

Isaiah 36-37: The Prayer of Hezekiah

The year was about 701 BC, and the dominant empire in the Middle East was Assyria. The King of Judah and Jerusalem was Hezekiah and God's prophet in Jerusalem was Isaiah. 2 Kings 18 gives us the historical account from the Jewish perspective. Judah was a tiny nation caught between the two powerful forces of Assyria and Egypt. The northern kingdoms of Israel and Syria had already fallen to Assyria, but Hezekiah had avoided war by paying massive tribute of gold and silver, but in 701 BC, he rebelled. King Sennacherib of Assyria led a massive force into Judah, defeated the Egyptians and took all the cities in the Middle East, except one—Jerusalem. Finally the Assyrian army laid siege to Jerusalem, but Isaiah assured Hezekiah that the Assyrian army would not take Jerusalem. In 2 Chronicles 32:7, we read his encouraging words to his people, "Be strong and courageous, do not fear the king of Assyria, nor shall you fear the multitude which is with him, for the one with us is greater than the one with him."

Intimidation—the Letter from the King of Assyria

The problems of life are cleverly disguised as overwhelming and unsolvable. The King of Assyria sent an intimidating letter to be broadcast to the people of Jerusalem. Not only was the Assyrian army huge, but they had destroyed every other nation and city they had attacked. So far their record was about 200 to nothing, so why would Jerusalem be any different? Scared, Hezekiah sent a delegation to the prophet Isaiah to inquire of The Lord. Then Hezekiah went into the Temple and laid out the ruthless letter of Assyria before The Lord. From a humanistic viewpoint the argument of the letter was irrefutable—your ally Egypt will be no help, your religion won't help you any more than the religions of all the other cities, even if we spotted you 2000 horses you couldn't field the men to ride them, the more powerful Assyrian god sent them and he is on our side, and odds makers put us a thousand to one favorite. The messenger of Assyria yelled an enticing but deceitful offer to the people, "surrender and come out and I will take you to a new and better land and give it to you".

The Boasting of the King of Assyria vs. the Humility of Hezekiah

I'm sure the Assyrian ambassador sounded like the pro wrestlers on TV talking about how great they are and all the horrible things they plan to do to their opponents. This begs the question—why does the human race revel in such boasting? Why do people love to listen to the pro wrestlers? Why is Joe Namath famous because he guaranteed a Super Bowl win? Why is Jimmy Johnson famous for guaranteeing the win over San Francisco in the NFL Championship game? My theory is that we secretly wish we could get away with such blatant self promotion. We fantasize our own selfish vain glory, and we would love to be able to

actually do what our pride fantasizes we could do. Meanwhile the King of Judah was prostrate within the Temple. Isaiah 37:1 tells us that King Hezekiah tore his clothes off and put on sackcloth (a burlap bag), which were signs of grief and humility, and then he entered the house of The Lord to pray. To us, this is a sign that they had come to an end of themselves, they were broken, and were placing themselves totally in the hands of God. The answer came through Isaiah from God that they should not worry, but He would send the bad guys back to Assyria where King Sennacherib would be murdered by his own. The nature of the day within Jerusalem was disclosed in Isaiah 37:3, “a day of distress, rebuke, and rejection”, but Assyria sent yet another boastful message to Jerusalem in Isa. 37:10-13. My paraphrase of that letter is “Don’t listen to your prophet from God, we kicked everyone else’s behind and we will kick yours too. Their gods couldn’t help them and yours won’t help you.” What made that letter intimidating is that Judah continued to get reports that all those cities and nations had indeed fallen, and Assyria had committed horrible atrocities to all of them. Could tiny Judah stand alone against the world? These types of threats and problems really do appear to be overwhelming and unsolvable, but this circumstance is what it took to bring the people of Jerusalem and the King of Judah to their knees in complete submission and dependence on the one true God. Therefore in Isa. 37:14, we see King Hezekiah spread out the letter on the floor of the Temple before God, which was a symbolic act of laying the problem and their need before The Lord.

Hezekiah’s Prayer-a Model of the Great Prayers of the Bible

A breakdown of this prayer in Isaiah 37:16-20 may give us a wonderful model for answered prayer in our own lives. In v.16, we read that Hezekiah, a previously proud king, enters God’s presence in all humility knowing that only God can save them. He addresses God as the one and only Lord of all the heavenly host, and the historic God of Israel who made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not just some god or one of many gods, but He is the one and only living God who has a special relationship with His people. A proud person might typically pray by telling God about all his good works and why God should act to help him—basically because he deserves it. Nevertheless, in all the biblical prayers, people like Hezekiah are focused only in who God is and in what God does. God is loving and compassionate, and God is on His throne in heaven ruling over His creation. In verse 17-20, the king gives his petition asking God to hear the terrible blasphemies of the King of Assyria and asking God to respond in righteous judgment against Assyria. Hezekiah’s request is much more than a selfish desire to save himself, but more importantly for God to act against evil and to reveal Himself to the whole world as the one true God. The Assyrians had success

destroying all the fake gods that the other nations had made for themselves, but please Lord let it be known that You alone are God by delivering Jerusalem. Therefore, Hezekiah was praying for Gods will, Gods plan, and Gods glory as the principle reason for answering his prayer.

“Because You Have Prayed to Me”-Isaiah 37:21

The prophet Isaiah was a spokesperson for God, and he delivered a wonderful message from God to Hezekiah-because he had prayed in this way, God would deliver Jerusalem. Not only would Assyria not take the city, they would not even fire an arrow into it, v.33. Because the arrogant King of Assyria had raged insults against God, the Lord would “put My hook in your nose”. This was a reference to Assyria’s practice of putting hooks in their captive’s noses to lead them out to slavery, so God was going to give them some of their own medicine. In verses 24-30, the bottom line to Assyria was that God had brought them on the worlds stage and allowed them to have the success, but now God would take them out. In Isa.37:36-38, we read the short version of what God did to save Jerusalem and punish Assyria. The angel of The Lord struck the camp of the Assyrians that night with some sort of plague and wiped them out, then King Sennacherib returned to Nineveh where his own sons killed him.

I find it interesting to observe that God had always planned to save Jerusalem from the Assyrians, and it was guaranteed before Hezekiah even prayed (37:6-7), yet we read in v. 21 that God acted in response to his prayer. Apparently God has chosen to carry out His sovereign will by using our prayers. God purposely includes us in His plan, and in this case God waited until the very last moment after Hezekiah finally was humble and prayed, to answer his prayer by wiping out the army of Assyria. I think this should answer the question, “If God is sovereign, then why do we need to pray since He determines what is going to happen anyway?” God desires a personal relationship with us in which we love Him and communicate to Him, and He responds to us by involving us in His plan.

2 Chronicles 7:14

Once I did an informal poll asking about which was the most well known prayer in the Bible besides the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6. Most people told me it was 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If My people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from Heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land”. Have you heard this prayer? Actually this is a trick because it’s not a prayer. This is God’s response to Solomon’s prayer for God to bless Israel. God responded by giving the conditions necessary for prayer to be answered. Therefore it should be fruitful for us to break down 2 Chron. 7:14 to understand what God expects from us. First of all we read “My people”

and know that in this case He is talking about believers. You must have a relationship with God, and be a part of His family. Of course God loves all people and hears their prayers, but clearly there is a sense in which God hears and responds to the prayers of “His people” on a higher level. Think about it, if you went into Chase Bank to cash a big check, but your bank account was at Wells Fargo, what would they say? Well, you have put your money and all your trust in that other bank so why don’t you go there?

Secondly, God told Solomon, if they “humble themselves”. I have heard many demanding prayers that are mainly about the attributes of the person praying. People tend to presume upon God as if they deserved an answer to their prayer. I remember in the parable of Luke 18:9-17 that the Pharisee was praying this way, and was actually “praying to himself”. In Matt.6:5, Jesus said that the hypocrites prayed to impress other people. The question is, who do you trust? Humility is in putting no confidence in self, men, or nations, but only in God. If you are truly praying to God you must submit, which necessitates humility.

Next in 2 Chron.7:14 we read that they must “seek My face”. This means to seek God’s will, and be willing to carry out God’s will. We are all very accomplished at seeking out and carrying out our own selfish will. Most prayers treat God like Santa Claus as we ask for what we want, but we need to go in humility seeking what He wants, and being ready to do what He wants. Do you give God orders, or do you report for duty to obey orders?

Last but not least, God told them to “turn from their wicked ways”. Sin blocks our communication channel with God. Therefore we must repent of the problem areas in our life. Our tendency even as believers is to follow the desires of our flesh instead of the leading of God’s Spirit. In Galatians 5:16, Paul wrote “walk (live) by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, for they are in opposition to one another.” After his sin with Bathsheba, David wrote about his prayer in Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a steadfast spirit in me. Do not cast me away from thy presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit away from me. But restore me to the joy of Thy salvation”. David recognized that his sin blocked his fellowship with God, and he was praying out of repentance for God to restore him. We also need a clear channel to God, and it is necessary to repent of sin that may be blocking that.

Conclusion

After analyzing Hezekiah’s prayer, Solomon’s prayer, David’s prayer, and the prayers of such men as Daniel, Jehoshaphat, and Jeremiah; it should be clear that there is no room for boasting or presumption in our prayers. If our petition is to be answered, it will be because God is loving, compassionate, and kind. Someone told me that God answers our prayers in

four different ways—Yes, No, Later, and “You’ve got to be kidding Me!” At the end of the day, God knows what is best for us and what we really need, therefore we praise God and thank Him beforehand for His answer to our prayers. Let us meditate on Hezekiah’s last line of his prayer, “O Lord, save us, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord”. The ultimate reason why God should intervene is for His glory.

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