

When Great Men of God Stop Chasing After His Heart

I love reformers. These people courageously live by the principles forgotten by the masses. Their resolve enables them to withstand opposition and push into the promises of God that everybody wants but few are willing to pay the price to obtain. They live with great risk so that a future generation will know what it is to live in the favor and blessing of the Lord. They are multi-generational if they are anything at all.

These people are the rarest of all of our heroes of the faith, in that they have targeted culture itself. It is not good enough for them that their church or parish succeeds in having many converts. It's not good enough that they have great influence throughout the church. While those things would be the great prize for many leaders throughout history, this rare breed cannot remain quiet until the culture itself changes to accommodate what God has intended to do on earth.

They live with the basic conviction that there are biblical answers to every societal problem and challenge. They have the burning conviction that there is more and that their children and grandchildren should be the ones who inherit what God is doing.

This quote by John Adams illustrates a natural version of this concept: "I must study politics and war, that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. Our sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain."

I love the wisdom of those words. It reveals the often

forgotten reality that a breakthrough in one generation creates an inheritance and momentum for the next. One generation deals with the harder things in life so preparations can be made for the next generation to build upon their accomplishments.

For me, any true reformer is a favorite historical figure. They are so few and far between. I love their passion for believing for more than what is typical. In doing so, they often eclipse the impact of other great spiritual leaders. One that stands out to me is Hezekiah, a noted king in Judah's history.

The Lord Was With Him

Hezekiah is often overlooked as a reformer, perhaps because he lived in the days of the Old Testament, yet in some ways, he may be the greatest of all the reformers we could list. His upbringing was a nightmare. He inherited the throne from his dad, a demented spiritual madman. Ahaz was a very evil man who did the unthinkable in sacrificing some of his own children to false gods. Hezekiah was a survivor of such atrocities.

It's amazing to think that anyone being raised in that atmosphere could come out sane, let alone a great leader. But that is exactly what happened. God used Hezekiah to restore the spiritual life of Judah as a nation, describing him as being like his father, David. Ahaz was his natural father, but Hezekiah's heart and behavior connected him to David, who lived almost 300 years before he did. When Hezekiah became king, he worked to restore his nation to its place of historical strength by returning to the standard David had set.

In 2 Kings 18:3-7a (NASB), God highlights the great impact of this reformer: "He did right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done. ... He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel; so that after him there was

none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. For he clung to the Lord; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord had commanded Moses. And the Lord was with him; wherever he went he prospered.”

Hezekiah is compared to David, whose reign was the high point in Israel’s history. He tore down the high places, which not even Solomon accomplished. He destroyed the worship of false gods. He tore down their altars. It says Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, he clung to the Lord and he didn’t cease following the Lord. This really is amazing.

When the priorities are taken care of, God takes care of the rest. This principle is similar to Matthew 6:33: “Seek first His kingdom ... and all these things will be added to you.” Whenever we attend to the things that matter to God, He attends to the things that matter to us. It’s a beautiful partnership. The result of the priority of God’s presence is what caused Hezekiah to prosper. As a result, God declared that there had never been anyone as great as Hezekiah! Did that include David and Solomon? I don’t know. But what I do know is that God was moved by this king’s choices and priorities. He then marked this man with His presence.

Later, Hezekiah became sick and was about to die. In fact, the prophet Isaiah came to see him, instructing him that it was time to get his affairs in order, as he was going to die. Hezekiah turned his heart toward the Lord again: “‘Remember now, O Lord, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart and have done what is good in Your sight.’ And Hezekiah wept bitterly” (2 Kings 20:3).

Before Isaiah made it out of the courtyard of the palace, God spoke again, promising Hezekiah 15 more years. Isaiah returned to give him the good news.

Beginning of the End

Hezekiah's recovery from sickness became well known, as did his prosperity and fame. The surrounding nations knew God had defended him from their enemies, and there was a certain awe associated with his name. His blessed life was a sign of God's favor. But it created an appetite that worked against his purpose for being (2 Chron. 32:27-31).

It's a scary thing to be left alone. But with God, it's never punishment. God doesn't give us the silent treatment as people do to one another. Usually, when He is silent, it is because He has already spoken, and it's up to us to find what has been said. When God is silent, He is giving us the opportunity to remember what He has already taught us, so we live from the principles gained during that season.

Theologically, we know God will never leave us or forsake us. That is His covenant promise. But it is also true that there are times when the "felt presence" of God is gone. In those moments or seasons, He seems to shut down our capacity to perceive Him. Living consciously aware of God is the great pleasure of life.

A sobering part of church history is that we can look at the lives of person after person who did stunningly well when the Spirit of God was on them. They were involved in great exploits, great miracles and bold faith. But these same people often crashed when the Spirit of God lifted.

This was Hezekiah's moment to prove that what was in his heart at his highest point in life was still in him in this moment of testing. The visit from Babylonian leaders is an interesting part of the story, revealing a crack in the king's foundation that had not surfaced before (2 Chron. 32:23). They came to bring him gifts after hearing he had been sick. I'm not sure if they were ill-intentioned when they came for a visit. It may have been a goodwill gesture.

Hezekiah was now more and more in the spotlight, becoming the

target of gifts, blessings, praises and much international attention. Something both wonderful and scary happened. Hezekiah had learned to live righteously under pressure and scorn. Now he would have to manage his heart during the times of favor and increase.

The king was moved by all this attention, so much so that he showed them everything he owned (2 Kings 20:13). The need to obtain favor from people, especially outsiders, is a potential weakness Solomon had modeled before him. This didn't serve as the warning to Hezekiah that it should have. He was now doing the same thing, although it manifested differently. He wanted to appear blessed and powerful to the leaders of other nations when, in reality, he already was. We lose so much when we fight to obtain what we already have.

This insecurity is the beginning of a downward spiral from which it is tough to recover. Something as simple as the need to be well thought of, often by people who don't matter, becomes the breaking point. Hezekiah wanted the respect of Babylon of all places. Whenever God exposes our insecurity, He is doing us a favor. As I mentioned earlier, insecurity is wrong security exposed.

It is easy to think favor from unbelievers is a primary goal for the Christian. It is, but only when God is giving it—not when it's ours to obtain. Favor is a wonderful gift when it comes from our living in the lordship of Jesus. But when favor is obtained by compromise, it will be sustained only by compromise. This creates a weakening of character that is catastrophic in nature, ultimately destroying any trace of divine favor for a secular setting. It's vital for us to remember that favor comes from the Lord.

Let me put it another way: The only favor worth having is the favor given to us by God as we thrive in the lordship of Jesus. It is His gift to us.

Consider this: Hezekiah was strong in battle. He was strong in bringing reform, regardless of the opposition. He sought God in the midst of a national disaster as well as when he was assaulted with personal sickness. He was known to pray effectively at the right moment and in the right way.

Learning to pray with passion is much easier when we're in pain or conflict. Passionate prayers make the greatest difference in our lives. If a prayer doesn't move me, it's not likely to move Him. But if we know to pray with passion only when we're in trial, we'll pray effectively only in the midst of problems. The challenge is to go beyond that and learn to pray passionately because of hope!

The Opposite of a Reformer

This was a moment of testing—but our greatest tests come when we don't know we're being tested. In this case, success is the greater trial. To succeed in these seasons, Hezekiah would have to live from the things he learned in the fire of difficulty. The lessons learned in the problems of life are the ones to be remembered for the blessings of life. So what did he learn? He learned obedience. He learned to pray with complete abandonment to God. These are the things that could take him into greater glory.

He had been thoroughly trained for this moment of blessing. Exaltation is often the reward for living in humility. Oftentimes, trusting God regardless of circumstances is what proves our humility. Hezekiah had already succeeded with these issues in the past, but he would have to do it again by remembering his why. He would have to remember what got him to where he was.

A leadership team from Babylon came with gifts to visit Hezekiah. Because he wanted to impress these from another land, he showed them everything he owned. He left nothing out (2 Kings 20:14-15). Showing restraint, especially when you're

with people you have no relationship with, is the way of wisdom in kingdom thinking. Flaunting blessing to obtain greater favor undermines our purpose.

Hezekiah traded his place of security with God for security in the opinions of others. The fear of man is at the root of endless problems for us all.

“Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, ‘Hear the word of the Lord: “Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,” says the Lord. “Some of your sons who shall issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away; and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon”’” (2 Kings 20:16-18).

In other words, when you compromise to obtain favor, you lose the favor you had. What was the Lord looking for from this king? He was looking for a king who would pray just as he did when faced with sickness.

The Bible calls this prayer posture standing in the gap (Ezek. 22:30). It describes taking a position of protection for others in our prayers. God was looking for Hezekiah to take the word of judgment to heart and cry out for mercy. He already had a history with God and knew what He was like.

But instead of living like a reformer, living for the sake of a generation to come, he responded in an unthinkable way: “So Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good!’ For he said, ‘Will there not be peace and truth at least in my days?’” (2 Kings 20:19, NKJV).

How does the father of a reformation movement lose track of his purpose to the extent that he is OK with causing an entire generation to suffer for his bad choices? How is it even possible, even for a bad father, to be OK with his children being sold into slavery and made eunuchs, which is obviously their suffering for his bad choices? It’s crazy how blind our

own pride can make us.

The Lord is looking for a father who will maintain his priestly responsibility by saying, "God, not on my kids. They didn't sin against You, and they don't deserve this. It was me. It was my pride. Please forgive me and show mercy to my children." Instead, we have a man who is unmoved by the word that his children will be taken captive by the same group that saw his treasures.

There's a time and place for transparency, and this wasn't it. It's never a tool to impress others. Hezekiah became so calloused by his need for recognition that he missed his moment to pray. He already knew of God's mercy in such times. He had a well-respected history with God in this area. But pride robs the heart of passion for God, pure and simple. Pride is truly a thief.

The Root Problem

Hezekiah was known for rebuilding a lifestyle of worship for the nation and especially for the priests of the Lord. David set the pattern. But Hezekiah failed at maintaining his personal involvement in the same way David did. I'm sure he still gave sacrifices to God and continued the routine of worship. But it was no longer the kind of expression that cost him. Second Chronicles 32:25 (NASB) tells us, "Hezekiah gave no return for the benefit he received, because his heart was proud."

There it is. This is what brought about the collapse of this great reformer's life and legacy. His sacrifices to God did not equal the favor given to Him. Token obedience eases the conscience but does nothing to transform our lives.

This passage of Scripture shows us how the kingdom of this great king began to crumble. He lost the position to set up Judah for a measure of reformation they had never experienced before. It would have been multigenerational. But he lost the

position to prepare the next generation when he stopped increasing the measure of sacrifice that was equal to the measure of favor and blessing.

Sacrifice is an essential part of our life with God, even in the New Testament. Of course, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice, made for us to have salvation now and a future forever. Yet it remains an important part of life. I don't care if it's financial giving to the church or the poor. It doesn't matter to me if it's giving thanksgiving and praise to God with shouting and dancing.

What was difficult yesterday has become normal today. What was sacrificial yesterday becomes commonplace today. The challenge is when we become satisfied in a routine, and we lose the heart. Remember, David taught us that the sacrifice God is looking for is from the yielded heart. That's the point. When we quit breaking new ground, we have the tendency to stop giving God that which costs us something.

God has no need of my sacrifices whatsoever. The dead sheep offered in David's day did nothing for Him. The money we give today is unneeded by Him completely. Sacrifices are not for Him, in the sense that they bring Him any benefit. Giving in the way we were designed to do is what keeps us healthy. To respond in an inadequate way affects our health, inside and out. For us to withhold offerings is to rob ourselves of the future He intended for us.

This reveals a vital part of life that is often overlooked: Our response to Him must mirror His response to us. He considers me the pearl of great price. I, in turn, must view Him as the pearl of great price for me. I am the apple of His eye. He must then become the focus of my entire life. He gave His life for mine. How can I give Him anything less? My response to Him must be equally significant to the measure of His impact on my life. To give anything less is to withhold what is due Him.

The book of Proverbs gives us a startling lesson on passion versus complacency that can help us understand why Hezekiah's choices were so devastating: "He who is slothful in his work is a brother to him who is a great destroyer" (Prov. 18:9, NKJV).

Picture three groups of people for the illustration given in this verse. First are the passionate, faithful workers. Second are the lazy or slothful workers. And finally, there are those who oppose the work. Which two are most alike? The lazy person and the destructive worker are the two most similar.

Now picture a passionate servant of the Lord. Then there is a complacent believer, followed by the opponent to the gospel. Which two are most alike? It's frightening to consider, but it's the complacent believer and the opponent to the gospel. In some ways, the life of the complacent legitimizes the opponent to the gospel. And the effect of Hezekiah's life bears witness to this conclusion.

Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, was 12 years old when he became king (2 Kings 21:1-9). This means he was born during the 15-year period when God extended his father's life. This should have been the time when Hezekiah's passion for God was at its highest, as God had spared his life and increased his favor on an international level. But it wasn't. Manasseh was born during the years when Hezekiah's sacrifices were token offerings. They didn't illustrate the passion for God he had in the first part of his reign. When young people are born into religious traditions and forms without the manifestation of God's presence and power, there is a much greater likelihood they will choose an alternate way of life. Complacency fuels the heart of the opponent to the gospel.

To describe Manasseh's lifestyle as alternative is being kind. He became the biblical example of corrupt, evil and demonic. He was worse than the people of the nations God drove out of the promised land, which Israel inherited. As great as

Hezekiah was in his beginning days, so Manasseh was evil in his beginning. A beautiful part of the story is that eventually, Manasseh repented. There was enough evidence of truth in his father's traditions that it became due north in his thinking when he was in trouble.

The problem isn't with being blessed. If it were, we could blame God for causing Hezekiah's fall. Blessing is an essential tool that will help us finish our assignments. We are blessed to be a blessing. But favor also puts us into a place where pride becomes an option, should we not maintain humility and trust. This is the path Hezekiah fell into when his offerings were no longer sacrificial in nature. Instead, his efforts were in building his kingdom and fighting for favor from surrounding nations.

The need for applause and the desire to impress people with God's favor are signs of weakness that will affect our legacy. These values are evidence of the fear of man, which always replaces the fear of God. Whenever God reveals these issues in our lives, it is so we will acknowledge what we need to deal with and truly humble ourselves in the process. Ignoring them only accentuates the weaknesses and increases the impact of our collapse.

Thankfully, the perils of promotion are not automatic. In other words, I'm not saying failure is the only option when we're blessed. Success is possible—and probable—if we stay humble and dependent on God during the times of blessing in the same measure as in the times of trials. {eoa}

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