

The Captain of My People

"This man shall be the peace when the Assyrian shall come into our land, and when he shall tread in our Palaces"—Micah 5:5

HEZEKIAH was one of the 3 greatest kings of Israel: David, Hezekiah and Josiah. His outstanding characteristic was trust in God (2 Kings 18: 5-6)—

"He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him of all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him.

"For he clave to the Lord and departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses."

His one recorded failure—his heart being lifted up with pride when he showed all his glories and treasures to the Babylonian ambassadors—was the result, not of lack of trust, but of fleshly presumption upon that trust. How easy it is to fail—either at one extreme or the other! How deceptive is the flesh and the heart of man!

Because Paul had great privileges and prominence in God's purpose, he had to have a "thorn in the flesh" to humble and handicap him. Hezekiah had great power and great blessing, and great favor with God for his zeal and faithfulness: and the flesh being what it is, even this great man was carried away, and had to be humbled and rebuked.

There is a tremendous lesson here—we are never safe. We must be always prayerfully on our guard against the deception of the flesh.

The chronology of this period is difficult to harmonize, both within the Scriptures itself, and with the Assyrian records. Much is made by orthodox commentators of the accuracy of the Assyrian records—the so-called "eponyms" or lists of years and events tied in with eclipses, etc.—and the archaeological inscriptions. The modern tendency is to rewrite the Bible record to fit these human records.

But as soon as we look into these wonderful "eponyms," we find scholars vary greatly in interpreting and aligning them, and they are clearly far from dependable. And as for the inscriptions found, the Assyrians, even more than most, were notoriously liars and boasters in promoting their own glory.

The scriptural record in 2 Kings 18 to 20 is clearly not all in chronological order, nor meant to be. Chapters 18 and 19 are generally chronological, except that some items are mentioned in them that refer backward or forward—like the general summary in 18:2-8, and the death of Sennacherib in 19:37, which was actually 20 years later. Also it is not clear where time gaps occur. There appears to be a 12-year gap between verses 16 and 17 of chapter 18.

Chronology is not too important, except to the extent that it helps us to see the relationship of events to each other, and the period in a man's life and development when he does certain things (as in what period of Hezekiah's life his heart was lifted up). We can get a better and fairer picture of a man's actions and record if we can determine the order in which they occur.

Hezekiah's sickness and presumption are recorded at the end, in both Kings and Isaiah, but clearly they did not occur at the end, by the dates and facts given. We know he lived 15 years after his sickness.

The history of Hezekiah is given great prominence in the scripture record. It fills 11 chapters: 2 Kings 18 to 20; 2 Chronicles 29 to 32; and Isaiah 36 to 39. ...

... We are told in this chapter (20) that 15 years were added to Hezekiah's life. He reigned 29 years, so we have to go back to his 14th year for his sickness—the same year the Assyrians first came and he paid tribute, as recorded in 18:13-16. So beginning chapter 20—

Verse 1: God said, "*Set thine house in order for thou shalt die, and not live.*"

Verse 3: And Hezekiah wept sore, and prayed not to die. Whether he was wise in this request is hard to say. Certainly as a general rule it is best to submit to the vastly superior wisdom and arrangements of God, rather than to seek our own way. Who are we to know what is best? And certainly the son that was born during the added 15 years was by his wickedness the direct cause of Judah's final destruction (2 Kings 23:26). And certainly Hezekiah's one great failure occurred later, and as a direct consequence of his extension of life.

If his concern was for himself, it would seem far wiser to submit to God's appointments. But if his concern was for his people, like Paul and Moses under similar considerations, then at least we can sympathize. The fact that God gave him assurance of deliverance from the oppression of Assyria right together with the extension of his life (v. 6) would point in this direction and indicate that this was probably why he did not want to die.

He doubtless realized the shallowness and precariousness of the people's reformation and worship. He would realize there was much to be done if the nation was to be preserved, and he would not want to leave his people as they then were—under bondage and tribute to Assyria.

Truly he did fail after this, but also he did humble and recover himself, so God's wrath was turned away, and he went on later to his greatest triumph of faith—his defiance of the Assyrian host. In its consequent miraculous destruction Judah was completely relieved of the Assyrian oppressor for many years, and may have been permanently so had not Manasseh's wickedness caused God to bring Assyria to carry him away captive.

* * *

Hezekiah's life was extended 15 years. In Rabshakeh's appeal to the people to submit to Assyria (2 Kings 18:32), he said the king would carry them away to a land like their own land. This was the Assyrian policy: Israel had already been taken away, and so had a great number from Judah itself.

Clearly the Assyrians planned the end of the nation of Judah, and Hezekiah could see this closing in on the land. But as a result of his faith and resistance, we find that Judah enjoyed 105 more years of independence and national life, from the year of Hezekiah's sickness (713 BC) to 608 BC, when Pharaoh Necho carried king Jehoahaz captive and set up Jehoiakim as an Egyptian vassal.

105 is 7 x 15; the nation had 7-fold the extension of life that Hezekiah had.

Verse 8: Hezekiah asked for a sign. Why? Was this a lack of faith? And he was given a sign—a tremendous sign—one of the great mysteries of Scripture which people have pondered on ever since. In some way, God caused the shadow on the sundial to go exactly 10 degrees backward, and He gave Hezekiah choice beforehand whether it would be backward or forward.

Why such a tremendous sign for something that was going to happen in 3 days anyway? Couldn't Hezekiah just believe and wait?

Perhaps this reveals something to us about Hezekiah's faith that God knew and Hezekiah realized. Faith is not an automatic thing: God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

Hezekiah bore great responsibility for the nation. Their destiny and very existence depended on what this one man did. The Assyrians are notorious for their ruthless and wanton cruelty to their captives—especially to any who had resisted them. It was customary to cut off the hands, feet, ears and noses, and put out their eyes, or to impale them alive on sharp poles.

Clearly, for what he had to do in standing up to this power with only the armor of faith, Hezekiah needed the strength of a tremendous sign. It wasn't just getting well. It was the prodigious work that lay before him.

The very fact that he failed so soon after this when put to the test emphasizes the need. It wasn't that his faith failed. He failed in the opposite direction—presumption, self-sufficiency: his heart was lifted up. And the sign was the indirect cause of his failure, for the ambassadors had come because of his sickness and recovery, and to *"inquire of the wonder that was done in the land."*

How hard it is for the flesh to keep a true and stable balance! But it was all part of his training and development, out of which he at last successfully came.

Verse 12: Berodach (or Merodach) Baladan sends messengers and a present to Hezekiah.

Verse 13: And Hezekiah "hearkened unto them," and showed them everything he had. What does it mean, he "hearkened unto them"? Clearly there was something more to it than a simple goodwill visit. Isaiah pointedly asked Hezekiah, *"What saith these men?"* (v. 14).

Merodach-Baladan had a continuous history—before and after this time—of revolt and sedition against Assyria, to which he was nominally subject. It would seem here that his purpose was intrigue, and Hezekiah seems to have been flattered and carried away.

Hezekiah's basic desire was freedom for his people from Assyria. Here was a strong ally with a scheme for revolt. It would be easy for him to convince himself that here was a provision from God.

But he did not seek divine counsel. If we are not careful to continually seek God's guidance—in study of His Word and in prayer—we can let our desires, very commendable as they may be, cause us to get involved in questionable associations and activities by relying on our own wisdom and power. Of this incident 2 Chr. 32:25 records—

"Therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem."

Note again how his action affected others beside himself. The specific reason given for God's displeasure was that—

"He rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him, for his heart was lifted up."

Apparently, like Moses, he for the time being forgot his complete dependence upon God, and was carried away by the natural pride and self-sufficiency of the flesh. Mercifully, Isaiah was sent immediately to rebuke him back to wisdom and humility and faithful dependence. Deliverance from the Assyrian yoke was not to come by human scheming or by the pride-arousing arm of the flesh.

Isaiah—in saying that all Judah's wealth, and Hezekiah's own descendants, should be taken captive to Babylon—does not specifically say it was because of Hezekiah's display of pride. But he does make it very clear that material things are very transitory and nothing to build pride on, and also that Babylon would be a very dangerous ally, and would replace

Assyria as the oppressor.

Hezekiah immediately humbled himself, and recognized his error, and so did the inhabitants of Jerusalem (so, clearly, they were involved with him). And he was given assurance (v. 19) there should be—

"Peace and truth in his days."

We note "peace AND truth." There cannot be peace without truth. Hezekiah's whole course before God was a sincere endeavor to serve Him in TRUTH, and when he humbled himself he determined to follow truth, and not allow pride to deceive him again.

This concludes 2 Kings 20 (except the final summary of verses 20-21), and brings us back to 2 Kings 18:17.

The Assyrians have invaded the land again, and this time Hezekiah is not paying tribute but putting his faith in God, and defying them. It is clearly a different and later occasion from verses 13-16, where he bought them off.

The Bible does not give any date for this invasion, but from Assyrian records it appears to have been 12 years later, in Hezekiah's 26th year, in 701 BC, near the end of his reign. In the intervening 12 years, God had prospered Hezekiah greatly.

Rabshakeh's words (2 Kings 18:19-25 and 28-35) make two things clear that distinguish this invasion from the previous one—

1. Hezekiah was in defiance and not submitting and paying tribute.
2. The purpose this time was not tribute, but destruction of the nation (v. 25) and deportation of the people (v. 32).

Rabshakeh's speech is very clever, and he makes five strong points that would be a great test of his hearers' faith:

1. Verse 21: He points out that Egypt, their only possible natural ally, was both weak and undependable—a bruised reed which pierced the hand of him that leaned on it for support. Isaiah had publicly said much in warning against dependence upon Egypt, and doubtless the Assyrians were aware of this, for they show a remarkable familiarity with Judah's internal affairs. (Espionage and intelligence has always been the lifeblood of successful war). Isaiah had said—

"They shall be ashamed of Egypt their glory ... whither shall we flee for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria?" (20:5-6).

Similarly, over 100 years later, the Babylonians were aware of Jeremiah's prophecies and exhortations to his people to submit, and they used them in their psychological warfare against Judah.

2. Verse 22: Rabshakeh points out that Hezekiah had removed all the high places throughout the land. To many, perhaps most, of the people, this would be removing the visible aspects of their worship, and rejecting their God. Again we note Rabshakeh's knowledge of Judah's affairs, and his clever use of that knowledge.

3. Verse 23: He vividly exposes and emphasizes the military weakness of Hezekiah and focuses attention on his own vast military resources by the challenge that he will supply 2000 horses if Hezekiah can furnish riders.

Hezekiah's inability to meet this challenge would manifest to all the people how hopeless his condition naturally was. It would also, a little later, emphasize the miraculousness of the deliverance.

4. Verse 25: Rabshakeh says God had told him to come against Judah to punish it. (And he is actually familiar with and uses the divine Name, Yahweh. We notice later he is able to speak Hebrew).

This point would have a disturbing and discouraging effect on those most likely to support Hezekiah: those sincere ones who realized the nation's wickedness and the call for God's judgment. Here again, Rabshakeh manifests an apparent knowledge of Isaiah's prophecies, for Isaiah had said to Ahaz, Hezekiah's father (7:17)—

"Yahweh shall bring upon thee the king of Assyria."

There would, therefore, be much doubting and searching of heart: If this is truly God's doing, should we resist?

5. Verse 33: His final point: "Have any gods of any lands been able to deliver their people from Assyria?" If Assyria was stronger than the combined gods of all the other nations, how could little Judah and its God stop them?

But here was where the Assyrians, with their cleverness of argument, went too far and destroyed themselves. They directly challenged the God of Israel. Furthermore, the king of Assyria himself put this last point—their key point, their basic challenge—into writing, and messengers came again from the king of Assyria with it in a letter (2 Kings 19:9-14). And Hezekiah took this letter of blasphemy and spread it before the Lord in the Temple.

The consequence was the miraculous destruction of 185,000 of the enemy in one night. And we learn from 2 Chr. 32:21 that it was ALL the mighty men of valor, and the leaders, and the captains—his whole trained officer corps—and not just plain soldiers that could soon be replaced. This would break the back of the Assyrian power for many years.

This appears to have been about 3 years before Hezekiah's death. He had at last, by his faith, delivered his people from the enemy. This typical Messiah had gone to the gates of the grave (Isa. 38:10-14), and had come again the THIRD DAY (2 Kings 20:5) to the House of the Lord, and at last in renewed strength had "become the peace when the Assyrian came into the land" (Micah 5:5).

"And Hezekiah slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the chiefest of the sepulchres of the sons of David, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem did him honor at his death..."

"And Manasseh his son reigned in his stead."

And with Manasseh began all over again the wickedness and abominations, and consequent oppression of the cruel Assyrian power, and at last the complete destruction of the nation and desolation of the land.

(Taken from "Be Ye Transformed" Volume 3 by Bro. G. Growcott).