Bald Head?

"Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!" (2 Kings 2:23, ESV)

There are two strange verses tucked into the second chapter of 2 Kings.

Elijah has just been taken into heaven by a whirlwind. Elisha has received his mantle and crossed the Jordan on dry ground. The sons of the prophets have recognized that the spirit of Elijah now rests upon Elisha. Then Elisha goes to Jericho, where the LORD uses him to heal the city's water.

Immediately afterward, Elisha travels toward Bethel.

Along the way, a group comes out of the city and begins mocking him: *"Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!"*

Elisha turns, sees them, and curses them in the name of the LORD. Two female bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of them.

And then the story ends.

Two verses.

What in the world are we supposed to do with that?

At first glance, the account can sound almost absurdly severe. Some children make fun of a prophet's bald head, the prophet becomes angry, curses them, and God sends bears after them.

But perhaps that is not what happened at all.

First, this happened near Bethel. That matters. Bethel had become one of the principal centers of the false worship established by Jeroboam. A golden calf had been placed there, and worship deliberately contrary to God's command had become established there. Elisha was not simply walking past some insignificant little town. God's newly recognized prophet was approaching a center of Israel's rebellion against the LORD.

Nor should we necessarily picture a handful of little children teasing an old man. The Hebrew word used can refer to youths or young men, and there must have been a considerable group of them. Forty-two were mauled.

But perhaps the most important words in their taunt are not *"baldhead."*

They are *"Go up."*

Only a few verses earlier, Scripture tells us, *"Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven"* (2 Kings 2:11, ESV).

Now they tell Elisha, *"Go up."*

Were they simply telling him to continue up the road? Perhaps. But in the immediate context, their words sound considerably more sinister. Elijah had gone up. Now they mock his successor: Go up yourself. Why don't you follow him?

If so, this was not merely ridicule directed at a man's appearance. It was contempt directed toward the LORD's appointed prophet.

That also explains something important about Elisha's response. Scripture does not say that an insulted man angrily retaliated against those who hurt his feelings. It says that Elisha *"cursed them in the name of the LORD"* (2 Kings 2:24, ESV).

This was not about protecting Elisha's dignity. It was about the authority of the God whose word Elisha had been appointed to speak.

Suddenly, the story is not really about baldness at all.

It is about contempt for holy things.

We live in a world in which the things of God are routinely mocked. His name becomes an exclamation. His Word becomes material for jokes. His commands are dismissed as antiquated. His Son is treated as merely another religious figure.

And perhaps familiarity can cause even believers to lose something of the reverence that belongs to God.

The young men outside Bethel saw a bald man walking along a road.

But he was carrying the Word of the LORD.

The strange little story of Elisha and the bears reminds us that what men treat casually, God does not necessarily regard casually.

Perhaps the question is not why God cared about someone calling Elisha bald.

Perhaps the question is whether we still understand what it means to regard the things of God as holy.

Just a thought.

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