am trying to get your attention – are you listening?
- The Israelites for the most part did not listen. They continued to pursue every alternate form of comfort, entertainment and worship that was convenient for them. And less than 100 years after Elisha, the nation had ceased to exist.
- That is the question it triggers for you and me today.
- God wants to get our attention.
- God is not a mean, angry God who does mean, angry things to you.
- He knows that just like the Israelites needed to get their attention jogged, so do we.
- So maybe this is something we should consider.
- How might God be trying to get your attention?
- Whenever something bumps up against your preferences, make a habit of asking how God might be trying to get your attention.

- *“Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”* (C.S. Lewis)
- How is he using that crisis? How is he using your situation? How is he using your quiet time? What you listen to? The people you speak to? The whispers from the Spirit? Is it through conflict? Kids?
- That’s question number 1. But that brings me back to the question we asked at the beginning. As God is trying to get your attention, “What is your biggest distraction from living life as Jesus desires?”
- What do you find yourself turning to? Where do you find your comfort?
- Are you letting God get your attention or are you letting distractions prevent embracing him?
- Does God have your attention?
- Let’s not ignore his voice or worse, show contempt by doing our own thing and chasing distractions in his place.
- Let’s listen and follow.