

name" (Lk. 1:49). We must thank God for over-seeing our lives and doing things for our good. She acknowledges that God's "mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation" (v. 50). In God's manifestation of His glory, Moses was told that He is merciful to those who "love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations" (Deut. 7:9).

Remembering Hannah and Peninnah, Mary said: "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts . . . exalted them of low degree . . . filled the hungry with good things"

(Lk. 1:51-53). We must remember not to take revenge upon our adversaries, but leave them to God.

Mary ended her prayer by recalling the promises made "to Abraham, and to his seed for ever" (v. 55), and we are encompassed by these words, as Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:29: "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise". May our prayers be similarly humble and joyful approaches to our heavenly Father, using His inspired words as our example.

The prayers of Hezekiah

Jeremy Thomas

IT IS HIGHLY exceptional to find three records of anyone's life in Scripture, yet this is precisely what we have in the case of Hezekiah. This "threefold cord" is preserved in the chronological accounts, 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, and in the historical section of Isaiah, a contemporary of Hezekiah (we shall see the importance of their relationship when prayer was needed). We are used to comparing parallel passages in Scripture to build up a more complete picture than a single account brings out, and so it is with Hezekiah's prayers; each one reveals unique details of his prayer life, so only by acquainting ourselves with them all shall we have anything like a full appreciation of the things Hezekiah prayed about.

Hezekiah was a purposeful man; he reopened the doors of the temple at the very beginning of his reign (2 Chron. 29:3), perhaps even on the day of his accession (v. 17), and cleansing the Lord's house in fact proved to be only a precursor to unprecedented Passover celebrations. Such action would have been inconceivable during the reign of Hezekiah's father, the idolatrous King Ahaz, who had burnt his own son (Hezekiah's brother) as an offering to pagan gods, and reorganised temple furnishings to accommodate Syrian religious rites within Judah's. Eventually he gave up even this compromise, closing down the temple for the rest of his reign (28:24). There was no possibility of Hezekiah implementing reforms as heir apparent.

Yet the appalling situation he inherited was tackled in the opening days of his reign, involving numerous priests and Levites. Such a thing

could never have been accomplished without forethought and preparation, and Hezekiah must long have intended to see the worship of the Lord reinstated at the first opportunity. Though none of his prayers from before his accession are preserved for us, it is difficult to imagine Hezekiah setting about this remarkable enterprise without having sought God's blessing and help; after all, his desire to emulate his ancestor David, the man after God's own heart, is plain (29:25-30).

"But Hezekiah prayed for them"

2 Chronicles contains easily the most information about Hezekiah's reforms, and here is the first of the three occasions on which Scripture tells us that he prayed. After the burnt offering for the nation, "the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves, and worshipped" (29:29).

Such had been the urgency of this Passover, many worshippers had not purified themselves, and the record does not disguise the fact that they "did . . . eat the passover otherwise than it was written" (v. 18). Thus:

- Passover was kept in the wrong month (v. 15)¹
- the priests and Levites were inadequately prepared (v. 15)

1. Strictly, Numbers 9:9-13 allowed for Passover observance in the second month only for those unclean through contact with the dead, or for those travelling.

- the Levites slew the Passover (v. 17)²
- the people had not cleansed themselves (v. 18)
- the Feast of Unleavened Bread was kept for two weeks, not one (vv. 21,23).

How would God regard all this? What was Hezekiah, supposedly leading by example, thinking of? We are not left to guess: “Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, The good LORD pardon every one that prepareth his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary” (vv. 18,19). And, remarkably, “the LORD hearkened to Hezekiah, and healed the people” (v. 20). Here is a rare instance of Divine approval when the ordinances of the Law of Moses were disregarded; a higher principle was at work.

So we are introduced to Hezekiah praying for others. He prepares himself, before interceding for those unable to correct their own defilement, yet still willing to serve God in spirit and in truth. In this, Hezekiah becomes a type of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose own prayer in John 17 indicates that he had similarly prepared his heart to seek God, so that others unable to help themselves might be reconciled to God too: “And *for their sakes* I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified . . .” (v. 19). In this first prayer, much about Hezekiah’s motives for praying is revealed.

“Hezekiah the king, and the prophet Isaiah . . . prayed and cried to heaven”

For the fullest account of Hezekiah’s second prayer we must include 2 Kings. 2 Chronicles seems to be a conflated account of the two separate occasions when Sennacherib’s servants came to Jerusalem; considering it is nevertheless essential for demonstrating the desire Hezekiah had to see Judah (and Israel) restored to fellowship with their God. Perhaps this explains why “the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah” (32:8) when this time of national crisis overtook them.

There is nothing to make us doubt Hezekiah’s own faith at that time, yet he was the one responsible for the physical and spiritual welfare of the Lord’s people. Thus it is in our lives too; unshakeable though our confidence in God might be, this does not guarantee the removal of the trials of life, which He sends for our chastisement and development. So we need not deprecate the practical arrangements Hezekiah took

to secure his kingdom; we shall shortly see again what his motives were in doing so.

Rab-shakeh’s repeated attempts to undermine Hezekiah’s authority on his arrival at Jerusalem could hardly have been more calculated: Egypt would prove an unreliable ally (2 Kgs. 18:21); allegedly, God Himself had sent the Assyrians against Judah (v. 25); Hezekiah personally was untrustworthy, both physically (v. 29) and spiritually (v. 22); and—the trump card—no other god on earth had saved his people from Sennacherib (vv. 33-35). Who could deny this? All Judah knew it to be true. But such was Hezekiah’s influence that “the people held their peace, and answered him not a word: for the king’s commandment was, saying, Answer him not” (v. 36).

On hearing what Rab-shakeh said, the king’s immediate response was to turn to God: “when king Hezekiah heard it . . . he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the LORD” (19:1). Why else, but to pray? But this time Hezekiah also appealed to Isaiah for him too to “lift up [his] prayer for the remnant that are left” (v. 4). So both “Hezekiah the king, and the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz, prayed and cried to heaven” (2 Chron. 32:20). How important this joint prayer was! What encouragement it would have given Hezekiah to know that he was not alone! Surely our closest relationships as brethren and sisters are those formed when we are at ease praying together.

The response was almost immediate, God reassuring the king that the proud Assyrian monarch would be sent packing, and would perish. So imagine Hezekiah’s shock when Sennacherib returns messengers to Jerusalem, now with a letter aimed directly against God. The threat had not yet subsided. But the Assyrians had made one fundamental mistake; they “spake against the God of Jerusalem, *as against the gods of the people of the earth*, which were the work of the hands of man” (v. 19).

Hezekiah knew Him better, and in his [prayer](#) (2 Kgs. 19:15-19), again uttered in the temple, there is one unshakeable theme: that God should be vindicated. Even in Judah’s darkest hour, the king’s prime concern is that Sennacherib’s blasphemy should not go unchallenged;

2. Exodus 12:6 indicates that the people should kill their own.

“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. 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. Of a truth, LORD, the kings of Assyria have destroyed the nations and their lands, 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. 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” (2 Kgs. 19:15-19).

we cannot fail to notice that Hezekiah sees the problem, not in terms of the threat to the nation, but as an affront to God’s majesty:

- God is Lord of all nations of the earth, including Assyria (v. 15)
- He has been reproached by a Gentile blasphemer (v. 16)
- May He act, *so that the world may know He is God* (v. 19).

Graciously, God’s reassuring voice was again heard quickly; the Assyrians were laughed to scorn as God revealed that He knew Sennacherib far better than Sennacherib knew Him. But, for the second time, what strikes us about Hezekiah’s prayer is his motivation. Threatened though he was, his own life unquestionably in doubt, his thoughts were centred on God and the insult paid Him.

“Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the LORD”

When Hezekiah was desperately ill that same year, all three accounts tell us that he “prayed unto the LORD”, but Isaiah 38:9-20 is the only record of his words after his recovery. It reads to us like a psalm, and we may refer to it as a prayer because much of it is addressed directly to God.

Hezekiah wrote these words “when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness” (that is, after the event), allowing him to see his near-death and resurrection experience in context. At first, however, there had been no doubt; he had been told plainly that he would die (v. 1).

How this must have focused his mind and revealed his innermost thoughts!

Where was Hezekiah’s heart now? If, as he pleads his righteousness (v. 3) and complains at the shortening of his days (v. 10), we feel he is merely bemoaning his fate, we are soon disabused; his greatest sadness is that in death he will be separated from God and His people, whom he has sought to serve: “I said, I shall not see the LORD, even the LORD, in the land of the living; I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world” (v. 11). Far from Hezekiah’s death somehow bringing him closer to God, it would rob him of any opportunity of worshipping and learning of Him: “For the grave cannot praise Thee, death can not celebrate Thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Thy truth” (v. 18).

Manasseh may have been born during the fifteen years added to Hezekiah’s life, so the promises concerning David’s seed might actually have been at stake here. There is no mention of this, and therefore no evidence that it was on Hezekiah’s mind, but he certainly struggled with the fact that his days were numbered; and perhaps we do too, since God had wrought wonders during his reign. Yet even now, when for the first time we find Hezekiah praying principally about himself, we may find his motives rather different from our own. Here is no selfish catalogue of personal requests sanctified by, “if it be Thy will”; Hezekiah’s desire to live is that he might continue to praise God and teach others about Him, just as we have seen in his first two prayers. We can hardly miss it. If God would grant Hezekiah this one request, the rest of his days would be lived out in that spirit of praise (v. 20).

“Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him”

But there was one occasion when Hezekiah did not pray. When Babylonian ambassadors came to him, demonstrating that his second prayer had been heard, and that the Gentiles had learned of Judah’s God, “Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up: therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem” (2 Chron. 32:25). It is astonishing that, after all God has done for him, he fails in this. But the record is there, and we should learn from Hezekiah’s pride, as he did (v. 26), as well as from his times of greater spirituality.

Lessons

Hezekiah's example is of God-centred prayer. His recorded prayers consist of:

- intercession on behalf of God's people, that they might be reconciled to Him
- petition that God's Name might be glorified in the earth, not blasphemed
- personal requests, but only that his relationship with God might be maintained.

His one recorded failure is a stark warning against our prayer life drying up.

These prayers make plain for us what our motives should be when we pray. Let us see to it, therefore, that our own prayers contain a healthy degree of the same material, not asking amiss to spend it on our own pleasures (Jas. 4:3), but making sure that God's priorities are ours too, giving glory to Him in all things.

The prayers of the Pharisee and the publican (Lk. 18:9-14)

Tony Benson

THE PARABLE of the Pharisee and the publican is introduced as follows: "And he spake also this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set the rest at nought" (Lk. 18:9, RV mg.). Jesus addressed his parable about prayer, not to those represented by the publican, for they already had the right attitude of approach to God, but to those represented by the Pharisee, including, we presume, not just the Pharisees themselves, but those who still followed Jesus yet retained the lifestyle and attitudes of the Pharisees. Such, according to the literal rendering of the Greek (as given in the RV margin), regarded themselves as superior to everybody else, "the rest", not just some others, as the AV might be taken to indicate.

Jesus said of the Pharisee that he "prayed thus *with himself*" (v. 11). Though this may indicate that he did not pray aloud, there is surely a deeper meaning too. His recital of his good deeds did not reach God, for it was not offered in the sort of spirit that is acceptable to God. In a sense we presume God must have heard the prayer, for our understanding of Him is that He knows all things, but the point is that he does not *hearken* to such prayers. Regarding the Pharisee's claims, the two things he boasted of doing were in fact going beyond the Law, for the Law did not command fasting twice weekly, nor the tithing of everything. For all their vaunted obedience to the Law, the Pharisees were guilty of omitting what Jesus elsewhere describes as "the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith" (Mt. 23:23).

As for the claim not to be guilty of sinful practices "as other men are", including extortion, Jesus said the Pharisees were "full of extortion and excess" and "full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (vv. 25,28). The Pharisees were not righteous men who happened to lack compassion for others, but wicked men who were completely oblivious to what they were really like.

The brief description of the publican portrays in masterly fashion his humility before the all-righteous Creator. He:

- stood afar off
- bowed his head
- smote his breast
- acknowledged himself to be a sinner.

In fact, taking the RV marginal rendering, he spoke of himself as "*the sinner*". All that matters when we stand before God in prayer is that we acknowledge *ourselves* to be sinners; the fact that other individuals are too is not relevant and should have no place in our thinking, though prayers for God to remove evil from the earth and bring judgement upon those who despise His Word do have their place.

The prayer, "God be merciful to me the sinner", receives its fulfilment in the work of Jesus Christ. The word translated "be merciful" occurs elsewhere only in Hebrews 2:17, where it refers to his work of bringing forgiveness of sins for the people: "Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, *to make reconciliation for the sins of the people*". The scene depicted in