

Hezekiah

I am Hezekiah, son of Ahaz. I was king of Judah for 29 years in the days of Isaiah the prophet. My reign began when I was 25 years old and I acted quickly. In my first year, I cleansed the temple of the LORD from pagan sacrilege. I was pretty passionate to serve the LORD and turn completely away from the practices of my father. It was not just the rebelliousness of youth. There was an alarming back story. My father sacrificed my brothers to the Baals, the gods of our neighbors. I think he considered it "diplomacy!" Providentially for me, he decided to leave at least one son to succeed him.

So, I thank the LORD, God of Israel, for my life. I purposed to love him with all my heart, all my soul and all my might as Moses taught us. The priests and Levites purified themselves and the temple was cleansed from the abominations of the previous 16 years. We even had to destroy the bronze serpent used by Moses to stop the plague of snake bites because, if you can believe it, this symbol of the power of Almighty God had become an object of worship for the people!

We then organized the first Passover in a long time, even inviting the 10 tribes that were in rebellion against the house of David. Sadly, many of them scorned and ridiculed the invitation. The feast had to be held a month late and continued an extra week, all of which was approved by the LORD. The celebration was worshipfully extravagant and the people who came went home joyful, zealous to remove all the artifacts of idolatry from the land and contribute to the upkeep of the temple and priesthood.

The major threat to our existence was the empire of Assyria. They had already taken Samaria and resettled its inhabitants in distant lands. In the 14th year of my reign Sennacherib attacked and I consulted my officials and military commanders. We diverted a stream into a tunnel to water the city, repaired the main wall and built an extra wall around Jerusalem. God had given me the faith to say to the people, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles."

The Assyrians attempted psychological warfare by sending a message to me, to be read in the hearing of the people, using Hebrew, which they all understood. "This is what Sennacherib king of Assyria says: On what are you basing your confidence, that you remain in Jerusalem under siege? When Hezekiah says, 'The LORD our God will save us from the hand of the king of Assyria,' he is misleading you, to let you die of hunger and thirst. Did not Hezekiah himself remove this god's high places and altars, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, 'You must worship before one altar and burn sacrifices on it'? Do you not know what I and my fathers have done to all the peoples of the other lands? Were the gods of those nations ever able to deliver their land from my hand?"

I knew as soon as the messenger started reading that Sennacherib had made a fatal mistake, underestimating the LORD God of Israel. Yet, although I knew that the LORD could defeat the Assyrians, I also knew that we did not deserve his mercy. I tore my clothing, put on sackcloth and went to the temple where I prayed, "O LORD, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God. It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but

only wood and stone, fashioned by men's hands. Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God."

I believe there is a saying in your time that might apply to a situation like this, "Make my day!" Anyway, in case you might have wondered, the LORD God of Israel WAS able to deliver us. Isaiah foretold it, saying, "Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria: 'He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city, declares the LORD. I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant.'"

Isaiah recorded what happened, "Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning — there were all the dead bodies! So, Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there. One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king."

The Assyrian soldiers, 185,000 of them, died suddenly as if struck by lightning! And Sennacherib was assassinated by his own sons as he worshipped his god. I should have retired right then and written my memoirs. In fact, I had that very opportunity, minus the writing. I became very ill and Isaiah told me, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover."

I wept bitterly and prayed, "Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." Do you notice that I focused on what *I* had done not what the LORD had done? But amazingly, Isaiah returned and reported, "This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: 'I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.'" And I got to choose the miraculous sign to accompany the healing. "This is the LORD's sign to you that the LORD will do what he has promised: Shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or shall it go back ten steps?" I said, "It is a simple matter for the shadow to go forward ten steps. Rather, have it go back ten steps." Then Isaiah called upon the LORD, and the LORD made the shadow go back the ten steps it had gone down. I should have fallen down in awe and worship, but I simply accepted the extension of my life as a reward for following the LORD.

I understand that in your day it is believed by some that the LORD always heals those with faith. I will say this, it may have been better if I had died, because I sinned and left an unfortunate legacy as well. Babylonian envoys came to wish me well and I showed them all of my wealth, without consulting the LORD. Isaiah told me that because I had done this, all that wealth would be carried away along with my surviving descendants, by the Babylonians. Also, during that time, I fathered Manasseh, who did not continue my legacy of righteousness but departed from the LORD and became more evil than the nations the LORD destroyed to give us the promised land.

How did I go from a young idealist to an old fool? It was by forgetting that only by the power of the LORD can we succeed. And even though I was the beneficiary of amazing miracles, it is not because I am special. My advice: start well, continue well and finish well. Humble yourself before the LORD and never become proud of your humility or ask for temporal rewards.

2 Kings 18 - 20, 2 Chronicles 29 – 32, Isaiah 36 - 39