

Pentwater Bible Church

Isaiah Message 87

October 18, 2020



Hezekiah Stained glass in Canterbury Cathedral 12th century artist unknown

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Pentwater Bible Church

The Book of Isaiah

Message Eighty–Seven

THE SICKNESS OF HEZEKIAH AND THE LORD’S DELIVERANCE

October 18, 2020

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HEZEKIAH’S DEATH PROPHECIED

Isaiah 38:1

In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith Jehovah, Set thy house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live (ASV, 1901).

This event occurred in the period just after the decimation of the Assyrian army of Sennacherib. Sennacherib had fled to Nineveh and was afterwards assassinated by his sons. Additional information regarding this story is found in II Kings 20. Hezekiah’s illness occurred *after* that attempted invasion, and probably close to that time. Josephus affirms this when he says that the sickness occurred soon after the destruction of the army of Sennacherib.¹ The Lord may have brought the illness upon him to prevent him from being prideful over the conquering of the Assyrian army. Hezekiah’s prayers caused the Lord to act against the Assyrians. Hezekiah must have been worn out as a result of the massive Assyrian victories in Israel and the 46 cities of Judah as well as the threats they made against Judah. Another cause of his anxiety was, that he had at that time no children, and consequently he had reason to believe that his kingdom would descend into a contentious struggle for the crown.

Now the sickness was severe enough to end *unto death*. And Isaiah bringing him God’s Word, said unto him that he *shalt die, and not live*. The manifestation of this illness was a boil (II Kings 20:7). Therefore, he should make the necessary disposition of his earthly possessions, other aspects and bequeathments in his will.

As it was announced and from all human appearance; the disease was deadly, and of which he could not recover through any human intervention. Only Almighty power could save him; and while this is true, it was God through the prophet Isaiah who was delivering to him the sentence of death.

HEZEKIAH PRAYED TO GOD

Isaiah 38:2–3

²Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto Jehovah, ³and said, Remember now, O Jehovah, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth

¹ Josephus, Flavius, William Whiston translator, The Works of Josephus, published by Hendrickson, Peabody, MA. Antiquities of the Jews book 10, 2. 1.pg 267

and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore (ASV, 1901).

Hezekiah probably turned his face to the wall in order that his emotion and his tears would not be seen by others. It would not be fitting for the king to be seen in a weak situation. He also probably sought to compose himself the better for a more effective prayer. He wanted his prayer, to be as secret as possible. He was only thirty-nine at the time and did not accept that it was his time to enter eternity.

Manasseh his son would ascend the throne at age twelve (II Kings 21:1). So, he was not born until three years after this incident. To be cut off childless in midlife was a most severe judgment from God. To king Hezekiah this seemed like an injustice from his God.

Hezekiah's response is helpful for us to see. He does not withdraw completely, and he does not withdraw from God. He also does not go into a rage against God nor does he demand that God heal him in payment for his life of devotion to Him. Rather, he simply pours out the feelings of a grieving heart to a heavenly Father. No father's heart can be untouched by such a cry. And his Heavenly Father was not. Hezekiah's plea focuses on his motivations. He had lived his life with one desire: to be absolutely faithful to God (Philippians 3:7–15; I Thessalonians 5:23). It is God's purpose that his people be able to be true and faithful to him and that their hearts might be one toward him.

Hezekiah prays out loud to the God of his people, the One who formed them into a large nation at Sinai. He enjoins God to call to mind (remember) his manner of life. In Old Testament times longevity was regarded as a blessing. He is merely pointing out the tragedy that would seem to occur if a theocratic ruler who had lived his life righteously before God should be taken without an heir. How would the people view such an early untimely death? Perhaps they would think that all Hezekiah's devotion was for nothing. He did have a whole heart, that was completely devoted to the Lord. Hezekiah's service to God was not half-hearted. Hezekiah also did not establish his own rules for obeying God and set himself up as the judge of what is good. God alone is to say what is good, and what God has declared to be good Hezekiah has done. According to the Mosaic Law the promises expressed in Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:30 and 30:16, Hezekiah could claim a long life for himself. The thought that this life might be brought to a sudden end is too much for the king, and he breaks out in strong crying affirming his sincerity.

GOD RESPONDS TO HEZEKIAH'S HEARTFELT PRAYER

Isaiah 38:4–8

⁴Then came the word of Jehovah to Isaiah, saying, ⁵Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith Jehovah, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years. ⁶And I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city. ⁷And this shall be the sign unto thee from Jehovah, that Jehovah will do this thing that he hath spoken: ⁸behold, I will cause the shadow on the steps, which is gone down on the dial of Ahaz

with the sun, to return backward ten steps. So, the sun returned ten steps on the dial whereon it was gone down.

The Bible describes very graphically in II Kings 20:4 how Isaiah, after delivering his message, had gone out, but had not even reached the middle court of the palace, when he stopped at the voice of God entering him, and He said to him “*turn again and relieve Hezekiah’s fears by a fresh announcement.*” It is a beautiful picture of how quickly God answers the prayers of faithful.

James 5:16b

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much (KJV).

According to the book of Kings, the full message sent to Hezekiah was, “I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: *behold, I will heal thee on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord.* And I will add unto thy days fifteen years; and I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the King of Assyria; and I will defend this city *for mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake*” (II Kings 20:5, 6). The words in italics are those from II Kings. This fifteen was doubling, or rather more than doubling, the length of Hezekiah’s reign, and allowing him a length of life exceeding that of the great majority of the kings of Judah, who rarely reached the age of fifty. Hezekiah lived to be fifty-four.

Hezekiah received a sign to assure him of the complete humiliation of Sennacherib (Isaiah 37:30). Then the Lord made him a sign of a peculiar kind, and it was offered under peculiar conditions. According to II Kings that a choice was given to him, and he was to determine whether time, as measured by a certain timepiece or clock, which was known as “the sundial of Ahaz,” should make a sudden leap forward—the shadow advancing ten degrees upon the dial (II Kings 20:9), or whether it should go backwards, the shadow upon the same dial receding ten degrees. Hezekiah decided for the latter sign, from its appearing to him the more difficult of accomplishment, and after declaring his decision, the shadow receded to the prescribed distance.

Time was rolled backward, or at any rate appeared to be rolled backward; and the king, seeing so great a miracle, accepted the additional predictions that had been made to him. The Lord will do this thing that he hath spoken.

Herodotus states that the sun-dial was an invention of the Babylonians², from whom it could have easily have passed from the Assyrians. Ahaz, Hezekiah’s father, may have obtained a knowledge of it, or an actual specimen, when he visited Tiglath-Pileser at Damascus (II Kings 16:10), and, on his return to his capital, have caused one to be erected there. There are several types of sun-dials. The one here spoken of seems to have consisted of a set of steps, with a perpendicular pole at the top, the shadow cast then receded up the steps as the sun rose, and descended down them as the sun declined. It seems that the sign was given in the morning, when the shadow was gradually creeping up the steps. Hezekiah thought that a sudden jump in the same direction would be as nothing compared with a reversal of the motion, and therefore asked that the shadow should go back. How the Lord made it visible whatever it was, caused it to only be seen locally, not

² Herodotus, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt, The Histories, published by the Easton Press, Norwalk, CT. 2000, book 2 paragraph 109 pg.123

widespread, since the King of Babylon subsequently sent ambassadors, to inquire concerning “the wonder *that was done in the land*” (II Chronicles 32:31).

HEZEKIAH PRAISES GOD

Isaiah 38:9–10

⁹The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness. ¹⁰I said, In the noontide of my days I shall go into the gates of Sheol: I am deprived of the residue of my years (ASV, 1901).

This song of rejoicing of Hezekiah, its author is made at time of his sickness and recovery. At the same time, not each section or stanza of the Psalm like song reflects the same period. So, in the first five verses, the period stated is that which is described in verses 2 and 3, namely, the period when the king was sick and had not yet heard the news that he would be healed. The introductory words of verse eleven, *I said*, introduce the thoughts that had fearfully overcame the king, those of death. The third word of the verse gives the time when the king verbalized his thoughts. It was the period in life of the king when that life was about to come to end. In speaking of *my days*, the king simply has reference to his period of life, the days that he is to live upon this earth.

Isaiah 38:11–20

¹¹I said, I shall not see Jehovah, even Jehovah in the land of the living: I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world. ¹²My dwelling is removed, and is carried away from me as a shepherd's tent: I have rolled up, like a weaver, my life; he will cut me off from the loom: From day even to night wilt thou make an end of me. ¹³I quieted myself until morning; as a lion, so he breaketh all my bones: From day even to night wilt thou make an end of me. ¹⁴Like a swallow or a crane, so did I chatter; I did moan as a dove; mine eyes fail with looking upward: O Lord, I am oppressed, be thou my surety. ¹⁵What shall I say? he hath both spoken unto me, and himself hath done it: I shall go softly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul. ¹⁶O Lord, by these things men live; And wholly therein is the life of my spirit: Wherefore recover thou me, and make me to live. ¹⁷Behold, it was for my peace that I had great bitterness: But thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption; For thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back. ¹⁸For Sheol cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee: They that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. ¹⁹The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day: The father to the children shall make known thy truth. ²⁰Jehovah is ready to save me: Therefore we will sing my songs with stringed instruments All the days of our life in the house of Jehovah (ASV, 1901).

Hezekiah begins immediately with an expression of his melancholy thoughts as he contemplated death. “In the pause of my days I shall go to the gates of Sheol.” The thought is, “I shall go from the days of my life to the gates of Sheol.” *In the gates of Sheol* expresses the destination to which Hezekiah believes he is going. It is not merely Sheol, but its gates. Once the gates have closed on the person who has entered, there is no possibility of escaping or returning through them to the days of this life. Then he says, *I am deprived* of the remainder of my years. He considered this as

a punishment, which gave him a bitterness of spirit. This clearly demonstrates that there is no return once one enters the afterlife.

The king's complaint is that he will no longer see God in this life. The *land of the living* refers to life on earth, in opposition to the gates of Sheol. There is a certain gradation or intensifying of the thought he has, and this is accomplished by means of the modifying phrase, *in the land of the living*. Perhaps Hezekiah realizes that without God there can only be fear, and death can then claim him. If he could see God, he would not have to fear death.

Hezekiah now expresses the same essential thought by means of two different figures. To express the first picture Hezekiah uses a term *dwelling*, and uses this term figuratively, referring to the body as man's place of abode. Of this dwelling, Hezekiah complains that it has departed (the idea of forceful removal is present in 33:20), and has been removed from him. He speaks as though this had already taken place, and that he is a man bereft of life, which has gone from him. The king compares his life to a tent belonging to the shepherd. In the first place the tent, in contrast to the permanent palace of a king, is a temporary abode; secondly, it is the tent of a shepherd, used only for passing purposes, easily erected and easily removed. In the second figure the king declares he has rolled up his life like a weaver. As the weaver when he has completed his work rolls up the cloth on the roller so that all that remains is to cut it off from the loom. Likewise, Hezekiah has finished all the responsibilities of life and has nothing more to do than to await the coming of death. The king then seems to attribute himself the cause of death; he himself has brought his death about; and yet ultimately he recognizes that his death is in God's hands, and that God is in complete control of it. It is God who is to cut him off from the loom. The word *dallah* (*loom*) is placed first and so is emphasized. It refers to the ends of the threads that fasten the web to the beam.

To express the suddenness and shortness of time Hezekiah says *from day unto night thou dost bring me to an end*. The thought is that in the morning one did not expect anything untoward to occur, and by evening, when darkness had come, the event had already taken place.

Then the king declares that he has waited till morning. Throughout the entire night the king looked upon God as upon a lion, expecting Him to act as a hungry lion. Hezekiah was constantly mindful of the presence of the Lord, his God. He compares his death to the breaking of all his bones. The death that God sends him is like the attack of a lion who breaks all the bones of its prey. In mentioning the bones, the king refers to a destruction that is thorough and complete.

Hezekiah moves on by comparing his sufferings to the moanings of birds, the swallow, crane and dove. The swallow makes a murmuring, softer sound, whereas the crane makes a louder, creaking noise. Like the sounds of these birds, so the king chirps, muttering his sounds in mourning calls of grief, and longing for help. Like the mournful sound that the dove makes, so does Hezekiah mourn (Isaiah 59:11; Ezekiel 7:16; Nahum 2:7). Still the king has not abandoned all hope. His eyes have become weak, but he has lifted them up on high, hoping that God will take notice of him. Now he gives another picture of his great despair. Yet he cries out to God, addressing Him as *Adonai* (sovereign Lord). This is the word that Isaiah himself so often has used to set forth God as the One who can carry out His remarkable purposes. Therefore, he prays earnestly, *be thou my surety*. It is a command to take Hezekiah's situation, to take the condition and cause of the king into His own hands, to make it His affair. Hezekiah has faced his desperate condition and has brought the condition before the Lord in prayer.

As a consequence of God's faithful dealing, Hezekiah describes how he can now live the remainder of his life. He will go slowly step by step, thus living a quiet, peaceful life; and so, his entire course of life will be an answer to the question regarding how he shall praise his God. Events have humbled the king and brought him low. He cannot live proudly and haughtily, but must walk in humility before his God all his days. It will be a long life, for the king speaks of *all my years*. He has heard the message of Isaiah that God will add fifteen years to his days. Unlike Ahaz his father, who proudly rejected a message from God, Hezekiah acknowledges the truth of the message and gratefully speaks of the remainder of his life as *all my years*. Anyone who had experienced a deliverance of this magnitude could only walk quietly, step by step, before our God in humble obedience. Hezekiah will live, and he will live actively. The thought of death is completely past. Praising God in prayer, the king states that God will both make him recover and also cause him to live again. More than that, God will restore to the king his life in all its fullness and strength.

Because his end was different than the king had expected, and so he exclaims, *behold!* It is a matter deserving of praise and also wonder, for God has dealt so wonderfully with him. He says that despite the bitterness that had befallen him, God loved him. He had been in the very pit of destruction and yet God had so loved him as to bring him out of it. This love was manifested in the fact that the Lord had cast all of Hezekiah's sins behind His back to get rid of them. What we do not want we throw away behind us.

Continuing Hezekiah expresses a strong reason for his gratitude to God. God desires that men should praise Him, and He will add to Hezekiah's years that Hezekiah also may praise Him. As a dead man, the king would be robbed of the privilege of exalting God in praise. So, he has deep gratitude for God for the extension of his life. Hezekiah has been deeply conscious of his sins. Now he is rejoicing that God has cast them behind Him. He knows that his sins are the cause of his death, and he looks upon this death as a punishment for them. Those who praise God are the living, and in this verse the king sets forth a strong contrast to what has just been stated. In contrast to Sheol and death he speaks of the living one who lives again. Only such are the ones that praise God, not those that go down into the pit in death.

These words in verse twenty form a conclusion to his entire beautiful prayer of thanksgiving. *The Lord is present to save me*. At the time of the king's great need, when above all else he required deliverance from death, the Lord intervened to bring him physical salvation. The result of this salvation is that the king would sing with the choir his own songs. He did indeed restore singing to the worship of God (II Chronicles 29:30). Isaiah was to tell the king (II Kings 20:5, 8) that on the third day he would go up to the Temple, and it is this thought that brings to a close his heartfelt prayer.

THE VISIBLE CURE

Isaiah 38:21–22

²¹Now Isaiah had said, Let them take a cake of figs, and lay it for a plaster upon the boil, and he shall recover. ²²Hezekiah also had said, What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of Jehovah?

The chapter ends describing the treatment that Isaiah ordered for Hezekiah to put on his boil to help with the healing process. Isaiah's presentation of the story has Isaiah announcing God's promise that the king will continue to live (Isaiah 38:4–6), giving a sign that he will live (Isaiah 38:7–8), advising the king on how to treat his boil (Isaiah 38:21), and giving the king another sign about going up to the temple (Isaiah 38:22). The use of a medicinal patch of figs can be viewed as an observable action of God's miraculous power to heal, like Jesus' use of clay to give sight to the blind (John 9:9). Isaiah predicts that Hezekiah will recover and live, rather than that he has already recovered (II Kings 20:7). The sign that Hezekiah requested is motivated by his desire to go to the temple to worship God and sing his praises. Since his skin disease would make him unclean (Leviticus 13:18–23) and unable to enter the temple area, he would have to wait until the signs of the sickness were past so that the priest could pronounce him clean (Leviticus 13:6, 17, 23, 28). In Isaiah's account there is no record of what the sign was, if it was a miraculous event, or how many days it was before the king could go to the temple to worship God with the rest of the people and tell everyone his testimony of what God had graciously done for him.

Once God promised Hezekiah life and recovery, he was reminded of several important principles that most take for granted:

1. God is the source of life
2. God's promises are true
3. God forgives sins

In appropriate response to these truths, believers must praise God for his salvation and to share with others how we have also personally experienced his grace. He is the one that deserves all praise, when people are well, and when they are sick, and when they die. He has a plan and all of his servants need to accept and follow his plan and never doubt Him.

Next message: HEZEKIAH SHOWS JUDAH'S WEALTH TO THE BABYLONIANS
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