

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

### Week 30, chapter 20

Be aware that we're going to take a couple of detours today in order to give you some information that ought to be helpful for your general understanding of the Bible.

For several weeks, now, we've been following the see-saw progress of Judah, the southern kingdom, which is generally all that remains of God's chosen people still living in the Promised Land (no doubt a few members of the 10 northern tribes were also still around having somehow avoided deportation by Assyria). And the latest king of Judah is **Hizkiyahu**, who was pretty close to being on par with King David when it comes to wholeheartedness towards God.

His father **Achaz**, however, was the worst sort of tyrant who had led Judah into the most degrading sorts of abominations, including accepting a vassal relationship with Assyria in return for allowing him to retain his crown. But what we learned of **Achaz** was that he didn't just submit meekly to Assyria, he also eagerly accepted their ways and their gods and did everything in his power to become just like them. He admired them. He decided that the Israelites ought not to be exceptional in the world's eyes, better to be like everyone else. King **Achaz** didn't want Judah to be a "chosen" people of God; he wanted Judah to blend in with the new world order as envisioned by the Assyrian Empire.

It is ironic that 2700 years later, we see the modern day nation of the Israelites essentially seeking after the same thing. Their attitude is probably best characterized by the brief prayer offered up to God by **Tevye**, a Jewish milkman and father of only daughters, in the Hollywood film *Fiddler on the Roof*, who looks skyward and says: ***"I know, I know, we are your chosen people. But once in a while can't you choose someone else?"***

King **Achaz** didn't want to stop being Hebrew, necessarily, he only wanted to be like the gentile world and to take advantage of all those benefits that he perceived would come his way. He wanted to remain identifiable as a racial Hebrew, but also to be indistinguishable as a citizen of the world. For hundreds and hundreds of years Jews the world over have sought only to be accepted by gentile nations, and Israel today seeks the same. Unfortunately that is not the destiny for anyone set apart for God. And Christians and Messianics, God's ekklesia, this is something that has been lost on most of us for a very long time. Apparently without realizing it we seek to be as **Achaz**: identified as Christians and Jews on the one hand, and yet

indistinguishable from the world by all outward appearances otherwise. We want to have it both ways; we want the spiritual benefits of salvation in Christ and also the economic and social advantages of the unsaved world. It didn't work out too well for King **Achaz**, and it isn't working out too well for the Church or for Judaism even though we often delude ourselves into believing that it is. Here is what Christ has to say about it:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Revelation 3:1** *"To the angel of the Messianic Community in Sardis, write: 'Here is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars: "I know what you are doing- you have a reputation for being alive, but in fact you are dead!*

<sup>2</sup> *Wake up, and strengthen what remains, before it dies too! For I have found what you are doing incomplete in the sight of my God.*

<sup>3</sup> *So remember what you received and heard, and obey it, and turn from your sin! For if you don't wake up, I will come like a thief; and you don't know at what moment I will come upon you.*

<sup>4</sup> *Nevertheless, you do have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; and they will walk with me, clothed in white, because they are worthy.*

<sup>5</sup> *He who wins the victory will, like them, be dressed in white clothing; and I will not blot his name out of the Book of Life; in fact, I will acknowledge him individually before my Father and before his angels.*

<sup>6</sup> *Those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Messianic communities."*

King Hezekiah, **Achaz's** son, meant to change all that his wicked father had done and to return Judah to the ways of the Lord. But because his father had many years earlier turned his people over to idolatry and to a foreign master, much had changed about the Israeli people and Israeli society. Irreparable damage had been done; like a car that has been in a flood, and outwardly repaired to where on the surface it seems bright and shiny and lovely, underneath the carpet, inside the crevices of the car's steel structure in unseen places, the car is rapidly rusting away. So as we'll soon see, while Hezekiah fought to his dying day to bring about much needed religious and civil reforms to Judah, and there were surface changes that occurred to be sure, when he finally died the country immediately returned to its old ways.

Let's read 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings Chapter 20 together.

**READ 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS CHAPTER 20**

We've discussed in earlier lessons that the Book of Kings works in concert with the Book of Isaiah and with parts of 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles. So let's read small portions of these other books just to get as much information as we can to best render the meaning and the context of what it is 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings chapter 20 is telling us.

First, let's go to 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 32.

### **READ 2<sup>ND</sup> CHRONICLES 32:24 – 29**

Later we're going to read extensively from Isaiah.

King Hezekiah became ill and it seemed that he would not survive it. But as we read, he did not die and in a strange set of circumstances it seems that the news of his miraculous recovery from his illness had something to do with a group of delegates from Babylon, which included the King of Babylon himself, coming to Jerusalem to visit *Hizkiyahu*.

The first thing we need to understand is that chapter 20 is not in chronological order with chapters 19 or even 18. Rather scholars rightly refer to chapter 20 as a kind of appendix. We've seen this literary style before in the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel. This appendix is added information that apparently the first writing of the handed down tradition about King Hezekiah did not include; information from some other source that was considered reliable enough and pertinent enough to add.

So when did Hezekiah fall ill? Shortly before King Sennacherib's invasion of Judah. Thus if 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 18:13 is accurate, then it was probably late in the 13<sup>th</sup> year or early in the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Hezekiah's reign that he was struck ill, since we're told that it was in the 14<sup>th</sup> year of his reign that Sennacherib attacked Judah.

Chapter 20 verse 1 states that Isaiah was summoned when Hezekiah suspected he had a serious illness, and Isaiah offered him no comfort. The great prophet said that indeed the king needed to get his affairs in order (mostly meaning to name a successor) because he was definitely going to die. In fact this was not Isaiah's supposition, but we're told that Yehoveh informed Isaiah that this would be the case.

Naturally this news sent the king into a state of despair, and so he rolled over in his bed, faced the wall, and tearfully prayed to the Lord to reconsider his case. Interestingly we don't find

Hezekiah actually asking Yehoveh to heal him; rather he merely expresses his great distress and that he has walked in a wholehearted way before God all of his days. And in fact, the feedback that he had been receiving concerning his reign (no doubt through Isaiah) was that he had done good deeds, been a righteous king, and was generally obedient to the Father. So what we have here is that King Hezekiah is perplexed as to why he is being struck down before he had even reached his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In ancient times, dying young was seen as a punishment, a curse from the gods. Even the Hebrews felt that the only real and tangible reward for faithfulness to God was a full lifespan. So to die earlier than that was an indication of a problem between that person and God. Hezekiah was crushed; all along he thought he had put himself on the line to do God's will (and often it pitted him against his advisors, priests, and citizens). Now it seems as though it was all a mirage, and he had been fooling himself even though he had no idea what he had done wrong.

As *Yesha'yahu* was leaving the king, and walking through the middle part of the city of Jerusalem, God's word came to him to return to the king with a new message. It was a MUCH better message than the earlier one because the Lord has decided that Hezekiah will not die, but rather shall recover and (according to the text) get an additional 15 years of life. In fact, the healing will occur so rapidly that within 3 days he'll be out of his death bed and instead be at the Temple, praising God and no doubt sacrificing in thanksgiving.

This begs an obvious question: did God change His mind? Do we have a situation whereby God sent a prophet with an oracle that the king is going to die, only to hours later reverse His verdict? I think not. What we have is a contrast between the natural and the supernatural and we'll see this same dynamic played out in a number of ways in this story of Hezekiah's mysterious illness and miraculous recovery. Whatever Hezekiah's illness might have been it was, indeed, a potentially fatal one. It was an illness that any and all humans are subject to simply because we are all part of the community of humanity and riddled with our frailties. It was not illness caused by God as a punishment or as a curse. But still by all that is natural it was the sort of medical condition that causes death. Yet when he received the bad news from Isaiah, Hezekiah responded appropriately and sought God's help, so God supernaturally intervened, healed an otherwise fatal disease, and Hezekiah lived. And I think it is perfectly reasonable for us to assume that the king's long record of righteousness and faithfulness had everything to do with the Lord saving his life; in fact I think that this is one of the chief lessons of this story.

But there is yet another unspoken circumstance going on; Hezekiah had no sons at this time. There is no record of his being married just yet, and no record of any children. In fact the Rabbis go so far as to say that it just may be that God was indeed punishing Hezekiah with a fatal illness for the crime of intentionally ignoring his duty to produce an heir. And while the duty of producing children, and especially sons, was incumbent upon all Hebrews as a

fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant to be fruitful and multiply, it was far more so for a royal descendant of King David to have sons so that David's dynasty would continue and eventually produce the Messiah.

While I don't agree with these Rabbis' assessment that the illness was divine retribution, it does add another bit of information to help us understand just how devastated Hezekiah was. He got it that to this point he had not married and had thus produced no sons to follow him; and as he lay on his death bed the consequences of that unwise decision were becoming all too apparent. Not only would the lack of a male heir end his royal line, but it meant that Hezekiah would have no son to carry on his life essence after death. We've discussed this before. The Hebrews had nothing but the fuzziest concept of a life after death. But ancestor worship did play a role in what they thought might happen. And so in some indefinable way it was believed that a father's spiritual life lived on through his sons. There was little more fearful, then, for any Hebrew man than to die with no sons. But for a king, and especially a Davidic King, it was beyond catastrophic.

This would be a good point to open our Bibles now to Isaiah chapter 38 as it adds some nuances to the Hezekiah's illness narrative, but also it includes a prayer of thanksgiving after he was healed. And in this prayer we get a glimpse into Hezekiah's mindset about death and the afterlife.

### **READ ISAIAH 38 all**

So, as regards Hezekiah's concept of death and what lies beyond for one of the most righteous Kings of Judah that ever ruled, we observe him to say that had he died he would have never again seen **Yah** (God), because **Yah** is the God of the land of the living. He would also have never again seen human beings (so whatever contact he had with his ancestors after death, they were in some form that didn't mimic a living human). Verse 17 says that the Lord saved him from the "nothingness pit". Thus in some sense Hezekiah felt that death was the end of life and of the self-consciousness of one's own existence.

And at the same time at least part of the reason for the Lord delivering him was that He put Hezekiah's sins behind His Holy back; meaning the Lord put Hezekiah's sins where He couldn't see them and thus be offended by them. And by the way, this isn't necessarily forgiveness; this is grace, and they are two different things. God didn't dispose of Hezekiah's sins, nor did He somehow cleanse Hezekiah's sins such that they were no longer sinful. Rather the sins were just hidden, covered over, so that God did not have to look upon them and therefore did not have to act in just response to them.

Verse 19 explains that only the living can thank the Lord for His goodness and mercies. Thus, one cannot praise God after death. If there is an afterlife it is devoid of God and therefore of relationship with God.

What this prayer of Hezekiah all adds up to is a brief summation of the current understanding of that time about the nature of life, death, and the afterlife. Basically, the thought was that there is no dying and then somehow existing in spiritual form in God's presence. Rather, after death there may be some type of unknown shadowy existence, but wherever and whatever it is, it isn't a particularly happy situation and certainly death is nothing that has any hope in it; there is no pot of gold at the end of this rainbow. The best situation for anyone is life. And it is during life that one has a chance to praise God, experience His grace, and know the joy of living in His ways.

I want to stress: this is NOT the divine description, nor is it the reality, of how a worshipper's relationship with God actually works, or is it what the nature of one's spirit or soul is, especially upon death. Rather this is Hezekiah's, and the typical Hebrew's, flawed human perspective on the matter in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. They were making their conclusions based on the limited information they had, and of course it was greatly influenced by the beliefs of their gentile neighbors. Continuing to the end of the Old Testament as we have it today, the nature of life, death and the afterlife remains generally like this. And when I say "as we have it today", I'm meaning that the Protestant Bible that most Christians carry around is incomplete; it has a significant "hole" in it because the final books of the Protestant Bible's Old Testament were removed 5 centuries ago. Thus the Protestant Old Testament only takes us up to about 400 years before Christ is born. And then the Bible starts up again with the Book of Matthew that concerns Messiah's birth.

Thus there is a missing 400 year period of Bible history and report on the progression of the Hebrew religion. This situation exists because of Martin Luther who, in the early 1500's A.D., upon his own authority, removed the so-called Books of the Apocrypha from the Bible that covered that 400 year time frame, when he rebelled against the Roman Catholic Church. Those books had been part of the Hebrew Bible that Christ knew and continued to be part of the bible that all Christians knew up until Luther insisted these books be removed because, according to him, they were "too Jewish". That's right; Martin Luther was a proud Jew hater. Virulently anti-Semitic, it was this German monk and his Christian doctrines that formed the basis of the new Protestant Church, and that set Germany itself on the course that culminated in the WWII Holocaust. In some ways, it is several of Martin Luther's misguided doctrines and teachings that the Hebrew Roots movement is attempting to overcome and bury in Sheol where they belong.

It is in the New Testament where we discover the hope of a real, vibrant, and in some ways even better ***eternal*** life that awaits after death for the Believer. It is in the New Testament where we find out that the Messiah's sacrificial blood is so efficacious that it can atone for us

so thoroughly, for both our behavioral sins and for our Adam sin nature, that we will actually be able to reside for a time in Heaven, in God's presence, in a relationship closer with Him than anything that is possible in this present life, and then later on with Christ on earth in the Millennial Kingdom of God.

So now you have a good idea of the many reasons why Hezekiah was so troubled by the thought that he would die at about 38 years old; and then why he was so relieved, so humbled, and so grateful to Yehoveh for delivering him from his terminal illness. To the ancient Hebrew, and for the most part for the modern Hebrew, the only hope that exists for them is this present carnal life. Death is the end.

Moving on. Let's look again at 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 20 verse 6. God says that a) He is going to immediately rescue **Melech Hizkiyahu** from his fatal disease, and b) He is going to rescue Judah from the power of the King of Ashur. Most bibles will say that Judah will be rescued from the power of the King of Assyria. I have told you in previous lessons that Ashur and Assyria is essentially the same thing; but now I believe you've learned enough that I'm going to explain how technically they are not identical terms. In reality Ashur is the name of the GOD of Assyria. Yet it was common in those days that a nation would be identified at times by its national name and at other times by its god's name. Thus often we'll find in the bible that Assyria will be called Ashur. This was just a common way of speaking in ancient times (especially in Mesopotamia), and it is an acknowledgment that a god and his territory were organically connected and could not be separated. They are, for all practical purposes, one in the same, and that is how it is viewed by the various bible characters.

In verse 8 Judah's king asks what the sign will be that Yehoveh will heal him well enough to leave his bed and even be able to go to the Temple in a mere 3 days. The Rabbis make the excellent point that the reason for including this piece of information is to draw the sharp contrast between Hezekiah and his father **Achaz**. The idea of a sign in the bible is not as a lack of faith, nor as what Christians call "laying a fleece". Rather it is that the person wanting a sign is expressing belief, and the sign is only a sort of an expected and customary gift of surety from God. So a sign is not an indication of weak faith, nor is it in any way offensive to the Lord.

In Isaiah 7 verses 10 and 11 we read this:

### Isaiah 7:10-12 CJB

<sup>10</sup> **ADONAI spoke again to Achaz; he said,**

<sup>11</sup> **"Ask ADONAI your God to give you a sign. Ask it anywhere, from the depths of Sh'ol**

*to the heights above."*

<sup>12</sup> *But Achaz answered, "I won't ask, I won't test ADONAI."*

Thus what we have is that when God, through Isaiah, told King **Achaz** that He would deliver Judah from the hand of Israel and their ally Syria, God told the King that he could come up with his own sign to certify God's promise. Anything **Achaz** chose God would do. But **Achaz** wanted no sign from God because he declined to believe God, or even to desire Yehoveh's deliverance. He preferred to be delivered from Israel and Syria by the king and the god of Assyria. Now however, Hezekiah immediately wants to apprehend God's promise to both deliver him from death and Judah from Assyria, and he is happily ready to accept any sign God chooses to offer.

But even then the Lord offers a choice of a sign that will satisfy and reassure Hezekiah the most. The sign involves a sun dial. But before we get there, let's back up to verse 7 where the Lord tells Hezekiah to apply a cake of figs to some kind of abscess or skin inflammation that was either the source of his illness, or perhaps the result of his illness (it's not clear). Many bibles will have a footnote that explains that it was known that figs had a healing quality and was a standard folk remedy so for Isaiah to tell Hezekiah to do this would have been easily accepted. That is just bad scholarship, the perpetuation of a myth, and it's reading something backwards into the bible.

In fact, the application of the cake of figs to the affected area was by all that is natural the **WRONG** thing to do. Then, as now, it was fully understood that figs are if anything a skin irritant, not something that soothes; and it is one of several fruits that can cause a severe allergic reaction to people. No one in their right mind would have put a cake of figs onto an open wound in that or any other era unless the goal was perhaps torture to cause pain. So what gets missed is that as part of the healing miracle the Lord used the very thing (figs) that would in nature cause the illness and pain to become worse, but instead by His divine power He uses it to heal. And of course this is considered merit to King Hezekiah because knowing that applying figs to this infected lesion would be awful, he trusts God so much that he allows it and voila.....he is healed. Therefore we are meant to notice that it is **NOT** that the figs contained some magical healing quality, it is that Hezekiah's faith healed him; it was his obedience to God's solution that otherwise seemed so counter-intuitive to anything a human would have done or recommended.

As for the sun dial; **Hizkiyahu's** father **Achaz** had acquired a sun dial from his master the Assyrians and brought it back with him to Judah. Mesopotamians, especially the Chaldeans, were astute astronomers and had invented many devices for using the heavenly bodies for measuring time and calculating seasons. Therefore Isaiah asked Hezekiah if as a sign of God's promise he would like the shadow on the sun dial to advance 10 intervals, or to go



backwards 10 intervals. Since going forward was the natural thing to happen for a sundial, even if it moved faster than normal, Hezekiah asked that it would retreat because that would have been impossible. And it happened. We must not compare this with the Joshua incident in which he asked that the sun stay in the sky several hours longer, thus to increase the length of the day so that his military victory could be more complete. Rather this appears to be only a highly localized incident, and somehow only the shadow on the sun dial moved counter to what it should have done. There seems to have been no other effect other than to provide comfort for King Hezekiah.

Let's end our lesson for today here, because we are about to be introduced to the King of Babylon and a very interesting incident that had long range consequences and meaning; and I'd prefer we not study it only partially today.