

"AN ANSWERED PRAYER"

The king of Assyria had sent his military commander, the Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem in hopes of convincing Hezekiah to abandon all hope and decide to surrender. The Rabshakeh's speech, which we studied last week, was filled with taunts and blasphemies. In this chapter, Isaiah tells us how Hezekiah responded to that speech, as well as how the Lord responded to Hezekiah. It is a wonderful passage. It provides us with an example of what it means to depend upon the Lord for help. And it shows us that prayer really does make a difference. This is what this passage is about. *It teaches us that the Lord hears the prayers of his people when we earnestly seek him.* There are three points for us to consider as we study this passage today: *seeking the Lord where he can be found; seeking the Lord in prayer; and seeing the Lord answer our prayers.*

Seeking the Lord Where He Can Be Found

Our first point is drawn from Isaiah's description of Hezekiah's initial response to the Rabshakeh's speech, where we see Judah's king *seeking the Lord where he can be found.* Hezekiah goes to the house of the Lord and to the prophet of the Lord. He worships the Lord, and he inquires of Isaiah to learn God's Word in this situation. He doesn't try to come up with his own method of getting

God's attention or discerning God's will. He avails himself of the ministry that was instituted by the Lord. This is how we should go about seeking wisdom and help from the Lord. We should seek him by availing ourselves of the church's ministry and by looking to his Word, the Bible.

Now, let's look at Hezekiah's response in more detail. First, take note of what his actions tell us about his heart attitude. He tears his clothes and covers himself with sackcloth, actions that convey sorrow and repentance. He was aggrieved over the words that the Rabshakeh had spoken against the Lord. He was also troubled by the difficult situation that his nation was in. But those were not the only reasons for his sorrow. Both his actions and his words indicate that he was expressing repentance for sin, his own sin and the sin of his people. Not only does he call this a day of distress and disgrace; he also calls it a day of *rebuke*. He is owning up to the fact that he had not placed his trust entirely in the Lord in the face of the Assyrian threat. Here is another lesson for us. When we are faced with trouble, we need to own up to our sin. Even when we cannot see a direct connection between our sin and the particular trouble we are experiencing, it is important for us to remember that there is never a situation in which we are completely free from sin.

Another thing to note about Hezekiah's response is that his faith is not just blind optimism. He certainly believes that God *can* remove the threat posed by the Assyrians, but he does not presume that God *will* do so. He had his men say to Isaiah, "It may be that the LORD your God will hear the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the LORD your God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left." He had his men say that "It *may* be" God's will to rebuke the Assyrians for the insults they had brought against him. This was not a lack faith on Hezekiah's part. It was simply an acknowledgement of the fact that we do not have perfect knowledge of the ways of the Lord. Hezekiah understood that it might be God's will to allow the Assyrians to prevail over Jerusalem. Here is another important lesson for us. The Lord wants us to bring our petitions to him with the understanding that he may or may not grant what we ask of him. We need to exhibit humility, realizing that our will may not be the will of the Lord, even when our will seems so right to us.

Isaiah's response to Hezekiah's representatives makes it clear that the Lord has indeed heard the words of the Rabshakeh, and he is not going to allow them to go unanswered. God assures the king that he has nothing to fear. He says, "Behold, I will put a spirit in [the king of Assyria], so that he shall hear a rumor

and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.” What a powerful example of the Proverb that says, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” [Prov. 21:1] Through Isaiah, the Word of the Lord enters this situation and begins to transform it. [Webb, 150]

In the last paragraph of this first part of the chapter, the king of Assyria sends more messengers to Hezekiah, probably in response to a letter that Hezekiah had sent to him. Notice how the words of these messengers compare with the speech of the Rabshakeh in the previous chapter. The Rabshakeh had said that *Hezekiah* was deceiving the people of Judah by telling them to trust in the Lord. That was bad enough. But now the Assyrian messengers go even further, saying that it is the *Lord* who is deceiving Hezekiah by promising to deliver Jerusalem from Assyria’s hands. The king of Assyria is calling the living God a deceiver! His blasphemy has reached new heights.

Seeking the Lord in Prayer

This brings us to the second point of this sermon: *seeking the Lord in prayer*. This is what we see Hezekiah doing in verses 14-20. Take note of how Hezekiah begins his prayer. He says, “O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, who is enthroned

above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth.” [v. 16] We might wonder why Hezekiah began his prayer this way. He was in a desperate situation. Why not just get down to business right away? He addressed God in this manner because he understood the importance of giving careful consideration to who it is that we are addressing when we pray. This is what Alexander Whyte is talking about when he advises us to “be sure to get a true sight and a true hold of God, in some way or other, before you begin either prayer or praise.” [*Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, 246] Likewise, John Owen says, “Do not plunge straight into prayer or worship, but spend time meditating on the glory of Christ first and in this way the graces necessary for carrying out that duty will be roused and ready.” [*The Glory of Christ*, 156] When we begin our prayers by addressing God in the way that Hezekiah does in this prayer, we stir up our faith. It is a way of reminding ourselves that God is really there, that he really cares about us, and that he really has the power to act on our behalf. It is very easy for us to slip into what Paul Miller describes as “functional deism,” living as if God is too distant to get involved in the details of our lives. The best way to head off this tendency is to take time to meditate on who it is that we are addressing when we pray.

We know from the earlier parts of Isaiah's prophecy that the nation of Judah had tried other strategies in the face of the Assyrian threat. They had looked for help from other sources. They entered into an alliance with Egypt in hopes that that great nation would be able to protect them from the Assyrians. But Egypt proved to be powerless to help them. The Lord removed all other supports so that his people would look to him alone.

Hezekiah knew that the Lord might not grant deliverance to his people. However, he had no doubts about God's ability to do so. In his prayer, he confesses that the Lord alone is God over all the kingdoms of the earth. He believes that this crisis is in God's hands. He is looking at the situation through the lenses of divine providence, trusting that the Lord rules over all. Trusting in God's providential control over everything in our lives makes all the difference in our prayer lives. As Paul Miller writes,

“When you stop trying to control your life and instead allow your anxieties and problems to bring you to God in prayer, you shift from worry to watching. You watch God weave his patterns in the story of your life. Instead of trying to be out front, designing your life, you realize you are inside God's drama. As you wait, you begin to see him work, and

your life begins to sparkle with wonder. You are learning to trust again." [*A Praying Life*, 73]

Trusting in God's providence is fundamental to true faith. And it is fundamental to true prayer, because prayer is the most basic way of expressing our faith.

Trusting in God's providence deepens our sense of dependence upon the Lord, and it fosters a way of looking at life that is always trying to understand what the Lord is doing.

The other thing to note about Hezekiah's prayer is the fact that his focus is not primarily upon his desperate situation but upon the honor of God's name. Hence, as commentator Barry Webb notes, "the cry for deliverance becomes a cry that God's kingdom may come and his will be done." [Webb, 152] Hezekiah's chief concern is the fact that the Assyrians are claiming that the Lord is no different than the gods of the other nations that they have conquered. He is zealous for the glory of the one true God, focusing his prayers upon how God might be glorified in this situation. Here again is an important lesson for us to apply in our prayer lives. While the Lord certainly wants us to bring our concerns to him in prayer, he also wants us to remember that the most important

thing is not that we get what we want, but that his name is glorified in the situation.

Seeing the Lord Answer Our Prayers

This brings us to the third point of our sermon, which is drawn from verses 21-38: *seeing the Lord answer our prayers*. After hearing Hezekiah's prayer, the Lord sent Isaiah to the king with the words, "Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria," followed by an oracle of judgment against Sennacherib that concludes with these words: "Because you have raged against me and your complacency has come to my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came." The Lord attributes the deliverance that he is about to bring about to Hezekiah's prayers. He tells Hezekiah that this is going to take place "Because you have prayed to me."

Here is one of the Bible's most clear examples of how prayer really does make a difference. God chooses to use the prayers of his people to accomplish his purposes. He would not have to do it this way, but he does. As commentator J.A. Motyer puts it, "Here is a mystery of prayer: it is a means by which the Lord brings his eternal counsel to pass." [282]

In the oracle addressed to Sennacherib, the Lord tells him that he has not mocked the people of Judah, but the God who claims them as his own: the living and true God. God rebukes Sennacherib for thinking that his victories were the result of his great might, telling him, "Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins." In all of his conquests, Sennacherib has been nothing more than a tool in the Lord's hand. Once he has served his purpose, he will be cast aside.

The Lord promises Hezekiah that Sennacherib will not enter Jerusalem or even set up a siege mound against it. Instead, he will return to his land by the way that he came. This is fulfilled in the last paragraph of the chapter, where the angel of the Lord strikes down one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrian soldiers in one night, prompting Sennacherib to sound the retreat.

Isaiah concludes this chapter by telling us how the king of Assyria met his end. One day, some time after Sennacherib had returned to his land, he went to the temple of his god to pray. While he was there, he was struck down and killed by his own sons. Take note of what this tells us about Sennacherib's god in comparison to Hezekiah's God. At the beginning of this chapter, Hezekiah goes to the house of the Lord, where he finds deliverance. At the end of the chapter,

Sennacherib goes to the house of his god, where he meets his doom. Truly, as Hezekiah said in his prayer, the gods of the nations are no gods, but the work of men's hands, mere wood and stone. The same is true of any false god that people might bow down to, anything in this world that people look to for the comfort, help, and security that can only be found in the Lord. Man's idols cannot provide any deliverance. On the contrary, they will be the downfall of those who trust in them.

This chapter tells us that God drove the Assyrians back to Assyria because Hezekiah asked him to do so. God answers prayer. Now, I know what you may be thinking. Perhaps you are thinking about the prayers that you have offered that seem to have gone unanswered. You have prayed for a loved one to come to faith in Christ, for relief from a chronic health problem, for deliverance from some temptation that plagues you, for reconciliation with an estranged family member -- but the Lord has not granted you these things. I know how you feel. I too have offered prayers where my request was not granted. But this does not mean that God does not hear our prayers, or that he does not care about us, or that he lacks the power to do what we ask of him. It only means that he is

working out his good purposes for us in a manner that remains mysterious to us for the time being. Listen to these thoughts from Paul Miller in his book *A Praying Life*:

“I often find that when God doesn’t answer a prayer, he wants to expose something in me. Our prayers don’t exist in a world of their own. We are in dialogue with a personal, divine Spirit who wants to shape us as much as he wants to hear us. For God to act unthinkingly with our prayers would be paganism, which says that the gods do our will in response to our prayers...Most of us isolate prayer from the rest of what God is doing in our lives, but God doesn’t work that way. Prayer doesn’t exist in some rarified spiritual world; it is part of the warp and woof of our lives. Praying itself becomes a story.” [168]

Do not allow yourself to get discouraged in your prayer life. Do not fall for the lie that says that prayer doesn’t really make any difference. It does make a difference. It made all the difference in the world for the people of Judah in Hezekiah’s day. It saved them from the horrors of siege warfare and from the sorrows of deportation. God saved Jerusalem because Hezekiah prayed to him.

Prayer still makes a difference in the lives of God's people today. Do not slip into the snare of functional deism. Pray for the things that are of concern to you, both the big things and the little things. And as you pray, watch and see what the Lord will do. If you do this, you will begin to see God's hand at work in your life with greater clarity. I am not saying that he will always answer your prayers in the way that you want. He is not a cosmic genie, bound to do your bidding. But if you belong to Jesus Christ, you can be certain that the Lord of heaven and earth will listen to your prayers. And you can trust that he will act for your ultimate good. The words of the psalmist are the words of every Christian: "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles." [Ps. 34:6]