**Sunday 20th June 2021**

2 Kings 18: 1-5, 17-25, 31-32 and 19: 20 & 32-34 Hezekiah

Last week we introduced the kings for the start of this series. We looked at the beginning of kingship, where the people decided that they wanted to be like all the other nations and have a king that they could physically see. God in His mercy warned what that would bring to them but allowed it anyway.

God was still with His people, guiding them by showing them who He would anoint as a king. First Saul, who in the end had no heart for God, then David who was whole-hearted for God. David’s son Solomon then took the throne of the nation Israel. Solomon and the people however erred from God’s decrees and very soon foreign god’s were being allowed, temples built to accommodate the worship of these man-made idols. Solomon was only half-hearted in his devotion to God, trying to claim that he was worshiping God, but also had his feet (and hands etc) in the worship of other gods too (like the game of twister!).

His half-hearted approach to God meant that God divided the kingdom into two – Israel in the North and Judah in the South. He did not take the whole of the kingdom from Saul, because of His promise to the faithful king, David.

We continue today looking at the king Hezekiah, a descendant of David. We are not going to analyse every king (there are over 40 in total!). Hezekiah is the 13th king to reign over Judah after Solomon. In between there have been a selection of kings who began good and ended good, who began good and ended evil, who began evil and ended good, and those who began evil and remained evil all the way through their reign. Hezekiah was a king who began as good and remained so through the whole of his kingship. His father, Ahaz was a king who was evil throughout his reign. So definitely not a case of “like father like son” in this scenario. Highlights the importance of keeping a Spiritual influence over anyone we know so that the truth is heard and has a chance to prevail.

There is a lot of political background that I am not going to cover, so if you are an expert on Hezekiah then please forgive me when I miss some things – but if I cover every aspect we will not be out of here today!

Our reading began with Hezekiah taking the throne and the first action recorded is the removal and destruction of the temples built to foreign gods, high places and sacred stones that were all over the nation. It even states that he destroyed the bronze snake that God had commanded Moses to build because the people had turned it into a shrine to other gods, the statue itself had become an idol. (The reason for the snake is found in Numbers 21:4-9).

Hezekiah was not the first king to destroy the high places used for the worship of foreign gods, but he was the first to destroy high places that had been dedicated to the worship of the Lord. He was not only fervent for the worship of only the one true God, but also to follow the worship in the way that God had instructed – His Name is in the temple in Jerusalem.

His father, Ahaz had been evil and therefore the temple had been defiled, so Hezekiah opened the temple in Jerusalem once again for its proper use – hence the high places were no longer required.

We are also told that Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel – and this was his unique characteristic – his trust in God through the whole of his reign.

During his reign, the Assyrian empire was on the rampage, seeking to extend their power and dominion. It was during the early years of Hezekiah’s reign that Assyria defeated Israel in the North. The Israelites were deported from their land and Israel no longer being reigned by an Israelite king.

Hezekiah’s father had formed an alliance of sorts with Assyria, which included at least a formal recognition of Assyrian deities, as well as an annual monetary tribute. As Hezekiah destroyed all the places of worship, this was not only for the worship of God, but a rebellion against Assyria. Now perhaps we can see the trust a little more clearly.

We skip forward a little in the scripture to the Assyrian commanders, acting on behalf of their king, meeting with the officials of Hezekiah, seeking his surrender. The place where the meeting took place is actually where Isaiah had warned Ahaz to trust in the Lord rather than an alliance with Assyria. In amongst the records of the kings there are plenty of prophets speaking God’s word into the situations, always offering His grace and mercy and protection. This is now the place where Hezekiah is again placing his trust firmly in God.

The meeting is also in a public space, so within earshot of ordinary people, so when the Assyrians proclaim their questions and taunts, it will also be diminishing the morale of Hezekiah’s subjects.

As Hezekiah begins his rebellion the Assyrians question the military strength on which he is relying upon should war proceed. They question the reliance that Hezekiah is placing on Egypt. Although this is said by the Assyrians to cast doubt on the strategies to the people, it is indeed very similar to the words spoken by Isaiah the prophet. So even though their intentions are not the same, the words that they use echo prophecy, God’s word spoken to Hezekiah, when he rebukes him for not trusting God completely.

The Assyrians then proceed to question the trust placed in God too. They again try to manipulate the actions that Hezekiah had taken – “isn’t He the one whose high places and alters Hezekiah removed”. Well, they were speaking the earthly truth – but had not included the reason behind it was to honour God’s decrees.

You can see in the words that they used how the Assyrians were trying to undermine the decisions Hezekiah had taken in front of the people – taking the opportunity to turn the seemingly kind offer of leniency into a source of turning his people from Hezekiah’s kingship, questioning his wisdom.

They continue feeding the doubt and fear that would have been present – “I will give you two thousand horses, if you can put riders on them!”, again speaking the earthly truth that the military might in Judah was paramount to nothing.

They proceed with stating that “The Lord himself told me to march against this country and destroy it”. Well this again is true – in part. Likely he is referring to prophecy, again delivered through Isaiah thirty years ago when God warned that Assyria would be “the rod of (God’s) anger”. God would grant Assyria victory IF his people did not return to faithfulness to Him. As I said last week, God will warn of the consequences of certain actions. He will always remain merciful and forgiving if the response to the warning is to repent and turn away from the sins and follow Him again. However, if that response does not come about, God will allow events to bring about the consequences of the actions chosen.

Although God would allow Assyria to be victorious over Judah (and Israel as had been the case) – He was still giving people the opportunity to return to Him – like Hezekiah in whole-hearted trust.

The messengers then continue with promising the good life if Judah surrenders. “Every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree……until I take you to a land like your own…..Choose life and not death!

For some listening this would sound rather appealing – rather than war, combat, suffering, hardship, and death, surrender and you will be granted peace with good living. But it is in direct contrast to God’s plan. God led them to Israel, he provided them with this land of milk and honey to belong to them. God had provided them with His best place for them, desiring them to be safe, to flourish and live peacefully, in the community that He had tried to provide for them – the whole purpose of His laws.

If they choose surrender it will give earthly life – but Spiritual death.

We again skip forward a little to see Hezekiah’s response – Prayer! He went to the temple to pray.

God again speaks through Isaiah. I wonder why He did not speak directly to Hezekiah, or perhaps He had and wanted to give absolute clarity and assurance. Hezekiah was trusting in the Lord, with life or death consequences for many. Even if trust is present, encouragement and support is essential to ensure that it is fully God’s voice you are hearing – not being manipulated or out of context as we saw before with the Assyrians.

God is clear in His word – “(The king of Assyria) will not enter this city”. God makes a promise that He will defend Jerusalem. He will save it to prove His might to Assyria and the surrounding nations – when they were taunting Hezekiah about putting his trust in God, it was God that they were ultimately mocking. So to save Judah with no allegiance or help from any other nation would be a testament to God’s power. It was also to keep his promise to David – and the nation. He always gives warnings but is quick with His mercy if repentance is sought – and Hezekiah was doing exactly that, turning the nation back to God.

What can we draw from this account to apply to our own lives today?

Continue to examine whether you have any other idols in place. We have seen that Judah, although worshipping God still in the high places, was not pleasing God. It was not what He had commanded.

Sometimes we can turn to worship the acts of God, or the people He works through, rather than God himself, like the bronze snake that was made from the instruction of God, but became the object of worship.

Check where we are building alliances. In this scripture it was with other nations, but perhaps in our own lives it is more likely to be family, friends or financial.

Hezekiah chose to trust in God, even where the positive outcome would have been against all earthly expectations – and suffering was not avoided completely. Because of this he was ridiculed and taunted by the Assyrians in public. How do we feel when we are ridiculed for our Godly choices? Do we hold fast to God, or to the acceptance of those around us?

We need to remain open, always, to hear God’s words. We may expect to hear the word of God in a church context, but we have seen that on occasion those who speak in secular environments cans be used to emphasize a Spiritual truth, requirement or a reproach.

We have to be constantly weighing things up to. Some of the truth that we have seen spoken was not shared in full context, it can be manipulated. We should always seek wisdom from God.

Some of the words that were used about the land that the Assyrians were promising to “give” to the people sounded generous, pleasant and a peaceful option. It sounded good – but again it was not what God had promised to them. Sometimes, to follow God, to obtain His good plan for us, we have to take a difficult option – there is pain in the offering sometimes. But we should always trust in Him. Keep our focus and trust, whole-heartedly in the strength and power of His almighty love for us.