April 21/22, 2012

A Prayer in the Midst of Disaster

5 Prayers That Rocked the World

II Kings 18 & 19

Pastor Mark Kremer

Do we believe that God answers prayer? Do we believe that prayer actually moves the hand of a sovereign God? Those are the questions that were posed last week as we began this series on prayer. We had to acknowledge that we wrestle with those questions and we struggle sometimes to believe that God *does* answer prayer. We looked last week at an incredible story from the book of Acts, about the early church gathered together when Peter's in prison and God miraculously delivers Peter from that prison because of the prayers of His people. But they weren't prayers of great faith; in fact they were shocked and surprised by God's answering their prayers. They wrestled, too, with the question, "Does God really hear; does this prayer really move the hand of a sovereign God?" I'm sure that I'm like you, in that, as I look back over my life, there have been many Peter stories in my life. But there's also been any number of James stories, times when God didn't—His answer wasn't, "Yes"; it was "No". But one thing, as I look back over my life and the things that I've prayed about, is that every single time I prayed, the hand of God did move—many times it was the most noticeable in me. God changed *me* as I prayed. Regardless of whether I got a yes answer or a no answer, God did move; He did work.

I can think back to some early times in my life when, you know, I was just beginning to learn about prayer. I remember my cousin and I worked on the farm all the time in the summertime—day and night—and, during our teenage years we had an old Korean War-era jeep that, on the back of it, was mounted a trencher. He and I were sent off to some remote pasture in the middle of nowhere to dig a trench and this old Jeep died on us and we tried everything we could imagine to try to get this thing started. We checked the plugs; we checked the gas; we tried pushing it; we tried everything we could do and finally we said, in our young and innocent faith, "Hey, we haven't prayed about it." So here, my cousin and I, we got around that Jeep; we laid our hands on it and we prayed and, by golly, that thing started right away. (laughter) It was a faith-building moment for us and I don't know whether we would attribute it to God or not, but it built my faith. I believed that God sees and knows what's going on in my life.

You know, about eight-and-a-half years ago, my wife and I experienced a disaster, really, a traumatic experience in our life. My wife was eight or seven months pregnant with our youngest son, Sam. All of a sudden she had an abruption, which means that literally, within minutes, she's on death's door. I remember, vividly, standing in the hospital room by myself after they had just, as quickly as we got in there, whisked her away to try to save her and the baby—standing there just crying out to God and God really speaking to me something that has forever, from that moment forward, changed my prayer life. That's part of what we want to talk about this morning because, in that moment of saying, "God, save my wife; save my child," I heard God really assuring me and speaking to me and it was confirmed again and again in the weeks and months to come, "Mark, this isn't all about you. It's not all about you and your family; there's a much bigger story that's unfolding here. Your life, your little son's life—Sam—your wife, your story is interwoven with hundreds of other stories and what I'm doing in this moment is going to be a part of a bigger story that I'm going to play out, that will still be playing out generations from now." And as we watched over the weeks and months and years since then, even when not everything turns out in our life the way we think it should, or not every prayer is answered, "Yes," at least not right away, that there is

this overwhelming sense that everything that's going on in my life and in our little circle is a part of something so much bigger that God is doing. You see, we're not just a whole collection of millions and millions of little individual stories and God's answering these little individual prayers. No, God has a grand, big purpose and everything's woven together. So I want to challenge us to just think a little bit bigger, even bigger than, "Does God just answer prayer?" but, "Do you believe this morning that God, through your prayers, could literally change nations, could alter the course of history, could literally change the world and build the kingdom of God? Do you believe that God could use the prayers of an individual or a group of His people to literally change the course of history and the world?" We want to look at an example from the Scriptures that screams to us, "Yes, it is possible!"

If you have your Bibles, turn to 2 Kings in the Old Testament—2 Kings, Chapter 18. This is a story that is, evidently, so important that it's actually told three times in Scripture. In fact I don't know that, other than the Gospels and the accounts of Jesus, there's another story that's told almost word-for-word in detail like this story, and yet it's probably unknown to many of us here this morning. It's the story of Hezekiah who was the king of Judah, and about the situation that he and his nation faced. Now this story is in chapters 18 and 19 and we're not going to be able to read all of that. But we are going to walk through this and I think we get the foundation of who Hezekiah was in the start of the story, in the first eight verses here of 2 Kings 18.

> **Now it came about in the third year of Hoshea, the son of Elah king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah became king. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan. He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor *among those* who were before him. For he clung to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses. And the LORD was with him; wherever he went he prospered. And he rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him. He defeated the Philistines as far as Gaza and its territory, from watchtower to fortified city.** (*NASB, 2 Kings, 18:1-8)

Now here are a few things we learned about Hezekiah. First of all, he was very young. He was a king at age twenty-five, in fact by the time he was about my age, his reign was over. He was a very young man and yet he was a righteous man. He was one who followed after God. It says he both *trusted* God, which meant his security and his confidence were in his God, and not only that, but it says he *clung* to the Lord. That's the very same word we see in the Old Testament for a husband leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife. In other words he had an intimate, close relationship with his God that would mark his reign and that would mark his actions. One of those we read about is that he restored right-worship of Jehovah in the nation of Judah. He took down the idols. In fact they'd even been worshipping the snake that Moses had lifted up to overcome the curse generations before, and he tore that down and said, "No, we're going to worship the one true God," and so got rid of all the idols. He was passionate about his people following after Jehovah God. We read that because of that, whatever he did, God gave him success in it. Whatever he set his mind to do, he was successful, and God was with him in all that he did.

We also begin to see for the first time that one of the things he did was be bold and courageous against the Assyrians. The Assyrians, now, are going to be a huge part of this story. The Assyrian empire was the dominant world force. They were literally conquering nation after nation after nation. No one had been able to stand against the powerful military might of the Assyrians—they literally just walked across nation after nation. But Hezekiah had the strength of character and the strong belief in God that he withstood and rebelled against the king of Assyria and said, "No, I'm not going to roll over; I'm not going to just fold. I believe God will ultimately be able to deliver us, even from you." And so he went out and conquered the Philistines who were allies with the Assyrians. Now in verses 9 through 12 we read about how the Assyrians treated the northern kingdom of Israel. At this point Judah and Israel were two separate nations because of the sin of the people, and the Assyrians came and wiped out the northern tribes of Israel. This was the fulfillment of the prophecy that we read about in Amos. It was the sins that Amos confronted the nation of Israel about that ultimately brought the Assyrians in and carried them off into captivity. In fact, in verse 12 you'll read the reason why God allowed Israel to be carried into captivity is:

> **...because they did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, but transgressed His covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded; they would neither listen nor do it.**

So here we understand that sometimes in Israel, when they were praying, that God did not answer, "Yes" to their prayer for deliverance because they had not listened and obeyed God and they were wiped out. Verse 13 then brings us right up to the crisis for the nation of Judah.

> **Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them.**

We know from history that there were forty-six fortified, or walled, cities in the nation of Judah and the king of Assyria came up and conquered every last one of them. And so what we have left is really Hezekiah and whatever people had made their way back to Jerusalem, the capital of that nation, and they're surrounded by one of the greatest military forces known in the world at that time, an incredibly large—in fact, we're going to find out just how large this military force was. The Assyrian juggernaut was outside the gates of the city of Jerusalem and there literally was nowhere to turn. There was no strength; there was no ability to stand against such an incredibly vast and powerful kingdom as those of the Assyrians.

Well, in verses 14 through 16—we're not going to read that—we're told that the first thing that Hezekiah did is to say, "You know, if I maybe offer the king of Assyria my wealth, the wealth of the nation, that might appease him because, frankly, Jerusalem is nothing all that great to brag about. Why would he want the city itself; why would he want to mess with the people? If I just give him a lot of money, then maybe he'll be satisfied and go away." And he stripped the temple of gold—he even gave more than what the Assyrian king asked for—and still the Assyrian king was not satisfied. He wanted to conquer. He wanted to dominate.

Beginning in verse 17, the Assyrian king sends his emissary, sort of his top guys, down to a road outside of Jerusalem and Hezekiah sends his guys out to the same road. They have a little pow-wow outside of Jerusalem where Hezekiah's guys and the Assyrian king's guys got together and had a discussion. But it was a one-way discussion and what proceeds in the next verses—19 all the way through the end of the chapter—is really what we call brilliant psychological warfare. The Assyrians pulled out all the stops. They created doubt in Hezekiah's mind, doubt that God could

save them. They told lies; they offered bribes; they did everything they could to instill fear and doubt and basically just to rattle the cages of the king and all of the people. In fact they shouted to all of the people on the wall, "Hey, you're crazy for trusting in Hezekiah or the God of Hezekiah, because when we're through with you," it says actually in verse 27 **...you're going to be eating your own dung and drinking your own urine...**I mean it was a taunt, in-your-face, *"We're stronger and bigger than you, and you got nothing...you got nothing*!"

So in chapter 19, verse 1, we see the response of Hezekiah.

> **When King Hezekiah heard *it,* he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth and entered the house of the LORD.**

Hezekiah did what had been a part of his life and what was a part of his very heart and soul—and that is, immediately he went to God

> **Then he sent Eliakim who was over the household with Shebna the scribe and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz. They said to him, "Thus says Hezekiah, 'This day is a day of distress, rebuke, and rejection; for children have come to birth and there is no strength to *deliver*.'** (Vs: 2-3)

What he's saying is, "We've done everything we can; we've prepared; we followed God; we've done everything we can do and now it's the day. It's like the day of birth but we've got nothing—absolutely bankrupt, without any strength at all, without any ability within ourselves to do anything in this situation." So he asks Isaiah, along with his own prayer:

> **'Perhaps the LORD your God will hear all the words of Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to reproach the living God, and will rebuke the words which the LORD your God has heard. Therefore, offer a prayer for the remnant that is left.'"** (Vs. 4)

Immediately Hezekiah goes to prayer and he invites Isaiah the prophet to also go to prayer. Now one of the things that we need to understand is that Hezekiah went to Isaiah the prophet because Isaiah the prophet is the one who would hear from God and deliver messages back from God. So what we see really here is Hezekiah not only entering into prayer—speaking and asking God for help—but he's also listening. "God, what do you want? What are you going to say? What direction are you going to give us? What's your message in this time of disaster and crisis?" Well, Isaiah immediately gives back kind of a positive response, "Hey, listen up; don't be afraid. I'm going to take care of you." In verses 6 & 7 he gives a little hint that he's going to have the king hear a rumor and the king's going to pull back and, in verse 8, it looks like that's beginning to happen. There's a rumor of something and so these people that are around Jerusalem leave and go away. But they quickly find out it's really not that big of a deal and so they again send a message back to Hezekiah. This time we find out from the Chronicles passage that it's in writing. Verse 10:

> **"Thus you shall say to Hezekiah king of Judah, 'Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you saying, "Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." 'Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the lands, destroying them completely. So will you be spared? Did the gods of those nations which my fathers destroyed deliver them, even Gozan and**

> **Haran and Rezeph and the sons of Eden who were in Telassar? Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, and of Hena and Ivvah?'"** (Vs. 10-13)

Again he just comes back with this letter saying, "You're crazy for trusting in your God. We've got you surrounded; we're so powerful." And he throws out some statistics before them. "Hey, Hezekiah, how many gods of the nations have been able to spare those nations from our powerful army? Zero! How many kings of all of the nations—all the way from Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian empire, all the way through the middle-East, down to now Judah—how many kings are still alive and standing? Zero!" In other words, he's saying, "You don't have a prayer; you don't have a chance; we're so big; we're so powerful; you're just going to need to surrender." Verse 14:

> **Then Hezekiah took the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it, and he went up to the house of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD.**

Can you just picture the imagery? Hezekiah, in his sackcloth and ashes—signs of his distress and trouble—and he's just taking the letters, all the threats, all the facts, all the statistics, everything that's present that he knows about the situation, and he just lays it out before the Lord. "God, see this?"

> **Hezekiah prayed before the LORD** [this is the heart of this entire passage] **and said, "O LORD, the God of Israel, who are enthroned *above* the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God. Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them. Now, O LORD our God, I pray, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, O LORD, are God."** (Vs. 15-19)

What do you notice about the focus of the prayer of Hezekiah? Do you get a sense that Hezekiah is focused on himself, saying, "Hey, God, look at this terrible situation. Spare my life; save us"? No, what Hezekiah is focused on is the glory of God, the kingdom of God, the reputation of God. You see, Hezekiah's lifted up his eyes and is saying, "Hey, this isn't just about a moment in my life. This isn't just about me and my circumstances; this is about the very glory of God—the very reputation and fame of God. These people are reproaching the living God. We are the last bastion of God-followers; we are the ones who have Your Name, God, attached to us. We have a covenant relationship with You. Lord, for Your sake, for Your kingdom's sake, for the glory of Your Name, save us...hear us! Step in and intervene! We are bankrupt; we've got nothing of ourselves to bring to this situation. But, Lord, I know," Hezekiah says, "You're the God. You not only made the whole earth. Every kingdom on this planet is under You and You have the power to make this right, to bring about a different result than what seems inevitable to us." And Isaiah was listening to what God was saying...and Hezekiah was ready to hear what Isaiah had to say. Verse 20:

> **Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, I have heard you.'**

God speaks and says, "Really, Hezekiah, because you have prayed, because you have trusted in Me, your confidence and security are in Me, because you have clung to Me, I have heard you and I'm going to answer you." And then he speaks the word—God speaks the word—first of all against Assyria. He speaks words to Hezekiah; this is the judgment He's going to put on the Assyrians. This is His message to the Assyrians but He shares it with Hezekiah through Isaiah.

"This is the word that the LORD has spoken against him:
'She has despised you and mocked you,
The virgin daughter of Zion;
She has shaken *her* head behind you,
The daughter of Jerusalem! [In other words, he's saying Jerusalem is just going to shake her head and walk away from you.]
Whom have you reproached and blasphemed?
And against whom have you raised *your* voice,
And haughtily lifted up your eyes?
It's against the Holy One of Israel!
Through your messengers you have reproached the Lord,
And you have said, "With my many chariots
I came up to the heights of the mountains,
To the remotest parts of Lebanon;
And I cut down its tall cedars *and* its choice cypresses.
And I entered into its farthest lodging place, its thickest forest.
"I dug *wells* and drank foreign waters,
And with the sole of my feet I dried up
All the rivers of Egypt." (Vs. 21-24) [God's just recounting all the boasting and bragging and arrogance of the Assyrians.] Verse 25:
'Have you not heard?
Long ago I did it;
From ancient times I planned it.
Now I have brought it to pass,
That you should turn fortified cities into ruinous heaps.
"Therefore their inhabitants were short of strength,
They were dismayed and put to shame;
They were as the vegetation of the field and as the green herb,
As grass on the housetops is scorched before it is grown up.'" (Vs. 25-26)

God's basically saying, "Hey, you've been going around bragging and boasting in all of your massive accomplishments and conquering. But I just need you to know that you're just a tool in My hand and I've been directing you, and not a single conquering has happened that I have not been a part of that, in order to use you to bring judgment on godless nations. Don't think you're something." Verse 27:

"But I know your sitting down,
And your going out and your coming in,
And your raging against Me.
'Because of your raging against Me,
And because your arrogance has come up to My ears,
Therefore I will put My hook in your nose,
And My bridle in your lips,
And I will turn you back by the way which you came. (Vs. 27-28)

It's a great picture of this massive bull—Assyria—and God just simply putting the hooks in the nose, like I experienced on the farm growing up. You can take an animal that was more than a ton in size and you put a hook in their nose, that tender spot, and you just turn them wherever you want them to go. God says, "That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to *put a hook in your nose, a bridle in your lips; I'm going to take you right back where you came from* because I'm so much greater than you." And then he gives this word of restoration and hope to the people of Judah.

> **'Then this shall be the sign for you:** [Judah] **you will eat this year what grows of itself, in the second year what springs from the same, and in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. The surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root downward and bear fruit upward. For out of Jerusalem will go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the LORD will perform this.** (Vs. 29-31)

Not only does God pronounce judgment, "I'm going to take the Assyrians out of here, but I'm also going to restore Judah to a glory that it hasn't known for a long time." In fact, what we have here really is a part of a Messianic promise—a prophecy—that out of Judah would come the Messiah, that Judah would sink its roots down deep spiritually and then God would fulfill His purposes for Judah upward and out—that there would be this grand plan of God that would flow out of Judah. That we know is Jesus who would come, who would bring redemption to the whole world. Out of Judah, God would fulfill His promise. And then he speaks directly to the situation. Verse 32:

> **'Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, "He will not come to this city or shoot an arrow there; and he will not come before it with a shield or throw up a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came, by the same he will return, and he shall not come to this city,"' declares the LORD. 'For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake.'"** (Vs. 32-34)

God says, "I'm going to defend the city. You don't need to do anything. I've got it handled for you. I've heard your prayer; I've seen everything and I'm going to take care of it and I'm going to do it for two reasons. One is for My own Namesake, for the glory of My Name and for My Kingdom. This now is about Me and My reputation and My Kingdom and My glory, so I'm going to save it for My own sake, but I'm also going to save it for the sake of David." Because God had made a covenant with David, He made a promise to David that the throne would never depart from Jerusalem, that He would establish David's throne forever, and so He's saying, "Because I'm a God who keeps My promises, for the sake of My people and the covenant I have with them, I'm going to save them." We have a God who sees and hears not only our prayers but He sees and hears all the threats, all the blasphemy, all the horrible things that go on in the world, and none of it escapes His notice. But in this case, because Hezekiah prayed, God says, "I'm going to step in and do the impossible. I'm going to miraculously save Judah from the Assyrian juggernaut—the most powerful army in the world—that's surrounding you and I'm going to do it Myself; you don't have to do a thing." That's exactly what happened. Verse 35—amazing:

> **Then it happened that night that the angel of the LORD went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men rose early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead.**

Can you imagine, now, the size of this army? This rivals any army that's been put together in modern history—160,000 Allied Forces invaded Normandy on D-Day. Way more than that number was surrounding the city of Jerusalem and, in one night, without a sword, without a fight, without a trumpet blowing like at Jericho, without a pot and some candles, without people doing anything, God, in one moment, took 185,000 lives. That's how big, how strong, how mighty is our God! Verse 36:

> **So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed** [I'll bet he did] **and returned home** [back through the way he came. He certainly wasn't going to go through new territory; he had no army left. His only choice would be to retrace his steps right back through those kingdoms where there were still a few people left, all the way back]**...and lived in Nineveh.**

Verse 37:

> **It came about as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god...** [probably before his idol, crying out, wondering, "Nisroch, why didn't you deliver me?"]**, that** [two of his sons] **...Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son became king in his place.**

Without the people of God having to lift a single finger, God just stepped in because of the prayer of Hezekiah and altered the course of history. That would be the end of the Assyrian empire. It would never be the same again. God miraculously stepped in and changed the course of the nation's history, the course of the history of the world, the course of redemptive history. You and I, this morning, have some roots in this victorious story.

So the question is: Can God hear the prayers of people, of a man, of a couple of men, of a small remnant of people and change the course of history? Can He build His kingdom; can He do the amazing and the miraculous through the prayers of His people? Hezekiah and Isaiah and the people of Judah give a resounding, "Yes" to that question.

So what's the application to you and me in all of this? First of all it is to say to think about the fact that God is able to change even the most disastrous situations—He's able to completely turn those things around. Those may be very personal in nature; they may be much bigger. I think that's part of the application of this message to our lives and then there is: that we get so wrapped up in our individual stories and what's going on in *my* life, that sometimes we're not really even thinking about, *"Where is the kingdom of God and the reputation of God and the glory of God being threatened today and are we praying by faith that God would step in and intervene?"*

I think this morning, that hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters in Christ, in the middle-East, in almost every country of the middle-East, face just exactly this kind of situation every single day. They are surrounded by enemies; they are seeking to preemptively love people in their culture and be light shining there, but they are threatened and killed and put on trial and their houses are burned and churches are burned every single day. What would happen if the people of God would stand before God in the gap and say, "God, would you do something about this? Would you save Your kingdom in these places?" We've seen it in India; we've seen God deliver, but I think of the millions, almost three-hundred million orphans in the world. I think of all those being trafficked for sex in the world; I think of these horrific things that are just so vile, so against the kingdom of God, what would happen if the people of God would begin to pray? That prayer would be our first line of

defense—our first weapon—not our last resort. I think about what we all sense in our own culture, that there are all these blasphemous messages, all of this temptation, all of these lies that bombard us, bombard our families, bombard our children, that try to draw us into all of this destructive stuff. And there's this trail of disaster left all over our culture—of broken lives, broken families. This is an attack on the very name and kingdom of God, and we fight back with our little political tools and our rally—all those things. But what if we pray? What if we believe that God is the Lord of the nations, the King of the universe, and we sought His face and asked Him to step in and intervene, and do something that only He could do? I don't know exactly what that intervention would look like, but I know that our God is able to do exceedingly abundantly, above all that we could ask or imagine. That's what we learn from Hezekiah. "God, make us more like Hezekiah and Isaiah, focused on God and His kingdom, believing in His great power, and bringing even the most desperate situations that threaten the very reputation and kingdom of God before Him in prayer. Then let's watch and see what God might do.

Our Father, I pray that You would lift up our eyes, that we would have the mature view of You, like Hezekiah did, that sees You as a great and mighty and powerful God, that with You we are always stronger than even the greatest enemy and foe. Nothing is too difficult for You. Nothing is impossible for You. You specialize in things thought impossible. Help us to believe that and to pray in such a way that it's clear we do believe that. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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