

BOYS, BEARS, AND BALDNESS

Presented by

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In the Old Testament, there is an unusual story about a pair of bears. One of God's holy prophets, a man by the name of Elisha, was on a trip to the city of Bethel. The Bible says, "As he was going up the road, some young lads came from the city and mocked him, and said to him, 'Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!' So he turned around and looked at them, and pronounced a curse on them in the name of the Lord. And two female bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the young lads" (2 Kings 2:23-24).

What is the meaning of this strange series of events? First, it is important to remember that in Old Testament times, prophets were the people God used to communicate His will to men. God said in Deuteronomy 18:18, "I will raise up for them a prophet from among their brethren. I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him." Prophets were men who spoke directly for God. Therefore, if someone was being disrespectful to a prophet, that was the same thing as being disrespectful to **God**.

Second, it also is important to understand that these "young lads" probably were not young **children**, but young **adults**. The Hebrew word that the Bible uses for "young lads" can refer to anyone from a newborn child to an adult. In fact, the same word is used to speak of Joseph in Genesis 41:12 when he was approximately 39 years old, and in Genesis 21:5-12 it is used to describe Isaac when he was 28.

Third, these young men were not joking with Elisha in an innocent manner. Nor were they merely "poking good fun" at him. Rather, their language was intended to be a **real curse** on him. In the Old Testament, God sometimes cursed wicked men with baldness as an outward sign of their sin. So, when these young men referred to Elisha as "baldhead," it was not just an ugly or unkind thing to say. Rather, these young men were saying, "**We curse you, you sinner!**" In 2 Chronicles 36:16, we can read of people who "mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people." It is a very serious thing to show disrespect to a man who has been sent by God.

Fourth, when the young men said to Elisha, "Go up! Go up!," they very likely were saying something that was intended to be ugly and unkind. Not long before this, another prophet (a friend of Elisha's by the name of Elijah) had been carried up into heaven by a chariot of fire sent by God (2 Kings 2:9-11). Thus, when the young men screamed "Go up! Go up!," they were expressing their wish that Elisha, too, should hurry up and leave the Earth so that they could be rid of him!

Fifth, when the Bible says that Elisha “pronounced a curse on them,” it does not mean that he used cuss words. Nor was God’s prophet simply expressing his own personal revenge. The Lord’s prophets frequently were empowered by God’s authority to pronounce an impending judgment upon rebellious people. For example, in Deuteronomy 27:15, Moses said, “Cursed is the one who makes a carved image, which is an abomination to the Lord.” Furthermore, it is clearly stated that Elisha’s curse was “in the name of the Lord,” which means that it was issued by God’s authority.

Sixth, Elisha cannot be blamed for the fact that the two bears came out of the woods and mauled the young men. On his own, Elisha would have had no power to call wild animals out of the woods. But **God** could do that, because **He** has power over the animal kingdom. In Numbers 21:6, God sent fiery serpents to bite and kill the Israelites because they had disobeyed Him. In 1 Kings 13:24, God sent a lion to slay a disobedient young prophet. In Jonah 1:17, He prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And in Daniel 6:22, He shut the lions’ mouths in order to protect Daniel. Clearly, therefore, it was **God** Who brought the two bears out of the forest in order to teach those young men an important lesson about respect and obedience.

We today should learn a lesson from this story as well. We should treat people with respect, and we should obey those whom God has placed in positions of authority. For example, in Romans 13:1-4, we are told to obey the laws of the land. And in Ephesians 6:1, Paul said, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” When we obey the commands of God, we show our love for the Him and for His Son. Jesus Himself said, “If you love Me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). The apostle John spoke of those who were obedient to Christ when he wrote in Revelation 21:7, “He who conquers shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.” Which would you rather be—cursed by God, or referred to as “His Son”? To ask is to answer, isn’t it?