

"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wills!" (Proverbs 21:1)

Remember last week's lesson--on Isaiah 35, which began and ended with references to rejoicing and gladness (forming what Constable calls an "inclusio")! Isaiah, looking beyond "the day" when the world will be plunged into a terrible period of tribulation (as Isaiah had prophesied in chapter 34) to "the day" of the coming reign of the Lord in great glory and power, when the world will be totally transformed, beginning with all of nature itself, "being freed from the curse" (as Isaiah prophesied in chapter 35)! When "the wilderness and the desert will be glad; the mountains and hills break forth into shouts of joy, and the trees clap their hands..." Then, "the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped...The lame leaping like a deer, and the tongue of the mute shouting for joy"! A "highway" will be there also, Isaiah writes, called the "Highway of Holiness--reserved for the "redeemed" and the "ransomed of the Lord, who will come with joyful shouting to Zion"! (Interesting that Jesus would cite this prophecy, in Luke 7:18-23, to encourage John the Baptist when he was in prison and beginning to doubt--to assure him that He was, in fact, the promised Messiah, as evidenced by His miracles!)

And with that Isaiah shifts the focus and tone of his narrative, in chapter 36 through 39, from the eschatological to the "here and now"! From the prophetic to the historic! Motyer calls this section "the rock of history under the fabric of eschatology"! The great conflict King Hezekiah and all Jerusalem was facing from Sennacherib and the Assyrians! With a particular test of faith for Hezekiah!

Who is Hezekiah? Wierbe notes that except for David and Solomon, no king of Judah is given more attention, or commendation, in Scripture than Hezekiah (in II Kings 18-20, II Chronicles 29-32, and Isaiah 36-39)!

II Kings 18:5-6 says, "He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him! For he clung to the Lord; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord had commanded him"!

II Chronicles 29-32 tells how, among other things, he "re-opened the doors of the house of the Lord," and restored temple worship, re-instituted the Passover, "broke down the pillars, cut down the Asherim (wood symbols of a female deity), and pulled down the high places, destroying the idols... and bringing great joy in Jerusalem"! (Interestingly, II Kings 18:14-16 records Hezekiah's early lapse of faith in (unsuccessfully) attempting to buy off Sennacherib by giving him "three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold, taken from the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house"--the same scheme his father Ahaz had also concocted, in II Kings 16:7-8, showing, as Wierbe notes, that with all his good acts, "he was still a man, with all the frailties of human flesh"!)

His godly actions are particularly amazing given that he succeeded his father Ahaz, who was perhaps the worst-ever king of Judah (see II Kings 16:1-18)! How could the son of such an evil father become such a great king of Judah? Scripture doesn't say, but can perhaps be best explained by Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, and He turns it wherever He wills"!

And yet, with all the great reformations in Judah, Isaiah writes, in Isaiah 36:1, that "in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them...and sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem to King Hezekiah with a large army"!

The Assyrians, it turns out, had already ravished most of Judah and were now at Lachish, about 30 miles from southwest of Judah and, according to Constable, had taken 46 cities before heading for Jerusalem!

(Ortlund writes that, "The army of Sennacherib is swarming over Judah like a horde of Tolkienian Orcs, and only Jerusalem remains!")

Had God turned a blind eye to all that Hezekiah had done? Or was this part of God's discipline, and testing, to teach His people to trust in Him alone? Wierbe notes that "God's great purpose in the life of faith is to build godly character and Hezekiah and his people needed to learn that faith is living without scheming"!)

Rabshakeh came, verse 2 says, and "stood by the conduit (aqueduct) of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller's field" (just outside the walls of Jerusalem) to "taunt" Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem! (The same "landmark" site, ironically, where Isaiah, in Isaiah 7:3, had years before met with Ahaz, to try, unsuccessfully, to dissuade him from trusting foreign powers for security!)

"Where's your confidence, Hezekiah? On whom do you rely, that you would rebel against the great king, the king of Assyria? On the staff of the 'crushed reed' of Egypt? But if you say you trust in the Lord your God, is it not His high places and altars that you have removed, thus displeasing Him?" Implying that it was for this reason that the Lord had called the Assyrians to go up against the land of Judah and destroy it! (Obviously showing he had no clue about the workings and ways of Yahweh!)

In verse 11, Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah, representing Hezekiah, came out to meet Rabshakeh, but made a serious blunder, by pleading with him to speak in Aramaic (the language of diplomacy) rather than in Hebrew, so that the people listening on the walls wouldn't be greatly alarmed! Which led Rabshakeh, as might be expected, to speak even louder in Hebrew so that all might hear his words!

Verse 13 says that "then Rabshakeh "spoke and cried out in a loud voice for all to hear the words of the great king of Assyria"! "Don't let Hezekiah deceive you, for he won't be able to deliver you! And don't let him make you trust in the Lord, who he says will surely deliver this city from the hand of the king! Don't listen to him!"

Then he offered them a deal that must have seemed reasonable, and the evidence compelling for those living in unbelief! "Make your peace with us and come live in a land like your own land, where each of you can drink of the waters of your own cistern--a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards! Beware that Hezekiah doesn't mislead you, saying, 'the Lord will deliver you! Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the king of Assyria?' Etc. etc.

Wiersbe called it "one of the most insolent and blasphemous speeches found in all of Scripture, for he reproached the sovereign God of Israel!"

So what was Hezekiah's response? Verse 21 says he told his officials "not to answer" Rabshakeh!

You'll have to wait for the full response until next week!

But here's a preview: II Chronicles 32:6-8 says he gathered his military officers together in the square at the city gate and said to them: "Be strong and courageous! Do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria nor because of all the horde that is with him; for the one with us is greater than the one with him. With him is only an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles"! And the people relied on the words of Hezekiah, king of Judah!" Wow! (Some words, Kurt suggested, to pass on to our children and grandchildren!)

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II Corinthians 5: 7 adds a great reminder for living each day: "We walk by faith and not by sight!"

Have a great week, men! Be strong and courageous!

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