

Lesson 16: The Kings of Judah (2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chronicles 32; Isaiah 36-39)

The Wickedness of Ahaz

Due to its infidelity, God allows the northern kingdom, Israel, to be defeated, taken into exile and lost forever.¹ Now only the southern kingdom, Judah, remains.² Similar to Israel, Judah goes through a series of kings, both good and bad. One of the kings, Uzziah (also called Azariah), reigned for fifty-two years, and he was relatively righteous and faithful to Yahweh. While Uzziah leads the people to return to Yahweh, he does not take away the “high places” of pagan worship, for which God judges him harshly.³ This is an important lesson: half-measures are not enough in the eyes of God – he wants our whole heart, not just part of us. The Law is very clear, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all our soul, and with all your might.”⁴

After Uzziah and his immediate successor, Jotham, comes King Ahaz. He is an unrighteous king who leads Judah into the same depths of wickedness that brought Israel into exile.⁵ This is happening at roughly the same time Israel loses its way and falls to the Assyrians (722 BC). Under Ahaz, Judah reverts to pagan worship and idolatry. Ahaz’s leadership in the south is as remarkable as it is tragic in that Judah becomes even more sinful than the nations conquered by Joshua and David when taking possession of the Promised Land. The land of “milk and honey” promised to Moses turns back to its pagan idolatry, and the religious apostasy is compounded by political crisis. Judah is surrounded on all sides with enemies who are winning battles and taking back land that had been gained generations earlier through David’s conquests. Judah is no longer strong enough to defend itself. The Assyrians attack Jerusalem and conquer Judah, although Ahaz is allowed to remain in power as a vassal king. When Ahaz finally dies, the Israelites, although they followed him in his wickedness, refuse to bury him in the tombs of the kings of Israel since they recognize him as an unjust ruler.⁶ Here, again, is another important lesson. The people try to deflect responsibility for their apostasy but God sees through that. It is not just the king who is responsible, but the people as well. The people of Judah will not avoid culpability so easily, although they are given another chance to turn back to God.

¹ 2 Kings 17:18 (722 BC)

² The southern kingdom is comprised of Judah, the largest tribe, and the tribe of Benjamin, along with the Levites who serve in the Temple.

³ 2 Kings 15:1-5

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4-5. To emphasize the principle that God desires our whole heart, the great spiritual master, Saint Ignatius of Loyola said as an introduction to his *Spiritual Exercises* (#23), “Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created.”

⁵ 2 Kings 16:1-4

⁶ 2 Chronicles 28:16-27

The Reform of Hezekiah

Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, is the next king of Judah.⁷ Unlike his father and the kings of the north, he is a righteous king and a reformer since he calls the people back to fidelity to Yahweh. In the providential hand of God, the rise of Hezekiah corresponds to the prophet Isaiah's mission,⁸ whom God sends to Judah in order to call them back to live the covenant of God faithfully.⁹ Isaiah becomes, in essence, Hezekiah's spiritual guide and the two will work together to renew the kingdom's fidelity to Yahweh.

Hezekiah does what is right in the eyes of the Lord. He removes the "high places" that his father had built, and smashes the pagan idols. He trusts in the Lord so much that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him, for he kept the commandments given to Moses.¹⁰ He not only tears down the altars of the false gods, he also reforms the political order within Judah in opposition to the influence Assyria had over his father.

Hezekiah's political reform begins with his own advisors. Shebna, Hezekiah's first prime minister, is corrupt and loyal to Assyria. Isaiah recounts the injustices of Shebna and how Hezekiah replaces him with a new prime minister, Eliakim.¹¹ Eliakim is appointed "over the household," a technical phrase that means that he is in charge in all things under the king. Isaiah makes clear that this is an office and that the authority goes with the office. Because Eliakim replaces Shebna, Eliakim receives Shebna's authority. This phrase, "over the household," is used in other places in the Old Testament to describe the powers of a political office. For example, it used to explain how Joseph was placed over the house of Egypt.¹² In this authority, Joseph wields more power than any other person in Egypt, except for Pharaoh himself. The same expression is used to indicate that Moses is God's prime minister, his vicar, who rules and adjudicates on behalf of God Himself.¹³ Jesus also uses this phrase when he is talking to Peter, who is put "over his house."¹⁴ This authority is a broad authority that rests in the office, rather than simply being invested in a particular person.

Isaiah goes to great lengths and uses many expressions to explain this authority to Eliakim. Isaiah says that Eliakim will be a "father" to his people, a papa (which is where we get the term "pope"). The Lord tells this new prime minister that he shall "place on his shoulder the key of the House of David; he shall open and none shall shut; and he shall shut and none shall open."¹⁵ Eliakim is also told that he will be a peg "fastened in a

⁷ The rule of Hezekiah is covered in 2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chronicles 29-32; Isaiah 30-36.

⁸ Isaiah 1:1

⁹ Isaiah 6:1-5. It is interesting to note that when Isaiah's ministry begins, he has a vision of himself in the presence of Almighty God, hearing the angels worship God with praise: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts..." (Isaiah 6:3) The Church makes these words her own as a prayer of worship at the beginning of the liturgy of the Eucharist during Mass in preparation for entering into the very presence of God.

¹⁰ 2 Kings 18:5-7

¹¹ Isaiah 22:15-22

¹² Genesis 39:5; 41:41

¹³ Numbers 12:7

¹⁴ Luke 12:42

¹⁵ Isaiah 22:21-22

sure place.”¹⁶ This last reference is an allusion to how tents in this time are held together by one strong peg in the middle. If the main peg is strong, then the tent is capable of withstanding storms. The strength of the tent is dependent on of firm peg, which was usually hammered into a rocky foundation or some other “sure place” in order to make sure that the other stakes would not come up from the sand when the wind blew. So it is now with the office that Eliakim takes under King Hezekiah.

Isaiah and the Petrine Ministry

This section of Isaiah is the scriptural background of Jesus’ words in Matthew when he changes Peter’s name from Simon to Peter, the Rock.¹⁷ Jesus says, “And on this rock I will build my church.”¹⁸ Peter is put “over the master’s house,” to serve as prime minister to the king, Jesus. Peter is given the keys to the kingdom of heaven, which not only reveal his power and authority, but also the fact that there is to be a successor to his office when he dies, just as the keys of Eliakim symbolize not only kingly power and authority, but also dynastic succession. As a peg in a sure place, Peter, the first pope, and his successors hold the unity of the church in place. If the peg is lost, the entire tent of the Lord unravels, and the entire structure comes down. Thus, Jesus is establishing his Kingdom on earth with Peter as his prime minister. Peter takes an office that is to have a successor.¹⁹ This prime minister will be a “father,” a “papa” or pope to his people. He will stand in the place of the king when the king goes away, leading and governing God’s people with the king’s own authority, until he returns in power. Without this visible source of unity, the church divides (as we see with the thousands of denominations since the Protestant Reformation). So, the appointment of Eliakim by Hezekiah is the backdrop of the establishment of the petrine office of the papacy. This is another example how important it is to understand the Old Testament to properly interpret the New Testament.

The First Test of Trust

Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, invades Judah (701 BC). This is twenty-one years after he invaded and conquered Israel to the north. Sennacherib sends the Tartan, who is the commander in chief, the Rabsaris, or royal chamberlain, and the Rabshakeh, or general of his army. These three top henchmen come to intimidate Hezekiah, mock his God, and get him to surrender. The Rabshakeh asks Hezekiah, “On whom do you now rely?”²⁰ Hezekiah is forced to decide in whom he will place his trust. He has three main options: 1) he can surrender and turn the kingdom over to Assyria and risk the same fate as Israel; 2) he can pursue human wisdom and ally himself with Egypt to fight against the Assyrians, although Egypt has never been the friend of God’s people (this would be to follow the old saying, “Any enemy of my enemy is my friend”); 3) or Hezekiah could entrust himself and the kingdom to Yahweh, as was the call to the Israelites from the beginning of their election, and allow God to find a way to defeat the enemy.

¹⁶ Isaiah 22:23

¹⁷ Matthew 16:15ff

¹⁸ Matthew 16:18

¹⁹ see Acts 1:20

²⁰ 2 Kings 18:20

The Rabshakeh invites Hezekiah to negotiate a deal outside of the walls of the city. Hezekiah quickly finds out this is not much of a negotiation. The Rabshakeh taunts and insults Hezekiah's trust in God, and proclaims to all of Judah that Assyria is stronger than Judah.²¹ Warning the people not to trust Hezekiah or his God, the Rabshakeh boasts to the Israelites that in surrendering and following the king of Assyria, then they will have their fill of good, earthly things.²² The people, however, say nothing in the face of this gloating, and obey their king who asks them to remain silent.²³

In response Hezekiah prays and then seeks counsel from Isaiah.²⁴ This is a model for us today: prayer and spiritual direction is the best way to hear God in our lives. Isaiah knows that Hezekiah is tempted to put his faith in worldly means to save himself and his people, so he tells Hezekiah not to join in an alliance with Egypt and to wait and by staying calm he will be saved.²⁵ Isaiah says, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."²⁶ This is asking of Hezekiah a great act of faith. Judah is weak, and the large, powerful nation of Assyria is poised to capture it. The advice from Isaiah is similar to the experience of Elijah when he hears the voice of the Lord in "a still small voice."²⁷ It is through meditation and stillness that we hear the voice of the Lord in our lives. This is why it is so important to make time for quiet prayer. Hezekiah does something else that is a sign of his wisdom – he seeks spiritual direction from Isaiah. Hezekiah acts in prayer and spiritual counsel and God responds.²⁸ Isaiah's words to Hezekiah reinforce this lesson that God has taught Israel over and over again. Isaiah tells Hezekiah that his waiting on the Lord will result in the destruction of his enemy.²⁹ There is sharp contrast between what Isaiah says and what the Rabshakeh said. The Rabshakeh says, "Be afraid!" Isaiah says, "Do not be afraid."³⁰ The Rabshakeh says "Surrender or die!" Isaiah says, "Trust and live."

Sennacherib follows his first challenge with a second one in the form of a letter. Hezekiah responds to the situation with a prayer. He appeals to God's reputation, reminding Him of his steadfast love, and the fact that this pagan king has sent his envoys to mock Yahweh. Those who trust pray, and those who pray earnestly hear from God and experience His power. An angel of the Lord is sent into the camp of the Assyrians and kills 180,000 of the Assyrian soldiers. In fear, Sennacherib returns to his palace, and

²¹ 2 Kings 18:19-35

²² This is similar to the promise of the serpent to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:5). 2 Kings 19:29 and Isaiah 37:30 suggest that Assyria attacked Judah at the southern kingdom's most vulnerable point in the Jubilee cycle (see Leviticus 25:11) when the crops had been idle for two years, and so the food supply would have been unusually low and the siege especially acute.

²³ 2 Kings 18:36

²⁴ 2 Kings 19:1-4

²⁵ Isaiah 30:1-7

²⁶ Isaiah 30:15

²⁷ 2 Kings 19:12

²⁸ Hezekiah goes a second time to prayer in 2 Kings 19:14-19.

²⁹ 2 Kings 19:20-34; Isaiah 30:18-26

³⁰ 2 Kings 19:6. Jesus echoes this same sentiment to Peter (Luke 5:10). Interestingly, John Paul II began his pontificate with the proclamation, "Be not afraid!" and it defined his twenty-six years as pope. A parallel can be easily drawn between the siege of Judah by Assyria and the siege of the Church in the late 20th century by communism and secularism.

there is killed by his own sons.³¹ Literally overnight the threat is taken away (to say the least).³² This defeat of Assyria leaves a void that is soon filled by Babylon, the other power in Mesopotamia that had been competing for control. The competition between Assyria and Babylon is now over, and Babylon rules.

The Second Test

God often tests His children to give them the opportunity to experience the beauty of freedom and to grow in virtue. This is how we grow in the spiritual life, and this is how we grow in the spiritual life.³³ Hezekiah trusted the Lord during the Assyrian crisis, and now God tests Hezekiah again as an opportunity for virtue. He witnessed the divine power dismantle his enemy and send Sennacherib home to his own judgment, yet Hezekiah needs to be reminded of his own weaknesses and propensity to place trust in himself after such a victory and not Yahweh.

Unfortunately, Hezekiah's heart grows proud, and he does not credit to the Lord for what He had done for him.³⁴ Hezekiah becomes gravely ill, and Isaiah comes to visit him. Isaiah tells him to set his house in order, for he is about to die. Hezekiah turns to prayer, as he did with the Assyrians, and reminds God of His goodness, and of Hezekiah's own history of doing what was right in His sight. In his sickness, Hezekiah turns from his pride and renews his fidelity to Yahweh. God hears and answers his prayer, and Hezekiah is not only spared from death but is given fifteen years added on to his life to lead Judah in the ways of the Lord. The lesson he learns, however, is short lived, and he begins once again to consider himself the source of his blessings.³⁵

The Third Test and Final Test

The Assyrians have been defeated but that leaves a power vacuum in the region, and soon Prince Merodach-baladan, son of the king of Babylon, begins to move against Judah. The prince sends envoys with gifts and a letter to Hezekiah, having heard of his sickness. Moved by this apparent show of sympathy, Hezekiah shows the envoys all of his wealth; indeed, even his storehouses and armory.³⁶ Unfortunately, in his pride, Hezekiah does not recognize that the visitors have another motivation behind their visit. Flattered by the praise of men, Hezekiah allows his worldly success to blind him not only to the true motives of the Babylonians, but also to his utter need for God. This test shows Hezekiah the true state of his soul – his faith in God is fickle. Hezekiah is so inflated in his ego that he thinks that this superpower has come to pay him homage, rather than to size him up before they attack. King Hezekiah truly epitomizes the expression, “pride goes before

³¹ As Isaiah prophesized in 2 Kings 19:7.

³² 2 Kings 19:35-37

³³ See James 1:2-4. Saint Catherine of Siena said: “And so out of opposites we come to learn perfection without even noticing it. We discover that we have become perfect in the midst of storms and temptations. And there is no other way one can ever arrive at the port of perfection. So reflect on this: we cannot receive or even desire virtue unless we have desires and harassment and temptation to suffer with true holy patience for love of Christ crucified. We must, then, be happy and glad in times of struggle, temptation, and darkness, since they are the source of so much virtue and joy.”

³⁴ 2 Chronicles 32:24-26

³⁵ 2 Chronicles 32:30

³⁶ Isaiah 39:2-8

the fall.” His actions prove that he does not really depend on God, but rather himself. Isaiah, on the other hand, recognizes the nature of the visit, as well as the deeper, spiritual meaning, and God is about to reveal the consequences to Hezekiah as well.

Isaiah tells the king that the days are coming when all of the riches of his house, even all that his fathers had stored up to this day, will be carried off into Babylon, and nothing shall be left.³⁷ Hezekiah’s response is shocking and unfortunate, but it does indicate the depth of his foolishness. He replies by stating that at least there would be peace and security in his days.³⁸ That is, “At least the bad times will come after I die so I don’t have to deal with it.” We see, then, that his reform was inauthentic. Once Hezekiah is saved from mortal illness, he turned back to pride and vanity, the bitter fruits of self-reliance.

We, too, may find ourselves responding the same way Hezekiah responds. Once we feel our prayers are answered, we assume that perhaps the real reason why events turned out fortunate for us had nothing to do with God after all, but was due to our own abilities. In good times we forget God and rely only on ourselves. Only in our need do we turn to God. Once the need is met, we turn back to reliance on self, skeptical that it was God who helped us in the first place. It was this type of false security that led Israel to idol worship, and leads many people today to turn from God. The story Hezekiah in many ways is also our story!³⁹ God calls us to abandon ourselves entirely to Him and to trust Him. This alone leads to freedom and peace. Only in His care will we ever find the security we yearn for.

³⁷ Isaiah 39:5

³⁸ Isaiah 39:8; 2 Kings 20:19

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:6-14