

A large, spreading tree with green leaves stands in a grassy field. The tree has a thick, dark trunk and a wide canopy of green leaves. In the background, there are other trees and a line of green hills under a blue sky with white clouds. Several sheep are grazing in the field.

Standing Firm

by David Burr

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2 Chronicles 29:1-5; 23-25; 30:1-5; Acts 26:15-23; Revelation 3:11

Introduction

Like a number of households represented here, my wife and I generally just read through the Bible in the house. We have gone through chapter by chapter a few times, and it was quite recently that we found ourselves in the second book of Chronicles. Sometimes, something comes freshly to you that had not so much struck you before, and I was struck with what this second book of Chronicles has to say about Hezekiah and some lessons that we might learn from him.

Lessons from Hezekiah

I want just to say two things before I begin. The first is that Hezekiah, as it says, was a king. You and I are not kings in that sense. We do not have the kind of influence which Hezekiah was able to have. So we do not aspire to things, perhaps, as great as were given to Hezekiah to do. The other thing is, of course, that Hezekiah was not a Christian. It was not given to him to be a Christian in the days in which he lived. You and I can be Christians, and thank God for everyone here who is a Christian. I trust that you find yourself among them.

But Hezekiah was a man who had the light that belongs to the Old Testament. The great thing is that he acted upon the light that he had, and in that we might find something useful for ourselves. It is in that spirit that I call attention to him.

Hezekiah and other men appear in Scripture, but they are not the end of ministry at all: Christ is the object of ministry, and is the purpose of His people being gathered together. But the Old Testament and the New give us plenty of examples of souls that were used of God, that had the kind of experiences in many cases that you and I might have, and there are lessons we might learn from them.

So in that spirit I have a little to say about some salient points about Hezekiah, and we might well begin where he takes the throne in chapter 29. In doing so you may know that this is not the only place that speaks about Hezekiah. You will find him in 2 Kings and again in the prophet Isaiah. Those references are rather different, but they are all about the same man. 2 Kings and Isaiah tell us mostly about a period of great testing in Hezekiah's life. That is not left out here, but it is not what 2 Chronicles is occupied with. It is occupied with the kind of things that we have just been reading about. It is very interesting to compare the two: what we have in Chronicles, with what we have in 2 Kings and from chapter 36 of Isaiah onward.

Doing Right

As Hezekiah began to reign he was immediately committed to doing what was right in the sight of the Lord; and then in the first year and in the first month of his reign he had his priorities right. He opened the doors of the house of Jehovah and repaired them. Now, there is something here that you and I might seek to learn, and that is this:

he was the son of a bad king and he was followed, sadly, by another bad king. So he had to stand very much on his own feet. One of the things you and I have to learn as Christians is to stand on our own feet. It is not a question of being independent, as if my opinion is the one that matters and never mind what I might have learned from others. It is a question of taking responsibility both for my own life and for such part as the Lord may see fit to give me in the things of the Lord and of His God and Father.

So with Hezekiah – we do not know how it came about. He certainly did not learn it from his father, but he had convictions of his own and he stood by them. He saw that the first thing that needed to be done was as regards the temple: the place where God at that time was worshipped. He realised that things would not do as they were, and his language is very strong. He opened the doors which had been shut, and he repaired them because they had fallen into disrepair and disuse. He brought in those that should have taken a responsible part, and you can see that they responded to his appeal. And he uses strong language: he says, *“hallow yourselves now, and hallow the house of Jehovah the God of your fathers, and carry forth the filthiness out of the sanctuary”*. A very solemn thing that such conditions should ever have entered the sanctuary of God! But you will find that the profession of the Christian faith today is not without things which correspond very much to this filthiness. There is nothing that you and I can do about the general and public profession of the faith. But we can seek to set it right by one. And that is one of the first things that we might try to learn from Hezekiah.

Well, he had a good response. There came a day when the Levites came back and said *“we have done what you asked”* (v.18). And then Hezekiah saw the next step that needed to be taken was to take up the line of sacrifice which seems to have been lost sight of. The first thing we are told where I began to read at verse 23 was, *“And they brought near the he-goats of the sin-offering before the king and the congregation; and they laid their hands upon them”*. That is, they identified themselves with the sin offering: they recognised that they had had part in the conditions that had prevailed. They took responsibility. They did not attempt to say that it is other people’s fault: they took it upon themselves, which is a recurrent lesson in Scripture. Where I see failure and weakness I must take it home to myself. It is no good looking to see what others ought to have done, because if others have not done it, what is to happen? Is nothing to be done? Or will I take some responsibility?

The People of God

So, *“they made purification for sin with their blood upon the altar, to make an atonement for all Israel”*. Now that is another thing that is very interesting about Hezekiah. For many years the kingdom had been divided. There was Judah on the one hand with Benjamin, and then there were the ten other tribes. By this time, not very long before, Israel, the ten northern tribes, had succumbed to the power of the king of Assyria. There is plenty in Scripture to tell us that it was in the governmental ways of God that this happened. But it had, and so Hezekiah had two choices. One was to say, Well, there is nothing left but Judah and my own kingdom. Or he could say, God is still interested in those other tribes and those that still inhabit the rest of the

land. And, without fail, he took up all the tribes of Israel, to make an atonement for all Israel, *“because for all Israel, said the king, is the burnt-offering and the sin-offering”*. It is available and intended for all. As we might see later, not all would take advantage of it, but it was available to all. We never want to have narrow thoughts about God’s interests. I am not now speaking about questions of Christian fellowship or practical matters of that kind. But we should have whole thoughts of God’s interests here on the earth and seek to minister to them in whatever small way we can. So, the sin offering was offered. And then there was the burnt offering, *“because for all Israel, said the king, is the burnt-offering and the sin-offering”*.

And the next thing he did was to set up a service of song and music; cymbals, lutes and harps. *“And Hezekiah commanded to offer up the burnt-offering on the altar. And at the moment the burnt-offering began, the song of Jehovah began”*. It is a very happy thing when the service of God can be taken up harmoniously, in the sense of the full company belonging to God, all covered by the same sacrifice for sin and secured in the worth and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. I think we might keep that in mind as to the sin offering and the burnt offering. It set them in liberty. It is a very happy thing if the Lord’s people are able to sing with joyful hearts to the Lord as being set together. It is difficult to do so if they are not set together. *“And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded, all the time until the burnt-offering was finished”*. The two went on together: appreciation of the worth and work of Christ and a response from joyful hearts.

The Passover

Now, Hezekiah has something else to do. He realises that the Passover has fallen into disuse. A solemn thing that that should be so: the appointed feast that should mark and celebrate the deliverance of God’s people out of Egypt. So he takes up further responsibility. He wrote all round, *“And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh”, chapter 30*. He was faithful to what he had said, he sent it to all Israel and he acted upon it. He sought to get in touch with those who needed the word. And grace even extended to delaying the Passover. We might say that was very abnormal, but provision had been made for that happening. In Numbers chapter 9 there is provision for certain circumstances in which the Passover might be delayed. It does refer there to those that might be on a journey or so forth. Hezekiah was authorised by the Lord to make provision for the circumstances in which the testimony was.

So out went the couriers. One wonders how they felt as they left the security of Judah to enter this territory that by now was much under the control of the Assyrians. A good many of the people had gone to Assyria, a part seems to have become the lost tribes of Israel. But they went and gave a message. You will find, though, that in verse 10 of chapter 30, *“they passed through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, even to Zebulun; but they laughed them to scorn and mocked them”*. Sadly, that has to be accepted. You cannot always expect a good response to the appeal of God in the gospel, let alone *“the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14)*. But nonetheless there were some that came, *“Nevertheless certain of Asher and Manasseh*

and of Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem". It is very interesting to see how these things develop. There comes a time when they were able to celebrate the Passover together.

Now, dear friends and brethren, you and I do not need to gather together to celebrate the Passover. 1 Corinthians 5 makes it clear that *"our passover, Christ, has been sacrificed"*. There is no need to go over that again. What we are called upon to celebrate is the Lord's supper which, I think I might say, springs from the Passover but is distinguished from it. But what the apostle does say, (Christ having been sacrificed) is, *"let us celebrate the feast"*. By this he means the feast of unleavened bread. He is graciously used of the Spirit to tell us exactly what he has in mind by that, *"let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with leaven of malice and wickedness, but with unleavened bread of sincerity and truth"* (1 Corinthians 5:8). I mention that not, of course, to accuse any lover of the Lord of being marked by malice or wickedness, but just to remember what we should leave behind. We leave behind what belongs to what we were speaking of earlier, to the old man; what should be left behind in the death of Christ.

Sincerity and Truth

So what is one practical consequence? Well, sincerity and truth. Not very demanding; it is very testing, of course, for those of our brethren who are persecuted, for them to stand for the truth – that can be very demanding indeed. But sincerity and truth should not be too demanding for you and me: just to be marked by those two very simple features of sincerity – honesty, reality – and truth. It makes a good landmark in my soul history if I commit myself to being marked by the truth, standing for it. There is ample truth in the Scripture. Of course, at its most elementary the truth is just speaking the truth, being faithful to what I know to be true and right. But truth does extend beyond that in Scripture. It takes us all the way, in fact, to One who could say, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"* (John 14:6). We look to the Lord Jesus for full enlightenment as to the truth.

It is very interesting to go through the gospels – what you will find, I am sure most here will have found, is that there will come a point when something leaps off the page as being the Lord's word to you, to me. All of Scripture is profitable, it is all inspired (2 Timothy 3:16). But sometimes the Lord has something particular in mind, as I trust He did in calling my attention to 2 Chronicles. It is important to see the truth as it is in Jesus (Ephesians 4:21). If I begin to separate the truth from the Lord Jesus, I shall become hard and demanding. It is not that the Lord stood for compromise. He says Himself, I am *"Altogether that which I also say to you"* (John 8:25). But the truth as it is in Jesus will affect me in my spirit and it will have a bearing on the way in which I bring the truth before others – *"as the truth is in Jesus"*.

The Lord was the truth and yes, He could be severe, but no one could ever have had any doubt that He loved the one to whom He was speaking. One very touching passage when there were all kinds of people gathered together: scribes, Pharisees and so on, *"the Lord's power was there to heal them"* (Luke 5:17). It was as much available to them, if they would take advantage of it, as it was to anyone else.

Before we move on, we might notice that the people enjoyed the seven days of the feast of unleavened bread. So much, indeed, that they extended it for another seven days. A unique experience! It shows what they had come to value.

Just before we leave Hezekiah I would say one more thing: that is, we cannot ignore what is said about him in 2 Kings and Isaiah. He had these very solemn experiences which are very interesting in their own light. But there came a point where he rather fell away. We just have to remember that there is no such thing as a perfect vessel other than the Lord Jesus Himself.

The Apostle Paul

I would like now to look at the Acts of the Apostles to see another man who came to know what he believed and stood by it: stood by it rather more than Hezekiah did. We are not at the end of Paul's ministry in Acts 26. We are coming to the end of the detailed history of events in which he was involved. But we do have several epistles that he wrote in the prison where he ended up at Rome, and they are of great value to us.

Here we have a great occasion of public testimony before a very mixed audience, very mixed indeed. There is a Roman governor, there is a local Jewish king, a client king, who history tells us were no better than they ought to be and probably worse. But it was given to Paul to have the opportunity to preach to them. Yes, it was an address, but it is also a preaching.

Here is his testimony as to how he ever found himself to be a Christian. He has spoken about how he was on the road to Damascus and how he was converted there and came to know the One whom he was persecuting, came to know Him as Lord. He says, *"Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest"*. But the Lord had something immediately for him to do. It says, *"rise up and stand on thy feet"*. He had a reason for appearing: He had something in mind for Paul to do. You and I have greatly profited – I trust we have – by the ministry that was entrusted to Paul. You and I have benefited greatly from it and should continue to seek to do so.

"... to appoint thee to be a servant and a witness both of what thou hast seen, and of what I shall appear to thee in, taking thee out from among the people, and the nations, to whom I send thee". Paul was called to be separate from the Jewish world. He was called upon to be separate from the political and Gentile world. But he was still sent to them, most remarkably. And you will see, earlier in the Acts and in his epistles what it meant for Paul to be apart from Israel, apart from the world and yet ministering to them.

"... to whom I send thee". And what was he being sent for? *"... to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God"*. These fundamental truths come at the beginning of every soul history with God.

"... that they may receive remission of sins": so that again is fundamental, that I should have my sins forgiven.

"... and inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith in me". You will notice that in this kind of audience Paul did not set out to minister in any detail what you and I would call the truth of the assembly.

What he did speak about was *"an inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith"*

in me". In saying that he was effectively referring to the assembly or church of God, because that is where the inheritance is to be found. It is available to every believer, but the inheritance is something that you share with others; I should be sharing with others. It is a great advantage to be able to gather together and enjoy the inheritance, share it together with others. You will then find that there are those who have enjoyed more of it than perhaps you have or I have. So you can learn from them and draw from them what the Lord has given to them. And then it may be that I have something to contribute (and I should seek to do so): to be available, one to the other – *"an inheritance among"*, no, not among those I get along with, not among my personal friends, but *"among them that are sanctified by faith in me"*. That is the common ground of Christians. Not that they are friends on natural lines at all; 2 Corinthians 5 leaves that behind. The links that we have are in the Lord.

So Paul was not disobedient – *"I was told what I must do and so I did it!"* And so he says, *"Having therefore met with the help which is from God"*. He acknowledges he has been sustained by God in his service. He says, *"I have stood firm unto this day"*. Well, we can leave Hezekiah behind, because there did come a point where we cannot say that Hezekiah did stand firm. But Paul says, *"I have stood firm unto this day"*.

Standing Firm

Now, dear brethren, what can I say about that? Have I stood firm unto this day? Well, I know the answer to that question and I do not need to share it with you. You do not need to share your answer with me, either. But, have we stood firm unto this day? Do you still value the heritage, value what has come to you by way of godly teaching? Do not let it go, because it is of value even though it may need to be held in conditions of much weakness.

Paul was standing and was prepared to stand on his own. He was prepared to remain in prison, *"I have stood firm unto this day, witnessing both to small and great"*. To whom did he witness? Those to whom he was speaking probably thought themselves as among the great. Well, Paul says he witnessed to small and great. We all need the gospel.

And, he says, all that I have to say is entirely consistent with the Old Testament. Now, that is not to be misunderstood. The New Testament does give us fresh light as to the meaning and bearing of the Old. But be assured that the Old Testament is of great value in seeing the meaning of the New. But Paul says, there is nothing that I am saying that is inconsistent with the way that God has made Himself known to His earthly people. *"... those things which both the prophets and Moses have said should happen, namely, whether Christ should suffer"*. The first thing that Paul wanted to present to them was the fact that the One that he knew as the Son of God had to suffer.

"... whether he first, through resurrection of the dead, should announce light both to the people and to the nations". As we read it we might say, Well, Paul, you have not said very much at this point. I think he would be entitled to say, I have already said it in the earlier verses. I have gone over the ministry that was given to me. All I am saying now is that there is nothing in it which calls for me to be in prison, that calls for opposition: it is the gospel of the grace of God, it is good for everyone. And Paul

sought to stand to it.

A Verse in Revelation

Everyone knows that in Revelation there are letters to seven churches, and this is the one before last, the letter to Philadelphia. It is a place where there is much to commend. I hardly need to warn a gathering like this – I hardly need to warn anyone against imagining that they have found Philadelphia. I say that because pride is natural to the human heart and I can readily assume that I have more light than others and so forth. Philadelphia is set out for us to show what the Lord would desire that His people should be and indeed what they should seek to be. The further we get along that road the less we shall have to say about it and be humble about any light that we have, thankful as we should be to the mercy that has brought it to us.

These saints are going on well, and there will come a time when everyone will *“do homage before thy feet, and shall know that I have loved thee”*. Once again we have a reference to the love of Christ. They have kept the word of His patience. There is a promise therefore, to be kept out of the hour of trial. But now: *“I come quickly”*. Yes, that is the hope of the church. I trust it is your hope and mine as well.

“... hold fast what thou hast, that no one take thy crown”. Well now, there are crowns spoken about in Scripture. There is one for everyone who loves the appearing of our Lord Jesus (2 Timothy 4:8). I think what the Lord is referring to here is more about whether I will retain by way of witness and conscious enjoyment what I have learnt of Him in my experience along the road.

He says, Hold it fast. There has been a danger – with us all there is a danger – there has been a danger for many years and you and I will have seen some of the fruits of it. People, Christians, begin to say, It is all too difficult and I just find it easier to be part of a congregation and go along with what I can, and so forth. You will know the kind of thing. If it has never crossed your heart, it has mine. I make free confession of that.

But what the Lord says is, *“hold fast what thou hast”*. If you have gained from the scriptures; if you have gained from ministry rightly founded upon them, do not let it go. We have to take account of realities, and in times of trial and difficulty, which can be very real, the temptation is to relax a bit and say that not all that the Bible says can be worked out now; not all the truths of Christian fellowship can be worked out. Well, if I say that, I am really saying that the Spirit of God is not equal to the days in which we are. I would simply seek to encourage us all, myself included, to hold fast what we have. Hezekiah was a good man, a good king but he did let a bit go. Paul did not let go. I think I know which I would rather have as my example. But it is the Lord who preserves us, and it is for the Lord that we seek to be here. For His name's sake.

Address given by David Burr 28 May 2022

Scripture quotations are from the Darby translation unless stated

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