

## 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS

### Week 27, chapter 18

Momentarily we're going to re-read a goodly portion of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 18, so rich is it not only in Israel's history but in great and timeless spiritual lessons that seem to be regularly forgotten not only by Believers but by the Jews of modern-day Israel as well. And let there be no doubt that the weakened state of the modern church is at least partly because of the abandonment of God's Word in favor of manmade traditions and glib Christian sayings, and especially because the Old Testament, where these important God-principles are developed and the lessons they teach us are recorded, has been declared null and void by many influential but misguided Christian leaders.

The 5<sup>th</sup> verse of this chapter sums up God's perspective of His new King of Judah, **Hizkiyahu** (Hezekiah):

#### 2Kings 18:5-7 CJB

***<sup>5</sup> He put his trust in ADONAI the God of Isra'el; after him there was no one like him among all the kings of Y'hudah, nor had there been among those before him.***

***<sup>6</sup> For he clung to ADONAI and did not leave off following him, but obeyed his mitzvot, which ADONAI had given Moshe.***

***<sup>7</sup> So ADONAI was with him.....***

There is scarcely a sharper contrast in the Bible between 2 individuals (let alone a father and his son) than between Hezekiah and his father, the former King of Judah, **Achaz**. Because of **Achaz**, Judah had begun to look an awful lot like the northern kingdom, which was now in exile thanks to the Assyrian Empire. But God being of unchangeable character showed great mercy and patience by raising up a far better king for Judah, one that He compared favorably to the greatest king of Israel, and ancestor of the Messiah, King David. Hezekiah was more than a reformer, he was a transformer. So while the first 4 verses of chapter 18 speak of how he **reformed** the religion of Judah by destroying the pagan idols, tearing down the Asherah trees and essentially abolishing idol worship in his kingdom, the next several verses speak of how he **transformed** the nation of Judah's military, government, and civil society into one that could

better deal with the geopolitical realities of that era. And those realities were that Assyria was the greatest empire that the world had ever known up to that time, and they had Judah squarely in their sights. Apparently Hezekiah sensed that while prayer and obedience to God and attending to spiritual matters was his first and foremost duties, there was also a time of trouble just ahead and concrete action was needed, not merely pious passivity or wishful thinking. Therefore he spent the first few years of his reign fortifying his nation's defenses and preparing for the inevitable war with Assyria.

We're going to spend considerable time with this chapter, because we'll be reading extensively from the Book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles that adds much needed information and perspective to Hezekiah's reign. We'll get the practical side and the heavenly side of the story. Let me remind you that we're at a point of around 700 B.C. and therefore but one century from Judah suffering a similar fate as their long lost brothers of the 10 tribes. So as marvelously successful and righteous as Hezekiah's reign would be, it was but the proverbial finger-in-the-dyke that could only hold back the floodwaters of divine judgment but temporarily.

Let's re-read a portion of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 18.

### RE-READ 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS 18: 5 – 16

Verse 7 explains that Hezekiah inherently knew that the Kingdom of God could not coexist under the rule of a foreign occupier, which by definition gave their allegiance to a different god or gods. Hezekiah's father **Achaz** had agreed to turn Judah over to Assyria in exchange for Assyria allowing him to retain his title as King of Judah (that was the rather standard vassal arrangement for that era). Thus we read of Hezekiah informing the King of Assyria that no further tribute would be paid; this was rebellion. But in addition to this direct act of rebellion Hezekiah also took control of Philistia. Why was he interested in Philistia? Because at this time Philistia was under the rule of Assyria. Assyria needed the Philistine territory because of the important highway that linked Mesopotamia to Egypt, the Via Maris. And although I just told you that Judah was squarely in Assyria's sights, it was mostly because of Assyria's aspirations to conquer Egypt. And the fertile and productive land located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River (what was essentially Judah) was vital for Assyria to prosecute a war against Egypt. Philistia gave Assyria a needed seaport and a highway, but they would also need the resources of Judah to provision a large expeditionary force that would necessarily be in the field for several years (wars of this kind took a long time to resolve). By rebelling and then taking possession of Philistia, King **Hizkiyahu** was denying Assyria both. He knew that Assyria wouldn't stand still for this for very long, so he sought strategic alliances as well. By denying Assyria the land route they needed to attack Egypt, suddenly Egypt and Judah found themselves as uneasy partners against the Assyrian war machine.

Then in verse 9, the narrative takes a step back to explain that the siege of Assyria against Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom (that finally resulted in the exile of the 10 northern tribes) had actually begun in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of King **Hizkiyahu's** reign. Thus this latest King of Judah was an eyewitness to the destruction and exile of the northern kingdom. Since Prophets like Elijah and Isaiah had warned the northern kingdom about what was coming if they didn't repent and change their faithless and idolatrous ways, Hezekiah was aware of these prophecies and their catastrophic outcome. Notice verse 12 that explains, in part, **Hizkiyahu's** actions.

<sup>CJB</sup> **2 Kings 18:12** *This happened because they (Israel) did not heed the voice of ADONAI their God, but violated his covenant, everything that Moshe the servant of ADONAI had ordered them to do, and would neither hear it nor do it.*

Twice in this verse the Hebrew word **shema** was used to describe what it is that the northern kingdom of the 10 tribes did NOT do in regards to God's commandments given through Moses. That is, they did not DO what it is that they HEARD. We've discussed this import principle that is contained in the word **shema** on numerous occasions. It is fascinating to me that both Jews and Christians declare that the principle of 'love your God with all you heart, mind, and strength' is the basis of even the 10 Commandments, and therefore the common denominator of our faiths. In fact so recognized is this God-principle in Judaism that they have given a formal name to the Scripture passage where this principle is presented (Deuteronomy 6:4 & 5). Recall that this passage begins with the words, "Hear O Israel", or **shema Yisra'el**. Thus they call it The Shema.

I will not relent from chastising the church that in general, until recently, we have listened to God's words but have determined NOT to DO God's words. And what this leads to is what is happening now in the post-modern era church. The church (again, in general, not universally) has stopped LISTENING to God's Word. Fine speeches from the pulpit that pull a verse or two, or even part of a verse, out of context and then is used to validate some social or religious point of view of the speaker is NOT the same thing as listening to God's word. Reading books about the end times, or about heaven, or about how to grow the church, or about the nature of the human soul, or about social justice is not the same thing as reading God's word. So the principle is this: unlike what it might seem, it is **not** that being deaf to God's word leads to not DOING God's word. It is the other way around. In reality the ONLY people on this planet who are supposed to do God's Word are God's chosen and redeemed people. When God's worshippers hear God's Word but don't do it, it eventually leads to no longer listening to it. Why? Because as James said, even the demons know who God is and what God's principles are. But those who hear God's word and don't do it possess a dead faith. And a dead faith eventually loses interest in even hearing the Lord's word to us. And that is exactly what has happened.

Hezekiah didn't want the same thing to happen to Judah that happened to Israel. As the great

Hebrew scholar Abarbanel suggests: Assyria was able to sweep to victory not because it was all powerful, but because the 10 tribes and their king had sinned beyond reprieve, so God turned them over to Assyria for judgment rather than protecting them from conquest as He had up until then. So for Hezekiah step 1 was to lead Judah in repentance of their apostasy, and step 2 was to build up the kingdom's defenses against a formidable Assyrian army that was designed for world domination.

Verse 13 proves that Hezekiah had wisdom, because just as he had anticipated and prepared for, Assyria finally attacked Judah in retribution and in hopes of recapturing Judah, which would also then return Philistia and the valuable north/south Via Maris highway to their control.

Even though Hezekiah had reformed and transformed the Kingdom of Judah back to a strong and God-fearing nation, when the moment of truth finally arrived he acted in a way that surprises us. These passages seem to indicate that he panicked, and in a moment of weakness he reverted to his (and our) natural human carnal instincts. **Hizkiyahu** had reigned in righteousness for 14 years when King Sennacherib began attacking the fortified cities of Judah. When the large Jewish fortress city of Lachish was surrounded and near collapse, it greatly alarmed Hezekiah because it was only a couple of days march from there to Jerusalem. He appears to react by trying to buy his way out of trouble, instead of beseeching God. The narrative implies that Hezekiah was thinking that Assyria's forces were much too large and experienced to be defeated by natural means, so he sued for peace in the typical Middle Eastern way of that time. Sennacherib named his price: 20,000 pounds of silver and 2000 pounds of gold: an enormous amount that he probably didn't think Hezekiah could come up with. However by emptying the royal treasury, the Temple treasury, and even stripping slabs of gold off of the Temple doors, the King of Judah was able to meet the demand. But as we're about to see, the King of Assyria was insincere in his demands, and to give-in only emboldened him to press for more.

### RE-READ 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS 18: 17 – end

The King of Assyria was apparently present with his troops as they laid siege to Lachish. When word came to him that King Hezekiah was willing to admit his "sin" in rebelling, and to meet Sennacherib's outrageous price of 10 tons of silver and a ton of gold, he sent a delegation of underlings to meet with the Hebrew king with yet another set of demands in hand. And, let's not misunderstand the use of the word "sin" in relation to King **Hizkiyahu** pronouncing in verse 14 that he had "sinned" (or as in the CJB, "done wrong") against the King of Assyria by rebelling against him. This was just a common way of speaking; further, in no way had Hezekiah ever agreed to be Assyria's vassal. His father had done that, and it was usual that when the king of a vassal state vacated the throne and a new king took his place, that a new agreement had to be reached. There is no evidence from Assyrian or biblical records that such

a thing had occurred; so it's not as though Hezekiah had vowed in God's name to be a vassal to Assyria and then reneged on the deal. Thus there was no wrong-doing against Assyria, and certainly no trespass against Yehoveh was involved.

In order to get a fuller picture of what happened next, turn your Bibles to 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 32. We're going to read it all.

### **READ 2<sup>ND</sup> CHRONICLES 32 all**

It appears from these verses that while Hezekiah indeed offered a bribe to Sennacherib to stop attacking Judah, and that in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 18 it leaves us wondering that perhaps he had done a cowardly if not bad thing in paying off the Assyrian King with gigantic amounts of gold and silver, some of it from the Temple treasury, we now understand from 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 32 that at least part of his reaction was strategic in order to buy more time to prepare. And perhaps the most important thing that Hezekiah wanted to do with that time was to deny the Assyrian army a water source as they surrounded Jerusalem, and at the same time to protect that water source and keep it available to the besieged city residents and military defenders. Thus he began a project to not only fortify and expand Jerusalem's defensive walls, but he ordered that an impressive water diversion project be undertaken and that it must happen in an impossibly short period of time.

The main feature of that water project is a marvel of ancient engineering called Hezekiah's Tunnel, located in what we now know was the City of David. It was rediscovered in the mid-1800's by a Bible scholar and archeologist named Edward Robinson. However it took several more decades for the academic world to finally concede that this water tunnel was the project that is the subject of 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 32. One reason for the reluctance to agree with Robinson was that it seemed impossible that such a project could be built in 700 B.C. with such precision, and so quickly. In fact, excellent and reliable Bible commentaries written by such notables as Keil and Delitzsch, and Alfred Edersheim, were still guessing that a different water channel that was actually up a little higher in the holy city, nearby what is now called the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, or perhaps yet another channel that was discovered that goes under the Tyropean Valley, just to the west side of the Ophel and Temple Mount, was the one that Hezekiah ordered built. However the actual one turns out to be quite an engineering marvel as it was carved underground through bedrock, is about 600 yards long (about 6 football fields), and it was dug from both ends and the workers were somehow able to make it meet in the middle. That is not speculation: an inscription was actually found inside the tunnel that explained this is how they accomplished it. But the method they devised to allow the two excavations to precisely meet in the middle is still debated. I've walked through that narrow serpentine tunnel on several occasions, and at the bottom of it is the famous Pool of Siloam, itself only recently discovered in 2004.

The bottom line is that the combination of this tunnel and the Siloam Pool, which was kind of a reservoir to hold the water that flowed through the tunnel, was completely inside the defensive walls of the City of David. Once dug, the waters of the Gihon Spring were dammed up and diverted to the tunnel, instead of running down the Gihon Valley to the bottom, mostly outside the city walls. While this didn't solve the starvation problem besieged residents would face, it did solve the number one problem which was a nearly unlimited water source. And it kept the Assyrian army from having access to it for themselves. Since sieges could take from months or even years to come to a conclusion, a well defended and provisioned walled city could often outlast the enemy army, especially where inclement weather and a scarcity of water was an issue, as is the case with Jerusalem.

2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 32 also explains that King Hezekiah was anything but afraid and timid; it turns out that it wasn't fear that drove him to pay enormous sums of precious metals to the King of Assyria. In fact it is recorded that he gathered his military and civic leaders together and told them to have courage and not to fear the Assyrians because the God of Israel and not the size of the enemy forces is going to determine the outcome,. Oh, if only modern Israel had a Hezekiah to lead them! They still believe that their own military might, advanced weapons, and cunning strategies are the answer to their problems. If only they would turn to God and to His Son Yeshua, fall on their knees and exclaim as one, ***“Baruch haba B’shem Adonai”*** (blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord) then they would see miracles like the one that Hezekiah would soon witness.

Back to 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 18. In verse 17 we meet the delegation that Sennacherib sent to pow-wow with Hezekiah. It was an offensive display of arrogance that some lesser government officials would demand an audience with Judah's king, but Hezekiah wisely countered it; if Sennacherib was sending envoys to speak for him, then Hezekiah would send his own envoys to hear them. So here are 3 Assyrian fellows called Tartan, Rav-Saris and Rav-Shekeh. These are not their names, these are their titles. Tartan means viceroy; so this was probably Sennacherib's 2<sup>nd</sup> in command. Rav-Saris means chief of the Eunuchs, which mostly has to do with the king's household. Rav-Shekeh means something like chief baker, but probably was indicating that he was Sennacherib's chief steward. These men made up the upper echelon of the King of Assyria's royal court. The prophet Isaiah speaks of this incident, but singles out Rav-Shekeh as he was the leader, or at least the one who did all the talking.

Turn your Bibles to Isaiah 36.

### **READ ISAIAH 36:1 - 10**

Sennacherib's message was one of great impudence and designed to shame King Hezekiah and the people of Judah. Yet, there was truth in it. As Alfred Edersheim so rightly noticed: "Rarely, perhaps, was there an occasion on which faith in the unseen was put to a severer test



than in the conference between the leaders of the Assyrian army and the representatives of King Hezekiah". In other words, here is where the rubber meets the road. Faith in God is wonderful, and inspiring to sing about, and rather easy to maintain until one is severely tested. This particular test was one of life and death; not just of Hezekiah's life but of an entire kingdom's existence as a sovereign Hebrew nation. According to earthly eyes and logic, the situation was as hopeless as these representatives of King Sennacherib accurately portrayed to the 3 envoys of Judah and to all the common folk sitting and standing nearby. The Assyrian army simply had not known defeat; they were well equipped, well trained, large in number and expert in conquest. They had already taken on more formidable foes than Judah, and won handily.

But here there is yet another great spiritual lesson just under the surface. Hezekiah had been ruling for 14 years as a righteous king who had brought his kingdom back from apostasy to a proper worship and reverence of God. So why would God allow Assyria to invade now, and for Hezekiah to be humiliated? This issue has puzzled the Rabbis and Sages of old, and they have come up with various solutions. Radak and Abarbanel say that this was not Hezekiah's failure but the people's that God was reacting against. Other Sages agree that the invasion was all part of Yehoveh's plan of redemption, and that essentially this was the war of Gog and Magog against Jerusalem. King Sennacherib was intended to represent King Gog and King Hezekiah the Messiah.

I think Abarbanel is the closest to exposing the principle that is being taught, but didn't go far enough. Hezekiah indeed was not necessarily at fault, but the Kingdom of Judah in general had for a very long time erred to the point of unfaithfulness towards God. The Temple operated in an off-and-on fashion, there were high places built all over the hills of Judah, and idol worshipped was tolerated. Even though under Hezekiah's leadership the citizens of Judah had righted the ship in repentance and struck out on the straight path of righteousness, and thus had every reason to expect some level of help and deliverance from the Lord in acknowledgment of their sincere change of heart and change of behavior, there would necessarily remain the residue of consequence for their past sins that they would have to suffer.

If one has lived long enough, and walked with God close enough, the truth of this principle is evident enough. Despite perhaps an extended time of being faithful and obedient to our Lord, if our past life was full of sin and rebellion and foolishness we shall not fully escape its effects in this life or on this earth. Our redeemed lives will indeed be eligible for God's mercy and His favor; but we can also expect trouble that results from our failures of the past; some that we might call natural effects, and some that can be nothing other than God's justice being meted out upon us.

Christ did not come to save our fleshly lives by being hung up on that execution pole; His sacrifice was not intended to give us a reprieve from the just earthly consequences of our past

or present evil behavior (although that does seem to happen occasionally). His sacrifice had to do with pardoning the curse of the law upon us, also called in the New Testament the wages of sin. The curse (the wages of sin) is eternal death. But such pardon is only for those who sincerely trust in Him and make him Lord of our life. The law and its righteousness were not abolished as Yeshua so clearly stated in the Sermon on the Mount; only the eternal effects of breaking the law were dealt with.

The 3 representatives who King Hezekiah sent to receive the Assyrian envoys were **Elyakim**, **Shevnah**, and **Yo'ach**. Here is what they heard: the Assyrians wanted to know why it was that Hezekiah thought that by making all of these preparations for war that it would do him and Judah any good? What exactly was the source of Judah's confidence that it could ward off the unstoppable Assyrian forces? Was it brilliant words of motivation to the troops, or an astounding battle strategy? Could it be that Hezekiah was relying on Egypt to come to his aid?

It couldn't be, could it, that Hezekiah was trusting in Israel's God? Because that would be the most foolish thing of all possibilities. After all, hadn't King Hezekiah actually insulted his own god by breaking down the high places where his people had been worshipping the God of Israel, and instead forcing them to worship in only one place, a place that Hezekiah personally preferred, the Temple in Jerusalem? In other words, Rav-Shekeh, being primarily familiar with the Golden Calf cult of the former northern kingdom, thought that it was good and right that the citizens of Judah would have their own personal high places and altars of sacrifice. Therefore Hezekiah ordering them torn down was born of a selfish motive of some sort that allowed him to more fully control his people. And while it might please him, what god would be pleased with having all of his many high places torn down?

So, with the obvious conclusion that Judah stands no chance against Assyria, Rav-Shakeh presents an offer from his king to Hezekiah: the siege of Jerusalem wouldn't happen if Hezekiah would agree to forward some kind of special surety that would be forfeit if he again rebelled against Sennacherib. Now the CJB and some other Bibles translate verse 23 a bit differently and have the offer as being a wager, a bet. In other words this offer was not real; rather it was but a diplomatic game mocking Hezekiah that the King of Assyria would give him 2,000 horses if Hezekiah could present 2,000 men who were competent riders (the assumption being that Judah didn't have 2,000 competent riders). But that doesn't seem right to me. The Hebrew word used is **arob**, and it ought to be translated as surety or guarantee. It is nowhere else used in the Bible to mean a wager or a gambling bet.

There for certain was sarcasm in Sennacherib offering to give King Hezekiah 2,000 horses if he would put up the requested surety, because he didn't think Judah had 2,000 men who could ride. In fact, says Rav-Shekeh in the next verse, to emphasize just how weak and small Judah's army was in comparison, the lowliest officer in the Assyrian army commanded 2,000 horsemen.



To this point, there is much truth to Rav-Shekeh's rant and indictment towards Hezekiah and Judah, even if it was wrapped up in a great deal of hyperbole. But now he crosses over the line; now he says that he is Yehoveh's agent, and that YHWH will lead Assyria to victory over Judah.

**Elyakim, Shevnah,** and **Yo'ach** were becoming concerned that the common folks of Judah who were gathered all around and listening to Rav-Shekeh would become afraid and lose heart. So they pleaded with Rav-Shekeh to speak in Aramaic instead of Hebrew because they understood Aramaic but the people didn't. Rav-Shekeh let it be known that it was his intent that the people hear what they are in for if their king defies the will of the King of Assyria. It was they who would suffer the worst and the longest, and suffer the most degradation of a siege.

Next week we'll continue chapter 18 and move on to chapter 19.