

2 Kings 18–19 – Faith In A Time Of Crisis
9/5/2021 – St Mark's Northbridge

BIG Idea: God defeats his enemies for his sake, so we can unswervingly trust in Him

Pray.

Intro: Fight, Flight, or Freeze

Well how do you react when you are threatened? What is your response when you find yourself in a dangerous situation?

Whether we realise it or not, we will instinctively look to protect ourselves when we find ourselves threatened. Our bodies are wired such that we will physiologically react when we sense some kind of danger. And usually we will react in one of three ways: fight, flight, or freeze. It's a gut reaction or instinct that in the face of danger, we will either: confront it head-on (fight), or we will run away (take flight), or we will be still (freeze) because we are either overwhelmed or we're considering what to do.

So let's say you're crossing the road and a car is coming towards you, you will do one of three things: fight, flight, or freeze. Now hopefully you won't try and fight the car because that will end badly! You see, we are not immune from danger and threats.

There are dangerous situations we might find ourselves in, and we respond in different ways.

But I want us to consider those threats and dangers that we might face as God's people, the opposition that we face as Christians. And how we respond to it.

Because it's no secret that Christians face opposition.¹ And when you observe the landscape of where we are now in 21st century Australia, I don't think I'm the only one who feels a mood of increased opposition to Christianity, or at least more vocal opposition.² Just think of:

- the challenges and suspicion around school Scripture or any hint of Christianity in public school curriculum.
- Or churches and Christian organisations unable to meet in certain venues because of the public backlash to companies
- Or the slander of a prominent Christian in the public square simply because they are a Christian who actively lives out their Christianity.
- Or the pressure on Christians in schools and workplaces to conform to the latest moral crusade – often under the guise of diversity and inclusion, but really more about pushing a certain view of sexuality and gender.

How do you respond in the midst of that? What is your natural reaction to this opposition against Christ and His people?

Are you someone who's up for a contest? Are you inclined to fight back? That Christians should be at the forefront of public debate and push back against those opposed to the gospel.

Or are you more inclined to retreat in the face of opposition? To go into your shell and find safety. And come out when things are quieter and the drums aren't beating as

¹ Jesus himself promised this (Matt. 10; John 15:8) and the New Testament letters set up the expectation that Christians will suffer for their faith (2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Peter 2)

² Just last week one of my lecturers at college said that compared to 20 years ago, those graduating now (people like myself) are ministering in a much more threatening and challenging context.

loudly. There was a popular Christian book a few years ago that advocated this and went further – it argued that Christians should retreat from the mainstream culture and set up their own society run on Christian values as an alternative.³ Is that how we should respond to opposition and hostility?

Or in the face of opposition are you frozen with fear? Do you feel scared, gripped by fear, and paralysed? Do you just feel helpless and not know what to do or say?

I know at different times I have felt like responding in all three ways.

So how do God's people handle opposition?

Well as you would have picked up in our Bible readings from this part of 2 Kings, King Hezekiah was faced with opposition. He was under threat.⁴ He was faced with grave danger by those against the Lord God and His anointed. And Hezekiah stood firm in a time of crisis, trusting in the Lord. And we're going to unpack this faith of his in these chapters.

From the outset, King Hezekiah is a breath of fresh air. After a line of kings who did evil, we see there in chapter 18 verse 3 that Hezekiah: *...did what was right in the eyes of the Lord*. He obeys the Lord and removes idols from the land. We saw two weeks ago that Hezekiah's father, king Ahaz was seduced by the Assyrians and integrated some of their worship practices to the temple, leading the people astray in their worship. But in contrast, his son Hezekiah is a king who desires that God's people be devoted to the Lord.

³ *The Benedict Option*, by Rod Dreher

⁴ In this part of 2 Kings the story slows right down. Over the past few weeks as we've gone through 2 Kings we see quite repetitively king after king rise and fall, rise and fall. But we get to Hezekiah here and the story slows down – the writer of Kings devotes 3 whole chapters to him.

And verses 5 and 6 sum up King Hezekiah. He was a man of unswerving and steadfast trust in the Lord and one who was unparalleled in obedience. God was with him and he was successful in ruling God's people. Finally, we have a king who has the goods. A pleasant change after recent times.

Enemy At The Gate

But, like all the kings we have seen, Hezekiah had his share of enemies. And none bigger than Assyria, the superpower of the day.

We see there in verse 13 that:

13 ... Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them.

So we have Assyria closing in on Judah. They have taken the surrounding cities and are bearing down on Jerusalem. This is the same Assyria that we saw last week wipe out Israel and take them into exile. And now Judah is facing the same fate. Assyria is the enemy at the gate waiting to strangle the life out of Judah, with no way of escaping their clutches.

So this is a crisis for Judah and for King Hezekiah. Yet it isn't just a national or political crisis, but it's a spiritual and theological crisis too. Not only is Judah facing the prospect of being wiped out as a nation – losing their national identity, but their spiritual identity as God's chosen people is under threat. Judah is the sole remaining tribe of Israel. So if

they are wiped out by the Assyrians, what is to become of God's promises to bless the world?⁵

In recent decades we have had our attention drawn to genocides and atrocities done to people-groups. And that's been a good thing as the light has been shone on the darkness of these terrible atrocities. So much of our identity as people is based on our birth place and where we have come from, and to have that wiped away is devastating. And more so for Israel – a nation that the true and living God has chosen to work through to fulfil his purposes in blessing the world.

So there is a lot at stake here as God's people are faced with this threat of Assyria.

And the king of Assyria gives us a portrait of those who are opposed to the Lord and his anointed King and the tactics that these opponents will use against God's people. King Sennacherib of Assyria sends a spokesman to King Hezekiah and his message is very simple: "Who are you going to trust?"

And the first tactic is to try and persuade God's people into cutting a deal – to compromise, or in the words of verse 23: *Come now, make a bargain with the King of Assyria.*

This is done with the promise of earthly riches there in verse 31:

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, 32 until I come and take you to

⁵ Gen. 12, 15

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!

Those opposed to God's people will tell them to abandon their trust in God and his promises and instead trust in the riches of this world. Seducing God's people with the offer of vast riches and prosperity in the here and now on the condition that you stop trusting in God and his promises. To make peace with the world and get an easy run at the expense of trusting in God's promises. These words from Assyria to Hezekiah echo the words that another king many centuries later would hear: 'I will give you all these things if you bow down and worship me'.

And doesn't that temptation to compromise endure today.

Maybe you're enticed to take a shortcut in your workplace. To stop working with integrity and honestly and instead fudge the numbers or overquote or trample over people. Allured by the opportunity of promotion, at the expense of working honestly and obediently. Ultimately a call to stop listening to God's word and his promises.

But you see, those opposed to God and His people won't stop there. They will also slander God – questioning His anointed king and His ability to save. In verse 29 the commander from Assyria calls out:

29 ...Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you from my hand. 30 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.'

The message here is: ‘You shouldn’t listen to Hezekiah and trust that God will save you’ – it’s a message that causes God’s people to doubt their king and the power of their God.

And at this point Assyria’s opposition is unmasked. They are not just opposed to God’s people but they are opposed to God Himself. This is not just a political contest. Now it is about God’s honour and glory. Assyria have slandered the true and living God. They are opposed to God as they question whether God and His anointed king can be trusted.

But again, that’s not the limit of opposition to God. Those opposed to God will also boldly and arrogantly boast about their own might and power. That’s what we see Assyria do in verse 35. They boldly ask:

35 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?”⁶

This is pride and arrogance – pure and simple. Pointing out how superior you are above all. This is the bully in the Ancient Near East playground. The alpha male with swagger strutting around. Showing off all his trophies and conquests saying, “I am the greatest!” It would be comical and perhaps admirable if only they weren’t blaspheming the Lord God. But here is Assyria continuing in the tradition of the human race: trying to make a name for themselves and defying the Lord God and His anointed.

⁶ And then the second time around in chapter 19, from verse 11:

11 Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered? 12 Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my predecessors deliver them—the gods of Gozan, Harran, Rezeph and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar? 13 Where is the king of Hamath or the king of Arpad? Where are the kings of Lair, Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah?”

This is a snapshot of what opposition to God and His people looks like.⁷ This is the crisis that Hezekiah and Judah are in. And this is the enemy that they are up against.

And so we're left asking, 'how will Judah respond to this crisis'? What will Hezekiah do about this enemy that is raging like a bull at the gate?

Responding To A Crisis

Well we know how the people of Judah respond. At the end of chapter 18 the writer tells us that amidst the tirade of insults and blasphemy from Assyria:

36 the people remained silent and said nothing in reply, because the king (Hezekiah) had commanded, "Do not answer him."

You could argue that the people here were frozen and cowering in fear not knowing what to do – that's why they're silent. And no doubt they were afraid. I would be! But do you see that they were obedient to their king in the midst of a crisis. That amidst the threats and opposition, they trust in the Lord's anointed king.

So what then does the king do in response to this crisis? Well we see straight away that Hezekiah is brought to his knees. At the start of chapter 19 we see that Hezekiah tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth as he goes into the temple of the Lord. He is devastated at this threat that confronts him and he prays to the Lord.⁸

⁷ And the presence of this enemy and this opposition brings great fear. We see the fear of those officials of King Hezekiah who are meeting the representatives from the Assyrian king. Their fear seen in asking the Assyrians to speak in Aramaic so that the common people of Judah don't hear. There is genuine fear that these taunts and opposition from Assyria is too much for the people of Judah to bear.

⁸ And with Hezekiah's posture of lament there is probably a hint of repentance. We glossed over this before but when Assyria first showed up, he tried to solve the problem by his own might and wealth. He

In Hezekiah we see a king who is brought to his knees in absolute trust of God and someone who knows that he needs God's help. In chapter 19 verse 15] he turns to the Lord in prayer. He says:

15 "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. 16 Give ear, Lord, and hear; open your eyes, Lord, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.

It's a prayer based on God's character – His goodness, His might, His power, His holiness. There's not a shred of selfishness to this prayer. It is not a plea for his own survival but a prayer for God's honour and glory.

And this is captured at the end of His prayer in verse 19:

19 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."

"Deliver us so that we might live and prosper". No. "Deliver us so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone Lord, are God." May Your kingdom come, may Your will be done – that is the essence of Hezekiah's prayer.

You see, he's a king who recognises his place under the Almighty King. That's how Hezekiah responds in the midst of a crisis. He turns to the Lord God.

tried to throw money at the problem and hope to have it go away. That's what he did when Assyria first turned up. He followed in the footsteps of his father who did that with TP3 – the previous king of Assyria (18:13-16). But that didn't work.

Now at this stage it would be easy to round things off and say that Hezekiah and the people of Judah provide a good example of how to respond in a crisis. That for us today we should respond to those who are opposed to the gospel by turning to the Lord in prayer and trusting His king. These are not bad things to do. They are commendable ways that we should respond.

But if we only focussed on this, we would be neglecting an even more important response – God’s response. Because from His throne in heaven, amidst all the upheaval and crisis, He sees what is happening. He is not silent or inactive, but He speaks and intervenes in this crisis.

And we see this through the prophet Isaiah – the man who is God’s messenger and who carries God’s word to the people – in both the good times and the bad. And this word is a word of comfort and promise – that God is with His people and will deliver them – making His name known among all the kingdoms of the earth.

In chapter 19 Isaiah comes with God’s word. And in this crisis I want us to notice God’s word of comfort and promise to His people:

In verse 6 the first thing God says is: “*Do not be afraid*”. While fear may be a gut reaction to danger and being under threat, God says “Do not be afraid”. Why? Well it’s because of the promise that God will act:

Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. 7 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.’”

In the midst of this crisis, God is sovereign. He has heard every arrogant and blasphemous word from Assyria and He will act. He will draw Assyria away from Judah. This enemy is not undefeatable. God will protect and preserve His people.

And this is picked up later on when God says through Isaiah in verse 31:

For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.

“The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. 32 “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. 33 By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city, declares the Lord. 34 I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant.’”

God gives a word of comfort and promise in a time of crisis. He will protect and preserve His people. And He will also judge those who stand against Him. That is his promise. He will defend the city and save it. He will stand against the arrogance and pride of Assyria, and they will be judged for it.

And that’s what happens as this episode comes to an end in chapter 19. The Lord sends an angel into the Assyrian camp and one hundred and eighty five thousand of them are put to death. While King Sennacherib manages to flee to Assyria, he too meets his end. This once arrogant and proud king who stood against the Lord is slain by his own sons.

And you can't escape the irony that King Sennacherib is slain in his temple with all his gods surrounding him but offering no protection. A contrast to the true and living God of Judah who preserves and protects His dearly loved people.

This is the comfort that we take as God's people. That we have a God who is not static and passive. He sees the opposition and threat that His people face. He hears every word uttered against Him. And he knows every danger that we face as His people. Through it all He is with His people and we can cling to His words of comfort and promise.

Entrusting Yourself To The One Who Judges Justly

Well those words about King Hezekiah back in chapter 18 that he “*trusted in the Lord, and held fast to the Lord and did not stop following him*” are an accurate summary of how he handled this whole crisis with the Assyrians. In the face of opposition and threat, he had an unswerving and steadfast trust in God.

And as followers of the Lord Jesus, we know that this too would be an accurate description of Him. Like Hezekiah, Jesus was God's king who trusted in the Lord and did not stop following Him, even in a time of crisis.

We see this of course in the final week and days of his life as the Lord Jesus went to the cross. If ever there was a crisis this would have been it! A personal, national, and theological crisis all in one! Through everything He did not stop trusting God. In Peter's first letter we read that the Lord Jesus, when faced with mockery and insult and suffering, He didn't retaliate or make threats but He “entrusted himself to him who judges justly”.

I think the night before Jesus died captures this trust of Jesus so brilliantly. As he prayed to His Father, with fear, and tears of anguish, and a real sense of dread for what awaited Him, He had an unswerving and steadfast trust in His Heavenly Father. He entrusted Himself to the one who judges justly as He went to the cross to bear the sins of the world.

And as His followers today, He is the one we follow. He is the king we look to, especially when faced with opposition or hostility. Like Him, we trust in our Heavenly Father in a time of crisis – when we face opposition and threats. Our response isn't to fight back or cower in fear but like Jesus to entrust ourselves to the One who judges justly. We know that God will preserve and protect His people.

It means that if we as Christians are stopped from teaching Scripture in schools, we know that God will preserve and protect His people.

If Christians are prevented from gathering in public places, God will still preserve and protect His people.

If we are marginalised at work or school for being a Christian and obeying what Jesus says about how we live, we know that God will preserve and protect His people.

If Christians lose the “culture wars” and public debates, we know that God will preserve and protect His people.

And as followers of Jesus we have this comfort and promise because of who He is as the judge. That in the face of opposition and hostility, all the kings of the earth will have to answer to Jesus as the king of the world. Jesus sees everything and everyone is

accountable to Him. The assurance, and promise, and comfort that we have as Christians is that there will be a day when Jesus will return as judge. A day when everyone will bend the knee before this great king and judge – both those who have loved Him and those who haven't. Those who have trusted Him and those who have risen up against Him as God's anointed.

When God's people are in a crisis, and the opposition is mounting, all we can do is trust in Him and look to His King.

Let's Pray.