

Choose Wisely | Hezekiah: The Reformer | 1 Kings 18-20

August 20, 2023 | Matthew McNutt

[Title Slide] Do we have any soccer fans here? **Let's get a little Messi**, shall we? Yeah, that was a pretty cheesy pun, but you knew what you were in for when I stood up. On July 21 (2023), Lionel Messi, an Argentinian player, made his Major League Soccer debut with Inter Miami, the Florida soccer team. Messi is no rookie, however. He is considered the greatest soccer player in the world. He has been playing professionally for almost twenty years, has scored over 700 goals, has won the World Cup, has set all sorts of records.¹ And in a shocking move, turning down massive offers from around the world, he just joined the worst team in American Major League Soccer. Seriously.

He arrived in Miami on Tuesday, July 19th. He took the field, and the team captain role, for the first time with Miami after halftime. And immediately scored. At the end of the game, which was tied, with literally only a second or so on the clock, he scored a second goal, bringing in the win. And they have won every game since. Our Philadelphia Union, one of the best teams in the league – it took second place last year, lost to Messi and Inter Miami this past Tuesday night 4-1.

Messi has changed the face of American soccer in just a few weeks. One guy has completely changed it up. Major League Soccer subscriptions on Apple TV have more than doubled already.² Every game he appears in sells out. The Philadelphia game? Seats that normally sell for dozens of dollars went for hundreds or even over a thousand dollars. People paid hundreds for standing only tickets. Messi is the Taylor Swift of soccer.

I say all that because today we're looking at another disrupter, one guy who completely changed it up.

We are working our way through first and second Kings this summer in a series called **"Choose Wisely."** We're turning to Kings because in this ancient record of the history of the Israelite kings, each king's life is summed up with a simple phrase: they did what was pleasing in the Lord's sight, or, they did evil in the Lord's sight. The pattern repeats throughout 1-2 Kings because, ultimately, that is what truly matters.

Today, **we're looking at Hezekiah.** He was such a big deal that he has the longest story of any of the divided kingdom kings at 95 verses.³ Not only that, his story was told not just in 2 Kings, but in Isaiah and 2 Chronicles as well.

2 Kings 18:1-6 (NLT) ¹ Hezekiah son of Ahaz began to rule over Judah in the third year of King Hoshea's reign in Israel. ² He was twenty-five years old when he became king,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lionel_Messi

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/messi-philadelphia-union-inter-miami-leagues-cup-chester-subaru-park/>

³ David T. Lamb, *1-2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 450.

and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. ³ He did what was pleasing in the Lord's sight, just as his ancestor David had done.

Finally, a king that was pleasing in God's sight! The comparison to David is a big deal. Dr. Suzie Park writes in her commentary, "**the comparison to this beloved monarch is close to fawning praise.**"⁴ He's one of two kings to receive this comparison.

⁴ He removed the pagan shrines, smashed the sacred pillars, and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke up the bronze serpent that Moses had made, because the people of Israel had been offering sacrifices to it. The bronze serpent was called Nehushtan.

Dr. David Lamb notes in his commentary that a recent archeological discovery may be connected to this passage; the horns on a gate shrine near Lachish were intentionally cut off to destroy the pagan shrine.⁵ I love when archeology confirms the Bible.

There had been a few previous attempts at reform, but no one had ever gone as far as Hezekiah. The destruction of the bronze serpent is just one piece of that. Numbers 21 records the creation of it; God punished the Israelites by sending poisonous snakes after them. It says many were bitten and died. After Moses prayed for the people, God instructed him to make a bronze snake like the poisonous snakes and attach it to a pole. Anyone that was bitten and looked at it would be healed. Apparently, over time this had gone from being a relic of God's delivery to becoming an idol. I think I can understand why it would be hard to destroy something made by Moses, but Hezekiah recognized that this once good thing had become something evil because of how people used it.

⁵ Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before or after his time. ⁶ He remained faithful to the Lord in everything, and he carefully obeyed all the commands the Lord had given Moses.

2 Chronicles expands on this:

2 Chronicles 29:3-5 (NLT) ³ In the very first month of the first year of his reign, Hezekiah reopened the doors of the Temple of the Lord and repaired them. ⁴ He summoned the priests and Levites to meet him at the courtyard east of the Temple. ⁵ He said to them, "Listen to me, you Levites! Purify yourselves, and purify the Temple of the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Remove all the defiled things from the sanctuary.

⁴ Song-Mi Suzie Park, *2 Kings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), 377.

⁵ Lamb, *1-2 Kings*, 445.

Chronicles goes on to describe the process of purifying the temple – which took 16 days, as well as purifying the priests, and the people and how the nation was excited for Hezekiah’s reforms. It was an incredible time.

2 Chronicles 31:21 (NLT) In all that he did in the service of the Temple of God and in his efforts to follow God’s laws and commands, Hezekiah sought his God wholeheartedly. As a result, he was very successful.

Hezekiah sought his God wholeheartedly. Can we pause on that for a moment? What an incredible legacy, an incredible statement.

Being thousands of years removed it’s easy to miss just how shocking and courageous Hezekiah’s actions were. These verses summarize momentous actions. Kings were assassinated all the time, often by their own family members! The shortest reign was King Zimri in Judah; 1 Kings 16 records that he killed his predecessor, only to reign for seven days before killing himself by burning his citadel down with himself in it because Omri was coming to kill him – Omri then became the next king. His son was Ahab, who we looked at last week.

There was very real risk to pushing these reforms. People don’t give up their religious beliefs easily. He risked his life to change the direction of Judah. Hezekiah sought his God wholeheartedly.

And then, in the fourteenth year of his reign, King Sennacherib of Assyria came with his army and began conquering towns in Judah. Hezekiah scraped together all of the wealth he could find, eleven tons of silver and a ton of gold, to pay a settlement to avoid war. Sennacherib took it and then declared he would conquer them anyway.

2 Kings 19:1 (NLT) When King Hezekiah heard their report, he tore his clothes and put on burlap and went into the Temple of the Lord.

Hezekiah went immediately to prayer. Over the course his life, a pattern of prayer emerges to readers. In good times and bad, Hezekiah consistently turned to God. He also sent word to the prophet Isaiah, who gave this message:

2 Kings 19:6b-7 (NLT) “Say to your master, ‘This is what the Lord says: Do not be disturbed by this blasphemous speech against me from the Assyrian king’s messengers. Listen! I myself will move against him, and the king will receive a message that he is needed at home. So he will return to his land, where I will have him killed with a sword.’”

Sure enough, Sennacherib got word that armies from Ethiopia were attacking another part of his kingdom and so he decided his army would shift there to defend. So he sent word to Hezekiah that while they were about to leave, they would be back and he would destroy them just as he had destroyed many other nations.

2 Kings 19:14-16 (NLT) ¹⁴ After Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it, he went up to the Lord's Temple and spread it out before the Lord. ¹⁵ And Hezekiah prayed this prayer before the Lord: "O Lord, God of Israel, you are enthroned between the mighty cherubim! You alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth. You alone created the heavens and the earth.

¹⁶ Bend down, O Lord, and listen! Open your eyes, O Lord, and see! Listen to Sennacherib's words of defiance against the living God.

I love the image of Hezekiah spreading the letter out before God to see. I wonder at times if we do not see God as close to us as the ancients did. His actions show an intimacy, a connection. He *knew* God was there with him, so he showed God what troubled him. Look how directly he praises God, but also how directly he tells God to act.

2 Kings 19:17-19 (NLT) ¹⁷ "It is true, Lord, that the kings of Assyria have destroyed all these nations. ¹⁸ And they have thrown the gods of these nations into the fire and burned them. But of course the Assyrians could destroy them! They were not gods at all—only idols of wood and stone shaped by human hands.

¹⁹ Now, O Lord our God, rescue us from his power; then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you alone, O Lord, are God."

"Rescue us ... the kingdoms of earth will know that you alone ... are God." We're going to come back to this prayer, but first 2 Kings records something incredible happened that night.

2 Kings 19:35-37 (NLT) ³⁵ That night the angel of the Lord went out to the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. When the surviving Assyrians woke up the next morning, they found corpses everywhere. ³⁶ Then King Sennacherib of Assyria broke camp and returned to his own land. He went home to his capital of Nineveh and stayed there.

Wow. That's a lot. Some have stumbled over these numbers. Did God slaughter that many people? Granted, Assyria was incredibly evil, and in this story repeated blasphemed God, but it is still shocking. Here's the thing, an army that large that long ago is shockingly big. Here's the thing; in recent decades scholars have realized that we may have been translating the ancient Hebrew word that is translated "thousand" here inaccurately. It would be more accurate to translate it as groupings, literally "families" of soldiers – 185 units, which would feel like corpses everywhere but be nowhere near 185,000. Or it could also be translated "generals," as in God killed 185 of the generals, which would be shocking for them to wake up to.⁶ Either way, it also

⁶ Logos, Strong's Talking Greek and Hebrew Dictionary, and Logos Bible Word Study.

explains why there are still soldiers left to find the bodies. Whatever the case, it was a divine intervention.

37 One day while Sennacherib was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with their swords. They then escaped to the land of Ararat, and another son, Esarhaddon, became the next king of Assyria.

Historians believe Sennacherib had decided to bypass his older sons and make Esarhaddon king, so they attempted a coup by killing him – and inadvertently fulfilled God’s prophecy.⁷ They also didn’t get the support they wanted so had to flee.

Our focus is not Sennacherib’s choices, though, it’s Hezekiah’s choices and what we can learn from them. Hezekiah was not perfect, but he was committed to God. He was a man of prayer. I want to dive back into one prayer in particular, the one where he had laid out the threatening letter from Sennacherib before God. There are three things we can learn from Hezekiah’s prayer:

1. Praise God

2 Kings 19:15 (NLT) ¹⁵ And Hezekiah prayed this prayer before the Lord: “O Lord, God of Israel, you are enthroned between the mighty cherubim! You alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth. You alone created the heavens and the earth.

Even in his terrifying moment, Hezekiah opened his prayer with praise. He directed his thoughts to God’s majesty and power. Dr. Lamb writes, **“Praise shifts our focus from ourselves and our problems to God and His sovereignty.”⁸**

C.S. Lewis writes **“all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.”⁹** He goes on to say, **“The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds praised most, while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least.”**

His point? Praise should come easily; the more we do it, the more natural it becomes. Praise reflects our love for God, our dependence on Him, our trust in Him. It reflects our focus on Him. We praise what we love. Every prayer should begin with praise, especially when we are in distress – because it shifts our focus from the fear to God and His power.

⁷ Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 399.

⁸ Lamb, *1-2 Kings*, 445.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2017), 109.

2. Be Bold

2 Kings 19:16-19 (NLT) ¹⁶ Bend down, O Lord, and listen! Open your eyes, O Lord, and see! Listen to Sennacherib's words of defiance against the living God. ¹⁷ "It is true, Lord, that the kings of Assyria have destroyed all these nations. ¹⁸ And they have thrown the gods of these nations into the fire and burned them. But of course the Assyrians could destroy them! They were not gods at all—only idols of wood and stone shaped by human hands. ¹⁹ Now, O Lord our God, rescue us from his power; then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you alone, O Lord, are God."

Look at Hezekiah's words; "bend down, listen, open your eyes, rescue us." Hezekiah is being incredibly direct with God; almost commanding God to act. It's a little shocking when you stop to think about it, isn't it? And yet, when the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, look at what He modeled to them:

Luke 11:2-4 (NLT) ² Jesus said, "This is how you should pray: "Father, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. ³ Give us each day the food we need, ⁴ and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation."

There's a lot to learn from the Lord's prayer but look how Jesus tells us to talk to God: "give us, forgive us, don't let us." It's bold, isn't it? We can approach God with the confidence that Hezekiah and Jesus model to us. Why beat around the bush? God knows everything already! Be bold in your prayers, be direct, tell God your concerns, your fears, your need for help, your need for forgiveness. And be confident in His love hearing your.

Finally, we need to:

3. Listen to God.

Where does it show Hezekiah listening? Through his obedience, through his repeated going to God. We see it in his demeanor; he goes from afraid before prayer to confident after. He has heard God.

Matthew 4:4 (NLT) ⁴ But Jesus told him, "The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Are you taking time to listen to God? How do we listen? Through reading His word, the Bible. Through silence in times of prayer where we allow God to move in our heart and conscience, guiding us. Through the teaching and words of others who love God and pursue Christlikeness. Listening is a discipline that takes time to develop. Start small; take some time to pray and read scripture, and then spend a few minutes in silence, invite God to move. As you flex this muscle it becomes easier to listen, to embrace silence, to calm yourself and open your heart and mind to God's words.

Let's pray.