

Sermon 63, The Power of a Prayer-Hearing God, 2 Kings 19:1-20

Proposition: The God of the Bible is available to us and hears our prayers.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we left off last Sunday right in the middle of a story. If you cast your mind back, you will remember that the Assyrian officials had just challenged Hezekiah about the location of his trust. Who, exactly, did he trust in when he rebelled against the king of Assyria? Our text tonight shows us where Hezekiah's trust was. It was in God Almighty. How could Hezekiah trust God when God was the one who sent the Assyrians against Judah in the first place? He trusted God because he knew God's character. He knew that this was a test, an opportunity to trust God instead of surrendering to fear in the face of an existential threat. This chapter, then, reinforces for us what we already know about our God. What we see about God tonight is that He was available to Hezekiah and heard Hezekiah's prayers — and therefore that He is available to us and hears our prayers too.

I. Hezekiah's Three Resources During a Trial, vv. 1-4

When trials come to us as they came to Judah's king so long ago, we too can be helped by utilizing these same resources.

A. A Temple For the Distressed, v. 1

Hezekiah heard the bad news. He heard that Assyrians had openly said "We are going to take this city and there is nothing Hezekiah or his God can do about it." He immediately went into

mourning. Just a side note here — it is appropriate and necessary to express sorrow over difficulties and trials in this life. God calls us to rejoice, but He never commands us to be Stoics!

And then, Hezekiah went straight to the Lord's House. When trouble came, he sought the presence of God. What's a temple for? It's a place for those who are in trouble! It's a place for those whose life is threatened. It's a place for those whose trials are so intense that they know there's a good chance they won't make it. That's what a temple is for. That's what the church is for. Pope Francis' favorite metaphor to describe the church is allegedly a field hospital — and regardless of the man's other failings, his metaphor is appropriate! When you have a problem, take it to God where you know He is. He has promised to be in the gathered assembly of His people, in the midst of His church. In other words, when you're suffering, don't withdraw from church; double down on church! That's what Hezekiah did, and he is clearly being presented as a model here.

In the trial in the next chapter, we will see Hezekiah succumbing to “Why me?” syndrome. He says, “God, didn't you notice how faithfully I followed you?” But here, he does not succumb. He simply seeks the face of God Almighty.

When trouble comes, don't think that your obedience and good habits should have spared you from it. Perhaps it is precisely because you have been faithful that you are being tested. God had one Son without sin, but He has no sons without suffering!

So what's a temple for? It's for you, and for me. It's for everyone who has problems.

B. A Determination to Hope in God, vv. 2-4b

The next thing Hezekiah asked is a little odd. Technically speaking, it's a statement, not a question. He sends this comment to Isaiah, expressing his hope. Perhaps God will hear and rebuke these arrogant words against Him!

Notice that even though he's not sure that God will deliver them from Assyria, he is sure that he is going to keep trusting in God. Things are terrible, but maybe God will help. In that *maybe* lies concealed what we call faith. Faith is not always being certain; sometimes it is simply knowing that there is a chance. If anyone will help, it will be Yahweh. He may not help us, *but He can*.

Is that enough for you? Can you trust a God who is always able to help, even if He does not always help in the way you wish He would?

C. A Request for Prayer, v. 4

Well, Hezekiah does have something he wants the prophet to do. Once again, we see the prophet, the priests, and the king united in working together for the salvation of Judah. The prophet's role is to pray for the remnant.

Now, if you had the prophet Isaiah praying for you, would you have fairly strong confidence in the power of his prayers? Clearly Hezekiah did. But the message of this chapter is not “God won't listen to you unless you have a mighty prophet like Isaiah praying for you.” The message is, “God saves His people in response to their prayers, and He even provides mighty prophets to do it.”

II. God's Answer, vv. 5-7

God's answer comes immediately. If Hezekiah was trying to fish for a prophetic oracle, he got it. The oracle has two parts.

A. "Fear Not"

The first one is hard to believe. A gigantic Assyrian army is camped outside the walls. They've already taken 46 other cities in Judah. They have conquered virtually every nation in their reach. And God says, "Fear not"? What is He, totally unrealistic? But brothers and sisters, our God does not live in la-la-land. He knows what conditions are like on the ground. He knows where we live, as He tells Assyria later in the chapter (v. 27). And His response to our neediness is the same response He gives so often in the Bible: "Fear not."

Alexa and I have a no-fear policy. We do our very best to not make decisions based on fear. Any decision made because you're afraid is almost automatically going to be a bad decision. Well, God also warns us against fear, not just to protect us, but for the deeper reason that when you have Him, fear is unnecessary!

God calls us to love, joy, and peace. Fear is the enemy of every one of those things. Occasionally, of course, it can help protect us from genuine dangers. But usually, when lived in from hour to hour and year to year, it is simply a problem, a source of major sin in our lives. Why did Adam hide from God? Because he was afraid. Why have you not told anyone about that secret sin? Because you're afraid. Why did Hezekiah attempt to bribe Sennacherib? That's right: because he was afraid. Fear is a good thing when it prevents you from attempting suicide. But fear is a bad thing when it traps you in sin.

The most common command in the Bible is "fear not." Do you think that we are fearful race? Of course we are. International Relations theorists even have a name for one of the major manifestations of fear. They call it the Security Dilemma. The gist of this dilemma is that the more power and weapons you have, the more people perceive you as a threat and therefore the more likely you are to be attacked. Increasing the amount of power you have only makes you a bigger target.

But God's way is different. He didn't tell Hezekiah to increase defense spending so that he wouldn't have to fear a puny country like Assyria. Rather, He told him not to live in fear. Don't be afraid of Assyria! Such a command seems completely absurd. Doesn't God know what Assyria is likely to do? Of course He does. But He wants us to live by trusting in Him, not by fearing what might happen to us.

Brothers and sisters, I guarantee that everyone in here is afraid of something. Probably almost all of us have made a decision based on fear in the last week. Guess what? You don't have to live that way anymore. God's command is "fear not." And why?

B. "I Will Handle This Problem"

Because He will handle our problems. In the text before us, the problem was a gigantic Assyrian army. God promised that He would remove it. Your problem might be a sin struggle, a pride struggle, a financial need, a relational worry — but God can handle it! He doesn't want you to

live in fear of what might happen. He wants you to live in love, joy, and peace, trusting that whatever He does is good, trusting that He can and will handle your problems.

This is not an unrealistic way to live! You can talk to any of the older saints in this room; you will quickly find that they can tell you how God has protected them and provided for them every step of the way through their lives. At the same time, of course, this is not an excuse to be lazy, to stop working. Not at all. You need to be faithful in what you've been called to do. But God has not called you, or any of us, to sit in a hammock and sip lemonade until Jesus comes back. Rather, He has called us to trust Him and to work six days a week. He will work all things together for good, but that doesn't mean that we will never have threats, disasters, and crises. It only means that in and through it all, He will do what's best for us and most glorifies Him.

III. A Temporary Reprieve and More Threats, vv. 8-13

Sure enough, as soon as this oracle is delivered, the Rabshakeh marches off (apparently leaving the huge siege army in place).

A. The Rabshakeh Goes Away, vv. 8-9

But this departure is not permanent. The Rabshakeh has to go chase down Sennacherib, who has finished off Lachish and is now at Libnah. In terms of our geography, we might say that it appears that the enemy has polished off New York and is now attacking Boston. Sure, it's farther from Washington, D.C., but is it really any better?

But then Sennacherib hears another rumor, this time about a general from Africa who's coming up to attack him.

B. The King of Assyria Openly Calls Yahweh a Liar, vv. 10-13

The rumor, far from intimidating Sennacherib, only presses him to further blasphemy. He repeats the litany of conquered cities, and adds openly that Yahweh is lying. Anyone who claims that Assyria will not conquer Jerusalem is, he says, a liar.

IV. Hezekiah's Three Arguments in Prayer, vv. 14-19

Hezekiah receives this message, and once again takes it to the Lord in prayer.

When you hear challenges to God — maybe an argument from an atheist that shakes you, or an experience in your own life that makes you wonder whether God really is good or even whether He really is there — how do you respond? Well, Hezekiah was moved by this challenge. Perhaps his faith was not shaken, but it was clearly stirred. His response was to take it to God. And that should be our response too. God is available to you. He listens to you! We know because He was available to Hezekiah and listened to Hezekiah. Hezekiah, meanwhile, uses three major arguments in his prayer.

A. God's Absolute Uniqueness, v. 15

The first is God's absolute uniqueness. The God of Israel, the God who sits on the Mercy Seat atop the Ark of the Covenant, is also the only God — and the only Creator. Do you see that, the simultaneous particularity and universality of our God? He is God of Israel — and He is the creator of the whole Earth. Brothers and sisters, nothing has changed there. Our God is still ours, and still unique, and still the Creator of the whole Earth. He rules everything, and yet He is

uniquely and specially ours! We find Him now not on top of a physical ark but everywhere, and preeminently in the assembly of His people.

When you're discouraged, when you're suffering, do you take the time in prayer to remind yourself of how amazing God is? Prayer should encourage you because in it you stand face to face with the God who belongs to us and yet is the creator of the whole Earth.

The fact that God sat in those days between the cherubim was a reminder that He was the God who accepted the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. It was a reminder that through the Levitical system, Israel could have access into His presence. In short, Hezekiah in this verse points to the reality that the only God is both Creator and Redeemer! Is this the God on whom you call? Do you remind yourself that the One who made you is the One who saved you, and that when you're asking Him for blessing, you're asking someone who's already proven that He loves to give to you? He gave you existence and He gave you salvation.

It's sort of like a generous grandparent who gives you a new car every Christmas. Do you think that if you're over at that grandparent's home one day and you say, "Grandma, could I have some orange juice?" she'll say, "No way! I gave you a new Honda; what more do you want?"

If God has already given creation and redemption, of course He's going to heed our lesser requests too!

B. God's Zeal for His Own Glory, v. 16

But Hezekiah doesn't just praise God. He also petitions God to pay attention to the words the Rabshakeh has spoken against Him. The underlying truth here, of course, is that God is zealous for His own glory! Why would Hezekiah call God's attention to the Rabshakeh's words? Normally, we consider it bad form to go to Jeff and say, "Hey, did you know that Bob was saying really bad things about you?" We call that stirring up trouble. But Hezekiah is not reporting to God something He didn't already know. Rather, he is asking God to act on behalf of His name. That's why he says, "Open your eyes. Open your ears. God, please react to the words of Rabshakeh." God loves to vindicate Himself; in fact, He promises that He will always do so, on His own terms.

C. God's Reputation Among the Nations, vv. 17-19

Hezekiah reminds the Lord that Assyria really has done a lot of damage to false gods — and then he asks God to vindicate Himself as the true God. This will be for the sake of the nations. It's not just for Judah's sake. It's for the whole earth. Why should God save us? So that everyone can see that He really is God.

Do you argue in this way in your prayers? Do you call on God's missionary heart? Do you appeal to His zeal for His glory? Do you rely on the reality of creation and redemption and make those blessings arguments when asking for more blessings? Hezekiah did.

V. God's Answer: "I Have Heard," v. 20

And Hezekiah was heard. When you pray for what God wants, He hears you. When you ask according to His will, He responds. Brothers and sisters, God is available to you and listens to

your prayers. He does so because He is the one who sits between the cherubim; He does so, therefore, because of the perfect atonement Jesus made for us, His people.

Do you pray to Him? Do you use the church to meet with Him? Do you seek Him in prayer? Do you live a life free from fear? You can, because in even the hardest test, God hears your prayers and acts to vindicate Himself in the sight of a watching world. He hears prayer — so keep praying. Amen.