Hezekiah's Prayer

Bible Stories Anthology — 2 Kings 18–20; Isaiah 36–38

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

He Spread It Before the LORD

The most powerful empire on earth had come to destroy Jerusalem.

Assyria had already swallowed the northern kingdom of Israel and carried its people away. Now its king, Sennacherib, had swept through Judah and captured forty-six of its fortified cities. Only Jerusalem was left. His field commander stood outside the walls and shouted up to the soldiers in their own language: *Don't let Hezekiah fool you. No god has ever saved a nation from the king of Assyria. What makes you think yours will?*

Then came a letter, saying the same thing in writing.

King Hezekiah of Judah read it. And then he did something simple and remarkable. He took the letter up to the house of the LORD, laid it open before God, and prayed.

He did not hide the threat or pretend it was smaller than it was. He said, in effect: *LORD, look at this. Read what he has written about You. It is true that the kings of Assyria have destroyed every nation they fought and burned their gods — because those gods were only wood and stone. But You are the living God. Save us, so that every kingdom on earth will know that You alone are God.*

That night, the Assyrian army was struck down in its camp. Sennacherib went home and never came back.

Not long after, Hezekiah faced a different enemy — a sickness that the prophet said would kill him. Again he turned to God in prayer, with tears. And again God heard.

This is the story of a king who took his crises to God — and of what God did when he did.

The Setting

When. The reign of **Hezekiah**, king of Judah, in the late 700s and early 600s B.C. He came to the throne at twenty-five and reigned twenty-nine years (2 Kings 18:2). Sennacherib's invasion is firmly dated by Assyrian records to **701 B.C.** (The exact years of Hezekiah's reign are one of the hardest puzzles in Old Testament chronology, because the dates given in 2 Kings 18 can be counted in more than one way. The invasion itself is not in doubt.)

The world. Assyria, based in northern Mesopotamia with its capital at **Nineveh**, was the superpower of the age. Its armies were famous for their cruelty. About twenty years before this story, in 722 B.C., Assyria had destroyed **Samaria** and carried the ten northern tribes into exile — **"Because they obeyed not the voice of the LORD their God"** (2 Kings 18:12). Judah, the small southern kingdom, was all that remained of David's people. **Egypt** to the south was a rival power that some in Judah hoped would rescue them.

Hezekiah's reign. Hezekiah was one of the few truly good kings of Judah. His father Ahaz had been an idolater. Hezekiah, in the first month of his reign, reopened the doors of the temple and repaired them (2 Chronicles 29:3). He held a great Passover and invited the survivors of the northern tribes (2 Chronicles 30:1). He tore down the pagan shrines. Scripture's verdict on him is striking:

> **2 Kings 18:5** *He trusted in the LORD God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him.*

Where. Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, on its hills, with the temple of the LORD. **Lachish**, about thirty miles to the southwest, Judah's second city, where Sennacherib set up his headquarters.

Who.

- **Hezekiah**, king of Judah.
- **Isaiah the son of Amoz**, the great prophet, who brought God's word to Hezekiah.
- **Sennacherib**, king of Assyria.
- **Rab-shakeh**, Sennacherib's chief spokesman (the name is a title, perhaps "chief cupbearer"), along with **Tartan** (commander-in-chief) and **Rabsaris** (a high court official).
- **Eliakim, Shebna and Joah**, Hezekiah's senior officials.
- **Berodach-baladan**, king of Babylon, who later sent envoys.

The administration. The **Mosaic Law**. Judah was God's covenant people, and Jerusalem was **"the city which the LORD did choose"** (compare 1 Kings 14:21), where His temple stood.

The Story, Told Faithfully

A King Who Trusted

> **2 Kings 18:3** *And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that David his father did.*

> **2 Kings 18:4** *He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.*

"The brasen serpent that Moses had made." Seven hundred years earlier, when Israel was dying from snakebites in the wilderness, God told Moses to make a serpent of brass and set it on a pole: **"every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live"** (Numbers 21:8). It had been a gift from God. But the people had kept it, and over the centuries they had turned it into an idol and were burning incense to it.

"And he called it Nehushtan." A Hebrew play on words: *nechosheth* is "brass," *nachash* is "serpent." Hezekiah called it, in effect, *"a piece of brass."* He smashed it. Something God once used for good had become an object of worship, and Hezekiah had the courage to destroy it — even though it went back to Moses.

> **2 Kings 18:6** *For he clave to the LORD, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the LORD commanded Moses.*
>
> **2 Kings 18:7** *And the LORD was with him; and he prospered whithersoever he went forth: and he rebelled against the king of Assyria, and served him not.*

"He clave to the LORD." He held on tight. The word is the one used of a husband cleaving to his wife (Genesis 2:24).

"He rebelled against the king of Assyria." Hezekiah's father had made Judah a vassal of Assyria, paying tribute. Hezekiah stopped paying. That decision brought the Assyrian army.

The Invasion

> **2 Kings 18:13** *Now in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah did Sennacherib king of Assyria come up against all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them.*

"All the fenced cities of Judah, and took them." Sennacherib's own records survive. On a clay prism now in museums, he boasted that he captured **forty-six** of Hezekiah's walled cities and countless villages, and carried off a vast number of people. His palace at Nineveh was decorated with carved stone panels showing the siege and capture of **Lachish** — the ramp, the battering rams, the captives led away. Those panels can still be seen today in the British Museum.

> **2 Kings 18:14** *And Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria to Lachish, saying, I have offended; return from me: that which thou puttest on me will I bear. And the king of Assyria appointed unto Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold.*
>
> **2 Kings 18:15** *And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king's house.*

"I have offended." Under pressure, even the king who trusted God tried to buy his way out. He stripped the silver from the temple and the palace, and even the gold from the temple doors he himself had overlaid (18:16). The Bible does not hide this moment of weakness. (Sennacherib's prism also records Hezekiah's tribute: thirty talents of gold, just as 2 Kings says, and a larger figure for the silver — perhaps counting other payments, or using a different weight.)

The payment did not work. Sennacherib took the money and sent his army anyway.

The Voice on the Wall

> **2 Kings 18:17** *And the king of Assyria sent Tartan and Rabsaris and Rab-shakeh from Lachish to king Hezekiah with a great host against Jerusalem. And they went up and came to Jerusalem. And when they were come up, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is in the highway of the fuller's field.*

"By the conduit of the upper pool." The very spot where, a generation earlier, Isaiah had met Hezekiah's father Ahaz and urged him to trust God instead of Assyria (Isaiah 7:3). Ahaz had refused. Now Assyria stood in that same place, threatening his son.

Rab-shakeh's speech is a masterpiece of intimidation. He attacked every possible source of hope, one by one:

> **2 Kings 18:19** *And Rab-shakeh said unto them, Speak ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence is this wherein thou trustest?*

"What confidence is this wherein thou trustest?" The key word of the whole speech is *trust*. It appears again and again. Rab-shakeh's aim was to destroy their trust.

Trust in Egypt? "Thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, on which if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it" (18:21). On this point he was right. Isaiah had said the same (Isaiah 30:1-3).

Trust in the LORD? "Is not that he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away …" (18:22). A clever twist: Rab-shakeh assumed that Hezekiah's reforms had offended the LORD. He did not understand that those shrines were the very thing God had forbidden.

Trust in your army? He mocked them: he would give them two thousand horses, if they could find enough men to ride them (18:23).

"The LORD said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it" (18:25). The cruellest lie of all: *your own God is on my side*.

> **2 Kings 18:26** *Then said Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and Shebna, and Joah, unto Rab-shakeh, Speak, I pray thee, to thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand it: and talk not with us in the Jews' language in the ears of the people that are on the wall.*

"The Syrian language." Aramaic, the diplomatic language of the day. Hezekiah's officials asked him not to speak in Hebrew, where the ordinary soldiers on the wall could hear.

Rab-shakeh did the opposite. He turned to the wall and shouted louder, in Hebrew, straight to the people: **"Let not Hezekiah deceive you … Neither let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD"** (18:29-30). He promised them a comfortable deportation to a land **"of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards"** (18:32). And he ended with the claim that had never yet been proved wrong:

> **2 Kings 18:33** *Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered at all his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?*
>
> **2 Kings 18:35** *Who are they among all the gods of the countries, that have delivered their country out of mine hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of mine hand?*

This was the fatal mistake. Rab-shakeh put the LORD on the same list as the idols of Hamath and Arpad. He challenged not just Hezekiah, but the living God.

> **2 Kings 18:36** *But the people held their peace, and answered him not a word: for the king's commandment was, saying, Answer him not.*

"Answer him not." Hezekiah's wise command. There was no point arguing with Rab-shakeh. The answer would come from God.

Hezekiah Goes to the House of the LORD

> **2 Kings 19:1** *And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the LORD.*

"He rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth." The signs of grief and humility before God. Hezekiah did not put on armour. He put on sackcloth.

"And went into the house of the LORD." His first move was toward God.

> **2 Kings 19:3** *And they said unto him, Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and blasphemy: for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth.*
> **2 Kings 19:4** *It may be the LORD thy God will hear all the words of Rab-shakeh, whom the king of Assyria his master hath sent to reproach the living God; and will reprove the words which the LORD thy God hath heard: wherefore lift up thy prayer for the remnant that are left.*

He sent his officials to Isaiah with a message.

"The children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth." A vivid picture: a woman in labour, the baby ready to be born, and no strength left to deliver it. Judah was at the point of crisis, and had nothing left.

"To reproach the living God." Hezekiah saw clearly what this was really about. The Assyrians had not only threatened Judah; they had insulted God. It was God's honour that was at stake.

"Lift up thy prayer for the remnant that are left." He asked the prophet to pray.

> **2 Kings 19:6** *And Isaiah said unto them, Thus shall ye say to your master, Thus saith the LORD, Be not afraid of the words which thou hast heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.*
> **2 Kings 19:7** *Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and shall return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.*

"Be not afraid of the words." They were only words. God had heard them too — and He took them personally: **"blasphemed me."**

The Letter

Rab-shakeh went back to Sennacherib, who had moved on to attack **Libnah**. News came that **Tirhakah**, the Ethiopian ruler of Egypt, was marching out against him (19:8-9). So before dealing with Egypt, Sennacherib sent Hezekiah a letter to finish breaking his will:

> **2 Kings 19:10** *Thus shall ye speak to Hezekiah king of Judah, saying, Let not thy God in whom thou trustest deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be delivered into the hand of the king of Assyria.*
>
> **2 Kings 19:11** *Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, by destroying them utterly: and shalt thou be delivered?*

"Let not thy God in whom thou trustest deceive thee." Rab-shakeh had said *Don't let Hezekiah deceive you.* Now the king himself said *Don't let your God deceive you.* The attack was aimed directly at God.

Spread Before the LORD

> **2 Kings 19:14** *And Hezekiah received the letter of the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up into the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD.*

This is the image the whole story is remembered for.

"And read it." He did not avoid it. He read every threatening word.

"And Hezekiah went up into the house of the LORD." Again, straight to God.

"And spread it before the LORD." He unrolled the letter and laid it open before God — literally. It was as if he said, *LORD, You read it too.* He did not carry the threat on his own. He handed it over.

The Prayer

> **2 Kings 19:15** *And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD, and said, O LORD God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth.*

Look at how Hezekiah began. Not with the problem. With God.

"O LORD God of Israel." The covenant God, the God of His people.

"Which dwellest between the cherubims." Enthroned above the ark in the most holy place, a few steps away from where Hezekiah was praying.

"Thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth." Not only of Judah. Of Assyria too. Sennacherib thought he ruled the kingdoms of the earth. Hezekiah reminded himself who really did.

"Thou hast made heaven and earth." The Creator. Before the greatness of the Creator, the greatest empire on earth was small.

> **2 Kings 19:16** *LORD, bow down thine ear, and hear: open, LORD, thine eyes, and see: and hear the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent him to reproach the living God.*

"Bow down thine ear, and hear: open, LORD, thine eyes, and see." Language of intimate appeal — asking God to lean close and look. **"Hear the words of Sennacherib."** *Listen to what he is saying about You.*

> **2 Kings 19:17** *Of a truth, LORD, the kings of Assyria have destroyed the nations and their lands,*

> **2 Kings 19:18** *And have cast their gods into the fire: for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them.*

"Of a truth." Hezekiah admitted that the facts were real. The Assyrians had done everything they claimed. He did not deny the danger.

"For they were no gods." But he saw what the Assyrians had missed. They had beaten *idols* — wood and stone. That proved nothing about the living God.

> **2 Kings 19:19** *Now therefore, O LORD our God, I beseech thee, save thou us out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the LORD God, even thou only.*

"Save thou us out of his hand." The request itself is short.

"That all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the LORD God, even thou only." And the reason is God's glory. Hezekiah began with *thou alone* and ended with *thou only*. His prayer was framed from start to finish by the truth that there is one God.

Look at the shape of this prayer:

1. **Who God is** — the LORD, enthroned, the only God, the Creator.
2. **The honest problem** — hear and see what is happening.
3. **The facts admitted** — the danger is real.
4. **The truth that answers the facts** — the idols were no gods.
5. **The request** — save us.
6. **The purpose** — that all may know You are God.

"I Have Heard"

> **2 Kings 19:20** *Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, That which thou hast prayed to me against Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard.*

"That which thou hast prayed ... I have heard." Hezekiah did not need to go to Isaiah this time. God sent Isaiah to him.

What follows is a long poem addressed to Sennacherib (19:21-34). God answered the Assyrian's boasting:

"The virgin the daughter of Zion hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn" (19:21). Jerusalem, pictured as a young woman the invader thought he could take, laughs at him.

"Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? ... even against the Holy One of Israel" (19:22). *Do you know who you have insulted?*

"Hast thou not heard long ago how I have done it ... now have I brought it to pass, that thou shouldest be to lay waste fenced cities" (19:25). Sennacherib thought his conquests were his own achievement. God said Assyria was only an instrument He had permitted to rise — and He could put it down.

> **2 Kings 19:28** *Because thy rage against me and thy tumult is come up into mine ears, therefore I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest.*

“I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips.” The Assyrians were known for leading captives with hooks through their noses or lips. God said He would do to Sennacherib what Sennacherib did to others — lead him home like an animal on a rope.

> **2 Kings 19:32** *Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it.*
>
> **2 Kings 19:34** *For I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake.*

“He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there.” Not even one arrow. God promised complete protection.

“For mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake.” Not because Jerusalem deserved it, but for God’s honour, and for the promise He had made to David of an everlasting throne.

That Night

> **2 Kings 19:35** *And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.*
>
> **2 Kings 19:36** *So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh.*

“That night.” No battle. No arrow shot. God’s messenger struck the Assyrian camp, and **185,000** men died. Chronicles adds that the angel **“cut off all the mighty men of valour, and the leaders and captains in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he returned with shame of face to his own land”** (2 Chronicles 32:21).

This was God’s judgment on an army that had slaughtered nation after nation and had come to do the same to Jerusalem while openly defying the living God. Scripture does not describe *how* the angel struck; it tells us only who acted and what the result was.

History confirms the outcome. Sennacherib’s own prism boasts of shutting Hezekiah up in Jerusalem **“like a bird in a cage”** — but it never claims to have taken the city. For a king who recorded every conquest, the silence is telling. (The Greek historian Herodotus later preserved an Egyptian story that an Assyrian army under Sennacherib was ruined overnight near the Egyptian border when mice gnawed their bowstrings. Scholars differ over whether that story preserves a distant memory of the same disaster.)

> **2 Kings 19:37** *And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword: and they escaped into the land of Armenia. And Esar-haddon his son reigned in his stead.*

“As he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god.” Twenty years later, in 681 B.C., Sennacherib was murdered by his own sons — in the temple of the very god he trusted. Babylonian and Assyrian records confirm his murder and the succession of Esar-haddon. The god that Sennacherib claimed was greater than the LORD could not protect him in his own house. Isaiah’s word — **“I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land”** (19:7) — was fulfilled exactly.

“Thou Shalt Die”

> **2 Kings 20:1** *In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live.*

“In those days.” This sickness came around the same time as the Assyrian crisis — in fact God’s answer in verse 6 promises deliverance from Assyria as something still to come, so it seems to have happened before the siege was lifted. Hezekiah was fighting two enemies at once: an empire outside the walls, and a disease inside his own body.

“Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live.” The prophet brought the hardest news a man can hear. Hezekiah was about thirty-nine. He had no son yet to take the throne — his son Manasseh was twelve when Hezekiah died fifteen years later (2 Kings 21:1). The line of David itself seemed at stake.

Face to the Wall

> **2 Kings 20:2** *Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the LORD, saying,*
>
> **2 Kings 20:3** *I beseech thee, O LORD, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore.*

“He turned his face to the wall.” He could not go up to the temple this time; he was too sick. So he turned away from everyone in the room and turned to God. It was a private prayer, from his bed.

“Remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart.” Hezekiah was not claiming to be sinless. He was appealing to his relationship with God — a life of trust and faithfulness — and asking God to remember it. *Perfect* here means whole, undivided.

“And Hezekiah wept sore.” He cried hard. The same king who had faced the Assyrians without flinching broke down before God. Tears are not a lack of faith. Jesus himself **“offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard”** (Hebrews 5:7).

“I Have Seen Thy Tears”

> **2 Kings 20:4** *And it came to pass, afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LORD came to him, saying,*
>
> **2 Kings 20:5** *Turn again, and tell Hezekiah the captain of my people, Thus saith the LORD, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the LORD.*
>
> **2 Kings 20:6** *And I will add unto thy days fifteen years; and I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake.*

“Afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court.” Before the prophet had even left the palace. The answer came almost at once.

“I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears.” God noticed both: the words and the weeping.

“On the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the LORD.” The man who could not get out of bed would walk into the temple on the third day.

“I will add unto thy days fifteen years.” God reversed the sentence. How can God say *thou shalt die* and then give fifteen more years? The prophets explain it. God’s announcements of coming judgment or death are often conditional, even when the condition is not spelled out: **“If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them”** (Jeremiah 18:8). God did the same for Nineveh (Jonah 3:10). As this series understands it, Isaiah’s word told Hezekiah the true course of his illness; Hezekiah’s prayer was the response God invited, and God answered it.

“And I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria.” The healing came with a double promise: his life, and his city.

> **2 Kings 20:7** *And Isaiah said, Take a lump of figs. And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.*

“A lump of figs … on the boil.” A poultice of pressed figs, a known remedy in the ancient world, laid on the infected sore. God healed Hezekiah — and used an ordinary remedy in doing it. Prayer and medicine were not in competition.

The Shadow Goes Back

> **2 Kings 20:9** *And Isaiah said, This sign shalt thou have of the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he hath spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten degrees, or go back ten degrees?*
>
> **2 Kings 20:10** *And Hezekiah answered, It is a light thing for the shadow to go down ten degrees: nay, but let the shadow return backward ten degrees.*
>
> **2 Kings 20:11** *And Isaiah the prophet cried unto the LORD: and he brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz.*

“The dial of Ahaz.” Literally *the steps of Ahaz* — probably a staircase built by Hezekiah’s father, on which the shadow of the sun moved down step by step as the day went on, used to tell the time.

“Let the shadow return backward ten degrees.” Shadows go forward naturally. Hezekiah asked for the impossible: for the shadow to go back. And God did it. Scripture does not say how. It records the sign as God’s confirmation that the fifteen years were real — as if God had turned back the clock on Hezekiah’s life.

Hezekiah’s Song

Isaiah preserves a psalm Hezekiah wrote after he recovered (Isaiah 38:9-20). Part of it reads:

> **Isaiah 38:17** *Behold, for peace I had great bitterness: but thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back.*
>
> **Isaiah 38:18** *For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth.*
>
> **Isaiah 38:19** *The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day: the father to the children shall make known thy truth.*

“Thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back.” A beautiful picture of forgiveness — God puts our sins where He will not see them again.

“For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee.” Hezekiah understood that death is not the doorway to praising God in another place. The dead do not praise God; they sleep in the grave until the resurrection. **“For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?”** (Psalm 6:5). That is why he was so glad to live: **“The living, the living, he shall praise thee.”**

The Envoys from Babylon

> **2 Kings 20:12** *At that time Berodach-baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present unto Hezekiah: for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick.*
>
> **2 Kings 20:13** *And Hezekiah hearkened unto them, and shewed them all the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah shewed them not.*

Berodach-baladan (called Merodach-baladan in Isaiah 39:1) was a Babylonian leader who spent years rebelling against Assyria. His envoys came with get-well wishes — and, very likely, with the hope of drawing Judah into an alliance against Assyria. Chronicles adds that they came **“to enquire of the wonder that was done in the land”** — the shadow on the steps (2 Chronicles 32:31).

“And shewed them all the house of his precious things.” Here Hezekiah stumbled. Flattered by the attention of a far-off king, he showed them everything — his treasures, his armoury, all his wealth. He did not show them the God who had just healed him and turned back the sun.

Chronicles is candid: **“But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up”** (2 Chronicles 32:25). And: **“God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart”** (32:31).

> **2 Kings 20:17** *Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store unto this day, shall be carried into Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the LORD.*

Isaiah announced that one day Babylon — not Assyria — would carry all of it away. About a hundred years later it happened.

> **2 Kings 20:19** *Then said Hezekiah unto Isaiah, Good is the word of the LORD which thou hast spoken. And he said, Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?*

This response has been read two ways. It can sound selfish: *at least it won’t happen in my lifetime.* But Chronicles says that **“Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart … so that the wrath of the LORD came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah”** (2 Chronicles 32:26). As this series understands it, Hezekiah accepted God’s word as just and was thankful for the mercy of a delay. Either way, the lesson is plain: even a man who prayed as Hezekiah prayed could be caught by pride in a moment of success.

> **2 Kings 20:20** *And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made a pool, and a conduit, and brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?*
>
> **2 Kings 20:21** *And Hezekiah slept with his fathers: and Manasseh his son reigned in his stead.*

"How he made a pool, and a conduit, and brought water into the city." To prepare for the Assyrian siege, Hezekiah cut off the springs outside Jerusalem so the enemy would find no water (2 Chronicles 32:3-4), and brought the waters of the Gihon spring into the city through a tunnel. That tunnel still exists. It winds some 1,750 feet through solid rock under the City of David. In 1880 an inscription was found inside it, describing the moment the two teams of diggers, cutting from opposite ends, heard each other's picks and broke through. People still wade through **Hezekiah's Tunnel** today.

"And Hezekiah slept with his fathers." He died and was buried, to sleep until the resurrection.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The serpent lifted up. Hezekiah smashed the brass serpent because the people had made it an idol. But the serpent itself had pointed forward. Jesus said: **"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life"** (John 3:14-15). Those who looked at the serpent lived; those who look to Christ, lifted up on the cross, receive eternal life. The object was never meant to be worshipped. It was meant to point to him.

"For my servant David's sake." God defended Jerusalem twice **"for my servant David's sake"** (19:34; 20:6). He was keeping His promise that David's throne would stand — the promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ, of whom the angel said, **"the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David ... and of his kingdom there shall be no end"** (Luke 1:32-33). Hezekiah is named in the Messiah's own genealogy (Matthew 1:9-10).

On the third day. God told the dying king, **"on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the LORD"** (20:5). As this series understands it, the words form a small picture of what God would do for the Son of David: he died, and on the third day God raised him from the dead, and then exalted him — not into a building made with hands, but to His own right hand in heaven.

The one who prayed with tears. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and wept, and God heard him. Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, **"O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt"** (Matthew 26:39). Hezekiah was spared death. Jesus was not spared death, but he was saved *out of* it: God raised him and set him at His right hand, where **"he ever liveth to make intercession"** for all who come to God by him (Hebrews 7:25).

The prophet of the Messiah. The Isaiah who stood beside Hezekiah is the same prophet who wrote of the suffering Servant: **"he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed"** (Isaiah 53:5).

To the Grace Administration

Spread it before God. Hezekiah laid the letter before the LORD. The believer is invited to do the same with every care:

> **Philippians 4:6** *Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.*
>
> **Philippians 4:7** *And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

"Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Come boldly. Hezekiah had to go up to the temple, to the place God had chosen. The believer today needs no building and no priest: **"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need"** (Hebrews 4:16), through **"one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"** (1 Timothy 2:5).

When we don't know how to pray. Hezekiah had words; sometimes we do not. **"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought"** (Romans 8:26).

Trust in God who raises the dead. Paul described his own crisis in words Hezekiah would have understood: **"we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver"** (2 Corinthians 1:9-10).

The unseen battle is already won. The Assyrians fell without a single arrow from Jerusalem. God raised Christ **"and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion"** (Ephesians 1:20-21), and **"having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them"** (Colossians 2:15).

Pray for those in authority. Hezekiah prayed as a king for his nation. Paul tells believers to pray **"For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty"** (1 Timothy 2:2).

Beware of pride after victory. Hezekiah's great prayers were followed by a moment of pride. **"Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall"** (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Hope beyond the grave. Hezekiah knew that **"the grave cannot praise thee."** The believer's hope is the same — not in going to heaven at death, but in the resurrection: **"them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him ... and the dead in Christ shall rise first"** (1 Thessalonians 4:14, 16).

To the Topic of Prayer in Crisis

- **Go to God first** — Hezekiah went to the house of the LORD before he did anything else.
- **Read the threat honestly,** then hand it over — spread it before the LORD.
- **Begin with who God is,** not with the size of the problem.
- **Admit the facts** — "Of a truth, LORD."
- **Then set the facts beside the truth** — the idols were no gods.
- **Ask plainly.**
- **Pray for God's honour** — "that all the kingdoms of the earth may know."
- **Tears are welcome** — "I have seen thy tears."
- **Ask others to pray** — Hezekiah sent to Isaiah.
- **Don't answer every accusation** — "Answer him not."
- **Use the means God provides** — the lump of figs, the tunnel.
- **Guard your heart after the answer comes.**
- **"Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me"** (Psalm 50:15).

The Main Takeaway

When Sennacherib king of Assyria had taken forty-six of Judah's walled cities and sent Rab-shakeh to shout to the soldiers on Jerusalem's wall that no god had ever saved a nation from Assyria's hand, King Hezekiah — who "trusted in the LORD God of Israel" — tore his clothes, went into the house of the LORD, and sent to Isaiah; and when a letter came mocking "thy God in whom thou trustest," Hezekiah "went up into the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD," and prayed, "thou art the God, even thou alone … save thou us out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the LORD God, even thou only"; God answered, "That which thou hast prayed to me … I have heard," and that night the angel of the LORD struck 185,000 in the Assyrian camp, Sennacherib went home and was later killed by his own sons in his god's temple; when Hezekiah fell sick unto death he turned his face to the wall and wept, and God said, "I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears," and added fifteen years, turning back the shadow on the steps as a sign — though afterward Hezekiah's heart was lifted up before the envoys of Babylon; God hears those who bring their crises to Him, and acts for the honour of His name.

- **Take every crisis to God** — spread it before Him.
- **Begin prayer with who God is.**
- **Be honest about the danger;** then trust God above it.
- **Pray for God's glory,** not only your relief.
- **God hears prayers and sees tears.**
- **God can do what no army can.**
- **Guard against pride** when the answer comes.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Hezekiah.** King of Judah, son of Ahaz; trusted God more than any king before or after him; removed idols, smashed the brass serpent, prayed over Sennacherib's letter and on his sickbed; was healed and given fifteen years; showed his treasures to Babylon's envoys.
- **Isaiah the son of Amoz.** The prophet who brought God's answers to Hezekiah and foretold Assyria's fall, Hezekiah's healing, and Babylon's future conquest.
- **Sennacherib.** King of Assyria (705–681 B.C.); invaded Judah in 701 B.C.; mocked the LORD; returned home in disgrace and was murdered by his sons.
- **Rab-shakeh.** Sennacherib's spokesman, who shouted to the people on the wall.
- **Tartan and Rabsaris.** Assyrian officials who came with Rab-shakeh.
- **Eliakim, Shebna and Joah.** Hezekiah's palace administrator, scribe and recorder, who met the Assyrians and carried messages to Isaiah.
- **Tirhakah.** Ethiopian (Cushite) ruler of Egypt, who marched out against Assyria.
- **Adrammelech and Sharezer.** Sennacherib's sons, who killed him.
- **Esar-haddon.** Sennacherib's son and successor.
- **Berodach-baladan.** King of Babylon, who sent envoys to Hezekiah after his illness.
- **Manasseh.** Hezekiah's son and successor, born during the fifteen added years.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Tribute** paid by smaller kingdoms to empires.
- **Siege warfare** — ramps, battering rams, cutting off water.
- **Envoys and field commanders** negotiating at a city's walls.
- **Aramaic as the diplomatic language;** Hebrew as the language of the common people.
- **Kings' letters** carried by messengers.
- **Tearing clothes and wearing sackcloth** in grief and repentance.
- **Spreading a matter before God** in His house.
- **Turning the face to the wall** — turning away from others to pray privately.
- **Leading captives with hooks and bridles.**
- **Poultices of figs** as medicine.
- **Telling time by a shadow on steps.**
- **Showing treasures** to foreign visitors as a display of power.
- **Water tunnels** to bring springs inside city walls.
- **"Slept with his fathers"** — the Old Testament way of describing death and burial.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Paronomasia (word play)** — "Nehushtan" (18:4), *nechosheth* (brass) and *nachash* (serpent): "a piece of brass."
- **Metaphor** — "the staff of this bruised reed" (18:21), Egypt as a cracked walking stick that pierces the hand.
- **Erotesis (rhetorical question)** — "What confidence is this wherein thou trustest?" (18:19); "Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered at all his land …?" (18:33).
- **Metaphor** — "the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth" (19:3).
- **Anthropopatheia** — "bow down thine ear, and hear: open, LORD, thine eyes, and see" (19:16); "come up into mine ears" (19:28).
- **Prosopopoeia (personification)** — "The virgin the daughter of Zion hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn" (19:21).
- **Metaphor** — "I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips" (19:28).
- **Metaphor** — "take root downward, and bear fruit upward" (19:30), the remnant as a tree.
- **Idiom** — "Set thine house in order" (20:1), settle your affairs.
- **Idiom** — "slept with his fathers" (20:21), died and was buried.
- **Anthropopatheia** — "thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back" (Isaiah 38:17).
- **Epizeuxis (repetition)** — "The living, the living, he shall praise thee" (Isaiah 38:19).
- **Inclusio** — "thou art the God, even thou alone" (19:15) … "thou art the LORD God, even thou only" (19:19), framing the prayer.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Hezekiah "trusted in the LORD God of Israel"** more than any king of Judah.
- **He smashed the brass serpent Moses made** because Israel was burning incense to it.
- **Sennacherib took Judah's fortified cities;** Hezekiah paid tribute, but the army came anyway.
- **Rab-shakeh mocked the LORD** as no better than the gods of the nations.
- **Hezekiah told the people not to answer.**
- **Hezekiah spread the letter before the LORD** and prayed.
- **His prayer began and ended with the truth that the LORD alone is God.**
- **God said, "I have heard."**
- **The angel of the LORD struck 185,000 in one night;** not one arrow was shot at Jerusalem.
- **Sennacherib was killed by his sons** in the temple of his god.
- **Hezekiah was told he would die;** he prayed and wept, and God added fifteen years.
- **Isaiah used a lump of figs** on the boil.
- **The shadow went back ten steps** as a sign.
- **Hezekiah wrote that "the grave cannot praise thee."**
- **His heart was lifted up** before the envoys from Babylon.

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants His people to bring their crises to Him.**
- **God hears prayer and sees tears.**
- **God defends His own name** against those who mock Him.
- **God keeps His promises** — for His own sake and for David's.
- **God is the only God;** idols are the work of men's hands.
- **God can reverse what seems final** when His people turn to Him.
- **God tests hearts,** and guards His people from pride.
- **God was preparing the Son of David whose throne has no end,** Jesus Christ — lifted up on the cross, raised on the third day, and ascended to God's right hand — who ever lives to make intercession for all who come to God by him.