

Christian Education

2 Kings 2:23-25

Do you like the bald look on men these days? Ladies, tell me this, do you think bald guys are hot? Everybody's looking for answers and hope. I want to help people find it in God. And his amazing grace.

I have to tell you, it sure seems as though men's hairstyles are in constant change, isn't it so? Usually it's female fashions that are changing all the time, but I have to tell you, men's hairstyles have sure changed a lot. Back in the '50s, the pompadours were big and the fenders and ducktails, that was big stuff. After that, all of a sudden the crew cuts were in and the military kind of buzz cuts and flat tops and butch wax stuff, which made your hair stand up so you could get that flat look. Then the Beatles wave came through and then the long hair came along and then in the '70s, everybody kind of grew their hair out. In fact, back in the '60s, there was even a musical called "Hair." You know, give me some beautiful hair, long beautiful hair. David Crosby had that song where he was going to go to the barbershop and have his hair cut and then he thought, "What am I doing? Somebody stop me. I'm going to let my freak flag fly." Say that three times fast! And you just thought, my hair is my identity, there's no way am I going to get it cut. I'm going to let it grow long. After that it seemed as though we've gone completely the other direction and short hair was cool again. Now hair is getting longer again.

Who started the short hair trend? Do you ever think about that? What starts that trend? Well, I've got my own opinion on this and the person that really seems to have initiated all of this was Michael Jordan, perhaps arguably the greatest basketball player the NBA has ever known. And the chatter in the fashion industry is that he was looking in the mirror one day and saw that his forehead was getting a little bigger and so he declared a preemptive strike and he decided to shave it all off.

It's my opinion that black guys really can pull this off, they look really good. Jordan looked awesome and he inspired a lot of people to follow his lead and shave their heads. And probably a lot of rappers and hip hop guys now got shaved heads underneath their sideways baseball caps and all the bling. But white folks have picked that up too and a lot of white movie stars like Bruce Willis and Vin Diesel had shaved their heads. A lot of young guys were doing it too.

But you know, I think some of this is not purely out of fashion. Some guys just see that horrible, dreaded male pattern baldness creeping in and they look in the mirror and see that their forehead's getting bigger or where they part their hair is getting bigger and they just decide to shave it all off and be done with it. Really, baldness is something most of us men really don't desire, it's something that fills us with a lot of apprehension.

I want to tell you a story from the Bible about baldness and it's not a happy story. Initially, I don't think you're going to like hearing this because it's very stressful. It is a very sad story. But it involves the concept of making fun of someone for being bald. And it's in the book of 2 Kings. It involves the prophet Elisha at the end of chapter 2, starting at verse 23.

2 Kings begins with the end of the ministry of Elijah. It was spiritually a terrible time in the history of God's people. The king of the north was Ahab, who was practically a synonym for corruption and evil, who took advantage of people, bullied them and also organized, permitted and then even financed the worship of Baal. Ahab became a synonym for a wicked king and his wife Jezebel was even worse. Jezebel has become a name for someone who is corrupt and a very bad woman. Just don't ever name your daughters Jezebel. You don't want to tag them with that. It's like calling your son, "Judas," or "Adolph." It's just one of those names better left unused. Ahab was a terrible king and this is the most amazing thing—God's response to Ahab was not to send 100,000 angels to set things right. He didn't send an entire army to overwhelm and conquer the land. He did that later, but not right now. God's plan was to send one guy, the power of one, he sent Elijah.

Elijah had a very hard ministry. Don't ever say: "I wish I could have been a hero like him." You don't want to walk in Elijah's sandals. Much of his ministry was frustrating. He was on the run from hit men trying to kill him. He had to hide half the time of his public service and at one point he thought he was the last believer on earth. God let him know that because of his patient work there were 7,000 believers, but even that

wasn't much compared to the millions of Israelites. So, this is a very low point in their history. God's answer? He sent one guy.

At the end of Elijah's life God said: "You've got one last job. I want you to take your apprentice Elisha, and anoint him and I want you to have him there when I come for you. And one miraculous day God sent a fiery chariot from heaven in a whirlwind. And while Elisha, his younger assistant, was watching, God lifted Elijah straight up into heaven and his reward was that he did not have to experience death. Elijah was one of God's very, very few exceptions where he went straight to heaven. And Elisha just gawked: "Wow!"

And now, God's plan was still the same. Send one guy. And now his name was Elisha. God sent him to represent the voice of God on earth. It might seem like so little, like sending a boy to do a man's job, or sending one guy to do the job of an army but God says: "That's enough. I just want him to talk for me and I want the nation to listen to him as though they were listening to me."

The very first thing Elisha needed to do was to get across the river so he struck the water with his cloak and the water parted and God did that, called the water trick. He did that very same thing to get the Israelite people out of slavery in Egypt—they crossed over the Red Sea, didn't they? And they crossed over the Jordan River bed in the same way. God reenacted that on a little mini-scale for Elisha to let him know that he had God's authority to speak for him. And that his job is nothing less than to hold this nation accountable. They're doing a terrible job of passing on my word. Elisha's ministry really started out with a couple of extraordinary events—one of them showing God's amazing mercy and one of them showing God's really severe judgment and anger on human sin.

The place where Elisha was commissioned for ministry happened near the Jordan River. He began to walk farther inland and went past the city of Jericho. The people there approached him because their water supply was bad and people were getting sick. You know, that's kind of a current thing, too. Once in a while you hear about people who have radon in their wells. As the water table drops to a certain point, you actually can get contaminated water if your well gets too low. So that's a big deal for us today, too, and these people were worried because water is life, especially in a dry land. They were plenty worried and Elisha, through the power of the Lord, actually restored the purity of their drinking water. Let's think about that, Elisha personally became the broker of the power of God to change the physics of their geography and restore healthy drinking water to their community. What a wonderful gift, the water of life, that God gave to them.

The next story though, is a very disturbing one. As Elisha continues to walk along, he's now climbing higher and higher from below sea level elevation. Bethel is now up in the mountains thousands of feet above sea level. As he's walking along the road, it says in 2 Kings 2: "*Some youths,*" some young men, "*came out of the town and jeered at him.*" They were making fun of him. What do you think they did? How do you think they tried to humiliate this man who's older than they were? They picked on him for what they perceived to be a physical deficiency, the fact that he did not have as much hair as they did, and they mocked him for it. "*Go on up, you baldhead,*" they said, "*Go on up, you baldhead!*" This wasn't a pleasant little story, this was mockery and ridicule, and what made it worse is that Elisha had been publicly identified as representing the word and authority and sovereignty of the Lord God of Israel.

Elisha "*turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths. And he went on to Mount Carmel,*" where there was that big showdown with the prophets of Baal and then returned to Samaria. Imagine that! Can you imagine that? What do you suppose it would have been like to be the parents of one of those kids and your son is brought back either limping or wrapped in bandages, or do you think any of them died, wrapped in a white sheet because of the mauling of those bears?

What's going on here? I'll tell you what's going on here. The culture in the land of Israel had now gone so far away from being attentive to God's word that they didn't care! In fact, the word of the Lord was now something to mock because they viewed the God of Israel as absent, as a dream, as an old wives tale, as a joke, nothing anybody who is as cool as us needs to take seriously. And so, these young men, I know they're mostly men, it just doesn't seem to me something that girls would do, this posse, this gang, these Judean hill disciples, these gangster disciples went out and started mocking the person who claimed to represent God. And God

chose this moment to answer the prayer of Elisha and he did what Elisha asked and sent two she bears that mauled those teenagers.

I know how that happens. Their parents did not bring them up in the word. They had not been taught respect. They didn't respect God in heaven, they didn't respect the people at their school, they didn't respect Elisha for his being older than they were, and they picked on something about his physical appearance to mock him and God said: "I will not tolerate that. You cannot mock me and get away with it." And he said: "Right here, I'm taking a stand."

You better believe that the story of those bloodied teenagers, possibly some who were even killed, went far and wide. And that was the first part of Elisha's message. You defy God at your peril. Don't mess with Yaweh—he is serious and worshipping him is serious business. But kids don't figure that out by themselves. If their family and their role models and leaders don't model that for them, they won't get it. Those young people were laughing and mocking at a prophet of the Lord for the same reason that young people cruise the streets of the cities of America—attacking society from the inside out: assaulting people, stealing things, abusing and beating on each other, stealing from their parents, causing pregnancies to bring children into the world nobody can support or care for, playing games with drugs that maim and kill and cause addictions.

Where does this come from? It comes from a failure to disciple, it comes from a failure to train and lead. From this story, do you need any further encouragement to see how important this is? This story, I hope, clinches the deal for you. God is deadly serious that you may not mock him and get away with it. And so, if you have any connection with a teenager, I hope that you pay attention to this story and take this to heart.

The mauling by the bears is only a preview of the great judgment to come. When people you know, maybe neighbors of yours, maybe even relatives of yours, are condemned in the great judgment and end up in an eternal damnation, that is even worse than being mauled by a bear. This is a telegraph from God. "Hello! Wake up, everybody! This is how angry, sinful rebellion makes me. I have infinite patience with your sins. I've sent my Son to live and die and rise again for you, but I cannot and will not ever accept you despising my rescue."

Elisha's job was not only to tell the leadership of Israel where they were wrong and tell them of all their sins, but Elisha also came to encourage people to discover and celebrate and appreciate God's rescue plan. Elisha directed people to the temple where the sacrifices were made, where the blood of an innocent victim was shed so that sinners could go free. The temple in Jerusalem was not just a place of learning interesting facts about Israel's past. It was the divine drama where a holy God accepted sinful people through the shedding of somebody else's blood, in this case the blood of an animal.

If you mocked Elisha, you were despising the God of mercy who sent him. God said: "I will not take it." He sent a message of how poorly the people of Israel were raising and discipling and modeling behavior for their teenagers.

Okay, so that was then, let's talk about now. You know, let's talk about the "so what" does this have to do with us today?

Raising teenagers has never been easy. It's hard to be a parent of teens. They're in that unusual, awkward kind of tween life where they're neither kids anymore, but they're grownups either. And I don't know how many hundreds of times I've treated my kids as grownups when they were still children and that was inappropriate. But I've often treated them like children when they really were acting like grownups. And kids sometimes have confusion, too. They know that they bounce back and forth between those two worlds. They don't want to be treated like a child, but yet they know they're not ready to have the full weight of adulthood resting on them.

I know it's hard to raise kids but I'll tell you what, I'm not proud as I look out at our country. I'm not proud at the job that the people of our country have been doing in raising their kids. This is what I see—I don't know what you see in your world—but what I'm seeing is that too many of our urban communities have kids running around unloved and unsupervised, finding affirmation and finding a sense of belonging in a gang instead of in a family.

I see way too many young people who are growing up missing one, or both, parents. I see way too many young people, way too many teens, who are not getting a decent education: partly because of their own

negligence and partly because of the negligence of others. In many cities, if you're a minority you have only a 40% chance of graduating from high school. That means that you're going to be very difficult to employ. If you cannot get a high school diploma, how can you get a job?

I'll tell you what, I am not proud of the level of safety that my generation is bequeathing to the next generation. I know we have an awful lot of problems in this country and you know what? I care about teens and God cares about teens, too. Let's pay attention to what he has to say to help us in that mission.

Alright, enough negative stuff. Let's conclude this by looking at a positive course of action so that the acts of judgment that God brought upon youthful despisers of his word will not come upon you and me, or our children, or the children of our world. What to do?

Fact One: Don't just let it slide. When God had an enormous job to do, to bring back the spiritual connection between himself and the people of Israel, what did he do? He sent one guy. He sent Elijah and then he sent one more, Elisha. Don't say: "This problem is too big." God is sending you. You have teenagers in your life. Maybe you have your own kids who are at that age, or grandchildren, nieces or nephews, neighbor kids on your block, there certainly are some in your church. Don't assume that they're just going to raise themselves. The reason there was such a miserable attitude on the part of that Judean hillside posse that jumped Elisha and were mocking God's prophet, is that the older people had let them run loose. Get engaged with them!

Survey after survey shows that when people ask teenagers: "What do you most want from your parents?" it's not more money or more freedom, or I want more stuff, I want more cell phones, I want more personal computers, I want laptops, I want bling, I want more clothes. It's not any of that stuff, believe it or not. Do you know what they say over and over again? Can you guess? Time. "I want more time with my parents. I know we argue sometimes, but I'm listening when they talk. I know I sometimes blow them off and I know I sometimes am hard to live with, but I do listen when they talk. I'm desperate for them to hear what's in my heart. I want my parents to hear my longings, I want them to hear my dreams, I can't always express it very well, but if they're hanging around they'll hear it when I finally do get it out. I don't want to be away from them. I don't enjoy fighting with my parents. I know we fight sometimes, but I don't enjoy it. I don't want it to be that way. Don't give up on me. Stay close, stay engaged, please." That's the message that they're sending. "Come to my events. Be part of my life. Cut me some slack and try to understand I'm not going to be a clone of you. Don't try to make me just like you, but accept me for who I am. But be there for me, be there with me. Tell me how to become an adult. I'm scared and confused. I don't want all that responsibility dropped on me right now. Help me finish the growth thing, help me finish arriving."

Another thing I want to challenge you and put on you is to care about schools and to pray for public education. Our country will never become a great, safe and productive place if public education is in the state of collapse. There should not be a Christian anywhere in the world who takes even one drop of satisfaction from seeing dysfunction in public schools. Every urban public school system in the United States is broken in some way. Pray for the schools. Pray for the people who are trying to disciple and raise up the next generation.

Advocate for the Christian high schools as an alternative for parents who are able and who desire an immersion place where their kids can be in a place where Jesus lives and rules. Those schools are not self-funding. Bags of money do not drop out of heaven. It comes one buck at a time from checkbooks and wallets and purses that look just like yours. Where better can you spend your money than to invest in a place where kids get a worldview bigger than themselves. Where they learn to respect the Lord, where they don't make fun of God's word, where they love to be. Where even when they're going through their teenage rebellion, they still know that here's a place where I'm encouraged and counseled in the word.

Spend time with kids, care about them, advocate for them and stay engaged. Do not run away, no matter what age. Out of fear or because you don't seem to understand those kids anymore, don't go away from them. At family gatherings, the kids may not seek you out because they think you think they're dumb and small and stupid. Seek them out and hang with them and be with them and get them to tell you their stories. Make them feel like successes so that they have something that they feel they can be proud of.

One of the reasons that young men join gangs is they are starving for a sense of significance and a sense of being connected to somebody. Give them a better replacement for that type of sick bonding experience and give them connections to something that's really going to matter.

Invest your time and volunteer in programs and ministries that involve mentoring, hanging out with, talking with, praying for and praying with, and being a role model for teens. Is that enough? Do you have enough on your plate? I guess what I'm really saying is that the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus applies to teenagers, too. When Jesus told Peter in the few days that were left before he ascended into heaven, he said: "I want you to feed my sheep" and the teens are part of that.

So, I'm giving a challenge to you personally to care about teenagers, not to give up on them, especially if they're in your extended family. Do not give up on your teens, but continue to hold them accountable, continue to love them and care about them and let them know what it is they need to know about their place in God's world. Jesus wants us to know that teens are precious to him and that his words of both law and gospel, his words of judgment and forgiveness apply to them, as well.

Let's pray especially today for you and for your relationship with the teenagers in your life: Dear Lord, it is a hard thing to be a teenager. You're not quite a child, you're not quite an adult and that transition is often a very stormy one. It's also hard to raise teenagers and for all those who are raising them and for all who are teenagers, we pray today and we ask for your help. Please give parents and leaders and teachers of teens your wisdom and guidance to do it well. Please give teens an eagerness to hear and listen to and obey your word and follow your will and your way for them. Love the teens, dear Lord, and help us to love them, too. We pray in your holy name. Amen.