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God Is: God Alone and in Charge

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TEXT: 2 Kings 19:14-19 (NRSV)

Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it; then Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord and spread it before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said: "O Lord the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are 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; hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone."

Dear friends,

How goes the battle? I recently asked a friend of mine that question; he is struggling with depression, which is a real battle. "Not so good," was his response, "this is hard." I asked a pastor friend of mine that same question quite a while back. He and his congregation had been experiencing some overwhelming challenges and obstacles to their ministry. He said, "Things are looking up. God's good." I asked a young man I was meeting with recently about his battle with drugs and addiction, and he smiled, reported that he had just passed a year and a half of being drug free and he knows every day is a battle. So how about you, how goes the battle in your life? I know from

personal experience life can feel like a battlefield for some days. The battles can be physical, emotional, spiritual, you name it.

The Old Testament story that we're looking at today is about a battle, actually an upcoming battle, that looked quite hopeless. It's 701 B.C. and Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrian army, the undefeated world power of the day. This Assyrian army had already captured a good share of the ancient world and they had captured even the northern kingdom of Israel and exiled them now turned its attention to the south and began invading some cities of Judah. It looked as if they might now be on the verge of actually capturing Jerusalem, the capital city, the big prize. Now, Hezekiah – he was the king of Judah at the time – he was a good king with a capital G. He obeyed God, took down all the idols of the land and walked in the ways of King David, who was considered Israel's greatest king of all time. God was with Hezekiah and the nation prospered. And even though his nation was small, he still stood up to Assyria and refused to serve its king, trusting that God would take care of his own people.

Well, the Assyrian army, who was knocking on the door now of Jerusalem, they were a scary and powerful lot, known for their extreme savagery towards their enemies. For instance, they would behead enemy leaders and hang the decapitated bodies from trees just for show. They would line up the prisoners and put a big hook in their noses or a bit in their mouths like an animal. They would run a rope through these hooks and mouth bits and marched them off into exile. Boy, you didn't want to trip with those in your mouth or your nose. The Assyrian army was led by King Sennacherib, who had never tasted defeat. And so, things look bad for Hezekiah and his people.

So, when the Assyrian army moved towards Jerusalem, Hezekiah apologized and sent a peace offering of silver and gold to Sennacherib, hoping to win them over and stop those Assyrians from invading the city, but it didn't work. Sennacherib said to Hezekiah, "Too late. Too late for that rebel." He sent three of his high officials to meet with some of Hezekiah's officials and demanded immediate surrender. The official who did all the speaking for the Assyrians was called the Rabshakeh. The meeting took place at the main water supply for Jerusalem, located near the walls of Jerusalem, and people were looking down from the walls trying to listen in to their conversation. The Rabshakeh spoke first to the officials of Hezekiah's, saying, "Surrender and come out from behind your walls now. Your God cannot save you. He won't save you because

he's angry. He's angry with Hezekiah for tearing down the idols. In fact, the Lord said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.' Your God is actually on our side." You see, he was thinking of Assyria's conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, where God backed to Syria to punish Israel for their disobedience. Now, the Assyrians were assuming the same thing goes for Judah.

To make matters worse, he then turned around and shouted in the hearing of all the people watching from the walls of Jerusalem that they were fools to trust in Hezekiah's leadership and even more foolish to trust in their God to deliver them, because it was obvious that the gods of Assyria were far more powerful. He also tried to entice them to surrender with this promise: he said, "Come out, make your peace with us now and we will provide a bright, plentiful future for you, a new 'Promised Land.' So don't listen to Hezekiah any longer or trust in your God. Your only hope of living is to surrender to us." Well, Hezekiah's officials came back to Hezekiah, tearing their clothes along the way, which is a symbol of being distraught and grief. And they were shook – of course they were. They told Hezekiah the words of the Rabshakeh, and Hezekiah tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth. And guess where he went? He went to the house of the Lord, the temple. He went to church to be with God. He also sent his officials to Isaiah, God's prophet, seeking a word from the Lord. Isaiah sent word back to Hezekiah quickly: "Thus says the Lord: don't be afraid of the words you have heard which have reviled me. I know what's going on, and I will put a spirit in Sennacherib so that he'll hear a rumor and return to his own land. In fact, I will cause Sennacherib to fall by the sword in his own land."

In the meantime, the Rabshakeh went and reported to Sennacherib that Hezekiah would not surrender but would fight them to the end. So Sennacherib, the king, sent a letter to Hezekiah telling him he was being a fool for trusting that God would deliver him. And in this letter, he wrote, basically, "Your God is lying to you when he promises that Jerusalem will not fall to me. Your God can't and will not help you. Look at our record of victories over all the other gods and kings we face. You can't win this battle." Hezekiah, being a man of faith, took the letter into the temple again and prayed to God. We read that earlier. Listen to the prayer again.

Oh, Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim. You are God, you alone. Of all the kingdoms of the earth, you've made Heaven and Earth. Incline your ear and hear and open your eyes and see. Hear the words of Sennacherib, which he sent to mock you. Truly, oh Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste

the nations in their lands and have hurled their gods into the fire because they weren't really God – just wood and stone. Lord, our God, save us. I pray you from Sennacherib's hand so that all the kingdoms of the Earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone.

That is a real prayer of faith, isn't it? A prayer of faith in the bigness and the power of God over everything. It's not only a prayer that asks for deliverance, but it's a kingdom prayer, basically – that God would be known and glorified among all the kingdoms as God alone. "Show them, God, who you are," Hezekiah was praying.

The next day, Isaiah the Prophet sent a word from the Lord to Hezekiah, saying, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel. I've heard your prayer concerning Sennacherib. And this is the word that I have for that King Sennacherib. "Whom have you mocked and reviled? The holy one of Israel. You think you're so great, you boast of your accomplishments; nothing but arrogance. I'm going to let you in on a little secret. You see, haven't you heard? I determined all of this long ago. I plan from days of old what now I bring to pass – that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded. They've become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass in the housetops, blighted before it's growing. But Sennacherib, I know you're rising in your city. You're going out and coming in and you're raging against me. And because you have raged against me and your arrogance has come to my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth and I will turn you back on the way by which you came." As for you, Hezekiah, I promise you and your people shall remain where you are and will soon be planting and harvesting again. Normalcy is coming. Sennacherib will not enter this city, for I will defend it, to save it for my own sake and for the sake of my servant, David.

And guess what? Sure enough, the next morning, when the people of Jerusalem looked out over the walls of Jerusalem towards the Syrian army's encampment, guess what they saw? There was no movement or stirring or signs of life, for Sennacherib's army lay dead, all 185,000 of them. They had been slain by an angel of the Lord during the night. The battle and victory was the Lord's. And when Sennacherib heard about this, he gathered his troops and went home, defeated with his tail between his legs. And sometime after this, the other part of Isaiah's prophecy came to pass. Sennacherib was assassinated by two of his own sons while he was worshipping one of his gods in his

temple, who couldn't seem to protect him. I would call that poetic justice. He couldn't protect him because that god didn't exist. There is but one God alone.

We now have some important words, don't we, to add to our list of who God is. God is God alone, and he is in charge. Let me say it again. God is God alone, and He is in charge. He's almighty. He's omnipotent. He holds this world in the palm of his hands. Now, as one of God's own through faith in Christ Jesus, I don't know about you, but I need to hear that truth about God again and again, because sometimes the future looks hopeless on the surface. The battle looks bad, like bad and evil, and godlessness is in control and headed towards a major victory, just like in this story. The battle looks lost for us. And you and I both know that being God's children doesn't make one immune from hardships and trials and temptations and attacks as we strive to serve him in the world. The battle is on for us every day – we're under attack. Scripture tells us there's an enemy who seeks to tempt and destroy us along the way. He's behind it all. The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 6, talks about this spiritual warfare that we're in the midst of in this broken world as we wait for the final consummation of history. Hear these words:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness; against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

We are still in a battle, but don't be afraid. Don't give in to despair. That's in our story for today. We see that our God is God alone. He's in charge. There's, in fact, no other god. All other so-called gods are human concoctions that cannot help anyone, cannot overcome you. Don't you suppose that Satan was at work in all of this paganism and darkness that was going on in Assyria and the surrounding countries? Only God, who has revealed himself to us ultimately in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, has the ability to save us and give us the strength for today and the bright hope for tomorrow. In Christ, the battle has been won. God alone holds this whole world in his hands. History is "his story." We see again in this story that nothing and no one is going to get in the way of his redemptive plan to save his world. He's already written the ending and it's good and perfect. So, come Lord Jesus – he knows what he's doing, this God of ours, even if we can't understand it or see his hand at work. All I can do is stand firm with him, trusting in his word that the gates of hell shall not prevail against us. I can still be still before him, like Hezekiah, who went to the temple to be alone with God, for

he is with us. I may not have a prophet to turn to, but I do have God's solid, authoritative word for me in Scripture to turn to and trust in and follow. And so do you. So, seek his counsel and strength and open it daily and get to know him. You don't have to face life alone. And like Hezekiah, you and I as well can humbly and confidently approach God in prayer, knowing that he answers prayer in his way and in his time. He can do all things and no human problem is too great for our God.

This is a prayer story today, a great prayer story, teaching us always to turn to God in prayer, ask for help, for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. That's what Hezekiah did. To paraphrase Hezekiah, he says, "Lord, things look bad, but you're God alone and in charge of everything. So, I'm turning to you and leaning on you to intervene so that you can be glorified before all the kingdoms of the world, teaching them that you are God alone." This truth, that he is God alone and in charge, gives me unflagging hope. There is no enemy that can stand against him or against us. Ultimately, God in Christ has defeated our greatest enemies – sin and death and the power of the devil – through the death and the resurrection of Jesus. The glorious day is coming when they will exist no more. They'll be destroyed once and for all. There's a new Heaven and a new Earth coming for the children of God. And in the meantime, we confidently wait and serve God as the Kingdom of God does its mop up operations. And we know that there's nothing – and I mean nothing – that can separate us from the love of God in Christ, Jesus, our Lord. Hallelujah! Kings and kingdoms shall come and go, but God's kingdom is forever.

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, and I hope you are, as you face your battles, I encourage you to be confident in the Lord in all matters. And as you serve him as one of his beloved, be a person of prayer and seek his word and be still and know and learn over and over again that he and he alone is God and in charge. And he loves you. He gave his son to make you his own forever. That's how much he loves you. Back in the 16th century, there was a fellow named Martin Luther who took a psalm, Psalm 46, that some Bible scholars have speculated was written following this Hezekiah story, and used it to write "A Mighty Fortress," a hymn which reflects Luther's awareness of our intense battle with Satan and which also celebrates the truth that God is God alone and the victory is ours in Christ Jesus. Let's listen to it now and even sing along with the words of that hymn and have our battle-worn souls revived again.

Amen.