

TWO PRAYERS AND THEIR ANSWERS.

– *NOV. 13. – 2 KINGS 19:20-22,28-37. –*

"God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble."
– Psa. 46:1.

HEZEKIAH, king of Judah, is one of the most notable characters of Old Testament history, and our present lesson relates to him. The preceding lesson showed us the beginning of his reign, accompanied by a great religious reformation and revival amongst the people. The present lesson shows him under severe trials, and how they developed and manifested his faith in the Lord, and the Lord's responses to his trust and prayers.

The Assyrian king, Sennacherib, had invaded the northern or ten-tribe kingdom, and carried its people captive, and had placed peoples of other nationalities in the land in their stead; and eight years after that conquest he determined upon an invasion of the kingdom of Judah. Already, one after the other, the Assyrians had conquered various nations, and were now evidently bent upon conquering Egypt, but first were disposing of the intermediate kingdoms, and Judah was the last of these which lay on the route between Assyria and Egypt. Bent upon conquest and mastery, rather than upon destruction, Sennacherib, while laying siege to some of the intermediate countries, first sent letters and subsequently his representative and general, Rabshakeh, with an armed host to Jerusalem, demanding the full surrender of the kingdom, that the people might be deported to other lands, as the people of the ten tribes had been.

These letters and the message were full of boastings of the power of Assyria, and the conquests already made, and promised the people of Judah homes and circumstances similar to those then enjoyed, the object, apparently, being to establish the Assyrian empire on a firm basis by obliterating as far as possible the feelings of patriotism in the

various peoples conquered. Not only did these messages boast of the power of Sennacherib, as exemplified in other wars, but taking cognizance of the fact that Israel trusted in Jehovah, they first declared that the Assyrians were sent there by Jehovah for the very purpose of overthrowing the kingdom, and taking the people captive, and secondly declared that their trust in Jehovah was vain, because the various nations which had been conquered trusted severally to their own gods, and yet all alike failed; and that Israel's God, Jehovah, could do nothing more for them than could the other gods for the other peoples, against the mighty power of Assyria, which was rapidly becoming a world-empire.

Hezekiah's first move was to placate his adversary, by becoming his vassal, and paying annual tribute, and as a preliminary step in this direction he sent Sennacherib a present of great value, gold and silver, ivory couches, etc., – even stripping the gold and silver ornaments from the Temple for this purpose. Herein we believe he greatly erred, and it would appear to have been as a consequence of this failure to at once recognize Jehovah as the almighty ruler and preserver of his people and typical kingdom, that the Assyrians were permitted to assail them, and to destroy many of the outlying smaller cities, and to besiege Jerusalem, the capital city, with fortresses, etc. Nevertheless, when it came to the extremity, Hezekiah's faith in the Lord increased in proportion as the power of the Assyrians was manifested, and the condition of his own city and people became the more critical. Then it was that he did what he should have done at the very beginning – he, with Isaiah, the prophet (his faithful friend and adviser and supposed **[R2381 : page 326]** tutor in earlier years), joined together in prayer to the Lord (2 Kings 19:1,2,14-19), in the Temple, laying before the Lord the letters received from the haughty Sennacherib, and recounting his boastful words, beseeching the Lord to have mercy upon his covenanted people, who now, more than for centuries, were seeking to please and serve him, and to grant them deliverance from their enemies, when there seemed no hope from any other quarter.

It was in answer to this prayer that Isaiah sent to Hezekiah the message of our lesson: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, that which thou hast prayed to me against Sennacherib, king of Assyria, I have heard," etc. The remainder of Isaiah's message was evidently intended to be the answer which Hezekiah should send to Sennacherib, through Rabshakeh, that the people of Jehovah laughed to scorn his boastful message and ultimatum. The answer calls attention to Sennacherib's boastful pride and his blasphemy of the only true God, the God of Israel. The threat of the hook in the nose and the bridle in the mouth is figurative, representing the manner in which bullocks and horses are controlled: thus would the Lord control the Assyrian army. "Isaiah said unto him, Thus shall ye say to your master [Hezekiah], Thus saith the Lord, be not afraid of the words which thou hast heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria has blasphemed me. Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumor, and shall return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own hand." (2 Kings 19:6,7.) The message calls attention to the success of the Assyrian monarch previously, and points out that it was because the Lord had so permitted, designed and foretold, but points out, also, that Sennacherib is equally under the divine power, and on the present occasion, having blasphemed Jehovah, would be unsuccessful, would be turned back, while his people, Israel, and their king Hezekiah, would be heard and succored.

Spiritual Israelites may draw valuable lessons from the foregoing. We should beware how at any time we lose sight of the Lord's power on our behalf, no matter how threatening or great or dark the evil which assails us. A proper faith will look up to God, under such circumstances, and relying upon his promises will seek his aid, rather than seek to purchase deliverance from the great adversary, Satan, by any compromises. But how many, on the contrary, are disposed to do as Hezekiah did, purchase peace with things consecrated to the Lord, – to compromise the truth: for instance, if threatened with the disfavor of friends or neighbors or employers, how many are willing to conciliate such adversaries by a more worldly course, by subtracting from the

time, influence, means, etc., consecrated to the Lord, considerable portions to be given to worldly service, or to secure domestic peace or social advancement, or commercial prosperity. So surely as the Lord's consecrated people do this, we may expect that the Lord will permit to come upon them the very difficulties which they dread and seek to avert by unholy compromise.

They need just such a lesson; and as a faithful father will give needed chastisements and corrections to his son, so the Lord deals with those who have been adopted into his family. But with the world in general matters are different; God's special dealings and special corrections are the manifestations of his special care for those whom he is now selecting from amongst mankind for a great future work, for which they need to be prepared, and for which unlimited faith and trust in the **[R2382 : page 326]** Almighty are absolutely essential. As David expressed it, "Before I was afflicted I went astray:" in other words, it was because he went astray, and because he was a consecrated servant of God, therefore, instead of permitting him to go far astray he was corrected in order to bring him back. So with all who have entered into the New Covenant, and accepted the call to joint-heirship with Christ; they are not permitted to go astray and make compromises whose tendency would be to lead them further and further astray from faith and trust in the Lord. Therefore they are chastened, and happy it is for all of Spiritual Israel who, like Hezekiah, permit the divine chastisements to develop more and more of faith and obedience.

It required great faith and courage on the part of Hezekiah and his princes, and the people of Judah in general, to resist the great power of Assyria, and to send to Sennacherib such a reply as the Lord had indicated, yet evidently their faith and trust were developed in proportion to the difficulty; and shortly they beheld the fulfilment of the Lord's declaration respecting the Assyrians. Rabshakeh returned to meet Sennacherib, and to give him Hezekiah's answer, and then, apparently was fulfilled the catastrophe upon Sennacherib's army, referred to in our lesson.

In one place this is called "the blast of the Lord," from which some have supposed that it was a simoon, or sandstorm, not uncommon in the vicinity of the Arabian desert. In the lesson it is spoken of as the smiting of the angel of the Lord, and others have assumed from this that it was a pestilence which broke out in Sennacherib's army and destroyed in one night one hundred and eighty-five thousand of his warriors; because elsewhere pestilence is spoken of as being the work of a destroying angel or messenger. (See 2 Sam. 24:16,17.) Jewish tradition ascribes the destruction to a pestilence. The word "angel" here, as often elsewhere in the Scriptures, does not necessarily refer to a member of the angelic order of beings, but simply signifies "messenger;" and God is as able to use winds or waves, [R2382 : page 327] lightnings or sandstorms, or pestilence, as any other agency in the execution of his will. "Who maketh the winds his angels, and flaming fire his servants." – Psa. 104:4.

Egyptian history contains an account of the remarkable departure of Sennacherib's army, and ascribes its retreat to an invasion of field mice, which gnawed the quivers and bowstrings and the thongs by which their shields were managed. But some have suggested that this is the Egyptian figurative way of speaking of a pestilence, because with them the mouse was a symbol representing pestilence. There are many other notable instances in history in which, apparently, divine providence has similarly intervened and protected those whom it was not the divine will should be further injured. For instance, the notable case of the Spanish Armada, designed to work great havoc upon the people of Great Britain, and apparently well qualified to do the work, was destroyed by a remarkable storm. Similarly, Napoleon's army, which had invaded Russia, and was encamped at Moscow, was, it is said, forced to retreat because of a heavy fall of snow, which is said to have caused the death of 20,000 of Napoleon's horses, and compelled the retreat which involved the almost complete destruction of his army, numbering over a quarter of a million. In the churches of Moscow the narrative of the destruction of Sennacherib's army is read on the

anniversary of the retreat of the French from their city, as marking a similar interposition of divine providence.

As the Israelites accepted the overthrow and turning back of Sennacherib's forces as of divine interposition, altho the sceptically inclined might view it differently, and ascribe it to natural causes, so Spiritual Israelites often find that God's answers to their prayers, and fulfilments of his promises are of such a kind that the trustful may see in them the hand of God, while those living less near to the Almighty will see in them nothing but the casualties of nature. Thus it is that our own spiritual condition has much to do with our joy in the Lord, and our appreciation of his care over us, and of the fulfilment of his promises. All of the divine leadings are along this line, namely, "According to thy faith be it unto thee." He who will not exercise faith in God cannot have the joy and peace which come to and are intended for believers only. It is the proper thing that as the Lord's people we should not only trust him for his goodness and providential care, and call to mind his promises, and plead them before him in our supplications, but it is also equally proper that we should seek to see at every step of life's journey how divine providence is directing our way, and causing all of life's affairs to work together for good to those who love God. Such expectations of divine care, and such waiting for it and looking for it, are evidences of true faith, and pleasing to the Lord. Accordingly, he assures us that without faith it is impossible to please him and again he assures us, "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even your faith."

In those days wars were not accomplished so quickly as at the present time, and the Israelites might well have been fearful that the retreat of Sennacherib's army was only temporary, and that he would come upon them again, and hence the Lord gave them a sign; *viz.*, that altho they had been hindered from planting their crops that year they should have a sufficiency of food from that which would spring up of itself, and likewise the year following. The sign was fulfilled, and the people understood that they were effectually delivered: and altho

Sennacherib lived for some twenty years after his retreat, he did not again attempt to conquer the land of Judah, and subsequently was assassinated by his own sons, as was set forth in the Lord's prophecy.
– Verse 7.

Assyrian history records, on tablets and cylinders of baked clay (the books of those days), Sennacherib's many victories, but they make no mention of this disaster which the Lord brought upon him, just as upon Napoleon's tomb in Paris are inscribed the various battles of his wars, but Waterloo is omitted. The first features of Sennacherib's victory over Judah are described in these words, on what is known as the "Taylor cylinder," now in the British Museum: "Because Hezekiah, king of Judah, would not submit to my yoke I came up against him, and by force of arms, and by the might of my power, I took forty-six of his strong fenced cities; and of the smaller towns, which were scattered about, with the march of a host and surrounding of a multitude, with attack of ranks, and force of battering-rams, and mines and missiles, I besieged and captured a countless number. From these places I took and carried off 200,150 persons, old and young, male and female, together with horses and mules, asses and goats, sheep and oxen, a countless multitude, and Hezekiah himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his capital city, like a bird in a cage, building towers round the city, to hem him in, and raising banks of earth against the gates, so as to prevent his escape....Then upon this Hezekiah there fell the fear of the might of my arms, and he sent out to me the chiefs and the elders of Jerusalem, with thirty talents of gold, and eight hundred talents of silver, precious stones, of large size, couches of ivory... woods of every kind – an abundant treasure...all these were brought to me at Nineveh, the city of my dominion, Hezekiah having sent them by way of tribute, as a token of submission to my power." Thus Sennacherib boasts of Hezekiah's mistake, but wholly omits Hezekiah's subsequent victory, through prayer and the manifestation of divine power. [R2382 : page 328]

ANOTHER DEFEAT AND ANOTHER VICTORY.

In consequence of this marked deliverance of Judah from the superior power of Assyria, we read, "And many brought gifts unto the Lord at Jerusalem, and presents to Hezekiah, King of Judah; so that he was magnified in the sight of all nations from henceforth. ...And Hezekiah had exceeding much riches and honor, and he made himself treasuries for silver and gold, and for precious stones, and for spices, and shields, and for all manner of desirable instruments," etc. (2 Chron. 32:22,27,30.) But prosperity is often a severer test of character than adversity, and hence we read, "But 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. Notwithstanding, Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants in Judah, so that the wrath of the Lord came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah." – 2 Chron. 32:25,26.

"In those days Hezekiah was sick unto death." It was somewhere in this period of time, we may not be certain exactly when, but evidently the sickness had somewhat to do with Hezekiah's prosperity and consequent pride; but his sickness, in the midst of various great projects for the advancement of his country, and the welfare of his people, was a sore disappointment to Hezekiah, and led him to the Lord in prayer. Doubtless he realized from the nature of the message delivered to him by Isaiah, that his sickness and premature death were penalties for his failure to render unto the Lord according to the multitude of his blessings. And so realizing, the king prayed most earnestly for forgiveness and help, promising that henceforth "I shall go softly all my years....We will sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the Lord." Isa. 38:9-22 records, in poetic form, Hezekiah's resolves, and is evidently the embodiment of his previous prayer, with thanksgiving for his deliverance: for the Lord was gracious to him, accepted his prayer, covered his sins, and healed him. The prophet **[R2383 : page 328]** was sent back to him with the message of his recovery.

The king, anxious to assure himself that he was indeed the subject of a divine miracle, requested a proof of the increase of his life fifteen years. Isaiah proposed that the proof should be that the sun's record on the sun-dial should be suddenly advanced ten degrees, but Hezekiah thought it would be a still greater miracle if it should be turned back ten degrees, and his request was granted. The possibility of such a miracle has been questioned by many, who have insisted that it could in no way be possible, that it would involve not only stoppage of the motion of the earth upon its axis, but an impossible retrograde movement, to be accomplished in a moment of time. However, Professor Garbett, writing for a magazine called *Knowledge*, declares that he knew of an afternoon some years ago when, on many sundials in Southern England, there occurred exactly the wonder described in the book of Kings.

Asked by Astronomer R. A. Proctor to describe it, he writes as follows: – "The shiftings of the shadows on the dial, that Isaiah predicted to sick Hezekiah, are liable to occur at any place, when these two circumstances occur: (1) That the upper atmosphere is in that condition which causes two bright parhelion or mock suns to appear on opposite sides of the sun; and (2) that the lower air contains drifting clouds, massive enough to hide often two of the three [apparent suns]. When the real sun and eastern mock sun are hidden, there is only the western [mock sun] to cast shadows, which then coincide with what the sun would cast an hour and a half later; but if the cloud shift so as to hide the west parhelion, and disclose the eastern, the shadows instantly become such as the sun cast an hour and a half earlier....On March 29, 1858, these effects occurred, had any one been looking, on every dial of Portsea, and very probably of much of Hampshire besides. The parhelia were present and bright enough at about 11 A.M. and still better at 1 P.M."

But the fact that Joshua's long day can be accounted for by the reflected light of the sun in clouds of a peculiar kind, and the fact that the turning back of the shadow for Hezekiah can be accounted for

somewhat similarly, as above, by no means lessens either of these as miracles; because they were not accidental, but specially given as proofs of divine power. The fact that we may learn *how* the divine power acted in the fulfilment of the divine prediction subtracts nothing from the miracle, just as in the case of Hezekiah's recovery the fact that a fig poultice was applied, and that God thus made use of a means to an end, detracted nothing from the miraculousness of his recovery. As children of God, this is an important lesson for us to have deeply engraven upon our memories: God still uses natural means for the accomplishment of the exceeding great and precious promises of a spiritual kind, which he has bestowed upon us. Has he not promised us grace to help in every time of need? It is not necessary that we should suppose that this grace will come to us without a channel; it probably will come through a human channel. Has God promised to us meat in due season to the household of faith? It is reasonable for us to expect that it will come to us, as his other mercies and blessings have come, from his Word, and through the helpfulness of the fellow-members of the body of Christ, whom the Lord will make use of in serving the meat to the household of faith. – Matt. 24:45.

Hezekiah's experiences in respect to the Lord's remarkable answers to his two prayers seem to have wrought in him a commendable faith and trust, so that subsequently, when servants of the king of Babylon visited him with a present, and to congratulate him upon his recovery from sickness, and to view the wonderful aqueducts and evidences of engineering skill which he had accomplished, and when Hezekiah unwisely had shown these foreigners the great wealth of his treasuries, etc., and Isaiah was sent to reprove him for this, and to tell him that the king of Babylon would ultimately come and despoil the city of its treasures, etc., but not in Hezekiah's day, he said, with prompt resignation to the divine will, "Good is the word of the Lord, which thou hast spoken." He said, moreover, "For there shall be peace and truth in my day." – Isa. 39:3,8.

Similarly all who are learning to trust the Lord, or who have tasted that he is gracious, should more and more be coming to this attitude of heart and mind: to a recognition of the fact that all God's ways are perfect, so that they can say, "Tho he slay me yet will I trust him." "I will rejoice in the God of my salvation."
