

‘IN HEZEKIAH’S FINAL YEARS’ 2 KINGS 20

[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday May 16, 2021, All Services]

1. In Search of a Praiseworthy King.

Our adventure in 2 Kings has introduced us now to many of the kings of Israel and Judah. And whilst it may be too simplistic to simply divide them into good or bad, it’d be fair to say that the vast majority of the kings we’ve met have been profoundly disappointing. If we did put them into two simplistic columns, the “bad” king column would run right down the page, whereas the “good” king column would probably only have one or two names on it.

So part of the experience of being a reader of 2 Kings is that we find ourselves turning each new page hoping to discover a king we can respect. We want to read a happy story not just a long string of sad ones. We want to learn that there were times when God’s people were ruled by godly men who protected and provided for the people such that the nation knew the blessing of God. And so we come to each new chapter in search of a praiseworthy king. But up till now it’s largely been a frustrating and unfulfilling search.

But then last week we came to chapters 18 and 19, and we met Hezekiah. And we were introduced to him in 18:3 as a king who did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. And the chapters Rusdyan preached on last week gave us lots of reasons to believe that the story of Hezekiah’s kingship really was a happy one. He trusted God. He turned to God in times of trouble. He and his people knew the blessing of God, the protection of God. And we found ourselves saying “finally- a king who really is going to rule like a son of David; finally- a king after God’s own heart”.

But of course, 2 Kings doesn’t finish the Hezekiah story with chapter 19. His story finishes with chapter 20, which we’ve read today. And whilst this chapter doesn’t necessarily follow on from the previous ones chronologically¹, its purpose is to show us a picture of Hezekiah’s final years- in particular the last 15 years of his life. And as it does that it asks us again to assess how Hezekiah’s kingship should be characterised. So let’s review the chapter as we continue to ask ourselves, have we found the praiseworthy king we’ve been searching for?

And I want to look at the chapter with you this morning/evening under two headings. The first half focusses on Hezekiah being heard by God. And the second half focusses on a time when Hezekiah really needed to hear God. So firstly, verses 1-11.

¹ Verse 6 probably places 20:1-11 some time before the events of the end of 2 Kings 19.

2. When Hezekiah is Heard (vv.1-11).

- the prospect of death

The chapter opens with a moment in his life in when Hezekiah became extremely ill and was facing the prospect of imminent death². And the prophet Isaiah even comes to him to confirm the fact. Isaiah brings a word from the LORD that says he won't recover from his illness. He's about to die.

- the earnest prayer

And Hezekiah's response is to give himself to earnest prayer. Clearly he wasn't yet ready to die. Because he pours his heart out to God, and expresses a great longing to see his life extended. Verses 2-3 tell us that he turned his face to the wall as he prayed, and that he wept bitterly.

I can think of a few times in my life when I've prayed like this too. There have been moments where I've laid prostrate on the floor and begged God to be merciful to someone I love. There have been moments when I've prayed falteringly through floods of tears. Perhaps there have been times in your life like that too. Because there are moments in life, aren't there, where we have cause to turn to God with uncommon earnestness. And for Hezekiah this was one of them.

- the LORD's grace

And stunningly, verse 4 tells us that Isaiah hadn't even left the palace precinct when the word of the LORD came to him again with a new message for Hezekiah. And this suggests to us that the grace Hezekiah is about to learn of has not come from God begrudgingly in the slightest. God is swift to respond to his prayer.

And the message with which Isaiah returns to Hezekiah is a reassurance that God has heard his cry and will grant his request. It seems now that the LORD's previous message was a hard word but not the last word³. Through Isaiah, God says, verse 5- 'I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears. I will heal you.' And God promises to add 15 years to his life.

And we should just pause at this point to acknowledge what a remarkable thing this is. Because this is one of those moments in the Bible, and there are a couple of others, where it seems that God changes his mind about something in response to the prayers of his people⁴. And the Bible gives us insight into these moments as a gift- to encourage us in our prayers. God shows us this dynamic to persuade us that our prayers really are

² Note that the events of 2 Kings 20 are also told in 2 Chronicles 32 and Isaiah 38.

³ I owe this phrase to Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Kings*, p.293.

⁴ Eg. Exodus 32, Amos 7

part of how he works out his purposes in the world. To put it a little crassly, prayer works.

And so, in this way, this chapter is a gift from God to us today- to remind us of this reality which I think, frankly, we often struggle to believe. It seems to me it's very easy for us to slide into the working assumption that we should pray, perhaps just because God likes to hear from us, but that our prayers won't ultimately change anything. After all, God has sovereignly planned everything out, so our prayers are ultimately a kind of pious and sincere irrelevance. Right? No. Not right. Chapters like this are given to us to show us that if our account of God's sovereignty in the world has no place for prayers which move God and really do affect our lives and the world around us, then our account of God's sovereignty needs to change.

Hezekiah's testimony to us is that God graciously hears our prayers and graciously responds. And this is the kind of conviction, if we'll embrace it, which can really transform our prayers. Because it's one thing to pray believing you're doing something God wants you to do, something that nurtures the relationship perhaps, but something that ultimately won't prevail. But it's another thing to pray believing that you're playing a real and significant part in the working out of God's purposes in the world. And my own testimony would be that coming to really believe this truth, deep in my soul, is the thing that's shaped my prayer life more than anything else.

So this morning I do want to ask each of you whether this is really your conviction. Do you believe that God is a loving Heavenly Father who invites you to pray so that you can take part in the working out of his purposes- in your life and in the lives of others? Do you believe that he really is so gracious as to hear your prayers, to see your tears, and to respond by doing what you've asked?

I've got a friend who over the years has asked me to pray for growth in his prayer life. But in more recent years he's asked me to pray specifically that God would strengthen his Biblical convictions about prayer. And I've been delighted to pray that way for him because I think there's great wisdom in that request. That brother has recognised that the seed bed of fruitful prayerfulness is Biblical conviction about the place of prayer in God's work- the kind of conviction this chapter invites us to embrace.

- the means of grace

But back to the story. Because before we leave Hezekiah and the topic of prayer, we also need to notice verse 7. There Isaiah tells Hezekiah to go and prepare a medicinal balm for his boil- presumably the source of his sickness, and to put the balm on. And verse 7 tells us that it was when he did this that Hezekiah recovered. Don't you find that fascinating?

Hezekiah has just been told that God has decided to heal him. Surely God could have done that without the need for some three thousand year old herbal remedy? Of course

he could have! So why the figs? Well, I take it that this verse is a reminder to us that God doesn't just show grace but that he often provides the means of grace as well. That is, God's kindness often comes to us in familiar and even mundane form. Let me illustrate what I mean. By grace he encourages our hearts, but that encouragement often comes to us as we read the Bible or talk to a Christian sister or brother. By grace he comforts us in our troubles, but that comfort often comes to us through the tender look or touch of a friend. By grace he provides food for our tables each day, but this provision usually comes to us because we went to Woolworths. By grace, he helps us work through our disordered thoughts and feelings, but that help often comes to us through a trained counsellor we go to see. By grace, he heals our sick bodies, but it that healing usually comes to us because we have doctors and drugs. These are the means of grace. And this is the way God usually works- as he does here.

- the sign of grace

But finally under this section, the sign of grace. Because in Hezekiah's case, before the fig remedy was applied, he wanted extra assurance from the Lord that the healing he promised through Isaiah was really going to come. Verse 8.

[Read 20:8]

And not only does Isaiah respond to this when it was probably unnecessary, but he even gives Hezekiah a choice of two options! He said the sun could go forward ten steps or backwards ten steps. And Hezekiah decided having the sun go backwards was harder so he chose that option. And, once again, the LORD did exactly what Hezekiah asked. The shadows on the steps of the palace retreated as if it was all of a sudden an hour earlier.

I do think we see here some hints of faithlessness in the king. This request for a sign is arguably not praiseworthy at all. Why was the LORD's promise through Isaiah not enough? Why did he need this miracle to confirm God's word? There's at least the suggestion here that in Hezekiah's heart his confidence in God is mixed with doubt.

But I think what's even more noteworthy here is the limitless grace of God. He loves Hezekiah so much that he's willing to even give him an unnecessary sign, just to put his anxious heart at rest. There's a fatherly kindness here that's hard to miss and very sweet to observe. Right through these verses we see just how large and generous the grace of God is.

3. When Hezekiah Must Hear (vv.12-21).

And the grace of God continues to be a theme in the second half of the chapter as well. But sadly, here it stands in contrast to the foolishness of Hezekiah. Let's consider verses 12-25. I'll read again from verse 12.

- the moment of pride

[Read 20:12-13]

What we're seeing here in Hezekiah is a moment of pride. He's showing off his wealth and strength. He allows himself to be flattered by the visit these Babylonian envoys made, and he gives in to the desire to be thought of as praiseworthy by them. And, in the process, he becomes less praiseworthy to us. Because we start to see some more chinks in his armour, spiritually speaking⁵. Whilst he is a good king in so many ways, he's not perfect is he? Not even close. His trust in God is not flawless. His confidence in God's word is mingled with doubt. And his dependence on God is undermined by his boasting.

And part of what's sad here is how quickly Hezekiah has lost his bearings. At the end of verse 11 you have to presume Hezekiah has a full and sober grasp of just how much he depends upon God for everything- for the sign of his promise on the palace steps, for the poultice of healing figs, for generous answers to prayer, and for life itself. But then just two verses later, maybe in a matter of just weeks, we find him taking credit for the blessing of his kingdom and his reign. With such haste we find him stealing the glory his gracious God deserves.

Like many of us, it would seem, spiritually speaking, Hezekiah does better in sickness than in health. I think there's a picture here of a danger that is common to many of us. When we're suffering we know how much we depend on the LORD, and we call out to him with great humility. But when we're better, when things are going well, when suffering is just a memory, we feel strong and invincible, and pride can quickly push humility out. And whenever that happens, the problem is always that we've forgotten how large and generous the grace of God is, and how much we need it.

I see this pattern in my own life. And it troubles me. And it's led me over the years to pray that God would help me here. I pray he'd help me to be draw near to him in good times and in bad. I pray he'd prevent me from being the kind of slow learner and quick forgetter who needs the pain of suffering to be brought again to depend on God. I pray that God would teach me daily and unforgetful dependence. I don't want God to have to bring me sickness or suffering to show me my need of him. I want to be humble in health and happiness too. So I pray that he'd help me with this. Maybe you'd find that a helpful prayer too? Perhaps Hezekiah should've been praying something like that. It may have kept him from the pride we see here.

And, of course, this pride is not only spiritually compromised, it's also politically foolish. Because it's really not that smart to show the envoys of a foreign power everything they could stand to gain if they decided to attack and overrun you at some point.

⁵ See also 20:8, and 18:13-16.

- the LORD's judgement

And, of course, that's exactly what Isaiah the prophet then tells him will happen. Verse 16.

[Read 20:16-17]

And this, of course, is the LORD's judgement. Perhaps not specifically on Hezekiah- I think the narrative is ambiguous about that. But certainly it will be the LORD's judgement on the people of Judah. But either way, this judgement of God exposes just how foolish Hezekiah has been. Everything he's shown the Babylonian envoys, everything he's taken pride in as his, and as the fruit of his reign, will one day belong to the very people he boasted to.

- the LORD's grace

But, of course, alongside God's judgement here is another reminder of the LORD's grace. And Hezekiah sees it. Verse 19.

[Read 20:19]

Perhaps there is a kind of self absorption in Hezekiah's reaction here? He sees that the generations to come will feel God's wrath but he himself won't. Certainly you can read it this section and primarily see some selfishness in Hezekiah. But I think what's most important here is to see just how grateful he is. Once again he recognises the LORD's mercy in his life. Even though God will judge his people, Hezekiah himself will be spared. And he is thankful. And it's on that note that the story of Hezekiah's final years is brought to an end.

4. The Praiseworthy King.

So what do you think? Is Hezekiah the good king we've been looking for? Is he the praiseworthy king we've searched for in the pages of 2 Kings? Well, 2 Kings 20 certainly prevents us from any kind of hero-worship when it comes to Hezekiah doesn't it? Here we see a good king, who does do what is right in the eyes of the LORD in many respects, just as his father David had done. But here we also see a king who sometimes doubts God's word. Here we see a king who sometimes takes pride in that which is really the generous work of God in his life.

- the king behind the king

And that, of course, is part of the purpose of this chapter. To remind us, the readers, that there was a king behind the king in Hezekiah's life. And the king behind the king is the one who's truly worthy of our praise. Because the central theme of this chapter is really the grace of God. He's the God who hears prayers. The God who answers

prayers. The God who provides the means by which his grace can be received. He's the God who heals. The God who reassures those who doubt. He's the God who is the source of all wealth and strength and fame. He's the God who, even in judgement, does not fail to be merciful. And this chapter is about him because Hezekiah's life is about him! Even if Hezekiah didn't always see it or acknowledge it, his life was a long and consistent testimony to the grace of God. His blessed reign is actually just a reflection of the blessed reign of God.

And so this chapter is in the Bible to remind us that our lives are no different. They are nothing without the grace of God. They can only be understood by reference to the reign of God. And we must never fall into the trap of forgetting that. We must never take pride in who we are, in what we have, or in what we've become. We must never steal the glory that belongs to God- our perfect king.

- the king beyond the king

But there's another reason this chapter is in the Bible too. Because like so many other chapters in the Bible, it serves to frustrate our search for a praiseworthy king, or at least to prolong it. This chapter reminds us that if we're looking for a hero to worship amongst the kings of Israel, we'll always be disappointed. Because the kind of king we seek as we read this book would not arrive on planet earth until hundreds more years had passed. And when he came, he would be a king unlike Hezekiah in all sorts of important ways. And I guess while this chapter frustrates and prolongs our search for a praiseworthy king, it also intensifies our longings for one. With good reason. And so this chapter points us to the king beyond this king- to king Jesus.

Like Hezekiah, Jesus too would one day face the prospect of death and he would pray his heart out for God to change his mind. But unlike Hezekiah, Jesus' prayer would not be answered in the way he hoped. And God would say "no" to his prayer for the same reason that he said "yes" to Hezekiah's- because he's a gracious God who longs to heal people- people like you and me.

And unlike Hezekiah, king Jesus would never hear God's word and doubt it. Jesus would give signs to people to reassure them in their doubt. But he would never ask God for a sign himself. Because his confidence in his Father's word was unbroken and undoubting.

And like Hezekiah, Jesus was powerful and wealthy. After all he came to earth from the throneroom of heaven itself. But unlike Hezekiah he would always give glory to his Father. And he would always depend upon his father- refusing every temptation to grasp at worldly success and power, but resolutely seeking the will of God, and the praise of God. Yet not my will, but yours be done.

And unlike Hezekiah when the moment of fierce judgement came, Jesus would not be spared. For the same reason that Hezekiah was spared- because even in justice, God

is, inexplicably and beautifully, merciful towards sinners. And so, Jesus succumbed selflessly to God's wrath in order that the generations to come, generations like ours, might never see it. And that's why, above all, he is the Son of David who is most worthy of our praise.

Philippians 2, from verse 8.

[Read Philippians 2:8-11]