

The Prayer of Hezekiah

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Even though we no longer live under the law of Moses today, the Old Testament is still useful to us for a number of reasons, and one of the most important of those reasons is given in Romans 15:4. There are many different things that we can learn from the law, but one of the most important of those things is hope. When we read about all of the different ways that God rescued His people in those days, it encourages us to believe that He will save us today too.

This is particularly relevant in the area of prayer. Often, we find ourselves in situations that seem impossible to resolve. The obstacles that are placed in our way appear too great for us to have any chance at success. Sometimes, we find ourselves wondering if even prayer could make a difference in such a disaster. In those times, it helps to recall the heroes of the Old Testament, who often found themselves in equally impossible situations, and the ways that God answered their prayers. Let's look at just one such story this morning, the story of the prayer of Hezekiah.

The Dire Situation

Let's begin this story by looking at **HEZEKIAH'S SITUATION**. It's all too vividly described in Isaiah 36:1-2. To understand this, we need to understand a little bit about the politics of Hezekiah's day. In his time, the Assyrians were the regional superpower. They were the local bullies. Even by the standards of the time, they were a cruel, merciless people, and they marched their giant army up and down the Fertile Crescent, conquering smaller kingdoms, destroying cities, robbing, raping, and murdering. We can think of them as the ancient-world equivalent of the Nazis. And now, these long-ago Nazis have descended on Judah. They've conquered every fortified city in the land except for Jerusalem, and now their huge army, at least 185,000 men, has surrounded the city. Their goal is to kill Hezekiah and destroy Judah.

Basically, Hezekiah's situation was about as bad as we could possibly imagine it being, and in a strange way, that can be comforting to us when we're in an equally miserable position. As the Scripture tells us, Hezekiah was a good king. He did everything that the Lord wanted him to, and yet, he still ended up besieged by an invading horde. In the same way, we can be faithful Christians today, and still have terrible tragedies overtake us. In times like those, we need to remember that just like God wasn't finished with Hezekiah here, He isn't finished with us either.

At this point, one of the Assyrian generals, a man whose title was the Rabshakeh, makes a speech to the officials of Judah pointing out **JUDAH'S HELPLESSNESS**. He begins with a rhetorical question in Isaiah 36:4-5. In other words, he's saying, "What possible reason could you and your tiny little kingdom have for defying the armed might of Assyria? What makes your resistance anything but suicidal?" Then, he goes through and lists out the possibilities. The first two are presented in Isaiah 36:6-7. The Egyptians were the second-rate power in the region, but the Rabshakeh points out, correctly, that they didn't have the resources to protect Judah. Next, the Rabshakeh dismisses God, which is based on a misread by the Assyrian general. During the early portion of his reign, Hezekiah devoted a lot of effort to stamping out the unauthorized worship of Jehovah on the high places outside of Jerusalem. That was actually something that God wanted him to do, but from the Rabshakeh's perspective, it sure looks like Hezekiah is anti-God, and so the Rabshakeh warns the Jewish officials not to trust in God either. The final two warnings come in 36:8-10. The Assyrian army numbers in the hundreds of thousands; the Jewish army is so small that they couldn't come up with 2,000 cavalymen even if the Assyrians gave them the horses. Finally, Rabshakeh claims that God is actually on his side. His implication is that God has actually rejected Judah, and outwardly, there looks to be evidence for that claim.

In much the same way, there can be times in our lives when we feel completely helpless and may well be completely helpless, despite having done everything right. When we're in that position, the Rabshakeh's advice is actually partly correct. We shouldn't trust in ourselves. We shouldn't trust in some other human force to rescue us. However, we shouldn't also reject God on that basis. No matter how bad things are, if we follow Him, He will bless us.

As this dialogue continues, the Rabshakeh presents **THE KING'S BARGAIN** to the people of Jerusalem. Sennacherib's offer appears in Isaiah 36:16-17. In essence, these are terms of surrender. He's telling the people of Judah that if they give up on God, if they reject the king whom God has given them, then he's going to treat them well. He's not going to brutalize them if they leave the city, and he'll bring them into exile in a land that's as fruitful as Judah.

There are two problems with this offer. First, the Assyrian king was almost certainly lying. Once the people of Jerusalem leave the city, they have no bargaining power, and the Assyrians can treat them however they want. Second, though, it is a rejection of the promises of God. God had given them the land of Canaan to dwell in as long as they were faithful to Him, and if they left the land to go somewhere else, it would show that they had lost faith in the promise.

Today, the devil often offers similar bargains to us. He whispers in our ear that life will be better if we give up on God. If our lives are busy and frazzled, he wants us to believe that we can have more time if we start missing church. If our faith is causing conflict with non-Christian friends and family members, he'll tell us how much better and more

peaceful things will be if we stop fighting. He tells us that we don't need God, because he'll take care of us just fine. Of course, the devil's promises aren't any more to be believed than the promises of the Assyrian king. If we turn our lives over to him, he is sure to send us to hell by the most miserable route possible. We need to keep fighting for God.

After this little conference concludes, Sennacherib himself sends a **MESSAGE TO HEZEKIAH**. We find its essence in Isaiah 37:10-12. The Assyrian king doesn't bother explaining the situation like the Rabshakeh did. He knows that Hezekiah's position is hopeless in human terms, and he knows that Hezekiah is just as aware of that fact as he is. All that Hezekiah has left is the hope that God will deliver him, and Sennacherib does his best to demolish that hope. He points out that all kinds of other nations have trusted in their gods to save them, but all of those other kingdoms were destroyed. He wants Hezekiah to believe that his God is no different, that his faith is as vain as the faith of others.

This is a slightly different argument than we saw from the Rabshakeh earlier. The Rabshakeh argued that God wouldn't save Judah. This time, Sennacherib is arguing that God can't save Judah. That's something that the devil wants us to believe too. When we're in some difficult situation, he wants us to bow our heads to the seemingly inevitable. He wants us to reject faith, to reject prayer, to abandon our hope in God and surrender to him in despair.

The Salvation of God.

In the face of this apparently irresistible force, **HEZEKIAH'S REACTION** is quite telling. We read what he does in Isaiah 37:14-15. Sennacherib's message has come to him on a scroll, so Hezekiah takes the scroll to the temple and spreads it out before the Lord. He unrolls the scroll on the temple floor to make it perfectly clear to God what the Assyrian king has said. Then, he begins his prayer for deliverance from the invading army.

Brethren, we need to do the same thing. When all of these woes keep piling up in our lives, when the devil is really after us, we need to spread it all out before the Lord. We need to tell him everything that's going on in our lives, everything that's in our hearts, our weaknesses, our fears, everything. It reminds us of how badly we need his help and establishes our communication with Him. Then, we need to begin to pray for the help that only He can give.

We learn more about what's in Hezekiah's heart from **HIS PRAYER**. This prayer appears in Isaiah 37:16-20. Hezekiah begins here with a contrast. God is the Creator of all things, great beyond measure, and yet the arrogant king of Assyria has dared to mock Him by claiming that He can't protect His people. From there, Hezekiah shifts to make another contrast. Yes, the Assyrians have destroyed many cities. Yes, the gods of those cities failed to protect them. But God is different. Unlike the idols of wood and stone, God can save His people and prove again that He is Lord.

Likewise, brethren, our prayers must contain the knowledge that God is different. The people of the world around us place their trust in all kinds of different things. They worship the idols of self, of materialism, of human wisdom, and of false religion. When their burdens get heavy, they try to lean on those things, and those things inevitably betray them. All of us know shattered, ruined people who tried to rely on the wrong things, but that doesn't mean anything for us. God is different. No matter what the crisis, He will surely give us what we need. He will deliver us.

Next in the story, we see **GOD'S ANSWER** to this prayer. This answer comes from the lips of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 37:26-29. There are two main parts to this text. First of all, God points out who has really been in control as the Assyrians were rushing around the world destroying nations. The only reason they had such success is because God allowed them to have that success. Now that Sennacherib has gone too far and challenged his Creator, God is going to show him who's boss. He's going to deliver Judah from him and send him back to his homeland empty-handed.

Even though we aren't going to have a personalized answer delivered to us like Hezekiah did, God's words here are every bit as true in our lives. No matter how badly things have been going, no matter how strong the devil and his servants appear to be in our lives, the devil isn't in control. Evil men aren't in control. Even blind misfortune isn't in control. God is in control, now, tomorrow, and forever. For reasons that seem sufficient to Him, He may well allow the devil to sow misery and sorrow in our lives, just like He allowed that in the life of Job. He has never made a promise to us that everything's going to be fine just because we serve Him. However, He has promised that our problems will be limited to a little while, and that we will never face a test we cannot pass with His help. No matter how bleak things appear, the devil can't win unless we let Him. As long as we place our prayerful trust in God, our victory is certain.

In fact, the story of Hezekiah's prayer concludes with **GOD'S VICTORY**. We read about it in Isaiah 37:36-38. The Assyrian army looked like an unstoppable force, but it paled in comparison to the power of God. He sent a single angel out to destroy them, and 185,000 strong warriors perished in a single night. Apparently, of all that mighty host, only Sennacherib was left, not because God was merciful, but because God wanted him to appreciate how foolish it was to defy the Almighty. The Assyrian king fled home, only to be murdered by his sons, and Judah was delivered.

Today, brethren, God may not answer our prayers as spectacularly, but He will answer them every bit as powerfully. He may not give us more than we need, but He will never give us less. Throughout our lives, He will guard every step of the way with love, and once our lives are over, He will bring us to live with Him in the joyful eternity of heaven. We can have his incomparable blessings now and forever. All we have to do is ask.