

GOD HEARS

2 Kings 19:10-19, 32-34

What would most people say is the biggest threat to our nation and our “way of life” today? Typical responses could include a very wide range of issues such as China and their global ambitions, a worldwide pandemic of a deadly pathogen, inflation, national debt, lawlessness, nuclear war, terrorists, climate change, open borders and the influx of non-citizens, civil war, governmental tyranny and overreach. Around 700 BC, the biggest threat to most nations in the middle east was the nation of Assyria that had ambitions of dominating the region. They had already conquered many of their neighbors. Many of the names of their victims are unfamiliar to us; however, we do recognize the name of Israel that fell to Assyrian aggression around 720 BC. Their aggression and ambition continued impacting that region of the world.

One of the impacts felt by some of the nations was extortion or reallocation of wealth from weaker nations to Assyria. This was like paying protection money to the local gangsters so they would not trash your store located in the neighborhood they controlled. About eight years after the fall of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) Judah came under the extortion pressure of Assyria. Initially, Hezekiah refused to pay and Assyria responded by attacking and controlling some of the border towns of Judah. Hezekiah immediately apologized and agreed to pay the extortion demand which was a substantial amount of silver and gold which he took from the Temple and treasury in Jerusalem. Apparently, payment demands continued to be made and by 705 BC Hezekiah stopped paying this protection money because Assyria had a new king.

Assyria responded by sending a large army and several commanding generals to Jerusalem to conduct some psychological warfare against Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem so that he would restart paying the tribute money. This demand was delivered orally by Rabshakeh (a representative of the new Assyrian king Sennacherib) who spoke the message in the language of Judah so that the people of Jerusalem could hear what was said. The objective was to demoralize the people. He ridiculed Hezekiah and his God and accused him of deceiving his people by claiming that they could survive an attack from the Assyrians. When Hezekiah was told what the people were hearing he immediately went to the “house of the Lord” and sent several people to Isaiah to learn what God’s response was to the threats and ridicule of the Assyrians.

God’s message through Isaiah to Hezekiah was that he did not need to fear because God had heard the blasphemy and He would send a “spirit” with a rumor that would cause the Assyrians to pull back to take care of a problem somewhere else. That happened and after the problem was handled, Sennacherib (the Assyrian king) again focused his attention on Judah and Jerusalem. This time, he wrote a letter that was delivered by the Rabshakeh to Hezekiah.

The Taunt – 19:10-13

¹⁰ “Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah king of Judah: ‘Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. ¹¹ Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? ¹² Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? ¹³ Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivvah?’ ” 2 Kings 19:10–13 (ESV)

The Assyrians had defeated the Northern Kingdom (Israel) some 15 to 20 years earlier and they had demanded and received tribute from many of the other nations in the Middle East. Judah was one of those nations that was paying tribute. When their king, Sargon II, died, Judah

stopped paying tribute as did many other nations in that area. The new king, Sennacherib, saw that such loss of revenue would hurt the economy of his nation and went about reestablishing control. Judah, as well as most of the nations, was forced to start paying tribute again. Sennacherib was not satisfied with that, he demanded that Jerusalem completely surrender to him. Hezekiah did not surrender and the oral demand was followed by a written demand. In the first demand, the Assyrian king ridiculed Hezekiah and accused him of deceiving his people that they could survive an attack from the Assyrians. In the letter Sennacherib ridiculed God and accused Him of deceiving both the king and the people of Judah.

This letter that was given directly to Hezekiah had similar claims and demands as the oral demands that had occurred earlier. The letter was a craftily created message that appealed to human reasoning and it made multiple references to things that anyone who was vaguely aware could know were “facts.” The facts were that the Assyrians had successfully defeated all who had opposed them and the “gods” of those nations had not been able to stop them. While the “facts” may be true, the facts can mislead people when they misinterpret the facts and they do not take into account other truths. Sennacherib made a critical mistake in assuming that the God of Judah was like the gods of the pagan nations that Assyria had defeated. Some might think and argue that the God of Judah was the God of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) that Assyria had defeated. While that is true, when “all the facts” are considered, Israel had not submitted themselves to Yahweh because they were serving “other gods” and worshiping idols. Another thing that Sennacherib failed to know was that Yahweh was using Assyria to bring judgment on Israel. In his prideful arrogance, he was giving all credit to his gods rather than to Yahweh.

There was also an implied threat against Hezekiah’s life found in the question regarding the location of other kings who had opposed Assyria. This was meant to create fear in the mind of Hezekiah so that he might panic and resume extortion payments rather than risk defeat and death in a battle with Assyria.

The Prayer – 19:14-19

¹⁴ Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD and spread it before the LORD. ¹⁵ And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said: “O LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. ¹⁶ Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. ¹⁷ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands ¹⁸ and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. ¹⁹ So now, O LORD our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone.” 2 Kings 19:14–19 (ESV)

When Hezekiah went to the Temple and spread this message out before the Lord. This was symbolic action that he was bringing the source of what was troubling him to the Lord. We have heard the expression to “cast your burden on the Lord” and this was what Hezekiah was doing both in a spiritual reality sense and in the symbolic action. Hezekiah spread this message out before the Lord and, in fact, read it to Him.

Hezekiah did not have illusions of greatness as many people in positions of authority do. He realized that only God could provide deliverance from the situations that life throws at us. He started out recognizing that God is the Creator of heaven and earth. If you want to get an idea of the greatness of God, then that is the place to start. When we consider the vastness of the universe and minute detail of even the simplest of life forms, then we stand in awe of the One Who created it.

The words used by Hezekiah to describe Yahweh contained many profound truths. First of all, we see a realization of the special relationship that Yahweh had with the select

descendants of Abraham that was different from His relationship to all the rest of humanity. This was a result of the action that God took following the Tower of Babel dispersion of people to other areas to be governed by other “gods.” We also see a realization that Yahweh’s abiding place is in the spiritual (among the cherubim) but enthroned at the highest level in the divine realm. That is, He is the Most High God over all divine (spiritual) entities. Going further, Hezekiah acknowledged that not only did Yahweh have a special relationship with Israel, He also was over all those who governed or reigned on earth. He has these unique characteristics because He is the Creator of the universe (described as heaven and earth). One of the characteristics of “profound truths” is that what is stated is true and the opposite is also true. A simple example of this is that God dwells in the spiritual realm (heaven) and yet His presence was in Holy of Holies within the Temple of Jerusalem. Another example of such a truth is that Jesus was fully God and he was fully human. Another example is that God is so great that He is unapproachable and yet He invites us to “come unto” Him which exactly what Hezekiah did.

As his prayer continued Hezekiah acknowledged that God cares. Hezekiah did not hesitate to ask the God of Creation to stop and listen to and see the words that were in the letter. It is difficult to tell if Hezekiah was more upset about the blasphemy (insults) against God or the threats to the people. Hezekiah did not minimize the magnitude of the problem, but acknowledged the power of his enemy. Sometimes we fail to realize that we have enemies and, consequently, fail to seek God’s help in life.

Next, we see that Hezekiah recognized that real salvation comes from God (alone) and he asked for the Lord to save them. Finally, we see the importance of using whatever that happens to us in life as an opportunity to point others to God and away from ourselves. This points to the necessary humility that can open up the power of God in the life of a person.

Alexander MacLaren observed that “Our faith is of little power to bless, unless it impels us to take God into confidence in regard to everything which troubles us. If the letter is not grave enough to be spread before Him, it is too small to annoy us. If we truly live in fellowship with God, we shall find ourselves in His house, with the cause of our trouble in our hands, before we have time to think. Instinct acts more quickly than reason, and, if our faith be vital, it will not need to be argued into speaking to God of all that weighs upon us.”

The Answer – 19:32-34

³² “Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. ³³ By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. ³⁴ For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.” 2 Kings 19:32–34 (ESV)

Many more details of God’s answer to this letter are included in the parallel account recorded in the book of Isaiah.

Since the letter had directly insulted (reproached) the God of all creation, the Sovereign of the universe, the answer that God gave through Isaiah was directed at the arrogantly ignorant writer of the letter, Sennacherib. The reply in the Isaiah account dripped with sarcasm and suggested that the young girls of Jerusalem would be mocking the “great king of Assyria” since he did not know Whom he had insulted and the consequences of such blasphemy. The taunt of these young people included a recitation of all that Sennacherib had bragged about and then they informed him that all he had done was enabled by Yahweh Whom he had just insulted.

God then went on to remind Sennacherib “I know where you lived, I know what you do and I know where you go.” (That is a very loose translation.) God then added that there would be a price to pay for his arrogant blasphemy. That price would be that God’s control of him

would not be gentle (hook in his nose and bridle in his lips) to turn him back to the place from which he came.

Those anti-God elements in the world today who direct insults and blasphemies against God and His Church would do well to learn that they will be held accountable for what they say and the choices they make. Many of the problems our nation is facing today are seen by some to be warnings signs that we need to repent and turn back to God.

The rest of the story of how God fulfilled His promise to Hezekiah is found in the next verse of this account.

³⁵ And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. 2 Kings 19:35 (ESV)

Problems for Sennacherib were heating up on another front where the Assyrians were trying to assert their power near the city of Libnah. However, Sennacherib had left a considerable force outside the walls of Jerusalem with the intent of moving against them at the appropriate time. However, God intervened by sending an angel among the Assyrians and as a result 185,000 were killed. This devastated the forces of Sennacherib and he pulled out of the area and returned to Nineveh. He did not shoot an arrow or any of the other things he had threatened to do.

The lesson for us is that God is capable of dealing with any of our problems, no matter how large or how small. Not only is He capable, He is also willing to do so. The real lesson is that we need to learn is that nothing or no one else can be the saving power in our lives.