

“A GOOD KING DISAPPOINTS”

This passage records events that probably took place sometime before the Lord’s rout of the Assyrian army, which was described at the end of chapter 37. This seems to be the case in light of what the Lord says to Hezekiah in 38:6: “I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.” God had already brought about that deliverance, so it stands to reason that chapters 38-39 function as a sort of flashback, describing something that took place at the time when the Assyrians were preparing to attack Jerusalem.

These chapters also contain the last words that Isaiah is going to say about the reign of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was one of Judah’s greatest kings. His reign stood in sharp contrast to the reigns of his father Ahaz and his son Manasseh, both of which were marked by idolatry and apostasy. We are given a summary of Hezekiah’s tenure as Judah’s king in 2 Kings 18. There we are told that Hezekiah

“did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made

offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan). He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. And the LORD was with him; wherever he went out, he prospered.” (2 Kings 18:3–7 ESV)

Hezekiah was a good king. He was a reformer. He trusted in the Lord and walked in God’s ways. Still, he was not without his failings. This is one of the things that is so unique about the Bible. It is not afraid to show us the dark side of its human heroes. It can do this because it knows that, in the end, there really are no human heroes. Even the best of men are in desperate need of a Savior. And only Jesus Christ, the one who is both fully God and fully man, can fill that need for us.

The two chapters that we are studying today relate two separate events but they are intertwined with each other. This is why we are studying them together today. Hezekiah’s illness and recovery paves the way for the Babylonian embassy, which culminates in God’s announcement of the coming exile to Babylon. This in turn paves the way for the promise of comfort that dominates

the second half of this book of prophecy. We also see in these chapters a parallel between God's dealings with Hezekiah and his dealings with the nation of Judah as a whole. Both were granted a reprieve from certain doom, but both were also told that this reprieve would not last forever. In just fifteen years, Hezekiah would be dead. And in about one hundred and fifteen years, Judah would fall to Babylon.

These two chapters show us a man of genuine faith, a man who ruled on David's throne, looking to the Lord for help. They show him expressing heartfelt gratitude to the Lord when that help was given. But they also tell us how Hezekiah's faith failed at an important point in the life of his nation. All in all, *these chapters set the stage for the glorious prophecy of deliverance that is promised in chapters 40-66 by showing us that even our best efforts are not enough to spare us from the judgment that we deserve. As we study this passage today, we will do so in three sections, looking first at Hezekiah's sickness and prayer, then Hezekiah's song and healing, and lastly Hezekiah's failure and Judah's future.*

Hezekiah's Sickness and Prayer

After the Lord's dramatic deliverance of Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrians at the end of chapter 37, we would expect Isaiah to conclude his

account of Hezekiah's reign on an upbeat note. After all, the deliverance was brought about by Hezekiah's prayers, as we saw in our study of chapter 37 last week. But instead of something positive, chapter 38 begins by telling us that Hezekiah became so sick that he was at the point of death. And to top that off, when Isaiah came to visit him he brought this message from the Lord: "Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover." This is not the kind of thing that a person in a hospital would want to hear when visited by his pastor.

Hezekiah was probably in his mid to late thirties when this took place, so you can understand why he was especially upset by this word from the Lord. He was not an old man; he was in the prime of life. Furthermore, it is generally agreed by commentators that he did not have an heir at this time. Manasseh had not been born yet. Because of this, Hezekiah's death would not only be a personal tragedy, but a national one as well.

Isaiah tells us that Hezekiah responded to this prophetic announcement by praying that the Lord would have mercy upon him and spare his life. Was it wrong for him to ask God to restore him to health? Was he refusing to submit to God's will? There is nothing in the passage to suggest that this was the case. Nor does the fact that God answered his prayer mean that God changed his mind. Instead, this was a situation in which God revealed what would have

happened if Hezekiah had not prayed for deliverance. By sending Isaiah to him with the news of his impending death, God was giving Hezekiah a chance to turn to him in prayer. It is very similar to what the Lord was doing when he sent Jonah to Ninevah to announce the doom that was about to befall that city.

The one thing that stands out as we look at Hezekiah's prayer is the fact that he appears to base his plea upon his own faithfulness and obedience. We often see the same sort of thing in the psalms. For example, Psalm 26 begins with David saying, "Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering." [26:1] What are we to make of such prayers? Are they examples of man placing his confidence in himself rather than in God? Not at all. Neither Hezekiah nor David looked to their own performance as the basis of their acceptance with God. The thing that we have to remember is that the prayers that they offered were the prayers of believers, prayers of people who had already been made right with God on the basis of his grace alone. When they call attention to their integrity in their prayers, they are simply pointing to their lives as evidence that they really are a part of God's people. They are saying that they are not the kind of people who profess faith with their lips while continuing to be ruled by sin. They are testifying to what the Scriptures tell us in many places: true faith produces the fruit of a

transformed life. By appealing to his faithfulness, Hezekiah is identifying himself as one of God's covenant people and claiming God's promises as his own.

If you want further confirmation that Hezekiah was not boasting in his own righteousness here, you can find it by looking at how the Lord responded to his prayer. God said that he heard his prayer. He declared that Hezekiah would be healed and would live for another fifteen years. He even gave a miraculous sign to confirm what he said. He made the shadow on the sundial go backwards, a miracle that symbolized a sort of turning back of the clock for both Hezekiah and Jerusalem. Hezekiah's death would be delayed for another fifteen years, and Jerusalem's fall would not happen until Babylon rose to prominence.

Hezekiah's Song and Healing

In the second part of our passage, Isaiah records a song that Hezekiah composed after the Lord healed him of his sickness. This song is very similar to the lament psalms, in which the psalmist expresses his sorrows and places in trust in the Lord for deliverance. Hezekiah's song begins by describing his plight. This is what he is talking about in verses 10-15. And notice what he says in verse 15: "What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done

it." Hezekiah admits that his sickness has been brought on by the hand of God. This is an important thing for us to remember and to ponder. God is sovereign over everything, even the most difficult things that we have to face in life. He holds the entire world in his hands. As Paul declares in Ephesians 1, the Lord "works *all things* according to the counsel of his will." [1:11] Some of the Bible's most comforting promises are rooted in this doctrine. We are told that God causes all things to work together for the Christian's ultimate good. We are assured that not even a hair can fall from our heads apart from the will of our Father in heaven. It really is a comfort for us to know that the Lord is sovereign over all of the trials that we experience in this life.

After describing his plight, Hezekiah recounts his plea for help. He says that he cried out, "Oh restore me to health and make me live!" He did not want to die. He asked the Lord to heal him. This shows us that it is okay for us to express our desires to the Lord in our prayers. Of course, we have to remember that our will may not be the same as his will. But because we cannot know what God has ordained until it comes to pass, we really can ask the Lord for what we want, as long as it is not in conflict with what he has revealed in his Word.

Next, Hezekiah admits that this affliction has been for his own good. He says, "Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness." This shows us

that the Lord uses our trials to purify and strengthen our faith. And one of the chief ways that he does this is by humbling us. This is clearly what happened with Hezekiah. He says to God, “you have cast all my sins behind your back.” As he battled against this illness that threatened his life, Hezekiah came to see his sin with even greater clarity. And this in turn caused him to see God’s grace with even greater clarity. We need to remember this when we are going through suffering. God wants us to be humbled under our trials. He wants to use them to give us a greater sense of his mercy and love.

In the last part of Hezekiah’s song, he gives thanks to the Lord for the healing that he has brought about for him. This is the response that God’s grace brings about in the lives of those who receive it. It causes us to have heartfelt gratitude for what he has done for us. And we should express our gratitude just as Hezekiah does: by telling others of God’s faithfulness and by taking delight in worshiping and serving our Lord.

There is one other thing I want to mention from this section. It has to do with the method that God used to bring about Hezekiah’s healing. Isaiah told the king’s attendants to make a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil that was the cause of the illness. This was one of the ways people in the ancient world treated this kind of sickness. It is interesting that God would choose to employ such a

common method when it was clear that this was a miraculous healing. I think this reminds us that all healing, whether miraculous or not, ultimately comes from the Lord. We should not lose sight of this. We should be sure to give God the credit and the thanks for the many ways in which we experience healing over the course of our lives.

Hezekiah's Failure and Judah's Future

This brings us to the third part of our passage, chapter 39, where the focus is upon Hezekiah's failure and Judah's future. This chapter begins by telling us about an embassy that was sent to Jerusalem from Babylon. As you might surmise, the king of Babylon was not sending envoys to Judah because he was genuinely interested in Hezekiah's welfare. At this point in history, Babylon was a vassal state under the authority of Assyria, and they were chafing under Assyrian control. The king of Babylon was trying to assemble a league of nations that would unite with him in a rebellion against Assyria. When he heard about Hezekiah's recovery and Jerusalem's surprising deliverance from Assyria, he saw this as a golden opportunity. He sent his envoys to flatter Hezekiah, in hopes of gaining his support.

After reading Hezekiah's great hymn in the previous chapter, we would expect him to respond to the congratulations of this embassy by giving glory to God. But that was not what he did. Instead, he took the Babylonians into his treasure house, trying to impress them with the extent of his wealth. He was taking credit for what the Lord had done. And in doing so, he was showing the Babylonians what they would stand to gain if Judah was on their side.

After Hezekiah did this, the Lord sent Isaiah to confront him for what he had done. Upon hearing Hezekiah's admission, the prophet gave another word from the Lord, saying that Judah would one day be taken captive by the Babylonians. All of her treasures would be plundered, and Hezekiah's descendants would be sent into exile as eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. This is exactly what happened when Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 586 BC.

I want to call your attention to the contrast between the way Hezekiah responded to this word from the Lord and the word that the Lord sent him when he was on his deathbed. When Isaiah told him that he was going to die, the king pleaded with God to heal him. But when Isaiah told him about the exile that his descendants would have to endure, he accepted God's word as good. He did not dispute it or bring another appeal before the Lord. We might be inclined to think that this indicated a willingness to submit to the Lord's will. However, Isaiah

tells us that privately Hezekiah thought, "There will be peace and security in my days." The reason why he was content with this word from Isaiah was because it was not going to effect him. He was not thinking about the suffering that future generations of his people would have to endure. He only thought about himself, about what life in Judah will be like "in my days." This is a pretty serious flaw for a king, especially for one who ruled over God's covenant people.

As we consider this passage today, we should let it remind us of our desperate need for a salvation that comes from outside of ourselves. This is true for you whether you are a Christian or not. If you have not yet trusted in Christ alone for your salvation, you need to do so. He is your only hope. And if you are a Christian, even as you strive to walk faithfully before the Lord, you must not forget that your works are never the basis of your standing with God.

We see this so clearly in the life of Hezekiah. He was one of Judah's greatest kings, but in the end he was not good enough to save Judah from the judgment that was hanging over her. While his prayers averted the threat that was posed by Assyria, Babylon was already on the horizon. Remember how this passage began. The Lord told Hezekiah to set his house in order. This was not just a

matter of sorting out his personal affairs, like making sure that his will was up to date. As king, it also would have meant doing all that he could to ensure the welfare of future generations of his people. But as we can see by his words in 39:8, he was content with the assurance that there would be peace and security in *his* days. He failed to set his house in order. He failed to secure peace for those who would come after him. Thanks be to God that he has given us a better King, a King who is faithful over God's house as a son, a King of whom it is said, "of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end."