

2 Kings 19:14–19 (NIV)

¹⁴Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. ¹⁵And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: “LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. ¹⁶Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.

¹⁷“It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands.

¹⁸They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. ¹⁹Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, LORD, are God.”

2 Kings 19:32–37 (NIV)

³²“Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria:

“He will not enter this city
or shoot an arrow here.

He will not come before it with shield
or build a siege ramp against it.

³³By the way that he came he will return;
he will not enter this city, declares the LORD.

³⁴I will defend this city and save it,
for my sake and for the sake of David my servant.’ ”

³⁵That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! ³⁶So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.

³⁷One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisrok, his sons Adrammelek and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.

Psalms 103:1-5 (NRSV)

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

²Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—

³who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,

⁴who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

⁵who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

*Are we courageous enough to trust God in **all** things?*

This week, we turn to King Hezekiah, one of the few Israelite kings to get a good report card from God. He took the throne of Judah at the young age of twenty-five and reigned for twenty-nine years. He brought the people back to the worship of YHWH, the Almighty. He smashed the pagan altars and cut down all those Asherah poles. Most significantly, the writers of Kings tell us, “Hezekiah trusted in YHWH, the God of Israel . . . he held fast to YHWH and did not stop following him . . . and YHWH was with him in whatever he undertook” (from 2 Kings 18:5-7).

Several prayers of Hezekiah are shared with us in the book of Kings. Today’s first Scripture passage is one of them. The prayer requires a bit of set-up.

The year is 701 BC. The northern kingdom of Israel fell twenty years before. Now, Sennacherib, the latest king of the Assyrians, is on the doorstep of Jerusalem. Surely

Judah must follow the other tribes into exile. Surely Hezekiah will be the last king of Judah. Who could hope to stand up to the mighty Assyrians? As they try to entice the Israelites to come out of Jerusalem's walls, the prophet Isaiah tells God's people to stand strong – God will cut down the enemy. When Sennacherib redoubles his threat, King Hezekiah retreats to the Lord's temple and prays. In his hand is the latest threatening message from the Assyrian king.

Hezekiah prays as any of us would under similar circumstances. He prays for rescue; he implores God to save his people from the Assyrians. Indeed, he says, God risks being ridiculed by Sennacherib. If God is who he claims to be, then now is the time to show up – the hourglass has almost emptied.

In response to the desperate king's prayer, Isaiah (yes, *the* Isaiah) brings God's promise that it will be Sennacherib and the Assyrians who flee in terror and disgrace, not the kingdom of Judah: "I [God] will defend this city [Jerusalem] and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant."

And since God keeps the promises God makes, the Assyrians, all 185,000, died in their sleep – at least that is how the writers of Kings put it. After all, what other explanation could there be for Sennacherib's failure to seize Jerusalem? By the world's measure, there was absolutely no way that the Assyrians could lose – but they did. And we know they failed because Jerusalem was still there for the Babylonians to seize in 586 B.C., more than a century later.

So, perhaps the writers over-dramatized things a bit or a lot, but the point is that the Assyrian defeat could not be explained by anything other than God's intervention. Many in our world want to dismiss the possibility of God actually stepping into things and participating, but the Bible never does. In the biblical view, God is active in the world in ways large and small every day.

So what does this story seek to tell us about our own journey with God? Richard Nelson considers how it would have been read by the Jews who were sent into exile by Babylonia:

This narrative is a call to trust God even in the face of inevitable disaster, even when all evidence and logic point the other way. The assurance that God was with Hezekiah (18:7) turned out to be true after all. Rabshakeh's¹ tempting logic turned out to be specious. Sennacherib's vaunted power evaporated into corpses. Assyria's word could not stand before God's word.

Certainly the original exilic audience, victims of Babylon's power, needed such a challenge to trust God. In the light of Jerusalem's fall, God's power must have been called deeply into question. Judah itself had joined that roll call of bludgeoned nations (vv. 12–13; 18:34) whose gods had proved powerless to save them. Was Rabshakeh right after all?

This narrative insists not. It is itself a "sign" for the "surviving remnant of the house of Judah" in exile. No promises are made to these exiles in the Book of Kings, except the most basic promise of all—God remains God, whose power cannot be undermined by any human agency, any political system, any military force. God remains God, whose word stands, who brings to reality that which was planned ages ago. God remains God, who will act so that all the kingdoms of the earth might know that the Lord is God alone.

The major interpretive problem with this narrative is that most of its modern readers will simply be unable to believe that it actually happened. Modern commentators show their unease by dragging in reports from Herodotus about bowstring-eating mice and rationalizing about plague. According to his own reports, Sennacherib left Judah without capturing Jerusalem, but few historians would be willing to credit the angel of the Lord for a death toll of one hundred eighty-five thousand.

For those to whom Scripture can speak authentically and authoritatively as "story" and not just as history, this dramatic narrative can still deliver its impact, its call to trust in God when the chips are down. . . .

All those who, like Sennacherib or the beast in Revelation 13, claim the trust and

¹ An Assyrian commander who pointed out all the reasons why Judah would certainly fall to Sennacherib.

² Nelson, R. D. (1987). *First and Second Kings. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and*

loyalty that belong to God alone, even if they control “all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them” (Matt. 4:8), must be answered as Jesus answered the tempter, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Deut. 6:13; Matt. 4:10). They may and must be so answered because in the end God will defeat them—Pharaoh, Sennacherib, Domitian. For Christians, the event which makes it possible to believe such incredible news is the resurrection of Jesus, the defeat of death itself. All the Old Testament victories of God, both historical and literary, serve as pointers to and signs of that cosmic Easter triumph.²

Nelson puts it well. We proclaim a God who acts, who is involved, and whose purposes must avail.

The God-Who-Rescues!

Christianity is not a philosophical religion; rather, we proclaim belief in a God who acts -- who loves and saves and forgives and redeems and heals. For Christians, God’s great act of salvation is Jesus Christ on the cross. For the ancient Hebrews, the writers of the Psalms, God’s great act of salvation was their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Exodus. Deliverance from the Assyrians in 701 BC was yet another story of God’s enduring salvation. Psalm 103, also one of today’s Scripture passages, is one of many praise Psalms, nearly all of which incorporate communal praise and thanksgiving for God’s deliverance of his people. The psalmist praises God for the many benefits bestowed on him, on God’s covenant people, and on all creation.³

In the opening verses of this Psalm, the psalmist begins by urging himself to praise God with all his soul and his inmost being. He has in mind 100% commitment to the act of giving thanks! I don’t know about you, but I can have trouble getting 100% focused on anything. The Psalmist prays here for the ability to shed all the moment-to-moment concerns of life and center his attention completely on God. Christians often express frustration with their inability to hear God’s voice. Perhaps a simple prayer like this one would help us to get quiet, focus on God, and develop a true one-on-one conversation. Frederica Mathewes-Green recently wrote that the Orthodox say, “Lord, have mercy” forty times, not because it might take God that long to hear the prayer, but because it takes us that long to mean it!⁴

In verses 3-5 of this Psalm, the Psalmist praises God for his goodness to individuals. Here, we see the *God-Who-Rescues* -- who forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, and satisfies. The Psalmist praises a God whose love is not just a feeling or a belief – this is a God whose love is expressed in action.

When you read these verses about God’s actions, bear in mind that this is not a theological exposition. Rather, the Psalmist is expressing his complete and unbounded praise for all God does. For example, in v. 3, the Psalmist isn’t making some sort of claim that God will heal all physical disease among God’s people. It may be that the Psalmist is using “disease” as a metaphor for sin and brokenness, echoing the first line of the verse. It may also be that the psalmist is simply expressing his exuberant confidence in the LORD’s love and sheltering care.

In any event, Psalm 103 surely expresses what must have been in King Hezekiah’s heart after the triumph over Sennacherib and his mighty army. May we trust God as fully as Hezekiah and be equally exuberant in our praise of God for own rescue. We can never relegate God to the dustbins of ancient history or consign him to the debates of the philosophers. The God we praise and worship loves and rescues and redeems today, just as he has always done.

² Nelson, R. D. (1987). *First and Second Kings. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (pp. 241–243). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

³ Much of my presentation of this Psalm comes from Willem VanGeren’s commentary in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 1991.

⁴ This is from a column by Ms. Mathewes-Green in the Feb 1, 2003, Religion section of the Dallas Morning News. Sadly, the Religion section of the News is no more.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How much stock do you put in the story of Hezekiah? What do you think a video machine would have captured? How important is your answer to your faith and confidence in the Bible? Can you imagine that God would do such a thing – kill 185,000 Assyrians? How important was it that Judah survives the Assyrian onslaught?
2. Hezekiah trusted God; it's that simple. How much do we really trust God? That's really what faith is all about – not agreeing with a bunch of doctrines but truly trusting in God, in Jesus. Doctrines inform our understanding of just who God really is – but it comes down to trust? Will we trust God with what we fear, with what we don't understand? What can we do to deepen our trust in God?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, 2 Kings 18: 1-16 Hezekiah takes the throne of Judah	Tuesday, 2 Kings 18:17-37 Sennacherib threatens Jerusalem
Wednesday, 2 Kings 19:1-19 Isaiah's reassures Hezekiah; the king prays for deliverance	Thursday, 2 Kings 19:20-37 Isaiah prophesies the defeat of the Assyrians and that is exactly what happens
Friday, 2 Kings 20 Hezekiah falls ill and prays to be healed; the shadow of Babylon falls across the story	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

**Monday Evening Class – now studying the Gospel of Mark
We'll begin our study of Romans**

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying 1 Peter

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current Series: *Old Testament Turning Points*

The Debut of Scott Engle's new book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish* will be on

Tuesday evening, August 27

Sanctuary, 7pm

Please join us for this exciting event!

Scott Engle and Robert Hasley will be leading a trip to Israel in late October 2014. This will be a land-only trip that will include all the major sites in Israel.

**The next information night will be Tuesday, Sept 10, 7pm,
Piro Hall**

For more information go to www.scottengle.org or email Scott at sengle@standrewumc.org