

2ND KINGS

Week 31, Chapters 20 and 21

In our day in the modern Western culture and body politic, human history and spirituality are considered as mutually exclusive subjects and realms. Thus in the United States we have this constant tension between the borderlines of Church and State. However in most of the Western world, the State long ago won out and religion is seen as little more than a relic of a superstitious and primitive past. And in places where it is not quite that extreme, such as in America, the Church and other religious institutions are still given a measure of validation but only as separate and unconnected organizations apart from the various levels of civil government. Thus the popular philosophy of the 21st century is that whatever represents the historical past, and whatever might happen in the present and in the future is entirely in the hands of humanity and fate. God, in whatever form you believe He exists, is here primarily for each person's own comfort, sense of inner peace, and happiness; nothing more.

But in ancient times people believed that history and spirituality were not just connected but interwoven and inseparable. The gods directed all human activity, and often created the circumstances behind human activity, and so earthly human history was nothing more than the visible and tangible result of what the gods decided. By way of example I explained in our previous lesson that the alternative name for Assyria that we find used often in the Bible is Ashur; and it is commonly said that Ashur is just the same word but in a different language for Assyria. Rather it is that Ashur is the name of Assyria's chief national god. And since one god or another was always considered as the actual founder of a nation of people, and since gods controlled human history, it was common to refer to a nation sometimes by its national name and at other times by its god's name. We find that scenario confronting us every few sentences during this point in our study of the Book of 2nd Kings.

Thus when studying the Bible we need to adjust our minds to the worldview of the Biblical characters, writers, and editors if we are to understand what they observed and experienced and meant by what they recorded for us. One of the problems that a modern Christian faces is that we subconsciously read the Bible through the lens of our modern world view. As an unintended consequence this modern world view can fill us with spiritual doubts; and what I mean by that is that under some circumstances we might question the tenets of our faith. Or we might wonder if God is actually living and present in this world or in our lives (and as has become popular since the Enlightenment Period, does God exist at all). Or as a friend of mine liked to say: what is it that we **actually** believe we believe?

That sort of modern skeptical mindset was nowhere present in Biblical times among any known culture. The only question for them was which god or gods they ought to give their allegiance to, and what they might do to gain favor with those chosen gods. The spiritual and the earthly could not be separated. Thus when we ended last time we found King Hezekiah of Judah with a terminal illness of some sort, and the Prophet Isaiah telling him to get his affairs in order because he was surely going to die. And Hezekiah's first thought was what had he done to displease his God Yehoveh such that his normal lifespan was being cut short. So he prayed to the Lord to consider his case, the Lord did and through His prophet Isaiah informed Judah's King that he would live and not die. That is, God would intervene and supernaturally heal the king from his otherwise fatal disease. And to provide assurance to Hezekiah that his healing would happen quickly and it would not just be temporary, the Lord offered to give **Melech Hizkiyahu** (King Hezekiah) a miraculous sign that involved a sun dial. The sign came about as promised, Hezekiah was healed, and he continued to rule Judah. This is where we left off and so let's re-read from there to the end of the chapter. This is important stuff as it will have much to do with Judah's eventual exile to Babylon.

RE-READ 2ND KINGS CHAPTER 20: 12 - end

Seemingly out of the blue Hezekiah gets a state visit from the King of Babylon, a fellow named **B'rodakh-Bal'adan**. You might have a Bible that makes this person's name to be Merodach-Baladan; this is the same person. The confusion comes in that in the oldest Hebrew texts the first letter of this man's name is a bet, and in the Greek Septuagint this has been changed to a Mu. And thus when further translating from Greek to English we get an M for Merodach instead of a B for Berodach. Which name is correct? Almost for sure it is Merodach, because we find that name used in that form in the Hebrew Bible to recount this same story in Isaiah 39. Further, ancient Chaldean annals record his name using an M, as Marduk-apla-iddina.

So who was Merodach and why did he venture all the way from Babylon to visit King Hezekiah? As to the why he came: there has been much speculation that it had to do with the sign of the sun dial that God gave to **Hizkiyahu**. The thought is that it was well known that the Chaldeans (Babylonians) were astute astronomers and astrology was the focus of their religion. Thus when he heard about the shadow of Hezekiah's sun dial retreating for 10 units instead of advancing as normal he came to inquire about it. However that reasoning belies the plain reading of the Scriptures, which say that Merodach came when he heard about Hezekiah's illness and recovery. But what about that illness and recovery would intrigue the King of Babylon? The reality is that the answer lies mostly within the political situation of Merodach and his nation.

Josephus says that Merodach came to invite Hezekiah to become his ally and friend; and this certainly has the ring of truth to it. Since Merodach was constantly at war with powerful

Assyria, and Judah was also constantly under pressure from this growing empire, both kings needed allies. Babylon was an off-and-on vassal to Assyria. and Judah had been severely damaged by Assyria's attempted conquest of the Holy Land. But upon the death of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser in 722 B.C., there was a time of political instability in Assyria and Merodach used that time to elevate himself to Babylon's throne. With the help of the neighboring Kingdom of Elam he held onto it until 710 B.C.

In 710 B.C. the latest King of Assyria, Sargon, attacked Babylon in order to recover it; Merodach fled, and Sargon named himself as Babel's king. About 5 years later Sargon was killed on the battlefield, and so another period of Assyrian instability occurred. This gave Merodach the opportunity to return from his exile and regain the throne, but for something less than one year. Sennacherib became Assyria's king and immediately he came after Babylon and Merodach, and that was the end of Merodach. So during which of his terms on Babylon's throne did Merodach come to Judah to visit **Hizkiyahu**? Since he had his hands full with Assyria attacking him, it is unlikely that he could have paid a visit to Judah during his second term, so it was no doubt during his first term in office that we're reading about here in 2nd Kings 20.

Apparently King Hezekiah was flattered by the king's visit. He wasted no time in showing King Merodach the wealth and armaments of Judah, something which he obviously took great pride in. The rabbis point out that in Isaiah 39, the parallel account of Merodach's visit, it says this:

^{CJB} **Isaiah 39:2 *Hizkiyahu was pleased with the gifts and showed the messengers all of the building where he kept his treasures,.....***

The Hebrew word that is usually translated as pleased or glad is **samach**, and the rabbis say that the English word **rejoice** better expresses the meaning. The idea is that **Hizkiyahu** was quite open and receptive to the idea of an alliance with the heathen Babylonians, and so was ecstatic that the Babylonian king came bearing gifts as a sign of wanting a political relationship of equals; something that the Lord was dead-set against. While Israel was always to try for peace with its neighbors they were never to have a formal alliance with a foreign nation, and they were to seek whatever deliverance they needed from God. This principle is stated emphatically and in a number of places in the Bible including Exodus 23 and 34, Deuteronomy 7, and Judges 2.

In reality Hezekiah was open to doing exactly what his father King **Achaz** had done, when he approached the Assyrians wanting their friendship; he was willing to give up some of Judah's sovereignty to Assyria if they could be allies. Only for Hezekiah it was with Babylon that he sought favor and partnership. And it is true that this would not be a vassal arrangement like

Achaz had with Assyria, but rather a relationship of friends having a mutual interest. Hezekiah was anxious to show off his royal might and wealth to the Babylonian King. It was quite inflating to the Judahite pride that ambassadors would come from such a well known and far off place as Babylon to seek an audience with Judah's King. It seems that **Melech Hizkiyahu** had not only **not** learned the lessons from his father's ill-advised attachment of God's Kingdom to heathen Assyria, but he had also forgotten about his quite recent God-granted recovery from his terminal illness. And this is likely what is meant by what we read in yet another parallel account of this misadventure in 2nd Chronicles 32.

2Chronicles 32:25-26 CJB ²⁵ However, Hizkiyahu did not respond commensurately with the benefit done for him, because he had grown proud; thus he brought anger on himself and on Y'udah and Yerushalayim as well.

²⁶ But Hizkiyahu then humbled himself for his pride, both he and the people living in Yerushalayim, so that ADONAI's anger did not strike them during Hizkiyahu's lifetime.

In other words, after his miraculous recovery, instead of growing humble Hezekiah grew proud for a time, and it cost him dearly. Rather than being grateful to the God of Israel, there was an extended period in which he saw himself as especially worthy, apparently deserving of divine favor, and full of merit and wisdom. Listen to the writer of 2nd Chronicles describe what Hezekiah had become and how God reacted to it all.

2Chronicles 32:27-31 CJB

²⁷ Hizkiyahu had vast riches and great honor. He provided himself with storage places for silver, gold, precious stones, spices, shields and all kinds of valuable articles;

²⁸ also storehouses for the harvest of grain, wine and olive oil; and stalls for all kinds of livestock and pens for the flocks.

²⁹ He provided cities for himself and purchased flocks and herds in abundance, for God had made him extremely wealthy.

³⁰ It was this same Hizkiyahu who blocked the upper outlet of the Gichon Spring and diverted the water straight down on the west side of the City of David. Hizkiyahu succeeded in all that he did.

³¹ However, in the matter of the ambassadors from the princes of Bavel, who sent to him to learn of the marvel that had taken place in the land, God left him by himself, in order

to test him, so that he might know everything that was in his heart.

Hezekiah, whom God had earlier pronounced was almost on par with King David in his righteousness, had a reaction to his being divinely healed that at once surprises us and yet seems so familiar. Rather than seeing his own mortality as being fragile and his fate lying purely in God's hands, he became strong in himself, feeling invincible, quickly turning from a rather shallow gratitude to a deeper seated arrogance and pride. He mistook God's love and mercy for him as a license to live his life as he pleased. He thought that since God loved him and was with him, that as Judah's king he was now the exception to the rule and could take great liberties with God's laws and commandments; God would simply approve or look the other way.

Doesn't that well describe the modern Christian viewpoint of salvation in Christ? That is to say that since we are redeemed by grace and loved by God, thus Jesus has relieved us of our obligations to the Father. We are the chosen exceptions to the divine rule. We are the only people on the planet or among the angels in heaven who have no duty to be obedient to God's laws and commandments. When we see this attitude surface in Hezekiah and then factor in all that God did for him, delivering him from death, and yet his reaction was to consider himself as free from God's commandments and free to live his life according to his own perspective and advantage, we shake our heads in mock amusement and disbelief. But when we are confronted with it in ourselves, are we any different? Or do we go on deceiving ourselves into thinking that liberty in Christ means freedom **from** God?

God's unchangeableness could only lead to Isaiah's denouncement and prophetic judgment against Hezekiah. And it is so like God that the very thing that Hezekiah sought as his deliverance from danger and ticket to prosperity (a friendship and alliance with Babylon) would in time become Israel's doom and extended misery.

2Kings 20:16-18 CJB ¹⁶ Yesha'yahu said to Hizkiyahu, "Hear what ADONAI says:

¹⁷ 'The day will come when everything in your palace, along with everything your ancestors stored up until today, will be carried off to Bavel. Nothing will be left,' says ADONAI.

¹⁸ 'They will carry off some of your descendants, your own offspring; and they will be made eunuchs serving in the palace of the king of Bavel.'"

A 2-part judgment is issued. First, in a like-for-like manner everything that Hezekiah holds dear

and so boastfully showed off to emissaries from Babylon as symbols of his personal greatness would (in time) be turned over to other representatives of this same kingdom. But even more, some of Hezekiah's descendants will wind up serving the Kingdom of Babel. In the generation of the Babylon exile Hebrews of royal lineage like **Daniel, Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah** along with a host of other bright and talented young people would be forced into the service of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.

Oh what a lesson. Our Christian and Messianic arrogance, our blind acceptance of age-old religious doctrines that excuse us from any responsibility and accountability towards God and make all relationship obligations incumbent only upon Him, will not necessarily fully bite us in our lifetimes. But it will inevitably lead to bad effects upon future generations. But what will our attitude be about that? Hezekiah's is stated in verse 19 when he rhetorically thinks to himself that despite the bad things that Isaiah says are going to happen to his people and his descendants, at least it won't happen during his lifetime (so that is a good thing). He won't have to be around to see what his sin and foolishness has wrought, or personally experience the coming catastrophe. Rather, there will be shalom while he is still living; others will have to deal with it in later times.

The truth is that the coming evil wrought especially by the Anti-Christ, and then the worldwide conflagration that happens when Yeshua returns, is (we hope) not during our lifetimes. I guarantee you that if we really believed that it could happen tomorrow, we wouldn't be asking for it today. We regularly sing about the glorious Battle of Armageddon, we fervently pray for the Lord to return and reign, but in secret we hope for peace and prosperity while we're still living. So what we're really asking is for all these divinely ordained cataclysmic things to happen to our children and our children's children; just not to us. The truth is also that so much of what will happen is at least partially on account of us and our generation. Evil will advance because we have ceased to fight against it; faithlessness will increase because we have not been faithful. Rather than oppose evil, often we have silently compromised with it. Rather than agree with God about what is forever right and wrong (and live it out) we regularly agree with the world and rationalize it away that God's laws and commands are somehow not applicable to us or claim that this was only for past times or for another people. This is what Hezekiah did and too many of us have fallen to the same temptation.

This chapter ends with Hezekiah's death after reigning for 29 years, and now chapter 21 will be about the reign of his son Manasseh. Open your Bibles to 2nd Kings 21.

READ 2ND KINGS 21 all

We are told that Manasseh was only 12 years old when he became king. However there is little

doubt that when he was first anointed his was a co-regency with his father Hezekiah. Manasseh ruled over Judah from 697 B.C. to 642 B.C. However **Hizkiyahu** died in 687 B.C. So what we see is that **Hizkiyahu** and Manasseh ruled together for about a decade. That means that Manasseh only began to rule on his own when he was about 22 years old.

Some quick math says that since Hezekiah was 25 years old when he assumed the throne, and he ruled for 29 years, that he was 54 years old when he died. Thus if Manasseh was anointed king 10 years before his father's death, then King Hezekiah waited until he was 32 years old to produce an heir. While there are strong implications in 2nd Kings that indeed King Hezekiah was derelict in his duty to father children so that David's dynasty could continue it is highly unlikely that he fathered no children at all until Manasseh. That would have been so unusual that it seems something would have been said about it. Either there were a bunch of daughters produced and no son for an heir, or perhaps the first of his sons died and Manasseh was the oldest of what remained; we just don't know because the issue is never addressed in the Scriptures.

And, as seems to be the case regularly among the kings, Manasseh was the polar opposite of his father just as his father Hezekiah was the polar opposite of his father **Achaz**. So in a strange way Manasseh was just like his grandfather **Achaz**. Manasseh was perhaps the most evil king to rule Judah up to that point, or at best the equal of **Achaz**. And, ironically, he ruled longer than any other king of Judah: 55 years.

The result was a steep decline in the spiritual standing of Judah before the Lord. Manasseh led the remnant of God's people to do the very abominations that caused the Lord to eject the Canaanites from their land and turn it over to Israel. Not one other Hebrew king from either Judah or Israel is described in Holy Scripture as being like the kings of the nations (the gentiles); it is the strongest indictment ever leveled at a Hebrew king. Starting in verse 3 we get a condensed list of some of the terrible things that Manasseh did. All the **bamot** (high places) that Hezekiah destroyed, Manasseh rebuilt. Most of these **bamot** were NOT for worshipping false gods, but rather for private sacrifice and worship of YHWH. But this violated God's commandment that there was to be only one place for such ritual activity: the Temple in Yerushalayim.

Next he re-introduced Ba'al worship to Judah. He made an Asherah, which was the symbol of the goddess Ashtoreth. He instituted worship of the sun, moon, planets and stars. This was new for Judah although it was rather common for many of the Middle Eastern cultures.

But Manasseh had no bounds to his wickedness; next he built pagan altars meant to worship pagan gods and placed them in the Temple grounds. He even adopted the practice of child sacrifice, leading the way by making his own son a burnt offering to Molech. He practiced astrology and divination, he called upon the spirits of the dead, and he did it profusely with the

intent of angering Yehoveh. Our CJB says that the result of Manasseh's actions made God angry, but the rabbis assure us that such is not the meaning. Rather Manasseh's intention was like Nimrod's: to stand before the Lord and defy Him and shake his fist at Him just daring God to do something about it. Why would he do this? No doubt he had become spiritually insane, but also because he had lost all respect for the Hebrew religion as practiced in Judah as he was growing up. And when we lose respect for the institution that claims to be the keepers of the faith, often we lose respect for the god of that faith.

A question we have to ask ourselves is why was Manasseh so easily and quickly able to undo all that his father had reformed? The answer, sadly, is that the reforms instituted by Hezekiah (although apparently heartfelt by the king) were shallow and tenuous on a national level. The veneer of holiness that Hezekiah applied all over Judah and Jerusalem only covered over the ugly perversion that lay just under its surface; the reality of holiness was nowhere present. Here is another of those lessons that I feel like I am bludgeoning you with today (and I really don't want to), but as your Pastor and teacher I have little choice but to present it to you, and the rest is between you and God.

Tearing down idols, sprucing up the Temple until it gleamed, making it law that people had to abandon their personal high places and do all their sacrificing at the Altar of Burnt Offering, the leader showing up at every ritual ceremony and demanding that the people do some or even most of what the Torah Law prescribes is useless and worthless if it is not backed up with contrite hearts, willing spirits, and souls hungry for God. For decade after decade Judah had been subjected to evil kings, corrupt government and many willing accomplices in the priesthood. The moral and spiritual fiber of Judah had been severely eroded. What passed for teaching the Torah was some strange mix of cultural traditions with pagan customs and Jewish ritual.

What I just told you has been fairly recently archeologically verified. Out in the Judean desert wilderness, some 55 miles northwest of the modern Jewish town of Eilat, has been found some artifacts with ancient Hebrew inscriptions on them that chill the blood. These religious sites that incorporated most of the Jewish icons of Manasseh's era, and are thought to be pretty standard fare for the timeframe that we are studying right now, demonstrate just how far astray the accepted religion of the Hebrews had ventured. Some written blessings were discovered on those artifacts that said this: "I bless you by YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah". Another said, "I bless you by YHWH of Teiman and his Asherah". Lest you not get the gist of this, what this is saying is that some within the Hebrew religion of Judah at that time had adopted the pagan Asherah (that was considered as symbolic of the wife or consort of Ba'al) and assigned her to Yehoveh, God of Israel.

Theses Judahites essentially took a pagan goddess and all of her symbolism, Hebrew-ized her, and adopted her as part of their modern Hebrew religion because it fit better with the then-current cultural beliefs and norms as practiced during Manasseh's era. No doubt they felt quite

good about themselves (or else they wouldn't have done it) and (if I can speculate a bit), probably wouldn't have taken kindly to being told that they had no heavenly authority to do such a thing, and that God would not have been pleased with them. In fact the Prophets just before Manasseh's reign and just after DID condemn the Judahites for the wrongness of their worship practices (done in the name of Yehoveh, God of Israel), and most of them didn't survive the anger and retribution of the people and the religious authorities. But how did the population of Judah get to such a deluded place so quickly after Hezekiah's time on the throne?

What seemed in Hezekiah's day to be good and faithful and obedient was only really so when compared to how it had been a few years earlier during the reigns of especially wicked kings like **Achaz**. But from a Godly perspective, what passed for holiness among the ekklesia (the congregation of God) was a mostly just an outer form of piousness that seemed right to them.

Thus when Hezekiah died and Manasseh was made king, the people easily fell back into the old ways and even worse. And that was because over the decades these ways had become deeply entrenched in society; they were reflected in their traditions, they were accepted as normal, and the people desired them. That for many years they generally obeyed King Hezekiah (to some degree at least) and practiced their religion a little closer to what the Torah mandates was not due to some newly discovered inner righteousness; for most it was more a matter of peer pressure and political correctness, and that Hezekiah had limited their choices. But with King Manasseh the people were essentially liberated to do what they inwardly desired all along and so these many abominable practices that are listed for us burst forth almost overnight.

It is Hebrew Tradition (and there is every reason not to discount it) that it was King Manasseh who killed the Prophet Isaiah, who no doubt regularly confronted the king and his kingdom about all their wickedness and pretend righteousness. For one thing, immediately upon Hezekiah's death we hear no more of Isaiah. For another there is no prophet listed in the Scriptures during most of the 55 year time period that Manasseh ruled. While it is not certain, if there was a prophet during Manasseh's time, it was probably Nahum and more in Manasseh's latter years.

Thus Manasseh had no spiritual guidance from the Lord, because there was no prophet to deliver Yehoveh's oracle to him. And this was because Manasseh didn't want it. And the people suffered greatly from it, even though they thought they were in one of the greatest periods of religious emancipation in the history of Israel.

We'll continue with this chapter next time.