

Isaiah 38 • The Healing of Hezekiah

Introduction

There's a military axiom that states something to the effect that no one knows what they're truly made of until they're actually under fire. But this is also the reason for repetitive training of how to fight and live under such conditions, Generals hoping that it will enable the soldier to react appropriately in spite of the pressures of the circumstances. As Christians, the way we cope with times of crisis often reveals how consistently (or not) we've walked with the Lord and whether we react appropriately in spite of the circumstances. Hezekiah is one of the strongest biblical examples for us in this regard.

¹In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. 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 and not live.'"

[Read v.1]

Q: Hezekiah fell "mortally ill." The literal translation is "sick to the point of death." What do you think was his illness? (Hint: read verse 21.)

A: He probably contracted some form of systemic infection; that is, blood poisoning, as the result of a boil.

Q: Isn't it unusual for God to give advanced warning of impending death, especially to a righteous person? Why does it come through Isaiah?

A: True, warnings of impending death/disaster are most often given to unrighteous people about to undergo judgment. It's very likely that this indicates from the outset that Hezekiah is undergoing a test from God. It most likely comes through Isaiah as he was the main communication conduit between the king and the King. (This was the normal relationship between kings and prophets.) So essentially Hezekiah's first prayer may be answered here, "Will this illness lead to death?"

Application: What would you do this week if you learned that your death was imminent and you had to "set your house in order"? Do you consider the possibility that God's answer is sometimes "No" or not the answer we expected? How do we react in such cases?

[Read v.2]

Q: What was Hezekiah's response in verse 2, and why did he turn to the wall?

A: He prayed. It's probably significant that he turned away from Isaiah—representing man—and faced God directly. It shows that the initial reaction of His heart was not to blame the messenger but to face squarely the sovereign God of his life.

Q: Why was it important that "he prayed" and not that he asked Isaiah to pray for him?

A: Because the desire of the heart had to be expressed from within himself, not to Isaiah or any other.

Q: What's the really positive thing about what Hezekiah did that means the illness could have been a test?

A: Verse 2 says "Then Hezekiah...prayed to the LORD." That is incredibly important. It means that Hezekiah did not resort to the sin of idolatry by seeking healers or consultations from false religions, that he did not begin worshipping other gods when he was desperate as so many before him. Therefore, it was not so much his prayer that counted, as much as it was the One from whom he sought help.

Application: Have you known someone facing a mortal illness? What is the true test of the heart when one becomes "mortally ill"?

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³and said, “Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth 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, saying, ⁵“Go and say to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, “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 from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city.”’ ⁷This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that He has spoken: ⁸“Behold, I will cause the shadow on the stairway, which has gone down with the sun on the stairway of Ahaz, to go back ten steps.” So the sun’s shadow went back ten steps on the stairway on which it had gone down.

[Read v.3-8]

Q: What is Hezekiah’s request in verse 3, and in what 3 ways did he describe his spiritual life?

A: He asked the Lord to “remember” him. To remember does not mean he thinks that God had somehow forgotten him. To remember is like “to remember one’s birthday” or anniversary. It’s more about remembering a legacy. The three ways he describes his spiritual life is:

- (1) he walked before God in truth;
- (2) he walked before God with a whole heart; and,
- (3) he did what was good in God’s sight.

Application: Take time to reflect where we are individually in terms of the above three things.

Q: Why do you think that Hezekiah wept bitterly?

A: It’s hard to say at this point. In his prayer to come in v.-22, however, it appears he’s more concerned for God’s name and work than his own. The important point is that he is totally sincere in his response to God.

Q: Why do you think that the Lord gave the good news of the extra 15 years through Isaiah instead of Hezekiah, if Hezekiah was such a good man?

A: A significant reason is as a testimony to what is actually going on. God commands that there always be at least 2 witnesses, so here we have affirmation not only of Hezekiah’s prayer and interaction with God, but of the sign itself. As with many events in our life, Hezekiah’s situation will be a testimony to a much larger audience than just himself.

Q: What was the sign that God would give Hezekiah to confirm His words? (According to 2 Kings 20:8-10, Hezekiah requested the sign.) What is the most significant part of this sign?

A: The sun’s shadow was used either on an early sun dial or a structure consisting of a wall and stairs that acted like a sun dial. It was an elegant demonstration of God’s power over all things, even time. The most significant thing in this case is that in assigning Hezekiah the choice of how the sign would work, Hezekiah was accepting by faith not only the authority of the sign, but that God would add the time to his life as stated. It’s really not about the sign, but faith.

Point: In the Psalms, the Hebrew word translated into English as “life” can also be translated as “soul”. Those discussions are more often about spiritual life than physical life, although they intersect from time to time. Here the word “life” can also be translated as “days”, depicting the set time appointed by God for our physical life here on earth. The lesson here is distinctly centered on the sovereignty of God over the time He has allotted us in this life.

Application: Sometimes God sets specific times and dates, but more often He sets a “chronology”, the sequence in which things will happen that may not have specific times assigned to each step. Do we understand our days are appointed by God, yet completely under His sovereign discretion? How should this affect our thinking of how to live the days that He has given?

⁹A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery:

¹⁰I said, “In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of Sheol; I am to be deprived of the rest of my years.”

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

¹²Like a shepherd’s tent my dwelling is pulled up and removed from me; As a weaver I rolled up my life. He cuts me off from the loom; From day until night You make an end of me.

¹³I composed my soul until morning. Like a lion—so He breaks all my bones, From day until night You make an end of me.

¹⁴Like a swallow, like a crane, so I twitter; I moan like a dove; My eyes look wistfully to the heights; O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.

¹⁵“What shall I say? For He has spoken to me, and He Himself has done it; I will wander about all my years because of the bitterness of my soul.

¹⁶O Lord, by these things men live, And in all these is the life of my spirit; O restore me to health and let me live!

¹⁷Lo, for my own welfare I had great bitterness; It is You who has kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.

¹⁸For Sheol cannot thank You, Death cannot praise You; Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness.

¹⁹It is the living who give thanks to You, as I do today; A father tells his sons about Your faithfulness.

²⁰The Lord will surely save me; So we will play my songs on stringed instruments All the days of our life at the house of the LORD.”

[Read v.9-20]

Q: Summarize v.10-12. What is Hezekiah’s number one concern regarding the news of his impending death?

A: Hezekiah is more concerned about heavenly things than earthly things. He does not list his possessions or power or even relationships, but is fixated on the Lord. It’s an indication of the quality of his heart that his first reaction is, “...I will not see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living...”

Q: What is Hezekiah describing in v.13-14?

A: This is the intensity of the test from God, the tremendous emotional and spiritual pressures of the time between hearing the news and awaiting an answer to his prayer.

Q: What is significant about Hezekiah’s attitude as described in v.15?

A: He is acknowledging the absolute sovereignty of God. It’s similar to Job’s reaction to the testing of his life:

“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.’ Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.”

—Job 1:20-22

Q: After his personal request for healing in v.16, what does Hezekiah reveal in v.17-20 as his motive for wanting more life on earth?

A: To praise God and be a testimony of God. Hezekiah’s heart is not inclined to desire material or earthly things for himself, but for God.

Application: How do we approach God with our requests—are they centered on our self or Him? Are we in the habit of thinking of God first, even over and above our self? Consider right now how we would weigh our concern over God’s name versus our own.

²¹Now Isaiah had said, “Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.”

²²Then Hezekiah had said, “What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?”

[Read v. 21-22]

Q: In Hezekiah's question, what is revealed about the character of his heart?

A: He is not asking when he can resume his “normal” life, but when he can resume his “spiritual” life. A person with such an illness was considered “unclean” and therefore prevented from entering the Temple, effectively denied access to God. Hezekiah’s first concern is restoration to the presence of God.

Application: What’s the one personal principle you walk away with from reading this chapter?