

“Our Best Moments”
2 Kings 19:14-19
October 28, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

To be a follower of Christ is not only to be part of a worshiping, learning and loving community, but also to be part of a serving community. As we have seen with the other three features of our life as Christians, this one is not optional. These four qualities should be regarded as essential, like an engine, transmission and wheels are an essential part of a car. You can no more have genuine Christianity without serving than you can have a car without an engine.

I’ve chosen this story about Hezekiah because it addresses one of the most common excuses I hear people offer for why they can’t serve. “I’ve got other big things going on in my life right now. As soon as I can get a handle on these things, I will serve.” The complicating issue varies. Here are some I’ve heard. “Things are really busy for me at work right now. As soon as I can get some space carved out from my work schedule, I can serve.” Or, “My children are young, and I really need to spend all my free time with them.” Or, “Our children have a very heavy schedule, and we just don’t have any time to serve right now. As soon as they graduate from high school, we should have some time to serve.” Or, “Our children have moved away, and we really need to spend our time visiting them every weekend.” Perhaps you’ve lived long enough to realize that there’s always something going on in your life that makes serving the Lord a challenge. If we wait for the perfect opportunity for serving, it may never come. Our need, instead, is to learn how to trust God and serve him no matter what the current crisis may be. That’s where Hezekiah can teach us. He too had a few complicating things going on in his life.

The events described here form the major crisis of his 29-year reign as king of Judah. The world’s superpower, Assyria, was moving through the nations of the Ancient Near East like a hot knife through butter. No one seemed able to withstand their mighty army. Just 21 years before this time, in 722 B.C., Assyria had captured the northern kingdom of Israel after laying siege to its capital city, Samaria. Since that time, Assyria had been somewhat weakened as a result of a leadership transition, leading some of the nations to stop paying tribute to them. That was an act Assyria viewed as rebellion. Judah was one of these kingdoms. Now, under a new king, Sennacherib, Assyria had regained its old power and was marching to bring these rebellious kingdoms back in line. They had already defeated all of Judah except its capital city, Jerusalem. Hezekiah offered to resume his tribute payments, but Sennacherib was not to be so easily pacified. He would stop at nothing less than the complete conquest of Jerusalem and the removal of its people back to Assyria. So he sends a delegation to Jerusalem to inform them of the inevitability of this conquest, telling them that they might as

well surrender now. Hezekiah's response to this crisis becomes his finest moment. As we are going to see, he responds by trusting in the Lord and finding refuge in the word of God and prayer. Like Hezekiah, our finest moments are often the crisis moments when, instead of retreating in unbelief and self-dependence, we serve God in the crisis. The presence of a crisis in your life doesn't give you a pass on serving God—it provides the context for faithful service. Note the following three elements that were true of Hezekiah in his service of God, and the three that are also to be part of our service to God.

I. **Accept Weakness as Normal**

Weakness should not be seen as a reason not to serve, but as the normal context for fruitful service. Weakness will change the way we serve, but it will not give us a pass on serving. If you break your leg, you won't be able to serve as an usher. The broken leg, though, will become the context for some new service of God. Serving God is not something we do only when things are running smoothly in our lives. We often are called upon to serve in the midst of chaotic and difficult trials. That was Hezekiah's experience here. Sennacherib sent a delegation to Jerusalem, and his spokesman was a man who occupied an office called the Rabshakeh, a type of regional governor. He seems to be well-acquainted with Judah, even knowing the Hebrew language. He gives a long speech in Hebrew, rather than the diplomatic language of his day, Aramaic, so everyone can hear and understand. His clear objective is intimidation and the undermining of Hezekiah's authority.

Point 1 of the Rabshakeh's speech concerned the foolishness of trusting in Egypt. Egypt was the other superpower of its day, and many of the smaller nations sought alliances with Egypt in order to be protected from Assyria. The Rabshakeh calls Egypt **“that broken reed of a staff”** (18:21), saying that all who depend on her will be disappointed.

It is really his next point that I want us to consider, since it is relevant to our point. The Rabshakeh says that you can't trust in the Lord either, and he gives two reasons for that. First, he's not a very great god at all. The view prevalent in this day was that a nation's military might was a direct reflection on the greatness of its god. Strong army—strong god; weak army—weak god. Clearly, under that assumption, Judah's God was weak because its army was weak. To drive this point home, the Rabshakeh proposes a wager. **“I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them”** (18:23). He is highlighting Judah's pitifully weak army as a way of saying that their God was also pitifully weak and not to be trusted. The second reason he gives for not trusting in their God is that this same God has told Assyria to attack Jerusalem. **“The Lord said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it”** (18:25).

The Rabshakeh's view of God is not dissimilar from the theological view held by many Christians today. That view expects that God will work to make me strong. If we submit ourselves to God, he will make us successful at work, in parenting, in marriage, and give us good mental and physical health. A strong God results in strong Christian soldiers. That is not the view prevalent in the Bible. Paul states this view clearly when he says that he will boast in his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:5). **“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong”** (12:10). The application to us is clear. Weakness is not a reason to opt out of service; it is the context for fruitful service. God often puts us in places of weakness, just like he did with Hezekiah, in order to bring deliverance in a way that would bring glory to his name. So the difficulties at work, at home, in your health or in your relationships, do not provide you with a pass on service, but are a prelude to effective service. God works through weakness in us to accomplish great things in order that he might receive the glory. Your best moments, like Hezekiah's, don't occur when everything is going well, but when you look to God when everything seems to be falling apart and move forward in serving his purposes.

II. Fight with Words

God often uses his enemies to speak truth that they don't know they're speaking. Probably the most famous case of that were the words spoken by the high priest, Caiaphas, in plotting the death of Jesus. **“It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish”** (John 11:50). The Rabshakeh's words in 18:20 provide us with another example of God's enemies speaking better than they know. **“Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war?”** He was saying that to ridicule Judah, the land of the prophets who spoke for God.

The truth is that we do believe that words are strategy and power for war, as long as they are God's words. Remember what won the day in this case. After the Rabshakeh concluded his speech, Hezekiah sent for Isaiah the son of Amoz (19:2), the same Isaiah whose prophecies are contained in the book we call by his name in the Old Testament. Hezekiah sought a word from the Lord, and Isaiah was given such a word. Isaiah said to them, **“Say to your master, ‘Thus says the Lord: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land’”** (19:6-7). It happened just as Isaiah said. Sennacherib's efforts were momentarily diverted from Jerusalem when he heard that Tirhakah king of Cush was marching against him. He said to Hezekiah that he would be back as soon as he took care of this African king who would later become the Pharaoh of Egypt. We know from sources outside the Bible that Assyria did indeed defeat Tirhakah. But Sennacherib was unable to

follow through on his threat to return and defeat Judah. In one night, **“the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians”** (19:35), forcing them to withdraw back to Assyria, never to return to Judah. Not a single sword was swung from an Israelite arm. God brought it about. Twenty years later, Sennacherib would die by the hand of two of his sons. It seems that he favored his younger son, Esarhaddon, and appointed him as his successor. In an attempted coup, his two older sons, the ones bypassed to be the future king, killed him. The one who defied the God of Judah and attempted to exert his control over the entire known world, could not even control his own family. Isaiah’s predictions all came true.

How does this relate to service? We serve in the same way Hezekiah did, counting on the truth of the word of God. Words are our strategy and power for war, because they are the words of God. We don’t serve by picking up a sword, but by speaking words. Christianity is based on words about something good that has happened in the past. The gospel means “good news.” Marin Lloyd-Jones has made a helpful distinction between good news and good advice. Advice is counsel about something to do in the future, while good news is about something that has happened in the past and about which you can do nothing. Lloyd-Jones gives an illustration of a king leading his army to repel an invading force. The king defeats the invader and sends a messenger back with the good news of the victory, by which the kingdom has been made safe. Had he lost the battle, he would have sent back a messenger with advice, not news. The advice would have been, “Head for the hills, the invasion is coming.” We serve not by giving advice, but by proclaiming news that Jesus has defeated all enemies, including the three great enemies of sin, death and Satan.

Illustration: I saw an interview a couple of weeks ago with Joel Osteen. I don’t normally mention negative examples, but since he is a public figure whose popularity is so widespread, I want to make an exception to my general practice. He was asked by the interviewer about his latest book. After noting that the book was basically filled with good advice about successful living, the interviewer asked a very perceptive question. “I note that there is very little mention of God and Jesus in this book. How is what you are writing any different from Oprah or Dr. Phil?” His answer was disappointing. “They too have been given truth,” he said. Here’s what a Christian should say in answer to that question. “Christianity is not just good advice; it’s good news. It is news of God’s defeat of the enemies of sin and death, with the result that peace and joy belong to any who trust in Jesus.”

If we are to serve God, we must believe this word and proclaim it. God has spoken to us even more clearly than he spoke to Hezekiah through Isaiah. He’s spoken to us through his Son, announcing this good news. St. Francis of Assisi is attributed the saying, “Preach the gospel always; and if necessary use words.” That’s not right, you see. We are to engage the fight by use of words because of the nature of the gospel.

III. Look to God in Prayer

After Sennacherib heads off to fight Tirhakah, he sends a letter to Hezekiah telling him that he's going to come back and take care of some unfinished business with him. In the process, he insults God, saying that he is weak and unable to defend his followers. Hezekiah simply took the letter to the temple, spread it before the Lord, and prayed. There are several things I notice about his prayer. First, it's short. It only takes about 45 seconds to read this prayer. The effectiveness of prayer is not related to its length.

Second, the reason Hezekiah states for God to act is for God's own glory. He prays that God would save him, **“that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone”** (19:19). A desire for God's glory, not our own, must fuel our prayers as we serve God.

Third, he presents God with the need, not the solution. He leaves it with God to determine the best way to bring help. He doesn't say, “God, will you send your angel into the Assyrian camp and kill 185,000 of them?” Our prayers must not dictate to God what he should do.

When the early church prayed, they did so standing. That posture indicates two things: joy and boldness. When you are filled with joy, you just want to stand. But their standing posture also indicated great boldness. When the king's subjects come into his presence, they are expected to kneel before him. Kneeling in prayer is also appropriate, but our standing indicates the access we have with God. We can come to him boldly presenting our needs, and leave it with him to act in appropriate ways.

CONCLUSION:

Anyone who has ever undertaken to serve God has felt what the Jews felt after the Rabshakeh's speech. With the mighty Assyrian army standing behind him, he mocked God and all who would put their trust in him. Afterwards, they tore their clothes in grief. Hezekiah had forbidden them to speak to the Rabshakeh, and it was probably a good thing. Anything more than silence would have revealed their fearful hearts. So they just turned and walked away without saying anything. That was appropriate, because the one whose word really counted wasn't the Rabshakeh, and it wasn't Hezekiah's officials. It was God's word that was important, because whatever he said would happen. It is the same today. It is God's word that matters, and God speaks to us right now through the Lord's Supper. He speaks of good news, acceptance and joy. Let us then go forth and serve him, even in our weakness, as we believe and declare his word and as we depend upon him in our prayers.