

Hezekiah's Reformation

Scripture Readings: 2 Chronicles 29-32 (excerpts); Hebrews 12:28-29

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Tomorrow, we remember one of the major events in world history. On this day in 1517, 505 years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg. This challenge to Rome for a debate sparked the spread of the Protestant Reformation throughout Europe. What is little known about the 95 Theses is that Luther argued mainly against Rome's indulgences. In fact, the title of this document was "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences."

But what are "indulgences"? In those days, people can buy certificates of indulgences to free their loved ones from purgatory. Johann Tetzel, the Pope's best salesman for indulgences, coined a jingle that says, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul in purgatory springs." As Luther studied the Scriptures, he found out that this practice by Rome is nowhere taught in the Bible. So, he found this practice "foolish" and a "blasphemy" against the cross of Christ.

Twenty-two centuries before Luther, there was a king named Hezekiah who also sparked a Reformation in the southern kingdom of Judah. Right after ascending to the throne after his wicked father Ahaz died, Hezekiah started reforming God's church, the people of Judah, and the temple in Jerusalem. He first ordered the Levitical priests to cleanse and restore the neglected temple. Then he restored the temple sacrifices and the observance of the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread. After reforming worship, Hezekiah reorganized the priests. Throughout this reformation, Hezekiah exhorted his people to reform their hearts by returning to serve the LORD and obeying his commandments. And so they did.

As God had always promised his people, blessings follow faithfulness and obedience. Therefore, prosperity and peace followed Hezekiah and his people. And even when Sennacherib king of the Assyrian empire invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem, the LORD fought for them by slaying tens of thousands of the Assyrians. However, prosperity also led Hezekiah to be proud, but sickness unto death humbled him to ask God's forgiveness and mercy. God healed him, but he made another serious mistake when he boasted of his riches to ambassadors from Babylon. We will see the outcome of this boasting later.

So this morning, our theme is, **Hezekiah's Reformation** under three headings.

Reforming Worship

In Second Chronicles Chapters 29-32, we find an account of the reign of Hezekiah in Judah. He was a young man of 25 when he ascended the throne of David, and reigned for 29 years. His reign is summarized in 29:2, "*And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD.*" What he did right in the eyes of God is his faithful reformation of Judah's worship, doctrine and practice according to God's word.

King Hezekiah first ordered the Levitical priests to cleanse and restore the temple to its original glory. At that time, because of a succession of evil kings who worshiped pagan gods, the temple of the LORD became a neglected “fixer upper.” So the Levitical priests consecrated themselves to this task and finished it as the king had commanded them.

After the Levites finished their work, Hezekiah restored the morning and evening sacrifices. The priests offered burnt offerings, sin offerings, thank offerings, food and drink offerings. Worshipers consecrated themselves to God with their burnt offerings. They offered sin offerings to atone for their sins. They praised and thanked God for his forgiveness and provisions with their food and drink offerings. They then were sent to their homes rejoicing at the things they have seen and heard in the worship service.

These are the same things we do in our Lord’s Day worship. We confess our sins before God. Then we praise and give thanks to God for saving us through the sacrifice of his own Son Jesus Christ for all our sins. We then promise to God that we will be faithful and obedient to his word in our daily lives, a consecration. Finally, God sends us home with a blessing, with hearts full of joy.

Note also that the whole assembly sang praises to the LORD as the burnt sacrifices were being offered. This means that the service in centered on God’s work of saving them from sin through sacrifices then, but through Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice on the cross afterwards. We must ask two questions about this ancient practice. First, what instruments did they use, since the people had all kinds of instruments they used in their culture? King David authorized only four instruments in the worship service: harps, lyres, cymbals and trumpets (1 Chr 16:5-6). This means that we must not use all kinds of instruments in our worship service as we like. Our church and our federation recommends only piano and organ for use in our worship, since these instruments are counter-cultural. That is, they are instruments not often used in pagan rock concerts and celebrations, such as drums and electric guitars played loudly in a frenzied and wild state. The use of all kinds of instruments to satisfy the whims of the congregation results in a mad and delirious cacophony, not reverential and joyful worship.

The second question is, What songs must we sing? In the Old Testament, only the Psalms were sung in worship. In 29:30, we read that the Levites sung only the words of David and Asaph the prophet, which are psalms in the Scriptures. The New Testament churches sang only psalms all the way to the 16th century Protestant Reformation. When citing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” Paul was referring to Old Testament psalms (Eph 5:19). They did not sing hymns. It was only after the Reformation, beginning in the early 18th century, when hymns started to be sung in churches. But these hymns were composed mostly by sound pastors and theologians who knew their Scriptures, not by Biblically-illiterate young men and women.

The other main reformation that Hezekiah accomplished was the restoration of the regular Feasts of the Passover and Unleavened Bread in Chapter 30. The Passover was a commemoration of the escape of the Israelites from Egypt on the night that God destroyed all the firstborn sons of Egypt, but spared those of Israel. God commanded the Israelites to bake unleavened bread in haste

as they had no time to wait to escape Egypt. Our Lord Jesus Christ is our Passover Lamb who saved us from God's wrath because of our sins by his sacrifice on the cross, *"For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed"* (1 Cor 5:7). And in the New Testament, leaven is often a symbol of sin that spreads in our lives and in the life of the church if not corrected and checked.

And this brings us to our second point.

Reforming Hearts

A worship service is not merely a rote ceremony of going through the motions. As our Lord Jesus Christ taught, we must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). In spirit, because our whole mind must be involved. We do not say that worship does not involve emotions, because in worship, all our diverse emotions are involved: joy and sadness, assurance and doubt, awe and reverence. Here is where the Psalms come in. The great Reformer John Calvin once said, "There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn... all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated." Therefore, all of these emotions are involved in worship.

When Hezekiah restored the Passover feast, he implored the people to return to the LORD, and not be like their stiff-necked forefathers. They were faithless and disobedient, so God punished them by sending the Assyrians to first destroy the northern kingdom. If they return to God, God's anger will be turned away because he is gracious and merciful. And with their sacrificial offerings, they repented of their sins and vowed to serve only God. Their sacrifices were pleasing and acceptable to God because they were offered with humble and repentant hearts.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread also remind us of our own sinfulness. As the Apostle Paul exhorts us, *"Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth"* (1 Cor 5:8). Let us turn away from malice and evil which can easily permeate our lives and our church community. Rather, turn to sincerity and truth. The LORD accepts our worship only if our hearts are reformed and transformed by his word, *"To obey is better than sacrifice"* (1 Sam 15:22).

And what happens when our hearts are reformed and transformed by his word and Spirit?

The Benefits of Reformation

The faithful reign of King Hezekiah teaches us the benefits of our hearts being transformed and reformed by God's word and Spirit. We have noted that the first benefit is a reformed worship, worship that is counter-cultural, with reverence and joy.

A second benefit is found in 2 Chronicles 32:1-22, when Sennacherib king of Assyria invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. Hezekiah did not rely on his powerful army to fight against the Assyrians. The first thing he did was to prepare for the long siege, but he also sought the help of the LORD in prayer, together with the prophet Isaiah. And how did God answer their prayers? He sent a destroying angel to destroy the tens of thousands—185,000 to be exact—of Assyrian

warriors. Hezekiah's army did not have to fight with swords and spears and armor, but with the Angel of the LORD. After returning to Assyria in defeat, Sennacherib was assassinated by two of his sons while he was worshiping at the temple of his pagan god Nisroch (2 Kgs 19:37).

A third benefit is found in 2 Chronicles Chapter 32:24-26. Hezekiah fell ill to the point of death because of his pride in his accomplishments, glory and riches. We all fall to this sin of pride. We take credit for our success. But we must acknowledge that it is only by God's mercy and grace and providence that we have anything in this life. Hezekiah, as he humbled himself in prayer when his kingdom was about to be destroyed by the Assyrians, again humbled himself before the LORD. Therefore, God relented from his punishment of Hezekiah and his kingdom. Isaiah revealed God's promise of healing to Hezekiah with a sign: the shadow of the sundial would go back ten degrees. Therefore, God extended his life 15 more years.

At the end of 2 Chronicles 32:30a, we read the summary of King Hezekiah's reign, *"And Hezekiah prospered in all his works."* He prospered because he had a reformed and transformed heart in his worship and practice.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: What would the summary of your life be in your grave marker? Is it, "And he prospered in all his works because he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord"? Or is it going to be, "He did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord?" May it be the first.

In verse 31 of Chapter 32, after the good summary of Hezekiah's life, there is a short, ominous footnote that says, *"And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart."* What was this all about? We read the answer in 2 Kings 20:12-19. Because of the destruction of Assyria's army by Hezekiah (through God's intervention), and the miraculous setting back of the sundial ten degrees, the king of Babylon sent ambassadors to Judah, possibly seeking an alliance against Assyria.

Hezekiah not only welcomed them, but he showed all the treasures of his palace and the temple. This is all because of his pride in his power and riches. The Babylonians coveted Judah's treasures. Isaiah therefore rebuked him and made an ominous prophecy, *"Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD"* (2 Kgs 20:17). A century later, God fulfilled his judgment against Hezekiah's sin of pride when the Babylonians invaded Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, plundering all the treasures of Judah.

This event started being fulfilled after Hezekiah died. A sad ending to his reformation.