

*The Story: Faith In Fearful Times*

*By Jason Huff*

*Psalms 25:1-3a, 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, 2 Kings 17:5-7; 18:1-7,28-30,33; 19:15-20,35-37*

Today's final Scripture readings are taken from the book of 2 Kings. Listen now to God's Word. "The king of Assyria invaded the entire land [of Israel], marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea [the king of Israel], the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes. All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

In the third year of Hoshea, Hezekiah son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles... Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook.

[Hezekiah] rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him. Then the Assyrian commander called out [to those in Jerusalem] in Hebrew: "Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria! This is what the king says: do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you from my hand. Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, 'The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?"

Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: "O LORD, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God. It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by men's hands. Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God."

Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I have heard your prayer concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria." That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning – there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there. One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king."

After this week's snows, we all know what it's like to live in fear...real or imagined. Now fear of snowstorms is not the same as the threat of violence or poverty...but it is fear nonetheless. Fear is part of the human landscape. A few here may remember World War II or Korea, more the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam. My generation was around for the oil crisis, and we grew up knowing we were only moments away from the reach of a Russian nuke. We've seen the horror of Tiananmen Square and 9/11. In the last month, we've seen a congresswoman shot, an airport bombed and the Egyptian government crumble. Instant international news makes us more aware than any other generation of what goes on in the world...and it all gives us more to fear. We fear the future and all its unknowns, and we wonder about God's role in it all.

As we study chapter 16 in *The Story* this week, we enter into a time of real fear for the Jewish people. As it begins, the northern kingdom of Israel is laid waste. The kings of Assyria systematically destroy it; they capture Samaria and deport the Hebrews while bringing their own people in. The northern empire receives its sentence after 200 years of disobedience. We also see the groundwork of a new people group laid – the Samaritans. When the Israelites trickle back home, they intermarry with the Assyrian pagans and intermingle worship practices until all they know is a bare shadow of the Hebrew faith. That's why the people of the southern kingdom of Judah grow to despise the Samaritans, as we will see in Jesus' day.

The southern kingdom of Judah watches this catastrophe unfold in their own backyard. The most powerful army in the entire known world is pounding at their gate, having just destroyed a nation far more powerful than themselves. King Hezekiah knows it. He's a deeply devoted follower of Yahweh. Everything God says he should do, he does. He removes all the idols. He even removes the high places where the people had worshipped. Now he sees the Assyrians destroy country after country. His father paid tribute to the Assyrians. But he rebels. He is determined to follow God and not the ways of the enemy.

During Sennacherib's reign over Assyria, things come to a head. Sennacherib takes Judah's fortified cities. Hezekiah strips the temple of gold and silver to appease him. But Sennacherib takes the money and then has it proclaimed to the city of Jerusalem, in Hebrew, that no god has ever stood before the might of the Assyrian army. The Assyrians suggest they give up, promising them kind treatment and deportation to a land just like their own. To their credit, the people of Jerusalem do nothing as the Assyrians march on them.

Hezekiah consults with the prophet Isaiah, who tells him not to fear, that God will deal with the blasphemy of the Assyrians. Hezekiah prays for deliverance, and God sends it as an enormous number of Assyrian troops die unexpectedly. Sennacherib heads back to Ninevah, where he is eventually betrayed and murdered by his own sons. By the faith of Hezekiah and the grace of God, disaster is averted.

This event is controversial because an ancient document called the Prism of Sennacherib tells the story from his point of view. Sennacherib's Prism was found in the ruins of Nineveh in 1830. It describes how Sennacherib received a payment of tribute from Hezekiah and how his siege trapped Hezekiah in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage." No mention is made of a hundred thousand troops dying, only all the loot he took. Does this contradict the Bible?

Scholars of the ancient near east, believers and non-believers alike, agree that both accounts show Sennacherib surrounding the city with a massive army and siege works...and then leaving, heading back to Nineveh and never again leading another military campaign. This was a man whose records boast of him utterly annihilating rebellious kings who refused to honor him. Meanwhile, Egyptian and Chaldean records – never very favorable to the Israelites – confirm the death of Sennacherib's men. Another Babylonian artifact confirms that Sennacherib was assassinated by his sons precisely as the Bible mentions. If you ever wonder about the historical accuracy of the Bible, you can see its truthfulness here.

During the time of Hezekiah, Isaiah brought both good and bad news. Isaiah prophesied that Jerusalem would fall to invaders that God Himself would assemble. The nation would be destroyed as a sign of God's judgment on their rebellion against Him. But while Isaiah predicted that the Judeans would be carried off into exile, God would return them to their home one day. And still further, Isaiah prophesied about the messiah who would deliver Israel.

The story of Hezekiah resonated with me this week. Here you have a godly king faced with an overwhelming situation. In his most fear-filled moment, he turned to God and received an answer that saved Judah from ruin for over a hundred years. This story reveals just how like us Hezekiah was. What Hezekiah learned can save us a lot of grief in our relationship with God.

Here's the first thing I noticed...*Hezekiah followed his common sense first out of fear, and the common sense solution failed him.* When Sennacherib first comes knocking at Israel's door, despite being the godliest king since David, Hezekiah's first reaction is to pay him off. Hezekiah winds up peeling off every last piece of gold and silver off the temple just to satisfy him. We're talking ten tons of silver and a ton of gold. But this didn't satisfy Sennacherib. Hezekiah couldn't buy peace. His common sense solution was not to get God involved but to handle it himself...and all it did was whet Sennacherib's desire for more of his kingdom.

Fear makes people do strange things, things that go against the core of our faith. We fear that we won't have enough money, so we fail to tithe or help the less fortunate or support missions. We fear crime, so we buy guns to protect ourselves, forgetting that Jesus taught us to love our enemies and that He has control over our fate. We fear loneliness, so we have the TV or radio on all day to keep our minds distracted...only to find that we're distracted from God. We fear not being loved, so we dive into unhealthy and sometimes immoral relationships to keep the hope of love alive. We fear rejection, so we keep our faith to ourselves, overlooking that Christ said only those that acknowledge Him before others will be welcomed into His kingdom.

That isn't to say that we should go through life without a care for safety or security or love; Scripture tells us to be wise as serpents but gentle as doves. Wisdom tells us not to travel at 70 miles an hour without a seat belt, for example. But common sense often fails us because it's not necessarily godly sense. In some situations, Hezekiah's bribe for peace might have worked. It still doesn't mean it was the best, most godly move he could have made. Had he shown as much faith in God at this moment of crisis as he did when he was removing the idol worship of the past from his nation, who knows what the long-term outcome would have been?

And so I encourage us to think briefly...what fears do we have that get in the way of our love of God? What is so big that God can't handle it? The passage we heard from 2 Corinthians this morning reaffirms that God's people do suffer from time to time, but ultimately it teaches us to rely on God and not on ourselves. As Paul wrote, "God has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us again." Either God is in control of the universe or He's not. Either God is in control of your ultimate salvation or He's not. Either God is in control of your finances and your family and your choices, or He's not. One path leads to fear; the other path leads to life. It's my prayer that you and I give ourselves over to God and have faith in His ways.

Eventually, that's what Hezekiah did, and that's the second thing I saw in my study...*the prayers of the faithful are heard and answered as they bring glory to God.* As James the brother of Jesus writes in James 5:16, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." What's interesting about Hezekiah's prayer is that it is not about saving the Israelites for their own sake. Sennacherib had stated that no nation's god had ever stopped him from destroying them. Hezekiah asks God to deliver the Israelites from him so that the world might know that Yahweh alone is the true God. Hezekiah asks for God to be glorified, and that's what God does by destroying the Assyrian army.

Now we may fault Hezekiah for not being perfect, for not first turning to God in prayer. Yet his situation is not unlike ours. We've all heard the old adage, "do your best and leave the rest up to God." But what if turning it all over to God first is in fact the very best thing possible? What if prayer was the first thing we did in the morning and something we did whenever we thought of it throughout the day? What if prayer was less like work and more like breathing? If prayer was oxygen, we'd notice real quickly if we stopped praying. After just a short time, we would realize our need for more time with God. When Paul writes, "Pray without ceasing," he didn't mean spending every waking moment with eyes closed and head bowed. He meant living in a constant awareness of God's presence and speaking to Him regularly as if He was our closest friend. I believe that would be a huge step for us in coming closer to God. If we talk to God about everything on a regular basis, when fearful times arrive, our fear won't rule us.

Another thing really convicted me this week...how often do I pray for God to be glorified in my prayer requests? Each week when we say the Lord's Prayer, we say, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." A constant theme in the Bible is the glorification of God. One of our Presbyterian confessions states the chief end of humanity is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Are we intentional in asking God to be glorified through us?

Perhaps one of the reasons our prayers seem unanswered is because they don't glorify God. I love it when we lift up praises alongside our prayer requests each week here in the worship service because it glorifies God for what He has done. But in my daily prayer life, I'm often more concerned about what I want to see happen than I am concerned about seeing God glorified through His response to my prayers. I started thinking this week about God's being glorified. God doesn't need an ego massage; He's not conceited. When He is truly glorified, it brings people into relationship with Himself. When He is glorified, when people see God for who He really is, it is a life-changing experience. When we see God's glory, we see our own sin and guilt and how we are separated from God -- but we also see in His glory His love for us and His willingness to save us from ourselves.

Seeking God's will and asking for His glory to be revealed, to know Him and make Him known – those are the core reasons why we pray. The means by which He glorifies and reveals Himself, by answering our requests, is secondary. Whether it's through the healing of a friend or providing someone with a job or mending a broken heart or stopping an invasion, God can be glorified through them all. Let's *start* praying with God's glory in mind, and *then* bring our requests before Him.

Here's one final thought...*your faithfulness in fearful times may not change events, but it will change you.* God granted Hezekiah's request, but it didn't mean the nation was all better for all time. Isaiah predicted that wickedness would once again consume the people; he predicted their exile as God's punishment. Hezekiah's prayer didn't save the nation of Judah forever. But Hezekiah and the nations around Judah knew the LORD's power when Hezekiah's prayer was answered.

Not every prayer fits into God's will, even some prayers He answers with a "yes." Often, we have no idea of the ramifications of our prayers. For example, Hezekiah became ill, and God told him through Isaiah that he would not recover. Hezekiah prayed for healing, and because of his prayer, God extended his life 15 years. Now that's a great answer to prayer, right? But here's the difficult part...three years later, Hezekiah welcomed a son named Manasseh. Manasseh became king at age 12, and he ruled for 55 years. But Manasseh was incredibly wicked and did more evil than any other king of Judah. God declared that it was Manasseh and the wickedness he led the nation into that brought about its eventual destruction. Who knows what might have happened if Hezekiah had accepted the will of God rather than asking for more time?

That's hard for us to hear. If we pray for the LORD's will to be done, for Him to be glorified when He answers our prayers, He might not say "yes" to the specifics. But when we become faithful in prayer, we realize that God is still faithful to us when He answers "no." He truly has the best interests of His children in mind. When God grows us to maturity in Christ, our primary reason to pray is not to get what we want. We pray so that we might become attuned to what God wants. And when that happens, we start to realize just what a change He has made in us. It's when we begin to pray in earnest, when we get past our own desires and start seeing prayer as a way to commune with the creator of the universe, that we will start to see true change occur...in tiny ways, perhaps, but changes that will have eternal significance.

We live in fearful times, but we need not be afraid. Instead, we simply need to be in prayer to our maker. We can rejoice that through faith in Jesus Christ, we will live forever with Him, where the fears of the present day will be a quickly forgotten shadow. If you have never turned to God and asked Him to forgive you, to save you through the sacrifice of His Son, do it today. You will never be free from fear if you don't. When you do, you will find that your world won't necessarily have changed. Your life will not become easier; it may in fact be harder. But *you* will be changed, and the Savior in whom you have faith will see you through the fearful times into His glorious eternity.