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November 6th: 2 Kings 20 & Acts 11:1-18

November 5, 2020



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Hezekiah's illness. The Apostle Peter's testimony concerning the Gentiles to the Jerusalem Christians.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings 20. In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, came to him and said to him, Thus says the Lord, Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.

Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, saying, Now, O Lord, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight. And Hezekiah wept bitterly. And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him, Turn back and say to Hezekiah, the leader of my people, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears.

Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord, and I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the

king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake.

And Isaiah said, Bring a cake of figs, and let them take and lay it on the bed, that he may recover. And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord on the third day? And Isaiah said, This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do the thing that he has promised. Shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or go back ten steps? And Hezekiah answered, It is an easy thing for the shadow to lengthen ten steps, rather let the shadow go back ten steps.

And Isaiah the prophet called to the Lord, and he brought the shadow back ten steps, by which it had gone down on the steps of Ahaz. At that time Merodach Baladan, the son of Baladan king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick. And Hezekiah welcomed them, and he showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his armory, all that was found in his storehouses.

There was nothing in his house, or in all his realm, that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet came to king Hezekiah, and said to him, What did these men say, and from where did they come to you? And Hezekiah said, They have come from a far country, from Babylon. He said, What have they seen in your house? And Hezekiah answered, They have seen all that is in my house.

There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them. Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord. Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon.

Nothing shall be left, says the Lord, and some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good. For he thought, Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days? The rest of the deeds of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made the pool and the conduit, and brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? And Hezekiah slept with his fathers, and Manasseh his son reigned in his place.

Second Kings chapter 20 concludes the account of the life of Hezekiah within the books of the kings. As a sort of addendum to the story of Hezekiah's life, it tells of two particular events that are connected together. The two events occur around the time of the Syrian threat, as we see in verse 6. The city is under threat, but the king is also seriously ill.

He is at the point of death. And if the severity of his illness was not enough, the Lord sends Isaiah to confirm the fact of his forthcoming death to him. He will not recover.

With the nation being on the brink of being overrun by the Assyrians, the king is on his deathbed. He is about to die. At one of the most critical times in the nation's history, he would have to leave the reigns of the nation in the hands of his son Manasseh, and help him to establish a new regime under these circumstances.

The symbolic relationship between the physical body of the king and the body politic has been much explored by writers and poets, and theorised by theologians and political thinkers, perhaps most notably in the work of Shakespeare and also in the work of someone like Ernst Kantorowicz, who wrote on the subject in *The King's Two Bodies*. The illness of King Hezekiah is a symbol of the ailing of the kingdom. The kingdom is near to death.

Can the kingdom be delivered from its fate, from the exile that seemingly awaits it? Hezekiah's response to the Lord's announcement is to turn his face to the wall and to seek the Lord's reprieve. He calls upon the Lord to consider the way that he has walked before him faithfully. Like David, he has walked before the Lord with a whole heart.

He has sought to do what is good in the sight of the Lord. After the idolatry of the reign of Ahaz, he has sought to re-establish true worship in the land and to root out all the idolatry and false worship that had become entrenched there. Even before Isaiah has left the courts of the palace, the word of the Lord comes to him, sending him back to Hezekiah with the message that his prayer has been heard.

God addresses Hezekiah as the God of David his father. He will be healed and restored, and on the third day he will be raised up to go into the house of the Lord. And this won't merely be a reprieve of a short duration.

The Lord will add 15 years to his life. And as the king symbolises the nation, this deliverance is not just for Hezekiah as a private person. It's also for Hezekiah as the representative of the nation and the city.

The city will also be delivered, delivered from the hand of the king of Assyria. God's commitment to the city is for the sake of David, his servant, and also for his own namesake. He has placed his name there in the temple, and he is jealous for its holiness.

Isaiah instructs them to bring a cake of figs, and to take it and lay it on the boil, and that would be the means by which he would recover. It is not entirely clear what is meant by a boil here. However, the application of figs was a known form of treatment.

We need not presume that it is some strange prophetic sign. Hezekiah requests a further sign, and Isaiah doesn't rebuke him here. He offers Hezekiah the choice of two alternatives.

On the one hand, the shadow could go forward ten steps, or it could go back ten steps. The location of this sign, as we see in Isaiah chapter 38 verse 8, is the steps of Ahaz. It is not entirely clear what these were.

Some suggest that this is a reference to a sundial. Others suggest that these are literal steps, maybe steps that go up to the altar, or perhaps they are steps that go up to some part of the palace. Hezekiah chooses the harder of the two signs, and the Lord brings it to pass, demonstrating that he will indeed be saved from his illness.

In the book of Isaiah chapter 38 verses 10 to 20, we have a writing from Hezekiah around this time concerning his illness. I say for he has spoken to me and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul.

Oh Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh, restore me to health and make me live. Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness, but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction.

For you have cast all my sins behind your back. For she old does not thank you. Death does not praise you.

Those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day. The Father makes known to the children your faithfulness.

The Lord will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives at the house of the Lord. The second event from the reign of Hezekiah recorded in this chapter is a visit from Merodach Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon. He sends envoys to Hezekiah, and Hezekiah shows them around all of his treasures.

He shows them the riches of his house, the riches of his armoury, and all of the wealth of his storehouses. This probably occurs in the second period of Merodach Baladan's reign, around 703-702 BC. Hezekiah presumably seeks to form an alliance with Merodach Baladan in order that they can both fight against Assyria together.

With such a northern ally, he would be much more confident in fighting against the Assyrians. He also looks, of course, to the south, to Egypt, as another potential ally. Neither of these two potential allies would prove to be of true aid to Judah.

The Lord sends the prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah to give him a dismaying message about the Babylonians. He has shown them all around his house, and all that he has shown them will one day be carried out into Babylon. Nothing will be left.

Indeed, some of Hezekiah's own sons, whether his immediate sons or some of his later descendants, would also be carried into Babylon. Hezekiah's response is rather selfish. He acknowledges that the word of the Lord is good and just, but he takes more concern for the peace and security of his own days, with seemingly little concern for the well-

being of the nation after his death.

The chapter concludes with a brief summary of his reign. The building of the pool and the conduit that brought water into the city from the river Gihon is mentioned here. This was a remarkable work of engineering undertaken in the days of Hezekiah, a 530-metre-long tunnel excavated by two different teams on the two different ends who met in the middle, according to the Siloam inscription.

It better protected the water supply of the city that was facing the threat of siege. The waters of the upper Gihon, which were already guarded by a tower, were diverted towards the city so that the critical water supply of the city would be less vulnerable to besieging armies. A question to consider, why would the Lord immediately reverse the word that he gave to Hezekiah concerning his imminent death in response to his prayer? Acts 11, verses 1-18 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticised him, saying, You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them. But Peter began and explained it to them in order. I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me.

Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air, and I heard a voice saying to me, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But I said, By no means, Lord, for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth. But the voice answered a second time from heaven, What God has made clean, do not call common.

This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea, and the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.

And he told us how he had seen an angel stand in his house and say, Send to Joppa, and bring Simon who is called Peter. He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.

And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way? When they heard these things they fell silent, and they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life. In Acts chapter 10 the gospel had been received by the centurion Cornelius and all of his household.

Both Cornelius and Peter had received visions, and when brought together Peter declared the message of the gospel to his whole household. They received it gladly, and the Spirit descended upon them in a manner that resembled the events of the day of Pentecost itself. Repetition is an important feature of Acts chapter 10, and this feature of the narrative continues into Acts chapter 11.

It is not just the event, but the communication and recognition of the events by others that is important. Here the events will be recounted to other members of the church in Jerusalem. Their acknowledgement that the Gentiles are true members of the people of God, as Gentiles, is an important part of the story.

This is part of the means by which the two peoples, Jews and Gentiles, will be brought together as one within the church. Word of what has taken place reaches the Judean Christians and the apostles, seemingly not by Peter himself. When Peter goes up to Jerusalem, he has to put out some fires that the news has started.

He has been criticised by the circumcision party. The ground for their criticism does not seem to be that Peter did not circumcise Cornelius and his household, but that he received a Gentile's hospitality and ate with him in the first place. While Diaspora Jews may have held laxer customs concerning fellowship and hospitality with Gentiles, Judean Jews were far more conservative on the matter and regarded the separateness of Jews from Gentiles as maintaining a very important standard of purity.

While they were very concerned that Peter remained separate from the Gentiles, in chapter 10 verse 20 the Holy Spirit had instructed him to rise and go with them without hesitation. The Lord does not draw those sorts of distinctions. It seems fitting, given the background of the Gospel of Luke, that there should be such a focus upon eating and table fellowship here.

Much of Jesus' ministry and teaching in the Gospel of Luke occurs in the context of the meal table. Who you eat with, who is invited, where people sit, these are all issues that are prominent within Luke's Gospel, and their importance continues into the story of the early church, which is formed around meal tables. Christ demonstrates his resurrection to his disciples by eating and drinking with them, and the early believers in Jerusalem break bread from house to house.

In chapter 6 the appointment of the seven as important leaders within the life of the early church centred upon providing for tables. Now the meal table as a place where the people of God are being gathered and formed is going to be redefined in another way, as people who were not expected to be invited are invited to take their seats as no less honoured guests, even though many of those already sitting at the table might feel discomforted by their presence. In response to the concerns of the circumcision party, Peter proceeds to tell the story from the very beginning.

While he was in the city of Joppa praying, he saw a vision within which a great sheet descended from heaven by its four corners. The sheet contained a great many different animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, birds of the air, unclean creatures that Peter as an observant Jew would have been forbidden to eat. Perhaps we are supposed to see the sheet as a sort of tablecloth, a tablecloth that's spread with all these things that Peter can eat.

In chapter 10 he is described as being hungry at the time and he is being invited to a meal. When he refuses, the word of the Lord comes to him, What God has made clean do not call common. This happens on three occasions and then the sheet is finally removed.

It is at that very moment that the three men sent from Cornelius in Caesarea arrive at Joppa, at the house of Simon the Tanner where Peter is staying. The Spirit then instructs him to go with them, not making a distinction. Peter is also accompanied by six other men who will serve as Jewish witnesses of what's taking place among the Gentiles.

As he delivers the message of the Gospel to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit descends upon them in just the way that he had descended upon the disciples at Pentecost. All of the significance of the event at Pentecost, all of the significance of the Spirit's descent upon the church was now being applied to the Gentiles, these people that would seem to be outsiders not included in the covenants of promise, not counted among God's people nor considered as the children of Abraham. All of this, for Peter, confirmed the word that Christ had given after his resurrection, that as John had baptised with water, they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit.

The reception of the Holy Spirit was a sign of God's blessing, the fulfilment of his promise, and marked out the recipients as true members of the people of God. In light of all of this, not to have fellowship with the Gentiles would be presuming a holiness that exceeded God's own. God had given them his own Holy Spirit.

Was Peter to refuse to eat with them? The heroes of Peter's account were silenced by it. It was now apparent to them, as it had been to Peter, that the Lord had made the Gentiles recipients of his blessings, just as they had been. It is worth spending a few moments considering the role of Peter in all of this.

Peter elsewhere is described as the apostle to the circumcision. Why is it that Peter was sent to Cornelius? Surely that would be the task for Paul, who as we see in Galatians chapter 2 was commissioned as an apostle to bring the gospel to the uncircumcised. The answer, I believe, is that Peter was chosen for this task precisely as the apostle to the circumcised.

He is the one that could represent the church of the circumcision, and in that capacity recognise his brothers and sisters, believers of the Gentiles. Peter's bearing witness to God's reception of the Gentiles in this chapter is a very important part of the story then.

It is for this task particularly that he has been set apart.

While some other party, like Philip, could have brought the gospel to Cornelius, it is Peter who is in the best position to recognise the Gentiles. Just as Peter and John confirmed the work of God among the Samaritans back in chapter 8, so Peter confirms the work of God among the Gentiles in this chapter. The fact that he is called to give some account of himself suggests that although Peter is the leading apostle, a fact that we see in a great many different ways within the gospels, he is not a figure in which all leadership authority is concentrated.

He is expected to give an account of himself to other leaders of the church. A question to consider. In Numbers chapter 11 we read of an event from which some illuminating analogies could be drawn with the story of the Gentiles' reception of the gospel.

What is the event and how can those analogies help us to understand what is taking place here?