

5. Life springs up and death threatens it

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[0 : 01] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 324, the passage that was read to us, and we'll have a moment of prayer. Father, we remember that on the road to Emmaus, the risen Lord Jesus Christ opened the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and from these Scriptures taught his disciples of that day about his death and resurrection.

We ask that the same privilege may be ours this evening. We ask that the Lord Christ himself, by his Spirit, will unfold to us the true meaning of these words that we have read, and so lead us to wonder, love, and praise, and to rejoice at his victory over death.

We ask this in his name. Amen. And so then, to 2 Kings 18. I have to confess, my heart failed me earlier this week.

As I looked over the material I was going to be preaching on, I panicked. I thought I must go to something that more directly, more obviously refers to the resurrection.

And no doubt, many of you, as the passage was read, were saying, what on earth is this to do? With Easter Sunday. It was as if the Lord said to me, do you really believe that all the Scriptures unfold the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ?

[1 : 36] Because if you do, go for it. So we are going to go for it. And we are going to find the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ anticipated in this chapter, 2 Kings 18.

One of the things that happens regularly, and it happens at Easter as well as at other times, is leading churchmen telling us that the church is in terminal decline.

There is no hope for it. Even at Easter time we hear these voices saying, the church is gone, no one is interested, people have ceased to come, and there is nothing we can do about it.

If they read their history, you would realize that this was nothing new. In the middle of the 18th century, the godly and decent man, Bishop Butler, wrote in his journal, the church in England as it now exists, no power on earth can save.

And indeed it looked like that. Large churches like St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey had something like seven people attending on Easter Sunday. The country was in a deplorable state of spiritual death.

[2 : 50] The clergy were more interested in gaming and dicing and drinking than in feeding the flock of God. And the church looked in absolutely terminal decline. About 18 months after the bishop wrote these words in his journal, another man sat in Aldersgate in London, listening to an exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans.

And after that experience, John Wesley wrote in his journal, My heart was strangely warmed. And God laid his hand on the Wesley brothers, on Whitefield and others.

And within a few short years of the bishop's doleful prophecy, revival was sweeping through this country, into Europe and into America. And something like this happens in 2 Kings 18.

After years of decay, of decline, of death and idolatry, God's man appears. This is, as we sang this morning, this is the dawning of hope in Jerusalem.

This is an anticipation of resurrection. And what I've got to say this evening, I'm calling life springs up and death threatens it. In 8th century BC Jerusalem, we have an anticipation of the resurrection.

[4 : 12] We have an anticipation of great David's greater son, who will destroy death and bring light and immortality to life through the gospel. As I said a moment ago, if we believe that all scripture, not only is given by inspiration of God, but that all scripture is about Christ, and particularly about his death and resurrection, we expect to find that everywhere, don't we?

Paul says, Christ died for our sins. He was buried and he was risen again, according to the scriptures. 1 Corinthians, one of the earliest of Paul's letters, written some 20 years after the great saving events, none of the gospels had been written, and none of the New Testament, apart from one or two of Paul's early letters.

What does Paul mean when he says, according to the scriptures? Paul means, read the scriptures of the Old Testament, and you'll find there, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now it's perfectly easy to look through the Old Testament scriptures, and find references to the death of Jesus. You think of Isaiah 53, the suffering servant. You think of Psalm 22, the passage we looked at this morning.

Not Isaiah 53, but the reference to the suffering servant. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? In Psalm 22, and the suffering servant, in Isaiah 53.

[5 : 39] It's not so easy to look into the Old Testament, and find actual passages about resurrection, until we realize that the whole pattern of the Old Testament, is in fact death, and resurrection.

God creates a perfect world. Sin and death invade it, but that scarcely happens when God promises. He doesn't specify when it will happen, or even who it is, that the descendant of the woman, will crush the head of the serpent.

Then we have the Tower of Babel, another descent into darkness and death. Then God calls Abraham, and then we have another descent into death, as the people go down to Egypt.

Then we have the Exodus, and then the chaos of the book of Judges, and then great David himself, pointing forward to his greater son. So there's this whole pattern of death, followed by resurrection of life, that springs up, is threatened by death.

But, as John says in his Gospel, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. So here in 2 Kings 18, here is the new David.

[6 : 52] 2 Kings 18 verse 3, And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. Now we've read that before, but we haven't read this last phrase, according to all that David, his father, had done.

We haven't read that phrase for many a long day. Because this is David come again. This is David Reed of Evas, the new David, who is carrying forward the line of promise.

If you've been here in earlier weeks, and we've looked at earlier chapters, we've had a number of yes, but kings. Kings who did partly what was right in the eyes of the Lord, but they were fairly fickle, and fairly apathetic.

We've had the terrible days of Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, and then we've had the fall of the northern kingdom, his capital in Samaria, which is repeated here.

And then the light shines, the brightest light since David himself. The author can scarcely conceal his excitement. Now some people have said that the earlier chapters are rather dull.

[8 : 00] Well they are. Because idolatry and sin and apathy are ultimately dull and boring. Because they don't have the life of God in them.

And therefore if you're going to describe apathy and decay and decline, the style is obviously going to be downbeat. But here, a young man of 25 comes to the throne, and the great days of David are being replayed before people's eyes.

Life has sprung up. And these really are my two points I want to make this evening. First of all, life springs up, verses 1 to 12, and then death threatens it, verses 13 to 37.

Just as in the days of the 18th century, life sprung up among the deadness and the decay of the spiritual life of the country.

God never gives up on his purposes. And even before the serpent crusher appears, even before great David's greater son comes to the throne, here is an anticipation.

[9 : 04] We've had half-hearted compromisers like Joash and Amaziah. And we've had a plunge into the abyss with Ahaz.

But here, life springs up when all is dead. Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. So what does it mean that life springs up?

Well, first of all, it means that God's promises can be trusted. Verse 3, all that David, his father, had done. And you may not wonder, why did this happen?

He most certainly learned nothing of this from his dad. Ahaz was thoroughly bad. Ahaz took the people away from God as fast as they could go.

But I think when you find a work of God where there's no obvious reason, you always find there's something or someone in the background. And we have behind Hezekiah the massive and powerful influence of the prophet Isaiah and also the prophet Micah.

[10 : 10] A hundred years later, Jeremiah, in his prophecy, Jeremiah 26, talks about the prophet Micah and how Hezekiah listened to him.

We don't actually read that in the story of Hezekiah himself, but Jeremiah tells us that Micah was an influence on Hezekiah and clearly we know that Isaiah was.

Now we know Isaiah's great prophecies about the coming serpent crusher, about the coming king. Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

A king will reign in righteousness. Now that must have seemed a hollow promise when Ahaz sat on the throne. A king will reign in righteousness. A guy who has led the people away into wholesale idolatry and bowing and groveling to Assyria.

Now that Hezekiah is on the throne, these promises are beginning to look as if they might be fulfilled after all. And then Micah says, in his great passage about you, Bethlehem, Judah, out of you will come one who is to govern my people Israel.

[11 : 22] This man will be our peace when the Assyrian comes into our land. And that's what's happening here. The serpent crusher hasn't yet arrived. Great David's greater son is not yet here, but God is encouraging His people in a time of darkness, saying, hold on, He's coming.

Even in these times, here is somebody who points forward to Him. So God's promises can be trusted. Secondly, Hezekiah puts people back in touch with God.

Look at verse 4. Removed the high places, broke the pillars, cut down the Asherah, and so on. The spiritual life of Judah was like a polluted river with all kinds of garbage and rubbish flowing down it.

This man removes the rubbish so that the rivers of God's grace can flow again. Verse 4 is a very brief summary. If this chapter didn't totally finish you, when you go home, read 2 Chronicles 29-31, which will give you far more detail on Hezekiah's reforming of the spiritual life of the nation.

Here is the king we've been waiting for. He removed the high places over and over and over again. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, said about Joash, Amaziah, Jotham, Uzziah, people like that.

[12 : 43] But, the high places were not removed. And the verse is emphatic. He removed the high places as rather weak. We better translate it something like this.

He was the one who removed the high places. It's happened at last. And he removed idolatry, thinking that we can get closer to God if we climb higher.

That's the point of the high places, the old error of Babel. If we climb upstairs, if we climb up steps, we'll get closer to God. He gets rid of the visible signs of Canaanite religion, the Asherah pole, the symbol of the fertility goddess.

And he gets rid of even good things that become idols. Long ago in the desert, Moses had made the bronze serpent. He'd been a symbol of God's power to heal. The trouble was, it had now become an idolatrous object.

And Hezekiah says, it's simply a piece of brass. There's nothing magic. There is no power in this at all. So all of these go, and the river flows again.

[13 : 49] The light shines. Life has sprung up. So the promises of God look more ready to be fulfilled. The pollution of idolatry is removed.

The third thing Hezekiah does is he trusts and obeys. Verse 5, He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. Once again emphatic, it was the Lord, the God of Israel, whom he trusted.

His dad, Ahaz, had trusted Assyria, and a foolish and short-sighted policy. That proved to be. How do we know he trusted the Lord?

We know because he obeyed the Lord. He did not depart. He held fast to the Lord. This word, hold fast, is the word in Genesis 2. A man will leave his father and mother and hold fast, cling to his wife.

Notice Hezekiah renews the covenant. The covenant's no longer a dead letter. Hezekiah is in a true relationship with the Lord. And notice positively, he held fast to the Lord, but the necessary negative, he did not depart from following Him, so that there was none like Him among all the kings of Judah after Him, nor among those who were before Him.

[15 : 03] This guy even out-David's David. David, we are told, did right in the eyes of the Lord, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite. There's no except here.

This guy is totally devoted to the Lord. A glimpse of resurrection. And then in verse 7, the Lord prospered him, the Lord blessed him.

His father had crawled to Assyria. He's not going to. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him. In other respects, in which he's like David, he struck down the Philistines as far as Gaza and its territory.

So, like David, the Word of God is being honoured again. The rivers of God's grace are flowing again. The promises of God are shining brightly.

Here is a man who trusts and obeys. As the old hymn says, there really is no other way but to trust the promises and obey the commands. What about verses 9 to 12?

[16 : 05] Well, this little appears to be a digression. We read about this the last time we were in Two Kings, about the kingdom in the north being taken away to Assyria.

The point of that is verse 12. Because they did not obey the voice of their God but transgressed his covenant, even all that Moses, the servant of the Lord, commanded, notice they neither listened nor obeyed.

Now, it's possible, of course, to listen without obeying. But if we don't listen, we're certainly not going to obey. So, here is the reason for the fall of the northern kingdom.

Disobedience leads to death. It's also a warning. Assyria is still there. It's still terrible and it's still powerful. So, life springs up.

The dawning of hope in Jerusalem. Now, what about verses 17 to 37? Death threatens it. The new David is reigning.

[17 : 08] The new David is prospering. But it's not long before Goliath appears again. The Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.

Faith is never allowed to remain untested. Otherwise, we'd succumb to that delusion called the prosperity gospel, trust in the Lord, obey him, and you'll have plenty money in the bank.

You'll have two cars in the drive. Your family will be a great credit to you. Everything will go wonderfully. The so-called prosperity gospel, which is no gospel at all, but a devilish delusion because that is not the way things work in this world.

Faith is always going to be tested. But what about then, verses 14? Verse 16. Can it be true what has been said?

And can my praise of this great king be justified? Where has his faith gone? Is this the guy whom we're told trusted in the Lord, none like him among all the kings of Israel?

[18 : 21] And the minute Sennacherib appears, verse 14, Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria, Lachish, saying, I have done wrong. Withdraw from me. Whatever you impose on me, I will bear.

Where has his faith gone? Now, there's no problem for liberal commentators. They simply tell us it's two different sources, one pro-Hezekiah and one anti-Hezekiah.

But that completely destroys the authority of Scripture, completely destroys the flow of the story. And it completely misunderstands the whole business of faith in this world.

Remember I said, the serpent crusher has not yet arrived. Great David's greater son, the proper man, as Luther calls him in his great hymn, has not yet appeared.

And verses 1 to 8 are God's summing up of Hezekiah's entire reign. This is the kind of man he was. He was a man of faith, a man of integrity, a man of courage, a man of deep spirituality.

[19 : 27] But he wobbled from time to time. And that's going to happen in this world. I mean, it's most discouraging if the Bible holds up for us people who are not like ourselves.

People who never wobble, who never waver in their faith. Now Hezekiah is a man, is a flawed man. We're going to see this in a few weeks' time later on.

But the fact that he's a flawed man doesn't mean he's any less a man of faith. The strongest faith wobbles. Don't let us get superior and snuffy about the people in Scriptures.

These people are flesh and blood like us and yet they are people whom God used. Now we're going to say more about Sennacherib and Lachish and all the rest of it the next time we look at this passage.

But you can see what's happening here. Hezekiah sends the tribute but Sennacherib is not satisfied. You're never going to please a playground bully like this.

[20 : 34] The more you give, the more trouble you're building up for yourself. Then verse 17, you'll notice he sent the Tartan, the Rapsaris and the Rapshaki. Now when we read that, we know that something pretty big in the way of posturing and nonsense and bluster is about to take place.

I won't comment on the Tartan. Willie stole one of my jokes. I don't have all that many but there you are.

Don't let these odd names deceive you though. The Tartan was probably the commander-in-chief, the Rapsaris some high official and the Rapshaki, the one who does most of the talking is probably the chief spokesman.

Now, there's two things I think about worldly power and one is its sheer absurdity. There is something very, very funny and very, very ridiculous about mortal men and women dressing themselves up and posturing as if they were the Lord God himself.

Why should I be afraid, says the prophet of mortal man whose breath is in his nostrils. And you get this in the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar summons all his astrologers, enchanter, magicians, all the rest of it, only to see that they are total failures.

[22 : 00] So there is something absurd about worldly power and worldly posturing. The world passes away and all its glory. There is also something desperately sinister about world power.

And the Assyrians were among the most cruel and bloodthirsty nations that have ever walked this earth. If you go to the British Museum and visit the Assyrian rooms, I think you can see something of the mad terror that Assyria would have evoked.

And there would be absolute terror in Jerusalem. There is no dawning of hope at this point, surely. There is actually a sense of crushing despair.

But once again, let's look at some of the details. When they arrived, they came and stood by the conduit. This is verse 17 of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the washer's field.

Now if you read the book of Isaiah, chapter 7, you'll find that place mentioned again. This is the place where the prophet Isaiah met Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, and said to him, Trust in the Lord.

[23 : 13] This is the, don't trust in Assyria, don't be intimidated by Assyria, trust in the Lord. I think our author is deliberately mentioning this again to show us that this is the kind, that this is, this test of faith is not an abstract idea.

This is happening to real people in a real place. And notice the arrogance, notice the terrible arrogance of these officials.

They went and came to Jerusalem and in verse 19 and so on, they call for the king. He sends this great army and they call for the king.

Now once again, as I say, there's a great deal of posturing and buffoonery here. Why on earth send an enormous army just for one man. And notice verse 19.

Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria. The Rabshakee didn't have the advantage, of course, of reading the Psalms. The Lord is the great king, the high king above all gods.

[24 : 23] The Rabshakee was simply speaking in his master's voice. And notice that they, they call Hezekiah to come out. And it's wonderful, it's wonderful the way this story is told.

I want you to imagine it. I want you to imagine this great army clustered there and the big brass, no doubt dressed in, no doubt dressed in ridiculous clothes and showing off and bellowing, deliberately bellowing in the language of Judah, verse 28, that's Hebrew, so that the people on the walls would hear.

And of course, showing off, we know your language as well. And the army behind them, this formidable war machine that had crushed so many places and overthrown so many kingdoms.

And they call on, and they call for the king, verse 18, they call for the king, send out this ridiculous kinglet, Hezekiah. This is absolutely wonderful.

Here we see something again of Hezekiah's metal. This is no wimp. Then they call for the king, there came out to them Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah.

[25 : 36] See what Hezekiah is saying? Not on your life, Rapshaki. If your master can't condescend to come to talk to me, I'm not going to talk to you. You are underlings.

I'm going to send underlings out to talk to you. These poor, brave men, Eliakim and Shebna, and Joah, must have been absolutely trembling in their shoes as they go out to meet the bullies.

So that's the situation then. This gigantic army or part of it because Sennacherib's, the rest of his army, still at Lachish, Judah's second city, some miles away across the Judean highlands.

And no doubt he is going to bring that army up to destroy Jerusalem. Look at that the next time. But the structure of this story is brilliantly done. We have the speech by the Rapshaki, the Assyrian top brass.

Then Eliakim speaks and says, please, and more or less begs him not to continue in their own language. And then, verse 28, the Rapshaki stood and called out in a loud voice.

[26 : 45] Everything is there to intimidate. Everything there is to humiliate and make the people in Jerusalem feel small. Now, Rapshaki is a loud mouth, but he's also shrewd and manipulative.

What he doesn't know is that what he says focuses on two of the great themes of the Gospel. Remember, remember in John's Gospel, the high priest says, it's right that one man should die and that the whole people should not perish.

And John says he didn't actually know the full meaning of what he was talking about because Jesus was to die for the whole people. Now, here, Rapshaki, in all his bluster, in all his posturing, doesn't realize what he's actually saying because there are two great questions that he raises.

And the first question is, who do we trust? Verse 19, verse 20, verse 22, verse 24, and verse 29.

Do not think you can trust, do not think you can rely on Egypt. And notice the contempt, verse 21, that broken reed of a staff which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it, such is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to all who trust in him.

[28 : 11] Now, of course, the Rapshaki had not had the advantage of reading verse 5. It was in the Lord, the God of Israel, that he trusted.

Do you think that mere words, says the Rapshaki, verse 20, are strategy and power for war? Well, mere words aren't. Unless, of course, as they are, we're going to see this in chapter 19, words from the living God.

That's the point. He uses these words, he uses them cleverly, and notice the mockery, come now, wager for my master, the king of Assyria, verse 23. I'll give you 2,000 horses if you're able, on your part, to set riders on them.

Hezekiah, unlike Solomon, did not multiply horses and chariots. Horses are a sign of military power. The Rapshaki is saying, look, you not only do not have horses, even if I gave you horses, then you couldn't find men to put on them.

So the theme here is the theme of trust. Right in front of the walls is the gigantic Assyrian army. There's the threat of what will happen to Jerusalem.

- [29 : 21] There's the terror of the stories that have run around the whole of the Middle East. The Assyrians are brutal. The Assyrians are ruthless. They are there in front of the walls.
- Can we trust the living but unseen God in face of this seen enemy? It must have appeared like that at the cross, mustn't it?
- The cause seemed to have gone down into utter defeat. The cause seemed to have vanished. Darkness had swallowed up light. Death had swallowed up life.
- And in those circumstances, it needed the eye of faith. We saw this morning, of course, one of those who had the eye of faith. Truly, this man was the Son of God.
- And of course, we don't forget in Luke's account of the dying criminal who said, Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom. Now, the kingdom of darkness appeared to be flourishing.
- [30 : 18] Then Rome and the Jewish establishment utterly crushed the word of life. And yet, this dying criminal, the eyes of faith, sees there is another king and another kingdom.
- So, who do we trust? So, the second question is, who can save us? Who can deliver us? Verse 20, verse 32, verse 34, verse 35.
- These are Easter verbs. Who can save? And back before that, they're Exodus verbs. These are verbs of the living God who snatches his people out of death and darkness.
- They're a challenge to death and darkness. Well, as Rabbi Shaki say, do not let Hezekiah deceive you. Do not listen. Thus speaks the Richard Dawkins of his day.
- Do not let the Bible deceive you. Do not listen. That's what he's saying. And notice, he glosses over the horrors of what life in Assyria would mean.
- [31 : 18] Look at verse 31. Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria. Who's going to, what dog is going to bark when he opens his mouth?
- Make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, drink of his own, drink of, each one of you eat of his own fig tree, drink the water of his own cistern, until I come away and take you to a land like your own.
- I don't suppose we can look for knowledge of biblical theology in the big picture from the Rabshaki, but he's certainly showing deplorable ignorance here. The point is, for Israel, there is no land like their own.
- This is the land that's given to them by God and it points forward to the better country of Hebrews 11, the land that is laid up for them in heaven.
- So, that's what the Rabshaki fails to understand. And because he fails to understand it, he then makes his fatal blunder and crosses the line of no return.
- [32 : 25] Verse 32, the end of verse, Do not listen to Hezekiah if he misleads you, saying, The Lord will deliver us, Yahweh will deliver us. Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad, the gods of Saar, Vim, Hena, and Diva?
- Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand? That Yahweh should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand.
- Of course, they haven't delivered. They haven't delivered because they don't exist. They're not real. They are not true gods at all. The fatal mistake of assuming that Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel, is simply another local godlet.
- And because Sennacherib has been so successful in the Judean city so far, including Lachish, strongly fortified city, he imagines that the Lord, Yahweh himself, is simply going to capitulate.
- Can't you hear the mocking voices flash forward 800 years in Jerusalem? If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.

[33 : 31] He saved others. He cannot save himself. And that is always the mentality of the Rabshakeys then and now. Prove it.

Show to us. Demonstrate. in language that we can understand. The language of force. The language of lustre. The language of buffoonery. Show to us that your God is able to deliver.

The Rabshakey has crossed the line. This is the beginning of the end for him and for his Master. So you see, this is an anticipation of the resurrection, is it not?

Life springs up and death threatens it. Think about summer holidays. It's a lovely thing to think about.

You're on a boating pond. You've been given a number and the man who controls the boat shouts, number 26, your time is up.

[34 : 28] Time for you to come in. You always get some idiot, of course, who disobeys and keeps on rowing around in the water. But his number is up. Satan's number is up.

The powers of darkness number is up. Their bluff has been called. The principalities and powers have done their worst.

They did the prince of life to death but their time is short. Well, we mentioned this morning the wayside pulpit outside the church and I remember another one outside the same church which says after Easter always Easter.

That's absolutely true. It is also true, isn't it, even before Easter there are a glimpse of the light that is going to flood the world from the empty tomb.

Even before the light shines in its fullness. Those lights foreshadowing the perfect day. The letter of the Hebrews tells us that the people of faith in the Old Testament did not receive the promises but saw them in the distance.

[35 : 37] And here in the dawning of hope in Jerusalem as we will see in the next chapter in a week or two's time light does indeed destroy darkness.

The great king of Assyria simply falls before the Lord. After Easter always Easter. And in this time between the times when the curse is still all around us when death and destruction still threaten us.

This chapter reminds us of who is in charge. The two questions who do we trust and who can save us. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, indeed we do praise you that all through Scripture from Genesis to Revelation shines the light. the prophetic light that shines in a dark place until the day dawns and the day star arises in our hearts.

May that light indeed shine around us. May that life enfold us until the day when the light shines and the darkness will be driven away forever.

[36 : 52] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.