

Earthy Spirituality:

Be Strong and Courageous

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2 Chronicles 32:1-22

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I have a title for a book I'd like to write someday. It's called *Desperate Places: How God Shines through Our Weakness*. Desperate Places are places of weakness and brokenness and vulnerability. They comprise the times in our lives when we're at wits end and if God doesn't show up with power and mercy and redemption, we're lost. The Apostle Paul described a desperate place in his life like this: "I will boast ... about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). You see, desperate places are hard and even agonizing places, but they are also the places where God unleashes His power in ways we could never imagine. That's why Paul wanted to boast about his weaknesses: he knew that eventually God's power would shine through his life and into the world. This has been the theme of my life over the past few years and I believe it's also the theme for our family here at Three Village Church.

The Bible reading you just heard describes one of these Desperate Places. I love the Old Testament stories. They are so raw, earthy, authentic, fresh and so often I feel like my life is in the story – especially this one. This is a story about trouble and finding God's strength in the midst of our weakness and brokenness and vulnerability.

The story begins in verse 1. For about 20-30 years the nation of Assyria was the reigning superpower. They were big and strong and organized and efficient and incredibly cruel. In 701 B.C. a man named Sennacherib, King of Assyria, started moving his vast army down the coast of Palestine to defeat and recapture all the territories that were supposed to remain under Assyria's thumb. (By the way, we have a wealth of archeological evidence for the events behind this passage. Also, you should know that we have a resident expert on Assyrian warfare tactics in our church family. Our youth pastor Bart Patton has taken an entire masters-level course on Assyrian Warfare tactics and he provided me with a great deal of resources for this passage). As Sennacherib moved down the coast he defeated a coalition of Egyptian forces and then moved on to the hill country of Judah. The fortified city of Lachish would have to be attacked and toppled on his way down the coast.

And that leads us right up to verse 1 of chapter 32. There are a few things to understand about the context behind this story. First, this is about real fear and real trouble. The Assyrians weren't like the other superpowers; they surpassed everyone for their sheer cruelty and savagery. As they conquered a new place they would take the leaders and hang their bodies on poles. Bart told me about one relief from this time that shows Sennacherib lounging on his throne, being fed grapes by one of his wives, holding a wine goblet in his hand, while off in the

distance you can just barely spot a grove of trees with Assyria's enemies, headless, hanging upside down like big bats from the branches. You'll notice as we go through this story that the Assyrians were not only violent but they were also masters of psychological warfare. They brilliantly utilized intimidation techniques. They were masters of fear.

Have you ever faced times and places in your life when you were overwhelmed with fear? I sure have. Do you know that according to the Bible we still have an enemy that relies on the same tactics? He's described this way in 1 Peter 5:10.

There is one more thing we have to mention before we dive into Hezekiah's response to this threat. This invasion and siege would have created a spiritual crisis as well. Why would God allow this powerful and cruel and violent army to attack his people? How could God let this happen? Why didn't God stop it? And where is God in the midst of this trouble and fear and destruction? (See Psalm 44).

So this is a real crisis. Everything is up for grabs. This incredible threat and trouble accompanied with fear and doubt and sadness. How will their leaders respond? Notice the mixture of action and trust; initiative and faith; stepping out and doing something concrete to fight back and then waiting on the Lord and leading hard into God.

First, there's human action and initiative and just plain hard work. Read verses 2-5. The first thing he did was to consult with others. I find that so practical and helpful. When you're going through trouble who do you lean on? This past week in the midst of some things I'm facing I consulted with my dad. I haven't always been close to my dad but based on his nearly 80 years of life he gave me some amazing insights. I called him back a few hours later and said, "Dad, I think that was the best talk I've ever had with you in my entire life. Thank you." When I got done with the conversation I thought, "I wish I would have asked for his advice twenty years ago." But then I remembered one of the insights my dad shared with me: "You're still a young man, Matt. You can learn and grow from here." Are you in trouble? Are you facing things that make you feel afraid and overwhelmed? Ask for help. Don't go it alone. Consult with others as soon as possible.

After consulting for help, they cut off the water supply. Obviously, they didn't want the Assyrian armies to get free beverages but it was also a military strategy. The Assyrians came with battering rams to demolish the walls around the city and Judah's troops kept lighting the battering rams on fire and Assyria needed water to extinguish the flames. It was a very practical thing to do.

Do you notice how having faith does not preclude taking action? Martin Luther once commented, "Oh, it is a living, creative, active, mighty thing – this faith!" Some people get the impression that having faith means the end of human ingenuity and initiative. Not at all. We work because we have faith. We work in

our faith. We let our faith spur us on to good deeds. Faith sometimes implies fighting well – for the right things in the right way.

For instance, we know from archeological digs from the battle described in this story that Hezekiah and his armies fought back. One of the most surprising discoveries at Lachish was a massive counter-ramp built by Judah's army opposite the Assyrian siege ramp. These guys didn't just trust God and then roll over and play dead. They had something valuable – like the lives of women and children and men and the elderly and a way of life and faith – that was worth protecting. So their faith led to action.

Two years ago our son Matt started attending Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, MA. He spent the last semester in Kenya at African Nazarene University. I hope you know that the Nazarene churches are very fine Christ-centered, Bible-teaching communities. A few months ago I asked Matt, "What is that draws you to the unique things about the Nazarene denomination?" He instantly replied, "They do things. They don't just think about things or forever plan things or even just pray about things. You get involved. They share the good news of Jesus in their words and in very practical ways like giving sandwiches to homeless people in downtown Boston and planting churches in rural Kenya."

Our faith should be an active thing. Sometimes we like to say, "I know that I'm forgiven and my God is a loving God of grace." Great, but what are you doing about that today? How will that change how you spend your money and what you watch on TV and how you spend your free time and what you do to serve your local church and who you invite to your parties? Faith is earthy and practical.

But this isn't just a story about human ingenuity and initiative and action. More than anything it's also a story of God's supernatural presence and power in our desperate places. It's much, much more than just our puny and flawed activities. One of the central themes of the Christian story found in the Bible is what theologians call "The Fall of Man" or sometimes it's called original sin or total depravity. Don't let the words scare you because it just means that although we have been and still are glorious creatures made in the image of God we're also deeply flawed human beings with a warp towards (not away from) sin. Every human being on this planet is flawed in every part of his or her life. Total depravity doesn't mean that every part of me is as bad as it could be. It doesn't mean that there isn't glory and goodness in my heart. It just means that all our attitudes, our actions, even our deepest and most spiritual thoughts and aspirations are bent and flawed. (The movie "Crash.").

The Bible puts it this way – "All we like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way..." We are warped away from God. Even pastors doing church-work can do it with a warped and fallen heart. Even mothers trying to love their children can do it in a warped heart. Even doctors removing an appendix can do it with a heart warped by pride or callousness. That's not just bad news because

that's where faith comes in. We have to come to the place where we feel – deeply feel – and then own and confess our brokenness and our fallenness – even in the midst of our good and noble and spiritual activity. You see, we don't look at our fallenness and just throw our hands up in the air and say, "Okay, I'm a total loser; I quit." Not at all. It's just that we realize where our strength and activity end and where the power and activity of God begin. We just have a little drop; God has the ocean. We have a spark; God is the raging fire. We exert a tiny force of power; God is the One who upholds the entire universe by His word or power. We are the fractured clay vessels and Jesus is the mighty, glorious treasure within those clay pots (2 Corinthians 4:7).

So faith begins when we acknowledge who we are – active, creative, broken and weak but more than anything we're people filled with the glorious treasure of Jesus Christ. That's what Hezekiah points his people to in verses 6-8. Notice in verse 6 that he encouraged them. How? He didn't start by pointing to himself: "Look at me. I have a great plan to save you and to thwart this attack. I'm the king and you can put all your faith in me." He didn't say that because he's a fallen and flawed man just like the rest of them. Instead he said this (see verses 7-8). He pointed towards God. There are four commands in this verse: Be strong; Be courageous; Do not be afraid; Do not be discouraged. And then he gives the reason for the commands: "for there is a greater power with us than with him." The reason for this confidence in strength is found not in ourselves but in the utter sufficiency of God's supremacy in every situation of life. No matter what you're facing right now, God's power is greater.

And notice the response in verse 8: "The people gained confidence from what Hezekiah said." Literally translated it reads: "They leaned into his words in order to find strength and support." They leaned into God. This wasn't about Hezekiah – he was just the instrument of God's encouragement and strength.

And then after these words of encouragement the people are socked with more fear and intimidation and psychological warfare. (Read verses 10 and 15). Then the Assyrian forces increase the volume of intimidation and threat (see verse 18). Do you see the whole purpose of spiritual warfare? It's found in verse 18 – "to terrify you and make you afraid." Satan wants you to live in fear and terror. God wants you to live with courage. God wants his people to encourage one another in their desperate places.

In verse 19 the Assyrians "dealt Yahweh the final insult" by comparing the God of Israel with the idols of the nations—"the work of men's hands" (32:19). Then see verse 20.

See verse 21. God's immediate answer is to send an *angel* (v. 21). His account compresses time in such a way to suggest that Sennacherib is assassinated immediately upon his return to Nineveh. In actuality, Sennacherib is murdered by his son Adrammelech while worshiping in the temple some twenty years later (ca. 681 B.C.) Instead, Chronicles concentrates on the link between prayer and answer. To look for

answers to prayer only in the short term is often to miss what God is doing. The murder of Sennacherib is

Are facing some things in your life that are causing you to be afraid or discouraged, things that are sucking the life and joy out of your heart? Remember: this was a real threat from a real enemy. Are you facing something like that, a desperate place? Isaac Singer quote. Consult with others. Take action. Put your faith to work. Cry out to God. Take the long view in prayer and waiting on God.