Matthew 24:36-44, II Chronicles 32:1-8

“Be Prepared”

The first time that I ever heard of Joe Paterno and Penn State was back in 1983 when we were watching TV and saw Doug Strand playing for the Nittany Lions. He was a friend of my brother’s and they used to play against each other in basketball in high school. I’d be lying if I were to say that I ever thought much about Penn State after that. I followed it more closely when Bobby Bowden and Paterno were vying for the winningest coach record. But the death of Joe Paterno has made all of us, whether we want to or not, recognize that we have all been affected by his life and by this past year of scandal that has attached itself to the program.

But one aspect of Joe Paterno was always lifted up to me from the time I was 10 to now and that was: his teams were always ready. There was no other coach in all of college football who would enter a game with his team better prepared than Joe Paterno. Both of our Scriptures today address being prepared which in some Christian circles could be seen as a sign of a distrust in God or a quenching of the Spirit. But instead we find our willingness to be prepared in life allows a channel through which God can work more effectively. Letting God do the work doesn’t preclude your own hard work and preparedness.

**READ**

We are still walking in His footsteps today, although once again we find ourselves in the Old Testament. We find ourselves with King Hezekiah who was the ruler of Judah a few generations after David and is listed in the geneology of Jesus. Let’s set the stage because I would guess that most of us think Hezekiah is a book in the Bible about an OT prophet. It is not.

King Hezekiah took over Israel when things had just gone really bad. He came and enacted sweeping reform which included the rediscovery of the law or the reading of the Bible. He put the temple back in working order and the priests who had fallen away to idol worship he cleaned up and got them back on track again.

We find in vs. 21 of chapter 31 and also in II Kings that Hezekiah was someone whom: “there was no one like him.” He had an uncompromising heart for God. He was able to take a culture of mistrust and broken relationships to one of trust and harmony by focusing on the worship of God. By rebuilding the temple and focusing on giving praise instead of gossip and slander the people were able to reunite. Worship as a means of being prepared in order to like each other again. I like Hezekiah.

But then we begin our reading in vs. 1 with a great acknowledgment of all that he done. After all of these things, these sweeping reforms to get people back to God and with each other, and these acts of faithfulness, Sennacherib rears his ugly head. Sennacherib is the King of Assyria who was the biggest, baddest, meanest king in the world. Assyria going against Judah was like the US going against Afghanistan. They don’t stand a chance, God’s people don’t have a chance.

But wait, what is wrong with this picture? Hezekiah had just brought the nation out of infidelity to God, his own personal heart was right with God, and this is the reward? You would think God would send a blessing not an enemy. Isn’t that our thinking sometime? We make ourselves right with God, you start coming back to church, you’ve resolved to get more involved, you join a Beth Moore Bible Study, that should give me some cover right? Blessings are headed my way and boom, you lose your house, your job, your spouse. Nothing seems to be going right.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ doesn’t protect you from Sennacherib, from danger, from a double valve replacement, from shingles that is so painful that is makes your heart stop, or a divorce that drives you to the pit of desperation. But what if Hezekiah hadn’t cleaned house, what if he hadn’t been prepared before God, what would have happened? He certainly could not have said what he did in vs. 7-8 that there is one greater than that king who is with us. They may have the people and the weapons, but we have Almighty God and nothing can overcome us.

That’s the mindset of one prepared. That’s the mindset of one who uses all of his resources to get prepared and this is key in our understanding of how God works in our lives in times that necessitate decisions and actions. But I’m getting ahead of myself to make the connection between all that Hezekiah did to be prepared and our task as Christians to be prepared as we face this life.

Verse 2 tells us that Hezekiah to good guy identifies the upcoming problems, the bad guy coming on his horizon. As a result we see in vs. 3-6 all of the preparations he makes to meet the challenge. Vs. 3 begins by stating he planned. He gives the list…gathered his officers and people, they protected their water source, they built up walls and embankments, and towers, then made weapons and shields in abundance, he appointed leaders over the people. Vs. 5 basically said he busted his back day and night in order to be ready for what came next.

Let me tell you about this tunnel they built. Both an engineering and a labor marvel. It was close to a mile or more long. You descend into a shaft in pitch black and drop into a tunnel that has water running up to your knees and you walk. He had this tunnel built in the bedrock and one group came from within the city and the other from outside and somehow they met somewhere in the middle. It was an incredible testimony to the grueling preparations that had to be done to meet the challenge, and they did it. All the people were involved in this work, all of them. There wasn’t just a small group of workers and the rest watched.

So, Hezekiah is well prepared to defend his kingdom. But, Hezekiah had always and even here in this Scripture still puts his trust in the Lord, rather than his own strength. This is not a contradiction. He is aware that all things came from God, including his own capabilities.

The preparations of Hezekiah reflect not a lack of trust, but a faithful response to God. I could not have made that statement with confidence last week. This Scripture has opened up a brand new way of looking at my faith and the way God acts for me that before I was on the other side.

In all my ministry I have always believed that God wants us with nothing so he can work a miracle. God wants us broken so he can do the healing. But here you have someone who loves God and doesn’t need to be broken or destitute to be able to believe in God’s priority and that it is only by God’s grace go I.

You see, their preparations become, in part, the means by which God brings victory. Louis Pasteur once said: perhaps grace, like chance, favors the prepared mind. So likewise the Holy Spirit favors the prepared mind. We are a denomination that stresses preparation for its pastors. You have to go to college, then seminary, it doesn’t have to be Princeton, but it is preferred, you spend 20 hours a week on a sermon and you quote people like Descartes or Louis Pasteur.

We are people defined by the Protestant work ethic and God’s moving in our lives is done more freely if hard work and preparedness is part of that. But what good is a PHD without GOD. As with Hezekiah our livelihood has to know as its bedrock Jesus Christ our Savior.

We find ourselves today, yes today, in a time when action and decisions have to be made. We have had a difficult recent past which is moving farther and farther away into the past and for that we thank God. We have been trying over these past 6 months to focus on worship as the means by which we can prepare each of you to be mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

Today our session will be meeting for a special meeting to decide whether or not to bring before you, the congregation, a decision to buy the green home on Funk Street. This hasn’t surprised us, but it has come suddenly. We are in the stage of getting prepared. But you know what I am the most thankful for? Besides the fact that God has brought us to a different place over these past 6 months than where we had been in our ability to trust in him and making him the rock upon which all of our decisions stand, way before that you all were faithful and busted your backside and worked very hard so that God through your work could put us in such a financial position in which we find ourselves. We still have a lot of work to do, but this church is very well prepared thanks to all of your hard work in saving for such a time as this.

Hezekiah when he encouraged his troops before Sennacherib attacked said: we have someone on our side who is more powerful than all of our enemies. They may have strength in numbers and in weapons, but we have the strength of Almighty God. Don’t ever think that preparing for life gets in the way of relying upon God. It doesn’t for Hezekiah, it doesn’t for Jesus, in Matthew as he warns his disciples that there is only one way in which a home can be broken into and that is if you aren’t ready. There is only one way God will find you unprepared and that is if you are sleeping.

Maybe our greatest challenge for our country is both the erosion of the bedrock of Christ as the foundation and the ethic of hard work that has always been our backbone. As Matthew 7 states: the one who built his house on sand, which is easier and takes less time, to prepare, came crashing down and great was the fall. They simply were not prepared.

Before our congregational meeting on the 19th we will call a day of fasting and prayer on the 18th which I will explain on the 12th as far as how that works so that as an entire church we can be prepared. But then we will need to work hard to make this vision a reality. Our preparations have to be consistent with the direction in which God is leading this church.

I am so excited to see Jerusalem stand up here in this Scripture. Hezekiah and his troops survive and go to live for another day because God’s presence in their lives and God’s ability to work through their hard work and preparedness. I am certain that God will work through our preparedness and our willingness to pursue his vision. Be prepared. Amen.