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2nd Kings 19:14–19, NRSVue.

¹⁴ Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it; then Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD and spread it before the LORD. ¹⁵ And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said, “O LORD the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. ¹⁶ Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. ¹⁷ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands ¹⁸ and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed. ¹⁹ So now, O LORD our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone.”

2nd Kings 6:15-17, NRSVue.

¹⁵ When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, “Alas, master! What shall we do?” ¹⁶ He replied, “Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.” ¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed, “O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Mark 5:21–24, NRSVue.

²¹ When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him, and he was by the sea. ²² Then one of the leaders of the synagogue, named Jairus, came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³ and pleaded with him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live.” ²⁴ So he went with him.

Powerful prayers.

Of all the kings mentioned in 1st and 2nd Kings, only Josiah and Hezekiah are presented as truly godly men who set out to reform the religious direction and practices of the People of God. Our first quote today comes from Chapter 19 of 2nd Kings, the middle of three chapters that deal with the reign of King Hezekiah. He comes to power around 715 B.C. He sets out to rid Judah, the southern part of Israel, which includes Jerusalem, of pagan cults, and to straighten out some incorrect worship and economic practices of his people. Overshadowing his reign is the threat of the massive Assyrian army. He tries to free his nation from the oppression of the Assyrians, who attacked Judah about 15 years previously. There is strong archeological evidence, as well as evidence from non-biblical writings that the Assyrians killed thousands, took a couple hundred thousand people prisoner, and destroyed many structures with battering rams and catapults. Just before our passage, two things happen. First, Hezekiah seeks the guidance of the great prophet Isaiah, who counsels him to be patient and to have faith that God will protect them. Second, Sennacherib, the King of the mighty Assyrian Empire, sends Hezekiah a letter telling him that Jerusalem will be destroyed. It includes this passage: *Do not let your God on whom you rely deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.* ¹¹ See, you have

heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, destroying them utterly.

Shall you be delivered?

Next comes our passage. Hezekiah goes to God in prayer, asking God to put Sennacherib to shame. Hezekiah says the People of God do not depend on idols made by human hands, but rather on the God who created all. Here is his prayer:

“O LORD the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. ¹⁶ Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. ¹⁷ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands ¹⁸ and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed. ¹⁹ So now, O LORD our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone.”

Here is what we read then happens:

³⁵ That very night the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. ³⁶ Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh. ³⁷ As he was worshiping in the house of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped into the land of Ararat.

It's clear that Hezekiah's brief prayer led to God destroying a good chunk of the Assyrian army and then the shaming and causing the death of King Sennacherib.

Our second quote, also from 2nd Kings, contains an extremely brief but powerful prayer. Leading up to our passage, the Syrians (not the Assyrians this

time) are encamped outside the Holy Land, threatening Israel. Elisha's fame as a powerful prophet spreads to the Syrians. The King of Aram, which included Syria as well as Mesopotamia, realizes that Elisha, not the King of Israel, is the true threat to Aram, and so the King of Aram sets out to capture Elisha. Here is our passage, complete with a ten-word prayer:

¹⁵ When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, "Alas, master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶ He replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them." ¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

We see that in answer to Elisha's prayer, God shows in a very vivid way, the mighty power that God will exert to protect his people. With the mountainside around Elisha filled with horses and chariots of fire, it must have been pretty intimidating. But the story goes on. The King of Aram does invade. This time, Elisha utters another, even briefer prayer to God: *"Strike this people, please, with blindness."* It works, and with the enemy blinded, Elisha goes out and sends them off to invade Samaria, not the land of God's people.

Our third quote contains and an almost as brief prayer. It's from the Gospel of Mark, believed to be the first Gospel written, and also believed to have served as source material for the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Jesus has crossed to one

side of the Sea of Galilee, where he cures a man who is possessed by demons; today, we might take this story as describing him healing a mentally ill man. Jesus then crosses back across the sea. A crowd gathers next to the sea. A man named Jairus, who is a leader in the synagogue and therefore an important man in the community, sees Jesus, falls to Jesus' feet, and asks this of him:

"My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."

First of all, this is an amazing display of faith. This guy is likely to greatly damage his position in his community by asking a favor of the man whom his religious authorities believe to be a fake and a great threat to their own powerbase.

Second, this very important man is willing to publicly humble himself because his belief in Jesus is so strong. Jesus agrees to do this. But first, Jesus heals a young woman who has been slowly bleeding to death. But by the time Jesus finishes this task, Jairus' daughter is dead. It's seemingly too late. When Jairus learns from messengers that his child is gone, we are told this:

Jesus said to the synagogue leader, "Do not be afraid; only believe."³⁷ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.³⁸ When they came to the synagogue leader's house, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.³⁹ When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping."⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was.⁴¹ Taking her by the hand, he said to her, "Talitha koum," which means, "Little girl, get up!"⁴² And

immediately the girl stood up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age).

It seems that Jesus has decided, by making use of the distraction of the woman who is bleeding, to make a couple of points: He can be depended on. When he says he will help, that's what he does. Further, he can do more than heal the sick, he can bring someone back from the dead. The point, of course, is that God is capable of great things – and our prayers can thus be answered in amazing ways.

There are many more examples that I could pull out of the Bible. We see that throughout the Old and the New Testament, the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures, many people turn to God in prayer and have their prayers answered. From this, we're not to infer that our quick ten second prayers will quickly be answered in the most immediate and personally satisfying way. Often answers take time and they come in a form we don't expect. The point is this, though: the Bible is a large document. It's very difficult to read pieces of it or even read straight through all of it, if any of you have ever done this, and catch on to just what points are made over and over. In the New Testament, one point that is hammered home via repetition, but which we often don't realize, is that how we live, how we treat other people, whether we pass on God's love, forgiveness, and grace to others, is the true focus of Jesus' message. It's not the often-proclaimed

message that all we need to do is believe and then when we die, we're all set, we'll go to Heaven. The importance of our actions on this planet is emphasized far more than salvation by faith alone. But another point, one made throughout the Old and New Testaments is that we need to be praying. And – prayers do not have to be long, agonizing, poetic things. It's the frequency of prayer that matters. It's whether we are in constant dialogue with God that is important. And yes, God does listen to us. Our lives will be dramatically changed if we live in a state of ongoing prayer.

Let's look at one more prayer. It comes late in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane. He has asked his some of his disciples to come with him, to wait for him, and to stay awake. He prays to God: *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want."* Then he goes back to his disciples, and he finds them sleeping. He asks Peter why he couldn't stay awake for him. Then Jesus goes and he offers his prayer in slightly different words: *"My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done?"* He goes back to his disciples and again, they are sleeping. Shortly thereafter, Judas comes along and betrays Jesus to the Chief Priests.

There is something powerful about this prayer. It is offered not by a regular human, but by Jesus himself. It underscores the fact that throughout his life,

Jesus is in regular prayer, in continuous conversation with God the Father. It also shows us that not all prayers – even those offers by Jesus himself – are answered in the way we want them answered. Superficially, it seems that it wasn't answered at all. But God knew that Jesus' mission on Earth hung in the balance. Jesus was going to have to make that symbolic and horrific sacrifice. He was going to die in one of the most agonizing ways possible: he would slowly and very painfully suffocate on the cross. Jesus, caught up in his human form, broke down in the Garden of Gethsemane and he seemingly prayed for himself – not for what God wanted him to do. But it wasn't a mistake. We presume Jesus knew that this prayer would not be answered by God whisking him away and keeping him from being harmed. Jesus was showing us something here, by offering up a prayer to God asking God the wrong question. The lesson is that in the end, even if we don't ask it, God will answer the correct question. God's answer was that he would do what was necessary for Jesus to fulfill his godly purpose. It was, of course, the best answer. Jesus' prayer to be spared from agony, when it was followed by the far greater answer offered by God, tells us that whenever we ask a prayer of God, the answer that comes will truly be the best one. We must believe this. We must trust. We must be patient and wait for God's answer to come to ultimate fulfillment.

There is more to this seemingly negative answer than that it was best for humanity, that it was the best way for Jesus to serve his purpose on Earth. It was also the best way for history to record true glory, godly nature, and deep love of Jesus. Would Jesus have wanted anything else?

The exact location of the Garden of Gethsemane is not known. We're told that it is located on the Mount of Olives, east of the Old City of Jerusalem. The hill was surrounded by olive trees and sits about 200 feet above sea level. It has a stunning view of the entire city of Jerusalem. The word Gethsemane apparent comes from the Hebrew phrase "*gat shermanim*", which means "oil press". This makes sense. Perhaps Jesus was surrounded by olive trees. Perhaps he prayed near an ancient olive oil press. Various places on the Mount of Olives have been suggested throughout the centuries as the location of the Garden. I have been to the Mount of Olives. I have prayed there. I knelt in the blazing summer sun and asked God to help me do my best with my life. Please pray with me.

God, we truly do not know what will happen to us in life. We do know that you are in control. We know our goal is to talk to you as frequently as possible so that what we do coincides as closely as possible with your will for us. We know that our goal in prayer is not to bend you to our will. Please never let us forget that. Amen.