

# Spiritual Bears

*A sermon about the way that every vice has its own adversary.*

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“Your servant used to keep his father’s sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock,  
<sup>35</sup> I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth.” *I Samuel 17.34*

**R**escuing a lamb from the jaws of a lion or a bear is an almost impossible feat – one scarcely less remarkable than David’s miraculous defeat of Goliath in this story. Anyone who has ever encountered lions or bears in the wild, much less fully armed giants, would know that taking a lamb away from them isn’t something that any person would be able to do.

The clear message is that this is something only the Lord can do.

The message for us is a familiar one: although we are no match for what often seem to be invincible threats to our spiritual lives, with the Lord’s help we can face these challenges.

Today we look more closely at one of these threats in an effort to make it more real, and to help us understand how the Lord helps us in our battles with them.

Leaving aside giants and lions, we focus on the spiritual bears that we meet as we find our way in life – and especially on what we learn from our story about a man who was attacked by a bear in the spiritual world.

Bears come into several stories in the Word. Aside from David’s reference here, there is a story about two bears who attacked some youths who mocked Elisha in *II Kings 2*. They are also referred to in a number of other passages as symbols of strength and ferocity (*II Samuel 17, Isaiah 11, Daniel 7, Amos 5, Hosea 13, Revelation 13*).

People are sometimes surprised to learn that there really were bears in the Holy Land. These were Syrian brown bears, and even today there is a population in the area around Mt. Hermon between

Syria and Lebanon, just north of the Sea of Galilee, and many more northward in Turkey. In Biblical times the bears ranged throughout Israel.



The Syrian brown bear is a subspecies of the brown bears that are native throughout Europe and Asia, found in Alaska as the Kodiak or Alaskan brown bear, and in the rest of North America as the Grizzly bear. Polar bears are close cousins. Interestingly, the American black bear is only distantly related to the brown bear.

Brown bears are typically huge – the Kodiak bear can be as much as nine feet long and over a thousand pounds. The Syrian brown bears are among the smaller subspecies, but they are still larger than our American black bears, which can

weigh up to five hundred pounds.

But whereas black bears are seldom aggressive, and people love seeing them when on vacation, Syrian brown bears are fierce and dangerous, as Grizzly bears are. They were a real threat to the flocks and herds of Israel, not to mention the people themselves.

This is why bears are mentioned so frequently in the Word, as are lions, leopards, wolves and other animals that are no longer, or only rarely, found in the Holy Land today.

## What kind of spiritual threat is a bear?

**I**n our lesson from *True Christianity*, we saw that animals of all kinds are seen in the spiritual world. We read in the *Apocalypse Explained*:

“Animals appear in the spiritual world representing such things as angels or spirits are thinking from their affections, inclinations, appetites, pleasures,

and desires. These things are presented before their eyes in various forms, as gardens, forests, fields, plains, and also fountains; they are also exhibited in the forms of animals of the earth, the flying things of heaven, and creeping things, in an infinite variety. These are seen not only in the forms of such animals and flying things as are upon our earth, but in forms composite from several forms, which nowhere exist on earth, many of which it has been granted me to see. When these appear, their spiritual origin and thus what they stand for is at once known. But as soon as the spirit or angel ceases from his thought and meditation these animals and birds instantly vanish.

[11] A "bear" stands for power from the natural sense of the Word, both with the well-disposed and with the evil." (Apocalypse Explained 781)

In the spiritual world the animals that people normally see in their day to day environment are representations of whatever it is that they love and are thinking about.

Bears are related to the power that is in the Word's literal meaning. In a good sense they would appear when that power was needed or when it was thought of. When Elisha, who represents the Word, was mocked by youths, bears came after them in his defense.



In a negative sense, bears stand for the problems that come when misunderstandings of the Word drive a person's thoughts:

*"A bear symbolizes people who read the Word but fail to understand it, so that they derive from it misconceptions. That these are the people symbolized by bears became apparent to me from seeing bears in the spiritual world, and from seeing some people there wearing bearskins. They were all people who read the Word and did not see any doctrinal truth in it. They were also people who affirmed the appearances of truth there, resulting in misconceptions. Some bears seen in the spiritual world are dangerous and some are not, and some also are white."* Apocalypse Revealed 573

So bears can be good or bad, gentle or aggressive, just as the words of Scripture can be used to confirm good understandings or hurtful ones.

### The man who was attacked by bears

This is where the man in our story comes into it. Swedenborg met a man, not knowing who he was. The man was lost. As it turned out he was well educated, and he apparently loved to discuss religious topics. But it seems that he was a better talker than listener, and this got him into trouble.

Since bears are involved, his situation evidently had to do with strongly held misconceptions about the Word's teachings.

The account says that in religious discussions "he would not affirm anything except only when he heard something that closely approached to his own [doctrine]." Then it says that he "betook himself to a congregation of the Moravian Church. But because he wanted there also to rule them according to his opinions, he was an annoyance to them and, and was asked to leave."

You might wonder what is wrong with being unwilling to affirm doctrine that you disagree with. No one should have to do that. But it seems that this man was insistent on his views, to the point that he was not merely holding his own opinion, but attempting to force it on others, causing a disturbance, and eventually being asked to leave.

Then he was attacked by a bear. Interestingly, the bear could attack him, but it couldn't actually hurt him. The man later told Swedenborg that he was frequently confronted by bears, so much so that he had grown used to them and was no longer even afraid of them.

The angels explained it this way:

*"It was told by angels that those appear to be attacked by bears who have confirmed themselves in doctrinal principles, and tenaciously cling to them, and try to control the minds of others in accordance with them, thus to rule over them - especially when they are false doctrinal tenets. They keep on being harassed until they no longer care to rule others, but are content to leave people to their own doctrine."*

The bears were there to teach the man a lesson about respecting the opinions of others. There is

nothing wrong with holding fast to your principles, but trying to impose them on other people causes problems – especially when they are false. Would it be different if the principles were true? The message is that either way it is important to leave people to their own opinions.

An amusing aspect to this story is that the bears don't seem to be successful in their efforts to change the man. They attack him but can't seem to do him any harm, and the man has gotten so used to them that they don't even bother him anymore. This is like the way that we can develop a thick skin about criticisms that we hear frequently, so that they don't even bother us. So we resist change.

### Every vice has its own adversaries

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**T**hen Swedenborg interviewed the bear: *“Next I spoke with him who appeared as a bear. It was noticeable that unfriendliness and antipathy existed between the kind of spirits who dispute about truths, and do not permit others to think according to their own understanding, but want to rule over the conscience of others. Hence it was plain that every vice has its own adversaries. He who was a bear said that he was not aware that he appears as such, nor did he know where the urge came from that drove him against the former one.”*

The bear was actually a person – a person similar to the one he attacked. Apparently the verbal attacks that he had launched in his lifetime against others became physical attacks in the next life, in which he appeared as a bear.

The message is clearly stated: *“Hence it was plain that every vice has its own adversaries.”* The two did not like each other because of their similarities, not because of their differences. The message for us may be that if we are often bothered by people who hold rigid views and try to impose them on others, it may be because we tend to do the same thing. The bear in our story did not seem to make an impact on the man, and so it seems that his future would hold many more encounters with bears.

### How did David overcome the bear?

**B**ut David's encounter with the bear in our text was much different. He not only escaped harm but rescued the lamb. He did the same with a lion, and would also do the same in rescuing Israel from Goliath and the Philistines.

What is the difference? We read:

*“Power was given to David to smite the lion and the bear that took away the sheep from the flock, because "David" represented the Lord in reference to Divine truth in which those who are of His church are instructed.”* *Apocalypse Explained* 781.12

The difference is that unlike the man who was attacked by the bear, David is rescuing the lamb. His aim is not to dominate but to save. His tools are not his opinions but the Divine truth. His methods are formed by that truth, and come from love for others, a desire for peace, a willingness to listen, and trust in the Lord.

And unlike the bear, who is misled by a surface understanding of the Word, David represents a deep understanding that is not fooled by fallacious reasoning.

We do not by nature have these qualities in us. We are no match for the bear or the lion. But with the Lord's help we can face these challenges and not be overcome.

The lion, the bear, the wolf and the leopard are then harmless, as in Isaiah's prophecy of a future in which the animals live together in peace. The meaning of Isaiah's words is that under the Lord's rule people will know the truth, will be safe from false ideas, and will not be prone to dominate with unfounded opinions and rigid views, but will live in harmony.

*“There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,*

<sup>6</sup> *“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.*

<sup>7</sup> *The cow and the bear shall graze; their young*



ones shall lie down together;  
<sup>9</sup>They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy  
mountain, for the earth shall be full of the

knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea."  
Isaiah 11 AMEN

## Readings from the Word

### I Samuel 17

**A**nd Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you *are* a youth, and he a man of war from his youth."  
<sup>34</sup> But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, <sup>35</sup> I went out after it and struck it, and delivered *the lamb* from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught *it* by its beard, and struck and killed it. <sup>36</sup> Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God." <sup>37</sup> Moreover David said, "The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."  
And Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you!"

### True Christianity 78

**T**he next day an angel from some community in heaven came to me and said, "... *I will show you how God produced animals and plants of every kind.*"

The angel took me down to a huge green meadow and said, "*Look around.*"

I looked around and I saw birds of gorgeous colors. Some were flying, some were sitting on trees, and some were down in the meadow plucking the petals off roses. Among the birds there were also doves and swans. These things vanished from my sight and then I saw not far from me flocks of sheep and lambs and of kids and nanny goats. Around the flocks I saw herds of cattle and calves, as well as camels and mules. In a grove I saw deer with tall antlers and also unicorns...

[2] When I had seen that, the angel said, "*All the things you saw correspond to different feelings of love felt by the angels who are nearby.*"

### Spiritual Experiences (minor) 4772

**T**here was a certain one who came to me, and the spirits (with me) wondered who he might be. It was sensed from his aura that the spirits felt a repugnance. He said he was lost, and did not know where he was going, and had drifted to this place. He was a man who had been educated, and had confirmed himself in the principles of his own doctrinal tenets, and especially those regarding faith and opposed to charity.

He had been very involved in the discussion of these matters, but he would not affirm anything except only when he heard something that closely approached to his own [doctrine]. He betook himself to a congregation of the Moravian Church. But because he wanted there also to rule them according to his opinions, he was an annoyance to them and, and was asked to leave.

When he left them, he seemed to happen upon a bear, which overcame him, and seemed to maul him, but was unable to do so. He said then that he quite often encountered bears, and they tried to maltreat him, but in vain. This had happened to him so often that he now cared nothing about them.

It was told by angels that those appear to be attacked by bears who have confirmed themselves in doctrinal principles, and tenaciously cling to them, and try to control the minds of others in accordance with them, thus to rule over them - especially when they are false doctrinal tenets. They keep on being harassed until they no longer care to rule others, but are content to leave people to their own doctrine.

Next I spoke with him who appeared as a bear. It was noticeable that unfriendliness and antipathy existed between the kind of spirits who dispute about truths, and do not permit others to think according to their own understanding, but want to rule over the conscience of others. Hence it was plain that every vice has its own



adversaries. He who was a bear said that he was not aware that he appears as such, nor did he know where the urge came from that drove him against the former one.

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