

The LORD administers justice and mercy for all his people according to his covenant faithfulness: justice for the foolishness of their leaders, and mercy for the humble prayers of their leaders. Will we receive his justice and mercy with fearful and thankful hearts, or with selfish relief for another temporary reprieve?

Introduction – The distance between two points can be near or far, but sometimes bridging the gap is not easy.

Background – 2 Kings 20 narrates events that occur chronologically before chapters 18-19. It seems the author is following the standard arrangement of presenting positive stories about each king before listing the sins and shortcomings that demonstrate he is not the hoped-for messianic son of David. Except for chapter 20’s concluding summary of Hezekiah’s last days, this chapter tells us what happened to Hezekiah before Assyria attacked, somewhere near the mid-point of his tenure as king of Judah.

I. God’s Providence Is Often Merciful and Gracious

A. Hezekiah’s prayer and God’s promise to heal and protect (vv. 1-7)

The first thing we should note are the good gifts of God. Hezekiah was not old yet, around 37-38 years old, but he got so sick the prophet Isaiah paid him a visit to deliver God’s message. Isaiah told the king he would not recover so he should get his royal affairs in order. But Hezekiah was a good and faithful man. Verse 3 recounts his simple one-sentence prayer, how he pleaded with God to remember his own undivided covenant loyalty, and how afterward he turned in his bed toward the wall and wept bitterly. The word of the LORD, a new message, came to Isaiah as soon as he left the palace and temple precinct. God would add 15 years to Hezekiah’s lifespan. God also promised to protect Jerusalem from the menacing Assyrian empire. Not on the basis of Hezekiah’s righteousness, but for God’s own sake and the sake of king David his servant. Upon this merciful news, Isaiah ordered a cake of figs to be medicinally applied to Hezekiah’s boil for healing. This is magnificent mercy on full display! The LORD is merciful when he doesn’t give us what we deserve (death).

B. God’s miraculous sign confirming his promise (vv. 8-11)

Hezekiah received a good word from God, and then he asked for a sign to confirm God’s promise. Isaiah offered a choice: say the word and God will cause the shadow to move forward or backward on the steps, presumably on a time-keeping staircase erected by Hezekiah’s father king Ahaz. The sun’s shadow supernaturally retreated 10 degrees on Ahaz’s sun-steps. Having already received *mercy* in a promise of healing and protection, Hezekiah also gained *grace* from the LORD. For Hezekiah, God’s grace came in the form of a miraculous sign that confirmed his promise. For us, all the good things we don’t deserve but still receive from God’s hand come to us through the riches of Jesus Christ.

II. God’s People Can Be Confident and Calculating

A. A flagrant display of wealth and strength (vv. 12-13)

Then God tested Hezekiah’s heart to see what return the king would give for the show of mercy and grace. Will he trust the LORD for the promised deliverance of his kingdom? The Babylonian king sent envoys to Jerusalem to comfort Hezekiah but also investigate the sign (2 Chr 32:25, 31). It seems Hezekiah, who had earlier followed his heart’s cry for mercy and grace, now follows his head in sensing a political opportunity. “I’ll impress these guests with my wealth and power!” And so he showed Babylon all the treasures in his palace and storehouses. In the king’s mind, he is not a steward of God’s wealth (1 Cor 4:7), since all these by divine right must belong to the crown.

B. A strategic move to forge a foreign alliance (vv. 14-15)

The ascendant kingdom of Babylon was seeking a political alignment with Judah and Egypt to oppose the Assyrians, and Hezekiah was keen to the notion because he knew Assyria was the immediate threat to his own nation. Maybe Hezekiah wondered, “Is an alliance with the Babylonian international coalition God’s means of keeping his promise to protect his people? It makes sense in my head!” In principle, seeking political alliances was a denial of the covenant nature of the royal office in Israel and Judah (2 Sam 24:2). Hezekiah is evidently proud of his wealth and power, but the Scripture says pride comes before a fall (Prov 11:2).

III. God’s Plans Are Always Just and Good

A. God’s severe justice can be reprieved, but only for a time (vv. 16-18)

Although Hezekiah welcomed the Babylonian envoys as friends, their reception brought the exact opposite of what he desired and expected. All the treasures and armory that Hezekiah showed the envoys will be carried off to Babylon! Isaiah delivered this devastating message from the LORD to the king as a rebuke to naïve Hezekiah (cf. Isa 39:1-8). This prophecy was fulfilled in the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 598 BC, and the Babylonian exile in 586 BC, at least 115 years later (2 Kgs 24:13; 25:13-17; cf. Ezr 1:7-11). Not even Hezekiah’s descendants will be spared. Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, was exiled by the Assyrians and held captive in Babylon (2 Chr 33:11-13). Other descendants followed during the Babylonian deportations of 605 BC (2 Kgs 24:1; Dan 1:1-7), 597 BC (2 Kgs 24:10-12; 2 Chr 36:10), and finally 586 BC (2 Kgs 25:5-7; 2 Chr 36:20; Jer 39:1-7; 52:4-15) to become eunuchs in the Babylonian king’s palace (cf. 2 Kgs 24:15; 25:6-7).

B. God is always good in his kind mercy to us (vv. 19a)

Even Hezekiah admitted God’s word was good. From a doctrinal perspective, every Christian with any familiarity with the Bible knows that every word that proceeds from the mouth of God is good. But again, most believers don’t live in their heads. Our hearts, the way we feel, so often contradict what we know in our heads. Every single Christian ought to confess that same truth. “God is always good in his kind mercy to us.” “God’s plans are always just and good.” (Rom 8:28-31)

C. Where will the kindness and severity of God lead you? (vv. 19b-21; Rom 11:22)

This is where it gets complicated. I’m not sure what Hezekiah meant by his last words in 2 Kings. But here are three possible ways to read the text. (1) A head and heart aligned but without repentance. (2) A head and heart divided, with a head acknowledgement of God’s way as good, but a heart that was not really repentant. (3) A head and heart aligned in repentance, thankfulness, and humble submission to God’s kind mercy and severe justice, because if God is in it, it must somehow, somehow be good. Based on the available evidence in this passage and in parallel accounts (Isa 38-39; 2 Chr 32), it is difficult to discern Hezekiah’s heart. But it is pretty clear in the 2 Kings account the author intended to portray Hezekiah in a comparatively negative light in this last recorded episode of his life. Again we see the king, this son of David, is not the Messiah—the final, true Son of David, the one David called “my Lord” (Ps 110:1; cf. Lk 20:41-44). Which way will your head and heart go?

Conclusion – Though the distance between your head and your heart is a vast chasm, the LORD is merciful and gracious. But his mercy and grace are not merely gifts. They are faith tests. After he shows himself trustworthy, he often tests our covenant loyalty. Will you look by faith to Jesus as you seek to bridge the gap between your head and heart, letting him set your priorities, making the glorious gospel of God your chief concern and driving force, and demoting all other concerns for the sake of knowing only Christ and him crucified? The message of the OT and NT agree, if you want to be saved from a tragic reprieve, if you want to unite your head and heart and unite them both to Jesus, then rekindle your first love. Will you?