

“The Best of Earthly Kings”
Isaiah 38-39
by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Hezekiah's Sickness and Recovery

38 In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, “Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.” ²Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³and said, “Please, O LORD, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

⁴Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ⁵“Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.

⁷“This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that he has promised: ⁸Behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps.” So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined.

⁹A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness:

¹⁰I said, In the middle of my days
I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol
for the rest of my years.

¹¹I said, I shall not see the LORD,
the LORD in the land of the living;
I shall look on man no more
among the inhabitants of the world.

¹²My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me
like a shepherd's tent;
like a weaver I have rolled up my life;
he cuts me off from the loom;

from day to night you bring me to an end;

¹³ I calmed myself until morning;

like a lion he breaks all my bones;
 from day to night you bring me to an end.

¹⁴ Like a swallow or a crane I chirp;
 I moan like a dove.

My eyes are weary with looking upward.
 O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety!

¹⁵ What shall I say? For he has spoken to me,
 and he himself has done it.

I walk slowly all my years
 because of the bitterness of my soul.

¹⁶ O Lord, by these things men live,
 and in all these is the life of my spirit.
 Oh restore me to health and make me live!

¹⁷ Behold, it was for my welfare
 that I had great bitterness;
 but in love you have delivered my life
 from the pit of destruction,
 for you have cast all my sins
 behind your back.

¹⁸ For Sheol does not thank you;
 death does not praise you;
 those who go down to the pit do not hope
 for your faithfulness.

¹⁹ The living, the living, he thanks you,
 as I do this day;
 the father makes known to the children
 your faithfulness.

²⁰ The LORD will save me,
 and we will play my music on stringed instruments
 all the days of our lives,
 at the house of the LORD.

²¹ Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover." ²² Hezekiah also had said, "What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?"

Envoys from Babylon

39 At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. ²And Hezekiah welcomed them gladly. And he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them. ³Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah, and said to him, “What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?” Hezekiah said, “They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon.” ⁴He said, “What have they seen in your house?” Hezekiah answered, “They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.”

⁵Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: ⁶Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. ⁷And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” ⁸Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.” For he thought, “There will be peace and security in my days.”

- Isaiah 38-39, ESV

Introduction: When We Get What We Want

Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it! – I’m sure you’ve heard that old saying. You may not know that it’s a variation of an old Yiddish curse, “May you get what you wish for.”

Stories of genies often illustrate the absurd extreme of this idea – You make a wish, and the genie gives you exactly what you ask for but in a way that is really a curse. So, you say, “I want to be rich,” and suddenly you find yourself buried alive in an avalanche of billions of pennies. Or you wish to be famous, and you suddenly become infamous, one of the most known and hated people in the world.

But in real life, sometimes we can get exactly what we think we really want and even what we think we most desperately need, and it can lead to disastrous consequences because of our own sinful human nature. How many highly successful professional athletes have had their wealth and success disappear quickly through poor personal choices or leeches who latch onto their success and drain them dry.

On the other hand, often the things we most fear and dread are used by God in marvelous ways in our lives. Trials and challenges often strengthen our faith, draw us closer to the Lord and those we love, and help us grow in humility and patience.

The events of Isaiah 38-39 – Isaiah’s sickness and recovery and the visit of the Babylonian envoys – probably took place before the destruction of Sennacherib’s army from Isaiah 37. We can’t be sure, but the word God gives Hezekiah in response to His prayer in 38:5-6 – *“Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.”* – does seem to indicate that this happens before chapter 38, perhaps even while Sennacherib is destroying the fortified cities of Judah and drawing closer to Jerusalem.

The chronological order in which these events took place in history is not as important as why Isaiah put them in the order he did here in these chapters. And I think the reason for that ordering brings a compelling message to us: Hezekiah passed the test of pressure and attack by trusting the Lord in the face of the Assyrian army. God delivered Him. Hezekiah passed the test of sickness and trial by turning to the Lord in prayer. God delivered Him from death by sickness, too. But when powerful men came enticing and flattering Hezekiah, he gave into the temptation and fell into pride. Sometimes, when Satan can’t draw our hearts away from the LORD through pressure or trials, he’ll do so through flattery and appeal to our pride. The most dangerous thing Hezekiah faced wasn’t the Assyrian army or a deadly illness but flattering politicians looking for his support.

Most of us are afraid of being persecuted for our faith or of a diagnosis of a deadly cancer. But we need to beware of a comfortable life of complacent compromise.

The Sobering News

Isaiah 38 opens with Hezekiah falling ill and getting some very sobering news from Isaiah –

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, “Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.”

Hezekiah was likely 39 years old when he got sick and got this message. He had been king for 15 years.

While God is in full control of all of the details of our lives, and while He had numbered and written every day of our lives before we were even born, He doesn’t

tell us the number or show us the story ahead of time. We never know what a day will bring.

Because our lives are so unpredictable from our perspective, Isaiah's message to Hezekiah is a good one for us to heed: "*Set your house in order, for you shall die.*" We don't know when we're going to die, but we all will someday (unless Jesus return first) and we should always make sure we're ready.

Is your house in order? Is your soul right with God? Are you trusting in Jesus or somehow hoping – vainly – that your own righteousness will be good enough on the day of your death when you face the Lord? The only way to have your house in order is to have it built on the solid foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ – for His righteousness to be your only righteousness, His death the atonement for all of your sins, His resurrection life your sure hope for eternal life. If Jesus is your life, both now and for eternity, then you are ready for eternity.

On a human level, do your loved ones know how much you love them? Are your affairs in order?

The Sincere Prayer

Hezekiah responds to this sobering word with an immediate sincere prayer –

² Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³ and said, "Please, O LORD, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

When Hezekiah turns his face to the wall away from Isaiah, it isn't to reject the word of the Lord but to seek the Lord from the heart.

Hezekiah has already led a thorough Reformation of worship and life in Judah. He has destroyed all the idols and removed all of the high places. He has undone the wickedness of his father, Ahaz. He has spent 15 years seeking to honor the Lord and lead His people well. Hezekiah doesn't even directly ask for healing here. He just asks the Lord to remember him. "Remember" is a covenantal term, asking God to regard him with favor and with kindness. Hezekiah's bitter weeping shows his desperate need for the Lord.

The Gracious Answer

God's gracious answer to Hezekiah's sincere prayer comes almost immediately -

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ⁵ “Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶ I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.

⁷ “This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that he has promised: ⁸ Behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps.” So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined. – vv. 4-7, ESV

2 Kings 20 describes the same events as Isaiah 38-39, using much of the same language, but it gives us more information -

And Hezekiah wept bitterly. ⁴ And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: ⁵ “Turn back, and say to Hezekiah the leader of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD, ⁶ and I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake.” ⁷ And Isaiah said, “Bring a cake of figs. And let them take and lay it on the boil, that he may recover.”

⁸ And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD on the third day?” ⁹ And Isaiah said, “This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he has promised: shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or go back ten steps?” ¹⁰ And Hezekiah answered, “It is an easy thing for the shadow to lengthen ten steps. Rather let the shadow go back ten steps.” ¹¹ And Isaiah the prophet called to the LORD, and he brought the shadow back ten steps, by which it had gone down on the steps of Ahaz.

- 2 Kings 20:3-11, ESV

A couple of things to note from 2 Kings 20:

1. How quickly God heard and responded to Hezekiah’s prayer. Isaiah had not even gotten out of the palace when God sent him back with the gracious response. Sometimes we do have to struggle long and hard in prayer, but sometimes God has the answer ready for us as soon as we seek Him.

2. The remarkable sign of “*the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz*” going backwards ten steps – or seemingly reversing time for 5 hours was actually done at Hezekiah’s request. God is so gracious as to allow Hezekiah to ask for this miraculous sign, which Hezekiah does, in contrast to his father, Ahaz, who refused to ask for a sign in chapter 7 when God gave the sign of Immanuel.

Both Isaiah and 2 Kings tell us how the promise of miraculous healing did not exclude the use of medicinal means. A cake of figs was used to heal the boil as the Lord was delivering Hezekiah from this sickness. The cake of figs itself was not the sufficient answer, or Hezekiah would not have truly been at the point of death and weeping bitterly. It was God’s miraculous healing, but God also chose to use means. God can certainly heal without means, but He usually chooses to use means, and that doesn’t make the healing any less a gracious act of God.

The Heartfelt Praise

When Hezekiah is healed by God, he offers heartfelt praise in verses 10-20, which we’re not going to look at in detail. God has been so good to us in Christ, and God is good to us every day of our lives. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, but He is gracious and kind to us. We should be offering Him heartfelt praise in thanksgiving every day, but especially at the start of each new week, as we gather in worship on the Lord’s Day.

The Human Weakness

If only Hezekiah’s story ended at the end of Isaiah 38. But, as has been said, the best of men are but men at best, and so the best of merely human kings have feet of clay in the end.

At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. ²And Hezekiah welcomed them gladly. And he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.

– Isaiah 39:1-2, ESV

This was an exciting moment for Hezekiah. Some have speculated that the sign of the sun’s shadow reversal was seen in Babylon, and this prompted the special visit by the envoys. It is possible that the shadow sign was just a local phenomenon in Jerusalem, though. We don’t know for sure.

What seems clear is that Hezekiah is excited to have drawn the attention of a rising power in the world and that he was likely excited about the prospect of a powerful ally in the struggle against Assyria. His pride, his susceptibility to flattery, and his tendency to look for allies among the nations instead of simply trusting the Lord are all on display here.

What Hezekiah doesn't realize is that he gave Babylon good reason to think that little Judah was a prize worth seeking and taking, which they would do in future generations. Hezekiah's response to this word from the Lord could not be more different from his response to the word about his sickness. Hezekiah did not seek the Lord for counsel when the Babylonian envoys arrived, and he did not seek the Lord in repentance with tears at the word of coming judgment. He is content that he will have peace in his days.

How do we handle blessings in life?

Pride is the root human sin, and pride often shows its ugly head more clearly in how we handle the blessings of life rather than the trials. While we may initially respond to trials with self-confidence, great trials will usually break us of our pride and drive us to depend on the Lord. Great blessings, on the other hand, most often inflate our pride and make us more complacent.

This is why we **MUST** give thanks and call upon the Lord in our trials and our triumphs, in hardships and in blessings. We must repent of self-satisfaction as well as self-reliance. We must anchor our lives in worship in every season and circumstance.