

The Greatest King

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T . H . E O . L . D T . E . S . T . A . M . E . N . T

“The history of the world is but the biography of great men,” said Thomas Carlyle. Where would one find greater men than those on the pages of the Bible?

The decision as to the most prominent preacher, peacemaker, soldier, or friend may well be subjective, for it is difficult to pinpoint who, among all the greats, is the greatest. However, in selecting *the greatest king* in the Old Testament, we have divine assistance. Of Hezekiah, king of Judah, we read,

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 Moses. And the Lord was with him; wherever he went he prospered. And he rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him (2 Kings 18:5-7).

Though Solomon was superior in intellect and David likely was a better military genius, no one followed the Lord so faithfully as did Hezekiah.

While he had shortcomings, taken as a whole, from childhood through manhood and across twenty-nine years on the throne, no other king in five hundred years so kept God’s commandments.

Hezekiah was a many-splendored man, for his greatness ran in every direction. He was a soldier, statesman, engineer, and builder. His Jerusalem water tunnel connecting the Gihon spring with the pool of Siloam is still there, 1,777 feet long, with the water flowing waist deep. Let us view Hezekiah, king of Judah in 700 B.C. in

three settings.

THE MYSTERY OF INIQUITY

First, we note the mystery of iniquity. He was the son of Ahaz and the father of Manasseh. This means he was the father of the worst king to rule Judah and the son of the second worst. Remarkably, good king Hezekiah is sandwiched between two of the vilest rulers of any age or place.

The study of heredity, environment, and childrearing is an endless vocation. Yet the human predicament always remains something of a mystery, that between an Ahaz and Manasseh is a Hezekiah.

We are never certain why men turn one direction or the other, but we are sure of this—each is responsible for the way he chooses. We are told, “So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12).

From the same home, the same table, the same mother’s knee came Cain and Abel. From the same family circle came John Calvin and his brother Charles, a thief and villain.

Hezekiah, the greatest of the kings, reminds each of us that we dare not be less than our best, no matter what our family connections may be. Solomon said, “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God, and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

THE WORTH OF A WELL-SPENT LIFE

King Hezekiah mounted the throne of Judah at age 25. Immediately, he set about to do what was right:

He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. And he did right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done. . . . 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 Moses (2 Kings 18:2, 3, 5, 6).

Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah, had led the nation far down the road to wreck and ruin. He set up an image of Moloch in the Valley of Hinnon and caused his own son to pass through the fire. The image had outstretched hands and a fiery interior. Infants were placed on the hands, and to the accompaniment of drums which muffled the screams, they were rolled into the fire. Ahaz also placed chariots dedicated to the sun at the entrance to the temple court. On the temple roof were altars reared for the worship of the moon, stars, and sun. Within the actual temple was a heathen altar. So complete was the collapse of true worship under Ahaz that he "shut up the doors of the house of the Lord." The lights were extinguished, the doors were closed, and seemingly everything great and good was lost forever! "For the Lord humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had brought about a lack of restraint in Judah and was very unfaithful to the Lord" (2 Chronicles 28:19). At his death, Ahaz was refused burial in the sepulchers of the kings.

Then came Hezekiah. "In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the Lord and repaired them" (2 Chronicles 29:3). The temple grounds were cleared of filth and rubbish, the sacred lamp was lit, the altar restored, the priests set in their rightful places, and the long-omitted Passover feast was celebrated with joy and thanksgiving.

. . . When the burnt offering began, the song to the Lord also began with the trumpets, . . . While the whole assembly worshiped, the singers also sang and the trumpets sounded; . . . the king and all who were present with him bowed down and worshiped. . . . So they sang praises with joy, and bowed down and worshiped. . . . Thus the service of the house of the Lord was established again. Then Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced over what God had prepared for the people, because the thing came about suddenly (2 Chronicles 29:27-30, 35, 36).

What a difference one man can make when he sets himself squarely on the side of truth! Hezekiah illustrates perfectly and personally the worth of a well-spent life: "So there was great joy in Jerusalem, because there was nothing like this in Jerusalem since the days of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel" (2 Chronicles 30:26).

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Hezekiah reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah during the period of Assyrian domination. The Assyrians mastered much of the Middle East, including the northern kingdom of Israel and forty-six walled cities of Palestine.

Inevitably, there came a day when Sennacherib, king of Assyria, would test the courage of young King Hezekiah. The Bible says, "Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come, and that he intended to make war on Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 32:2). Immediately, Hezekiah took counsel with his princes, fortified the city, strengthened the wall, prepared darts and shields, and stopped up all wells and springs outside the city. Beyond that, he stood in the gate of the city and said: "Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria, nor because of all the multitude which 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" (2 Chronicles 32:7, 8).

Soon there appeared at the walls of Jerusalem the vast Assyrian army, with threatening letters demanding their surrender, assuring the Israelites that escape was impossible, and promising them that they would be permitted to gather their harvest before being taken captive to the Assyrians.

When Hezekiah learned of these threats, he rent his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of God. There he called for Isaiah the prophet and spread before Jehovah the blasphemous Assyrian letter. Then he prayed:

O Lord the God of Israel, who art enthroned above the cherubim, Thou art the God, Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. Thou hast made heaven and earth. Incline Thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open Thine eyes, O Lord, and see; and listen to the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God. . . . And now, O Lord our God, I pray deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of

the earth may know that Thou alone, O Lord, art God (2 Kings 19:15, 16, 19).

Heaven's reply came immediately through inspired Isaiah:

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come to this city or shoot an arrow there; neither shall he come before it with a shield, nor throw up a mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come to this city, declares the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake (2 Kings 19:32-34).

Jerusalem has been conquered no fewer than forty-seven times in history, but it would not be conquered by Sennacherib, king of Assyria! That very night an angel of the Lord smote the Assyrian camp with the result that 185,000 soldiers died. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, "departed and returned home, and lived at Nineveh" (2 Kings 19:36).

Scholars seek in vain to explain the events of that night. Was there a storm or a sudden pestilence? We know only what is in the text. It is of interest that the royal archives of ancient Assyria bear no record of the capture of Jerusalem.

How awesome and awe-inspiring is the power of prayer and providence! That power is seen yet again in the life of Hezekiah who, at his peak of usefulness, fell critically ill at age thirty-nine. Isaiah appeared at his bedside to sadly say, "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live" (2 Kings 20:1). That same sentence is passed upon all, for all must at last die and not live. The day of the announcement of birth is also the day of the announcement of death.

Hezekiah characteristically resorted to prayer, turning his face to the wall, perhaps to hide his tears, and beseeching God for mercy and help. His prayer was wonderfully heard. Isaiah returned with these words from God: "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. And I will add fifteen years to your life, . . ." (2 Kings 20:5, 6). As a sign, the shadow on the sundial of Ahaz turned backward ten degrees, a symbol of the fact that the king would live another fifteen years.

Unfortunately, during this added life span, Hezekiah foolishly received into his court the Ambassador of Babylon, providing a guided

tour of the treasures and storehouses of Judah. For this Hezekiah was rebuked and warned that in the future Babylon would lead captive the people of God.

With few exceptions, the whole course of King Hezekiah's life was Godward and Heavenward. "After him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him." What finer tribute could be paid any man?

CONCLUSION

Hezekiah had an advantage over us, though indeed some might count it a disadvantage. He knew the year of his death. At age thirty-nine, he knew death would come at fifty-four. He could plan, purpose, and prepare to that end. We do not know the hour or the year of our departure. "In a moment we go down to the grave." We should live each day as though it were our last. Each decision should be made in the light of eternity, for "there is but a step between me and death."

—Paul Rogers

QUOTATIONS

"Love is the unconditional acceptance and active concern for the life and the growth of the one we love."

Bill & Linda Swetmon,
Your Friendship Potential

"Life is like riding a bicycle. You don't fall off unless you stop pedaling."

Claude Pepper

"If you would thoroughly know anything, teach it to others."

Tryon Edwards

"The squeaking wheel doesn't always get the grease. Sometimes it gets replaced."

Vic Gold

"The road to the heart is the ear."

Voltaire

"The nice thing about teamwork is that you always have others on your side."

Margaret Carty