

Faith Against All Odds

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[0 : 00] Back in November, when we did our Thanksgiving meal, I was sitting during the service while others were sharing about what they were thankful for that year.

And I was really thinking, and I should have said it then, but I didn't, so I'm going to say it now. Over the years, I've been thinking about how, and I'm not sure when it exactly happened, but at this point, I realize what a loving church family that I have here and how you've become my family.

And I love you so much. And my last church, many of you know parts of my story, and some of you don't, but we went through a very difficult time, went through some great conflict and division, and it really left me scarred and left me hurt a little bit.

And I have healed over the years by being here, by individuals loving me and my family. And I just thank you for that. And I just wanted you to know that because, you know, I feel so close to you and you as my church family today.

If you have your Bibles, I'd like to ask you to look with me, if you would, at 2 Kings. We're going to be looking at a couple different verses in 2 Kings. We're going to start there, what you see on the board, in chapter 18.

[1 : 28] But we'll be looking at a couple verses in chapter 17, and we'll be looking at some in chapter 19 as well. I will have them on the board in just a moment, but I always encourage you to look those up in your Bibles as well and read along in the Scripture.

That gives you an opportunity to make sure that what we have there really is what's in the Word. It also keeps you bringing your Bibles, carrying your Bibles, using your Bibles.

I hate to hear churches today that the people have basically quit carrying their Bibles with them and quit studying it for themselves. But never take anyone's Word. Never take my Word.

Never take Fred's Word if it doesn't align with the Word of God because that is ultimately superior and supreme. But we're going to be looking in 2 Kings chapter 18, verses 17 through 25.

The king of Assyria sent his supreme commander, his chief officer and his field commander with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem.

[2 : 33] They came up to Jerusalem and stopped at the aqueduct of the upper pool on the road to the washerman's field. They called for the king. And Elikim, son of Hilkiyah, the palace administrator, Shebna, the secretary, and Joah, son of Asaph, the recorder, went out to them.

The field commander said to them, Tell Hezekiah, this is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says. On what are you basing this confidence of yours?

You say you have strategy and military strength, but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending that you rebel against me?

Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man's hand and wounds him if he leans on it. Such is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to all who depend on him.

And if you say to me, we are depending on the Lord our God, isn't he the one whose high places and altars has Akiyah removed, saying to Judah in Jerusalem, You must worship before this altar in Jerusalem.

[3 : 49] Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria. I will give you 2,000 horses if you can put riders on them. How can you repulse one officer of the least of my master's officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen?

Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this place without word from the Lord? The Lord Himself told me to march against this country and destroy it.

Let's call the Lord in prayer. Father, we thank you for this day, this opportunity to be together as the body of Christ.

And I pray that as we study your word today, I pray that it is not my words that are heard, but it's the Holy Spirit speaking through your word to each and every heart here today.

And I pray that this is a message that will uplift, that will encourage, and give us faith and hope to enter into a new year, holding tightly to your hand and going forth with confidence that you will be with us as you have in the past.

[5 : 04] And we praise you and we thank you, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. This morning we're going to see that King Hezekiah, that was the king of Judah, found himself in a very difficult position.

You know, Judah had found themselves besieged, I should say Jerusalem, because the Assyrians had invaded the southern kingdom and had already conquered all of the fortified cities of Judah, say Jerusalem.

And now they've surrounded Jerusalem and they've besieged it. At this time, the Assyrian army was the largest and most powerful army, certainly of the world.

And they had already conquered the northern kingdom, which the northern kingdom of Israel consisted of 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel. And therefore, the southern kingdom was much smaller, consisting of only two of the 12 tribes of Israel.

And Assyria has already conquered the larger tribe, or the kingdom. And therefore, you can see the position, or the predicament, that King Hezekiah finds himself in at this particular time, where the Assyrians have surrounded Jerusalem and have besieged them, and basically have given them very little choice, either surrender to the Assyrians, or to be destroyed, and certainly annihilated.

[6 : 30] And so what would King Hezekiah do? Would he trust in the Lord to deliver Judah from the hands of the Assyrians? Now when we think about that, he's going to trust the Lord, but the Lord raised up the Assyrians to defeat and destroy the northern kingdom.

And so King Hezekiah, though, was not like the other kings of Israel or Judah. He had submitted himself to the Lord. But would he trust God to deliver them?

And if God did not do that, if God failed to deliver them, then they risk being annihilated. They risked being destroyed and even exiled like other nations.

Or could King Hezekiah decide to simply surrender to the Assyrians? They would be exported to other lands, but at least they would live, and they wouldn't be destroyed.

In that day and time, when a conquering nation or military conquered a people, they would export them. They would take the leading people of that society or civilization, they'd take the skilled, they'd take the educated, they would take the important, maybe royal families, and important individuals, and they would move them and settle them into another land, maybe where they had already conquered.

[8 : 00] And eventually, those people groups would mix. And people say the northern kingdom would lose their identity altogether. And that's what has happened to the northern kingdom.

The Assyrians came in, conquered them, put fish hooks in their mouths, and led them out, and settled them in lands that they had already conquered. But the northern kingdom has lost its identity.

To us, the northern kingdom doesn't exist anymore. And from this point forward, all references to Israel, even today, is really a reference to the two tribes that made up the southern kingdom, or Judah.

But verse 7 tells us that the Lord allowed that to happen. Why? Because of the sin of the northern kingdom. They had allowed themselves to abandon their faith in the Lord, and had gotten far away from keeping the covenant that God had made with Abraham.

And they were worshipping other gods. And so, God raised up the Assyrians to come in and to conquer them and to lead them away. So, what would King Hezekiah do in this situation?

[9 : 12] Would he trust in the Lord, or would he surrender to the Assyrians and allow his people to be deported and maybe completely lose their identity?

Often, the struggles that we face in life today, maybe they're not to the magnitude of what King Hezekiah found himself facing, but often, the struggles that we face in our lives today often seem bigger than ourselves.

They seem greater than our abilities maybe to handle. You know, what are some of the struggles that you may have been facing? Maybe health issues, financial issues, marital issues, maybe struggling with a wayward child, maybe job issues.

We face many different challenges and struggles in our lives today, and many of those seem to be greater than our own abilities to be able to handle.

However, what I want us to see today as we study this situation that Hezekiah finds himself in, that if we will focus upon the Lord and His ability, then we will have faith and confidence that He will see us through these times, that the Lord will be with us in those moments.

[10:34] My secretary at my last church had a little cartoon beside her desk that I always enjoyed seeing. It said, instead of focusing upon how big the storm is, tell the storm how big your God is, and it's focusing on the Lord and God's ability to see us through those storms of life, see us through those difficulties and those hardships.

And I think that if we will go into the new year, 2018, and whatever challenges we face, whatever difficulties we encounter, whatever struggles stand before us, keep our faith in the Lord, that He will deliver us through those times.

He will deliver us through those circumstances and He will use those circumstances to bring glory and honor to Him. Sometimes God uses those circumstances in our lives to help us to grow in our faith or to bring us in a nearer relationship with Him.

Do you remember Paul in the New Testament? And he had a thorn in the flesh. What was the purpose of that? Why did God allow that into his life?

It was because he was getting puffed up with pride. He had experienced things that no one else had experienced in his relationship with God. And God was using him in mighty and miraculous ways and he was in danger of being puffed up with pride and arrogance and so God brought a thorn into his flesh that we're not sure what exactly what it was but we do know that he used it to humble Paul bringing back to his knees and back into that relationship with him.

[12:20] Sometimes God allows those things to happen in our lives. You know after we receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and our Savior sometimes we think that's the end and we just sit back and we wait now for God to come and take us to heaven right?

But what is God's purpose for our lives once we've received Jesus as our Lord and Savior? The one thing that he desires to do in every one of our lives is to mold us and shape us into the image of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit comes to live within us and he begins working and molding and shaping us to become in the image of Christ. And if it takes difficulties, if it takes hardships, if it takes struggles, he will not hesitate to put us through those things because his ultimate goal is not our happiness but his ultimate goal is us being in the image of Jesus Christ.

And sometimes some of us are hard-headed and stubborn and wayward and sometimes God has to use those things to humble us and to bring us to a point where we're depending on him, leaning on him and surrendering to areas in our lives where he's trying to mold and shape us into the image of Christ.

But what struggles are you facing today? What challenges have you endured recently that you do not believe God can handle? Is there anything in your life that's too big for God?

[13:59] you know, Romans 8.28 tells us that all things work for the good of those who love the Lord. It doesn't say God caused everything, but it says God is working in every situation and every circumstance bringing about the good of those who love the Lord.

Also, Luke 1.37 says, for nothing is impossible with God. what challenges, what struggles, what hardships then are you facing or will you face in your life that is greater than God's ability to handle? I know of none. I know at times the Lord may bring us to the edge where we think we cannot handle another thing, but we have to look back at the times in our lives where God has already brought us through and be reminded of the things that God has done in our lives and look back and see how He has been working in our lives and bringing us to where we are even now and trust and have faith that despite our understanding that God is still working in those situations and circumstances in our lives, helping us to grow in our faith, grow in our character, grow in our endurance, even preparing us maybe for future works that He would have us to do and ultimately He's working to bring glory and honor among Himself.

You know, Israel had been led into the promised land by Joshua back in Deuteronomy and God had clearly instructed them in Deuteronomy 28 that if they were faithful and they were obedient to His commands, He would always bless them.

But that wasn't the full message, was it? What else did He go on to tell them? He said that if you fail to be obedient, if you fail to be faithful, then what?

[16:07] He said, I will curse you. Unfortunately, the northern kingdom forgot that second part of that message. Really, they forgot the first part as well.

And they had moved far away from being faithful and obedient to the Lord. They had abandoned the faith of the God of Abraham and the God of Moses who had led them out of Egypt. And they had begun to worship other gods and they had become, you know, trying to be more like the nations around them and worshipping the gods that the nations around them had, were worshipping.

And as a loving God will, God didn't just punish them immediately. What did He do? He sent prophets. He sent the prophets to them with words of warning and message for them to return to being faithful to the God of Abraham, the one true and only God, to return to being faithful and obedient to the covenant that God had made with them and He would bless them once again. But the Jews were very hard-headed and stubborn and they refused to listen to the prophets. The northern kingdom had gotten so wicked and so vile that they did something that we can't even begin to imagine today.

[17:33] And that was they were, they got into child sacrifices. They would take their own children and burn them on altars to false gods.

And so God raised up the Assyrian nation and He led them to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel. Look at chapter 17 verses 3 through 8.

Salmanazar, king of Assyria, came up to attack Hoswe who had been Salmanazar's vassal and had paid him tribute.

But the king of Assyria discovered that Hoswe was a traitor for he had sent envoys to Saul, king of Egypt, and he no longer paid tribute to the king of Assyria as he had done year by year.

Therefore Salmanazar seized him and put him in prison. The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years.

[18:39] In the ninth year of Hoswe, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan, on the harbor river, and in the towns of the Medes.

All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

They worshipped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced.

You know, the northern kingdom had forgotten the covenant that God had made with them and as a result, God punished them and destroyed them. And during this same time frame, king Hezekiah, king of Judah, the southern kingdom.

You know, Hezekiah's father was a very evil king and he did many wrong things in the eyes of the Lord. And yet Hezekiah was not like his father.

[19:47] The scriptures tell us that there were no other kings from the time of David on that were like Hezekiah. He honored God and actually tore down the Asherah poles and the places of false worship throughout the land.

He did everything within his power as king to lead his nation back to honoring, you know, the one true God and to being faithful to him. And as a result, God honored him and God blessed him and he was successful in all that he did.

It was his faith in the Lord that led him then to quit paying, you know, tribute to the king of Assyria. He trusted in the Lord and he refused to pay that price anymore.

However, when he failed to pay the price the Assyrians had set before him, then the Assyrians invaded back in to Judah, conquered all the fortified cities and now have besieged Jerusalem. You know, this reminds us that our faith at times cost us something. At times, our faith in the Lord comes at a price.

[20:58] And I mention that because so often we take a stand for the Lord and we think, well, everything should be perfect, well, and good, and yet we run into even greater difficulties.

We're at war. We're in a spiritual battle. I believe right now the United States is in a spiritual battle for the soul of this nation. And there will be times when we take a stand for God that we may suffer consequences of that.

But we do it in justice to ourselves as well as others when we say that if I accept Christ and I do what he tells me to do, I'll never have any problems in life.

It'll be a walk in the park and everything will be well and good. And those of you that have been Christians for any length of time at all know that's not true. We will face challenges. We will face difficulties. We will face hardships. But our faith in God is not that if we follow him, he'll handle everything and we'll never have a struggle in our life, is it?

[22 : 03] So what is our faith supposed to be in? Our faith should be that when we give our life to the Lord, we put our life in his hands and we trust him to take our life and do with us what he will to bring glory and honor to his name, to bring about his will and to advance the kingdom.

And sometimes that may be going through difficulties. Sometimes that may be hardships. I personally think the world needs to see that we're willing to worship God, Jesus Christ, if he doesn't do anything for us.

We don't need to be like the people of the New Testament who follow Jesus around just because he fed the hungry or raised, you know, the dead or healed the sick, many of them follow just to see what he would do for them.

We need to follow Christ because of what he's already done for us upon the cross and for that and that alone. If he never does another thing in my life and I live a miserable, wretched life due to hardships, not due to sin, but due to just struggles I face, then praise be to the Lord Jesus Christ because of what he's already done for me.

Oftentimes I hear people say we're in the safest place when we're in the center of God's will. I want to share with you today that's not true.

[23 : 32] Ask Jesus. Was Jesus in the center of God's will when he went to the cross? That wasn't the safe place. Ask many of our missionaries who serve in dangerous places today.

Ask many believers. I was reading a story in Voice of the Martyrs just the other day where they wouldn't say somewhere in Asia. Believers have to have church in their cars and they have to drive around while they do a church service, which you can see there's only going to be two, three, four of them in a car.

But that's the only place that they can meet that they don't fear being heard or, you know, people coming in and killing them for their faith. A few years back, my wife and my daughter Ashley were looking at going to Honduras.

And Ashley was only 12 at the time. And they were set to leave at something like 3 o'clock in the morning. Well, at 9 o'clock that night, the team leader calls me and he says, we need to have a meeting at the church in an hour.

So I said, okay. And I went up there with my wife and daughter. They said, Honduras has had a coup and they've run the president out of the country and there's rioting, you know, and conflict and we don't know whether we should go or not.

[24 : 55] And I was thinking there were several teenagers going on that trip and I thought there's no way parents are going to let their teenagers go on a trip like that to a third world country who is experiencing a coup and having rioting and fighting going on.

But when I got up there to my great surprise, you know, all of them were like, oh, let's go. You can send my kids. You're in the safest place when you're in the center of God's will.

And I said, that is not true. I said, it is not true at all. And they're like, well, you're just afraid to let your wife and daughter go. I said, I'm letting them make that decision and I will let them do what they feel the Lord leads them to do.

But I also shared with them what you have to do is if you feel God's leading you to go, then go. Put your life in God's hands and trust that whatever happens, whether you live or die, whether you're attacked, put in jail or you suffer, you're in God's hands and you're trusting that he's using those circumstances to fulfill his will and to bring glory and honor unto himself.

You know, mission teams, we need to understand that. When you go on a mission trip, there's no guarantee that something bad won't happen. And I mention that because the first time it does go wrong, I don't want to stand in back going, well, we trusted God.

[26 : 21] Why did God allow that to happen? Sometimes God uses circumstances and situations like that to accomplish his will. We don't understand. We may not even like it.

But when we go, whether it's on a mission trip or across the street, we put our life in God's hands and we trust God. We trust that he will use us to fulfill his will and his purposes in our life.

We trust that he's using our lives and the situations and the circumstances that we find ourselves in to bring glory unto himself and to advance the kingdom of God.

Hezekiah sent a message to the king of Assyria stating that he had sinned against him. And if they would withdraw, then Judah would pay them the price that they had asked.

This is the one little blemish on Hezekiah's record here is that he stepped back and instead of having complete faith and trust in the Lord, he agreed to pay the price.

[27 : 26] And so he went throughout the land. He took all the silver and gold he could find, including that which was in the temple, and he gave it to the king of Assyria. However, what happens?

The Assyrian king doesn't do what he said he would do. He did not withdraw, but rather he besieged Jerusalem. And so Hezekiah finds himself in a very awkward crisis here with a fundamental question that is still as true today as it was then.

That question is, what do you believe about God? Not what you say, but what do you really believe down in your heart about God? Is God worthy to be trusted?

Can He really fulfill His promises that He has given us today in His word? Do we really believe that? If Hezekiah trusted in the Lord and the Lord wasn't able to deliver them, then Judah would have been conquered by the Assyrians and destroyed.

[28 : 30] But Hezekiah, being the man of God that he was, he went to Isaiah, the prophet, to seek, you know, His word and His advice. Look over in chapter 19, verses 5 through 7, and we will see the message here.

When King Hezekiah's officials came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, Tell your master this is what the Lord says. Do not be afraid of what you have heard, those words with which the underling of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.

Listen, I am going to put a spirit in him that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword.

You know, Isaiah told King Hezekiah not to fear the king of Assyria because God would send him home and then would have him struck down with the sword.

But then Isaiah, he goes to the temple and he cries out unto the Lord on his own, which is a really, really good example for us to follow. When we're facing times when we're seeking wisdom, seeking, you know, direction, facing challenges, it's a good thing to go to spiritual leaders or spiritually mature individuals that we trust and go to them asking them for advice, even praying with them.

[29 : 57] But then go directly to God ourselves. Don't necessarily just take the word of others, but learn to go to God ourselves and seek God's direction and seek God's wisdom in our own life.

Well, the Lord heard Hezekiah's prayer and he responded once again through Isaiah. Flip over again, chapter 19, look down at verse 32 through 36.

Therefore, this is what the Lord says concerning the king of Assyria. He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it was shield or build a siege ramp against it.

By the way that He came, He will return. He will not enter this city, declares the Lord. I will defend this city and save it for my sake and for the sake of David, my servant.

That night, the angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp.

When the people got up the next morning, there were all the dead bodies.

[31 : 04] So Sennacherib, king of Assyria, broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and he stayed there. You know, until recently, it wasn't believed by non-Christians that Nineveh even existed.

You know, there were archaeologists and others who doubted the stories of the Bible and that Nineveh even existed. But recently, and I think this is amazing, the more scientists and the more archaeologists discover, the more they prove the Word of God to be true.

And it hasn't been long ago that they found evidence that Nineveh really did exist. Now, I couldn't find it, but Jim Gilstrap told me when he was in seminary that his professors shared with them that, you know, in the archaeological finds of Nineveh that they had recordings of the Assyrian army losing 185,000 soldiers in one night.

How is that possible, certainly in that day and time, other than the Lord? The Lord certainly delivered them in a manner that no one could have even imagined, that no one else could have done it in the way God did it.

And God often does that in our lives. Why? He does it so that He receives the glory, doesn't He? He receives the praise. Not Judah.

[32 : 39] You know, Judah didn't go out and fight a battle. The battle was won without even one single arrow being shot in that day and time.

You know, no one has ever lived without having problems or crisis to arise in their life. We see throughout scriptures men, good, faithful men like Hezekiah facing great challenges.

It can be hard for us to understand why God allows these things to take place in our lives. It can be hard to understand, especially in the midst of them, why God allows them to happen.

But as we look back, especially once we've gotten through a struggle or a hardship or a difficulty, and we look back, I hope we can see the hand of God that was always there, always in the midst of that struggle, always in the midst of that difficulty, right there alongside of us.

You know, we may not always be protected from difficulties and hardships, but God has said He will never leave us nor forsake us, that He will be there with us in the midst of all of those.

[33 : 51] As we stand here on the very last day of the year 2017, and we look back, you remember challenges or struggles that you faced throughout the year?

Can you look back now and see how God's hand was in the midst of that all along? You might not have been able to see it in the moment, but maybe now that we've come through that, we can see it.

You may be in a challenge or a struggle or a difficulty, hardship right now, and you may not be able to see the hand of God. But wait until we get out of it and look back.

We will be able to see it. And so, if you're in the midst of that right now, just hold on to God. Have faith and trust in Him.

And accept His answer. Accept how He's working in your life to bring about His purposes, to bring about His will, to bring about the advance of the kingdom of God.

[35 : 00] And I hope that as we look back on 2017, and we can see the hand of God in our lives. Maybe we didn't go through any struggles. Maybe we had a great year, and it was all happiness and bliss.

But I hope we see the hand of God in that as well. And as we face a new year, 2018, may it not strike fear in our hearts to face a new year, because we don't know what this new year will hold for us.

May we go into that new year holding the hand of God, allowing Him to hold us completely in His arms if necessary. But go forward in faith.

Go forward in trust. Go forward in belief that God is going to be with us in those moments. Those difficulties that are beyond our abilities.

He's going to go forward with us. And that He's going to take our lives. It may not all be perfect happiness and joy, but we're going to trust that God's going to take our lives.

[36 : 06] Excuse me. He's going to use us to bring about His purpose, His will, and to bring glory to His name. Or He may be working in us, preparing us for a work that He still has for us to do.

He may be strengthening our faith, strengthening our character, and helping us to become more and more like Jesus in our life.

King Hezekiah faced what the world would say was a hopeless situation. Some may have said he was crazy to trust in the Lord, but he went to God, heard the word of the Lord, trusted the Lord would see him through, and was willing to accept the consequences if he didn't, but he trusted and believed that he would, and God did.

God did exactly what He said He would do. As we go into 2018, not only do we trust that God will use us and be there with us, but we can trust His word.

We can know that He is faithful and that He will be faithful to the word of God, and so may we not only be a people of faith, but may we also go into 2018 striving to walk closer to the Lord this year than we've ever been.

[37 : 29] Maybe we strive to know His word better than we've ever known it before, and to obey it, and to apply it to our lives.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer. Father, we just thank You so much for Your word. We thank You for examples throughout Scripture like King Hezekiah, that He shows us an example of a man trusting in You, and You honoring that faith and that trust and delivering him and Judah from an army that was far superior to them.

And I pray that as we enter into 2018, I pray that we can have faith and trust in You, but that we will also be an honorable people who obey Your word, who study Your word, and apply Your word to

our lives, and that You will use us throughout our families, throughout our community, throughout our state and beyond, to allow the light of Christ to shine through us and others to see You and come to know You as their Lord and Savior as well.
And it's in Your holy name we pray. Amen.