

On this holiday weekend when we celebrate our national independence, our minds often turn to patriotic themes. Many of our senior members remember General Dwight Eisenhower who was the commander of the allied forces in the European theatre during World War 2 and then served as the 34<sup>th</sup> president of the United States for 2 terms. Eisenhower was a man who could make courageous decisions in difficult situations. On one occasion, General Eisenhower is said to have called in one of his intelligence officers for a brief assessment of the position of his troops as opposed to the German troops. Supposedly, the intelligence officer said, *Sir, picture a donut. We are the hole.*

Happily, General Eisenhower's military expertise helped lead us to victory in World War 2, but there are many times in life when we feel trapped and surrounded in difficult situations. We sometimes feel like the hole in the middle of a donut with no seeming way to escape.

Hezekiah undoubtedly felt that way when he assumed the throne as the king of Judah. The last good king that we looked at was Jotham. While not a great deal of material is devoted to him in the Bible, we do have enough to know that he was a good king. He seemed to have a great deal of wisdom learning from the mistakes of those who went before him.

Jotham's son, however, was a very foolish ruler. His name was Ahaz. He ruled for 16 years and was a very wicked and evil man. Ahaz reinstated Baal worship in Judah. He also led sacrifices to other foreign deities. He even offered his own son as a human sacrifice after the practices of the Moabites' worship of Chemosh. Because of his wickedness, God's hand of blessing was removed from Ahaz and Judah had nothing but problems during his entire rule. The Arameans defeated him taking many prisoners away. Then his Jewish brothers to the north, Israel, defeated him. God actually had to warn Israel through a prophet named Obed not to take advantage of their Jewish brothers making them slaves. But that still didn't end Ahaz's and Judah's problems. Ahaz tried to hire some help from Assyria, but that didn't pan out – in fact the Assyrian rulers caused him more trouble. And he ended his reign with Edom coming at him from the east, defeating him and taking over towns, and the Philistines coming at him from the west, defeating him and taking over towns. The historian sums up Ahaz's reign by writing,

<sup>19</sup> *The LORD had humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had promoted wickedness in Judah and had been most unfaithful to the LORD. (2 Chron. 28:19)* Sometimes the Lord humbles a nation because of the sins of its rulers. The Bible clearly indicates that this is what happened in Judah because of Ahaz's wickedness.

At the age of just 25, Hezekiah took over the throne from his father Ahaz. And as we have seen, the nation was in trouble. It was a mess. Hezekiah must have felt that he was the hole in the middle of the donut - enemies on every side and few resources to work with from within. What in the world was Hezekiah to do?

Well, amazingly, Hezekiah would end up having one of the most successful reigns of any king of Judah. Judah would be strong by the end of his reign. Israel, interestingly enough, would be exiled at the hands of the Assyrians by the end of Hezekiah's reign – but God would allow this Judean King who started out under such difficult circumstances to be delivered even from the hands of the Assyrians. How was Hezekiah able to have such a successful reign? We are not going to be able to look at his entire reign in detail because of the length of the Biblical material devoted to it. The Chronicler devotes 4 long chapters just to Hezekiah signifying his importance to Judah as king. This most interesting material includes the miraculous way that God delivered Hezekiah and his country from the Assyrians, it details some of the construction projects that Hezekiah was able to accomplish including his famous water conduit that remains a major tourist attraction in Israel because of its engineering prowess even to this day, and it also includes the sadder closing years of Hezekiah's life when he made a couple of serious mistakes. But we must leave many of these details for a later date. But this morning I would invite you to look at 3 steps that Hezekiah took right at the beginning of his reign – 3 steps that put him on the right course for personal and professional success.

1. First, he repaired the temple. This detail is given right at the beginning of the account of his reign.

READ 2 Chron. 29:1-3:

*2CH 29:1 Hezekiah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. <sup>2</sup> He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done.*

*2CH 29:3 In the first month of the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the temple of the LORD and repaired them.*

Now this step is certainly significant because the temple in Jerusalem was a visible representation of the nation's relationship with God. During these O.T. times, the temple was the place where people could meet God, offer their sacrifices to Him, hear His word and worship Him. So the condition of the temple was a visible reflection of the spiritual temperature of the nation. The temple was like a gauge. If it were neglected and in need of major repairs, the nation generally was not in a right relationship with God. If it were in good repair and functioning on a daily basis, the nation generally was in fellowship with God. There, of course, were many individual exceptions to the rule – righteous individuals who stood out like shining lights in the darkest of times and wicked people who continued in rebellion against God even while the nation was turning

to Jehovah. But the temple was the most visible symbol of the nation's spiritual condition. It was like a thermometer measuring the spiritual temperature of the nation.

The simple fact that the temple was in such need of repair gives testimony to the wickedness of King Ahaz. Ahaz had acknowledged and sacrificed to many pagan deities in different places. READ 2 Chron. 28:3-4:

<sup>3</sup> Ahaz burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his sons in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. <sup>4</sup> He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree.

You see, one of the differences between the pagan nations and Israel was that all of the surrounding nations were polytheistic, worshiping many gods. It was only natural for them to have many places of worship, picturing the many gods that they worshiped. Israel, on the other hand, was monotheistic, worshiping only the true and living God. So Israel had one temple and everyone had to come to this one location to worship. Ahaz had neglected the temple of the Lord in his pagan rituals of worshiping in many different places. It wasn't that Ahaz wasn't a religious man – he was. But he wasn't devoted to Jehovah, and God punished him and the nation for his spiritual waywardness.

To Hezekiah's credit, his first move in the first month of his reign was to begin renovations on the temple. It was likely that Hezekiah had seen this need for some time and had just waited for his opportunity to act. So he was ready when his time came. And this would have been an immediate and visible sign to the people that a new spiritual direction was being taken in the land.

2. Second, he led the nation in repenting of sin. READ 2 Chron. 29:4-11

<sup>4</sup> He brought in the priests and the Levites, assembled them in the square on the east side <sup>5</sup> and said: "Listen to me, Levites! Consecrate yourselves now and consecrate the temple of the LORD, the God of your fathers. Remove all defilement from the sanctuary. <sup>6</sup> Our fathers were unfaithful; they did evil in the eyes of the LORD our God and forsook him. They turned their faces away from the LORD's dwelling place and turned their backs on him. <sup>7</sup> They also shut the doors of the portico and put out the lamps. They did not burn incense or present any burnt offerings at the sanctuary to the God of Israel. <sup>8</sup> Therefore, the anger of the LORD has fallen on Judah and Jerusalem; he has made them an object of dread and horror and scorn, as you can see with your own eyes. <sup>9</sup> This is why our fathers have fallen by the sword and why our sons and daughters and our wives are in captivity. <sup>10</sup> Now I intend to make a covenant with the LORD, the God of Israel, so that his fierce anger will turn away from us. <sup>11</sup> My sons, do not be negligent now, for the LORD has chosen you to stand before him and serve him, to minister before him and to burn incense."

Then after giving a list of the Levites who were personally involved, the Bible continues in 2 Chron. 29:15-19

2CH 29:15 When they had assembled their brothers and consecrated themselves, they went in to purify the temple of the LORD, as the king had ordered, following the word of the LORD. <sup>16</sup> The priests went into the sanctuary of the LORD to purify it. They brought out to the courtyard of the LORD's temple everything unclean that they found in the temple of the LORD. The Levites took it and carried it out to the Kidron Valley. <sup>17</sup> They began the consecration on the first day of the first month, and by the eighth day of the month they reached the portico of the LORD. For eight more days they consecrated the temple of the LORD itself, finishing on the sixteenth day of the first month.

2CH 29:18 Then they went in to King Hezekiah and reported: "We have purified the entire temple of the LORD, the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the table for setting out the consecrated bread, with all its articles. <sup>19</sup> We have prepared and consecrated all the articles that King Ahaz removed in his unfaithfulness while he was king. They are now in front of the LORD's altar."

We must never forget the seriousness of sin. In the daily routine of our lives, as we are bombarded relentlessly with temptations showing only the pleasures of sin for a season, we can come to the place where we become almost immuned to sin. We can come to take it for granted forgetting its terrible character. After that tragic event that changed the course of our nation's history on September 11, 2001, most Americans were amazed to learn that the 19 terrorists who were involved in the crashing of the 4 planes and the taking of thousands of American lives were all people who had been living among us in our country, going to school with us, eating at the same restaurants beside us, shopping at the same stores with us, going through the daily routines of living with us. All the time they were plotting our destruction. So it is with sin. It is a spiritual cancer to our souls. If we allow it in our lives, it was destroy us from within. It hinders our fellowship with God and it corrupts and destroys us from within. Just as it is fruitless to negotiate with a hardened terrorist, so we can't negotiate with sin in our lives. It must be rooted out. It must be removed. We must be cleansed and purified.

When the national exposition came to New Orleans in 1884, its organizers wanted it to be an even bigger splash than the Centennial Exposition that had been in Philadelphia before it so they determined to come up with something that was unique and different, something that the American people had never seen before. One of the directors found an orchid-like bloom that grew in Venezuela. It was called the water hyacinth. It was breath-taking in its exquisite beauty. So they featured these plants all over the exposition grounds, and predictably, American ladies *oohed* and *ahhed* over this new exotic flower that they had never

seen before. Thousands of ladies coveted the water hyacinth so much that they secretly snipped little shoots of it and took them home hoping that they would take root in their own yards. Their immediate prayers were answered, but the long-term results were disastrous. For it soon became evident that the water hyacinth was not only going to survive – it might take over every water channel in the south. Too late, horticulturalists discovered that each water hyacinth plant produced a thousand little water hyacinths every 2 months. Pieces that might break off and float down the river could even transplant themselves without any human help at all. It wasn't long until there was a full scale war against the water hyacinth to try to stop it from taking over all southern waterways.

This is what sin does in our lives. It might appear to be beautiful and even beneficial at first, but it soon reveals its possessive nature. And as it begins to spread and consume, it can soon dominate and control every aspect of our lives.

Happily, God has given to us all that we need to remove the power of sin from our lives. Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary to defeat sin and Satan. We need only to appropriate the power of his cleansing through believing it and receiving it in order to know God's forgiveness in our lives. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

3. Third, Hezekiah restored worship. Having repaired and purified the temple, now worship that was acceptable to God could be restored. READ 2 Chron. 29:25-30:

2CH 29:25 He stationed the Levites in the temple of the LORD with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet; this was commanded by the LORD through his prophets. <sup>26</sup> So the Levites stood ready with David's instruments, and the priests with their trumpets.

2CH 29:27 Hezekiah gave the order to sacrifice the burnt offering on the altar. As the offering began, singing to the LORD began also, accompanied by trumpets and the instruments of David king of Israel. <sup>28</sup> The whole assembly bowed in worship, while the singers sang and the trumpeters played. All this continued until the sacrifice of the burnt offering was completed.

2CH 29:29 When the offerings were finished, the king and everyone present with him knelt down and worshiped. <sup>30</sup> King Hezekiah and his officials ordered the Levites to praise the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with gladness and bowed their heads and worshiped.

Worship is the most important and highest function that we can perform as human beings. It is through worship that we recognize who God is and give Him His rightful place in our lives. So it is important to

worship because of who God is. It is through worship that we recognize God as our creator and sustainer and give Him His due.

But it is also critically important that we worship for our own sake. It is through worship that we maintain a proper perspective on life. It's interesting that whenever there is an unusual tragedy in our nation, people in mass immediately turn to God in prayer. People who normally don't attend church suddenly are found in church services. Why is this the case? Because in the midst of apparent senseless and irrational acts, people are driven to find some kind of meaning. They need perspective. They need to find something that makes sense when all that they had put their faith in crumbles all around them. So they come to the house of God in an attempt to find a new perspective on life.

If we live our lives in a perpetual state of worship, we will find the meaning in life that God intended. And this is what God intends that we do. Certainly it is right and proper for us to pray in times of emergency, but we are also to live our lives in a continuous attitude of prayer. Paul encouraged the church at Thessalonica to pray without ceasing. Certainly it is right and proper for us to worship in times of emergency, but we are also to live our lives in a continuous attitude of worship. Paul encouraged the church at Rome to continuously present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice for this was their spiritual act of worship.

It is critical for the people of God to step up to the plate at this important time in our nation's history. In many ways, we are at a turning point in our nation's history. If our present course continues, our children and grandchildren are going to live in a very different country than we have lived in. Every single one of us is going to meet many people who are searching for answers to some of life's most basic questions. We have those answers. In a very compassionate way, let's share hope and life to those who are searching. National direction can be changed. Hezekiah was instrumental in making dramatic, positive changes in the nation of Judah. God desires for each of his people to be salt and light in the realm of influence that he has given to them.

I would like to conclude by just reading the account of one of the greatest miracles in all of the Bible – a miracle that Hezekiah experienced. The king of Assyrian had just conquered Samaria and taken the Israelites away into captivity. Now he was bent on doing the same to Jerusalem and Judah. Listen to these words recorded by the prophet Isaiah:

ISA 37:14 Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. <sup>15</sup> And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: <sup>16</sup> "O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the

earth. You have made heaven and earth. <sup>17</sup> Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God.

ISA 37:18 "It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. <sup>19</sup> They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. <sup>20</sup> Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God. "

ISA 37:36 Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning--there were all the dead bodies! <sup>37</sup> So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.

ISA 37:38 One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.

(Isaiah 37:14-20;36-38)