

# GOD WITH US

## Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return

### *Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness*

#### Message 1 – Hezekiah: God is my strength

#### 2Chronicles 29-32; 2Kings 18-20; Isaiah 36-37

#### Introduction

After Solomon's reign (970-939 B.C.), the nation of Israel was divided into two opposing kingdoms, north (Israel) and south (Judah). The Southern Kingdom, centered in Jerusalem, was loyal to the dynasty of king David. The Northern Kingdom was completely apostate, having non-Davidic kings and being immersed in idolatry and false religion for its entire 200-year history. As a judgment from God, the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians (722 B.C.) and was taken into captivity (2Kings 17).

The Southern Kingdom had both good and bad kings. As a result, God preserved Judah for an additional 136 years until the Southern Kingdom was taken into Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. During these additional 136 years, Judah had two great kings: Hezekiah and Josiah. We will focus on these two "reformer kings" who tried to call the people back to covenant loyalty with Yahweh. We will also focus the remainder of our O.T. survey on the writing prophets whom God raised up to speak to the nation before, during, and after the Babylonian captivity (Isaiah – Malachi).

To understand the life of **Hezekiah**, it is important to see the great challenges he faced as a king. Hezekiah came to power at a tumultuous time in the Southern Kingdom. There were three major challenges.

**1. Spiritual apostasy.** Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, was very wicked, reigning for 16 years. Ahaz's solution for national distress was to cry out to the king of Assyria for help in defeating Judah's enemies. At Ahaz's request, Assyria invaded destroying the Syrians and capturing their capitol city of Damascus (2Kings 16:7-9). In return for this help against the Syrian-Israel coalition, Ahaz made Judah a vassal state subject to Assyria. When Ahaz went to meet the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser, in Damascus of Syria, he saw a beautiful altar devoted to a pagan idol. He sent a drawing of

the altar back to Uriah the priest in Jerusalem (note: this was an altar devoted to a now defeated god!). A copy was made before Ahaz returned to Jerusalem. Then, Ahaz proceeded to revise the entire worship system of Judah, in keeping with his own desires. He shut down the temple of Yahweh and practiced idolatry, even sacrificing some of his own sons in fire to false gods (2Chronicles 28:3). Thus, Judah was spiritually apostate in the decades just prior to Hezekiah's kingship.

**2. Israel/Syria coalition.** During the reign of Ahaz, Syria and Israel (Northern Kingdom) formed a coalition. They attacked and *severely* defeated Judah, killing 120,000 in one day and taking 200,000 women, sons and daughters captive (2Chronicles 28:5-15). The military and socio-economic strength of Judah was at a low point during Ahaz's 16-year reign.

**3. The Assyrian threat.** The Assyrians, the dominant world power, had already begun to make incursions into the Northern Kingdom in the 50 years prior to Hezekiah's reign. The Assyrians were known for their cruelty against any enemy that failed to surrender immediately. Shortly after Hezekiah took the throne from Ahaz, the Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom and besieged Samaria for 3 years, finally taking Israel into captivity.

In short – Hezekiah inherited a kingdom in crisis. Now we can appreciate the significance of his name. **Hezekiah** means “God is my strength.” He was just 25 years old when he took the throne from his father Ahaz. His early moves show that he was, in fact, determined to live out the meaning of his name.

### **Move #1 – Return to God: 2Chronicles 29-31**

Hezekiah's first few years were dedicated to spiritually reforming Judah and calling the nation back to the true worship of Yahweh. He wasted no time initiating and prioritizing spiritual reforms.

*“In the first month of the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the temple of the LORD and repaired them” (2Chr. 29:3).*

He knew that the previous generation had suffered because they had departed from the Lord. He said to the people:

*“Our parents were unfaithful; they did evil in the eyes of the LORD our God and forsook him. They turned their faces away from the LORD's dwelling place and turned their backs on him” (2Chr. 29:6).*

Once he had reconstructed the temple, he had a massive service rededicating the temple and its servants to the service of the Lord.

***“So the service of the temple of the LORD was reestablished. Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced at what God had brought about for his people, because it was done so quickly” (2Chr. 29:35,36).***

Often, we know in our hearts when God wants us to change something in our lives, or to take some specific action. We hear a message, read a passage, or feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit . . . but then we procrastinate in making the change. When we do this, we end up spending precious days living outside of the will of God for our lives. Hezekiah reminds us of the importance of swift obedience. Are there any areas of your life where God has been calling out to you to make a change? If you write down what God is saying to you, and share this with a friend, they can not only pray for you but also hold you accountable to take whatever next step you need to take. “As the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts . . .’” (Hebrews 3:7).

## **Move #2 – The Great Passover: 2Chronicles 30**

Hezekiah’s next act was to invite *all of Israel in the Northern Kingdom* to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival with the people of the Southern Kingdom.

***“Hezekiah ... sent a proclamation throughout Israel, from Beersheba to Dan, calling the people to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel. It had not been celebrated in large numbers according to what was written” (2Chr. 30:1,5).***

The Passover had been neglected for years due to apostasy. This was Hezekiah’s attempt to bring north and south together in repentance and renewal, especially in light of the ongoing Assyrian threat. Sadly, most of the northerners missed the significance of this moment in their history.

***“The couriers went from town to town in Ephraim and Manasseh, as far as Zebulun, but people scorned and ridiculed them. Nevertheless, some from Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves and went to Jerusalem” (2Chr. 30:10,11).***

We are not responsible for the results when we take the initiative to invite people to come back to God. We are responsible to take the initiative . . . and Hezekiah did that. He was a faithful witness, even though a lot of people laughed at his message. On the other hand, many were rejoicing over the reforms led by Hezekiah.

***“The entire assembly of Judah rejoiced, along with the priests and Levites and all who had assembled from Israel, including the foreigners who had come from Israel and also those who resided in Judah. There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the days of Solomon son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. The priests and the Levites stood to bless the people, and God heard them, for their prayer reached heaven, his holy dwelling place” (2Chr. 30:25-27).***

Note: While Hezekiah was sharpening hearts for God, the Assyrians were sharpening their swords for war. Some could have said: “You’re wasting time with all these spiritual reforms. This money could have been spent building our war machine, our defenses, or coming up with new ways to resist the Assyrian machine.” Hezekiah focused his efforts on seeking God, because he truly believe that *God was his strength* (and the strong protector of the nation).

*Maybe you have felt a bit like Hezekiah – you have been inviting someone to come to church, or to a study group, or to a class . . . but they have been refusing your invitations. Remember – it is our job to reach out to others with grace and love, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, we must leave the results to God. We can only be responsible for our own motives and actions. We cannot decide for others. Yet, even if your invitations have been refused or ignored, you can still pray for people, that God would soften their hearts and show them their need for Him.*

### **Move #3 – Securing the reforms: 2Chronicles 31**

Hezekiah was diligent to ensure that this spiritual reform was not a short-lived event; but an ongoing movement – that the worship of Yahweh was well supported and would continue, according to the laws of Moses. Notice how *active* he was in making sure that these reforms would be long-lasting:

- ***Hezekiah assigned the priests and Levites to divisions . . .***
- ***Hezekiah contributed from his own possessions for the morning and evening burnt offerings and for the burnt offerings on the***

*Sabbaths, at the New Moons and at the appointed festivals as written in the Law of the LORD.*

*- Hezekiah ordered the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion due the priests and Levites so they could devote themselves to the Law of the LORD.*

*- When Hezekiah and his officials came and saw the heaps of offerings, they praised the LORD and blessed his people Israel.*

*- Hezekiah gave orders to prepare storerooms in the temple of the LORD, and this was done.*

The summary of his reform movement highlights his diligence:

*“This is what Hezekiah did throughout Judah, doing what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God. In everything that he undertook in the service of God’s temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. So he prospered” (2Chr. 31:20,21).*

Hezekiah defined true leadership for us. He sought God and moved decisively in a time of great crisis. He was thorough and thoughtful as he considered the times and took action. Is there some area of your life where God is inviting you to step up and lead with the strength and determination of Hezekiah? Take some time to sit in his story and be encouraged. Like this great king, you can make a difference in your world IF God is your strength and you move decisively in His strength.

#### **Move #4 – Breaking ranks with Assyria: 2Kings 18**

Hezekiah’s father, Ahaz, had made Judah subject to Assyria in hopes of being protected by Assyria, instead of being attacked. Hezekiah immediately decided to overturn that protection alliance. His strength was in God, not in Assyria.

*“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 stop following him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him. From watchtower to fortified city, he defeated the Philistines, as far as Gaza and its territory” (2Kings 18:5-8).*

Now that we have seen how Hezekiah leaned *into the Lord for his strength*, we can survey the subsequent threats that came to him.

## **Threat #1 - Years 4-6: Assyria destroys Israel: 2Kings 17**

It was in years 4-6 of Hezekiah's reign that the Northern Kingdom of Israel met its end. Israel was invaded by Shalmaneser and the Assyrians, and the entire population was taken captive.

***“The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria” (2Kgs.17:5,6).***

The Assyrian practice was to intermingle captives from various nations, to destroy the blood lines from each nation (to ‘erase’ national identity). Thus, the Northern Kingdom Israelites were forced to intermingle and intermarry with other nations/races.

*Note: Many of these intermingled Jewish people were resettled in the former capital of Israel, Samaria. Over the centuries that followed, they became known as “the Samaritans,” half-blooded Jews that were hated by the pure-blooded Jews. In the time of Jesus, we see many touchpoints with these hated Samaritans. Most notably, we find Jesus not only interacting with them, but also offering the gift of salvation to them, just as He did with the pure-blooded Jews that lived around the Samaritans. Jesus even told one famous parable where a Samaritan was the hero - the parable of the “Good Samaritan!”*

Hezekiah led the South with a steady hand as they witnessed the slow, 3-year death of the North. The divine protection over the Southern Kingdom was due to Hezekiah's strong spiritual reforms.

## **Threat #2 - Year 14: Assyria attacks Judah: 2Kings 18**

Hezekiah's biggest challenge came in his 14<sup>th</sup> year, when Sennacherib king of Assyria sought to capture Judah. At first, Hezekiah sought to ward off this invasion by retracting his earlier denial of the vassal relationship with Assyria, and paying tribute to the Assyrians. *This was one point in Hezekiah's life where he resorted to the wrong strategy to find protection.*

***So Hezekiah king of Judah sent this message to the king of Assyria at Lachish: “I have done wrong. Withdraw from me, and I will pay whatever you demand of me.” The king of Assyria exacted from Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. So Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the temple of the LORD and in the***

*treasuries of the royal palace. At this time Hezekiah king of Judah stripped off the gold with which he had covered the doors and doorposts of the temple of the LORD, and gave it to the king of Assyria (2Kings 18:14-16).*

These O.T. kings were human. Even Hezekiah had days where he wavered in faith and decided it would be better to sell off God's assets to buy some mercy from Assyria. But it didn't work.

Sennacherib was not satisfied. He sent his army to destroy Hezekiah and Jerusalem. Sennacherib sent one of his chief princes, Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem with a large army to demand immediate surrender from Hezekiah. Standing outside the walls of the city, Rabshakeh made one of the most defiant speeches ever made, against the people and the God of Israel.

*Then the commander stood and called out 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.' Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey. Choose life and not death! Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" (2Kings 18:28-35).*

Imagine being Hezekiah in this situation. He would have to make decisions that would impact the fate of all the people depending upon him. Should he surrender to the Assyrians and hope for mercy from Sennacherib? Or, should he call the nation to depend upon Yahweh and hope for protection from on high? Indeed, the stakes were very high.

When Hezekiah heard this ultimatum from Assyria, he did two things – he prayed and he asked for a word from God.

***“When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the LORD. He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz” (19:1,2).***

To tear one’s clothes and put on sackcloth was a sign of deep repentance and dependence upon the Lord. Hezekiah went into the temple of the Lord to seek God’s face in this hour of crisis. Then, he sent messengers to inquire of **Isaiah the prophet**, to see if there might be a revelation from God as to what he should do.

Sure enough, Isaiah heard from God and gave a word of reassurance to Hezekiah:

***When King Hezekiah’s officials came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, “Tell your master, ‘This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Listen! When he hears a certain report, I will make him want to return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword’” (2Kings 19:5-7).***

As Isaiah foresaw, Rabshakeh was forced to depart from Jerusalem because he was called to assist Sennacherib in another pressing battle. Yet, the crisis was far from over for Hezekiah.

### **Threat #3 - The letter from Sennacherib: 2Kings 19**

When the Assyrians departed, this gave Hezekiah time to gather himself, consult advisors, and make a plan. But his time to ponder was interrupted by a letter. When Rabshakeh reported to Sennacherib that Hezekiah had not surrendered, Sennacherib sent a letter back to Hezekiah warning that the Assyrians would soon return and that the Jews must be prepared to surrender quickly and quietly next time, or meet a cruel death.

This was another moment of truth for king Hezekiah. Would he call to Egypt for help? Would he seek to buy forgiveness from Assyria with more tribute money? Or, would he act in keeping with his name believing that *God was his strength*?

The defining moment came when Hezekiah took the threatening letter from Sennacherib and spread it out before the Lord in prayer:

*Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: "LORD, the 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, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God. It is true, 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 human hands. Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, LORD, are God" (2Kings 19:14-19).*

In response to Hezekiah's prayer of dependence, Isaiah the prophet came with a second word from Lord concerning God's protection over Hezekiah and the people of Judah.

*"Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria: 'He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city, declares the LORD. I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant'" (2Kings 19:32-34).*

*That same night, the angel of the Lord sent a wasting disease among the Assyrian camp and 185,000 warriors perished, just outside the walls of Jerusalem! This was the high point of Hezekiah's life, showing that as was his name, so was his experience: *God is my strength.**

What a great picture of how we should handle life's greatest threats and problems. We should "lay the letter out before the Lord." Is there some "threatening news" that you need to lay before the Lord today? Are you trying to solve the problem in your own strength? Or, are you inviting God to be your strength? I would encourage you to do what Peter said: "Cast ALL your anxieties upon Him, because He cares for you" (1Peter 5:7). Once you have "laid the letter out before the Lord," you can trust Him to bring about the result that will best bring honor and glory to His name. As Paul wrote concerning his trials with the Roman authorities: "Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (Philippians 1:20).

*Note: Archaeology has provided us with more details on the military campaigns of Sennacherib. The Sennacherib Stone was discovered in 1830 among the ruins of ancient Nineveh. It is a large stone with 6 sides on which are inscribed some 500 lines of text where Sennacherib boasts of 8 military campaigns, including his siege of Jerusalem. While Sennacherib boasts mightily of his many conquests, it is fascinating to see what he wrote about Hezekiah – that the king of Judah “would not submit to my yoke,” and that “I had him trapped like a caged bird in Jerusalem, his royal city.” He boasts that Hezekiah was forced to pay tribute to him, but he never boasts of actually capturing Jerusalem. Indeed, Sennacherib did have Hezekiah trapped like a caged bird . . . but the part that he did not care to write about what how “the bird escaped” by the hand of the Lord in one night!*



#### **Threat #4 – Mortal illness: 2Kings 20**

Hezekiah became king at age 25. He overcame the Assyrian invasion in his 14<sup>th</sup> year, at age 39. Then, shortly after escaping the Assyrian threat, he became mortally ill. Here we find him again calling out to God to be his strength and healer.

***In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, “This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.” Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, “Remember, LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly (2Kgs. 20:1-3).***

When he cried out to God, the Lord graciously intervened, giving him a miraculous sign *and* an additional 15 years of life.

## Threat #5 – Pride: 2Chronicles 32

Yet, something was not right in Hezekiah's heart. The parallel account in 2Chronicles gives us insight into his heart-condition:

***“In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. He prayed to the LORD, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the LORD's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD's wrath did not come on them during the days of Hezekiah” (2Chronicles 32:24-26).***

He did not respond properly to God. There was some form of pride in his heart over his miraculous healing (or perhaps over his own sense of self-importance). Or, perhaps the pride had begun to take root in Hezekiah's heart after the great deliverance from the Assyrians. We find this short note in 2Chronicles just after the story of the deliverance from Sennacherib's army:

***“Many brought offerings to Jerusalem for the LORD and valuable gifts for Hezekiah king of Judah. From then on he was highly regarded by all the nations” (2Chronicles 32:23).***

Whether it was the victory over Sennacherib, his miraculous healing, or the way he was being lauded by all nations . . . *pride gained a foothold in Hezekiah's life in year 14 (age 39).*

There is further evidence of his fall into pride. When the *king of Babylon* heard of Hezekiah's illness, he sent an envoy with gifts and good wishes. Hezekiah used the opportunity to try to impress the Babylonian envoy with a show of his wealth and strength.

***“Hezekiah received the envoys and showed them all that was in his storehouses—the silver, the gold, the spices and the fine olive oil—his armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them” (2Kings 20:13).***

Isaiah the prophet came to Hezekiah with a word of judgment from the Lord. Because of this display of pride, God would eventually send *the Babylonians* to capture those very treasures and take Judah into captivity (this would occur in 586 B.C.). The Babylonians did succeed the Assyrians as the dominant world-power about a century later.

The encouraging note is that, when confronted with his pride, Hezekiah repented so that the wrath of God did not fall upon him and Judah/Jerusalem during the remainder of his lifetime.

*Why is it that so many of the O.T. kings fell to the sin of PRIDE late in their lives? This is a sin that we must guard against! It seems that there is this innate human desire to look back over “our victories” and to find some measure of “self-worth” in them . . . when in fact all “our victories” were granted to us by GOD! They were really “His victories” that He graciously allowed us to be a part of, during our lifetime. Let us all be careful about this sin of pride. Who are you giving the credit to for the great things that have happened in your life?*

Hezekiah truly was one of the greatest kings of the Old Testament. His reforms brought an extension of life for the Kingdom of Judah. His prayers saved Judah from certain death at the hands of the Assyrians. His prayers also caused God to give him an extension of physical life. He was not perfect; but he was noble, and the Scriptures hold him up as a leader we should emulate.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Hezekiah initiated quick and thorough spiritual reforms as the foundation for his reign as king. How does he motivate you to reform some things in your life?
2. Hezekiah faced his greatest threat from Sennacherib, king of Assyria, especially when the letter arrived. What is the “great threat” in your life at this time?
3. Hezekiah took the letter from Sennacherib and laid it out before the Lord in fervent prayer. What would it look like for you to do the same with the thing(s) that are threatening you?
4. Hezekiah fell to the sin of pride. What impact has this part of his story had on your life? Are there any specific areas that come to mind where you might be (or are) tempted to fall into the sin of pride?