Hezekiah’s Sickness and Healing

Study Text: Isaiah 38:1-9

Hezekiah was 25 years old when he became king and he reigned in Jerusalem for 29 years; that was until 686BC (I Kings 18:2). He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just like his ancestor King David. He removed the high places where the people worshipped at sacred pillars. The Lord was with Hezekiah and prospered him; but that did not mean the people stopped rebelling against the Lord.

In the middle years of Hezekiah’s reign the king of Assyria invaded Judah and came to lay siege to Jerusalem. Hezekiah was shaken because he had no way to repel the Assyrians. In distress he went to the house of the Lord. He sent a message to Isaiah the prophet asking him to pray. Eventually Hezekiah prayed himself, and the Lord assured him through the prophet that the enemy would not come into the city (37:33, 34).

1. Sickness

‘In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death’ (38:1). ‘Those days’ is not specific but it does indicate a time around the Assyrian siege. Since Hezekiah was given fifteen more years to live and he died in 686BC his sickness would have been around 701BC which was the time of the siege. Some scholars think his sickness was a bit earlier than this.

Hezekiah had a boil that must have got infected, and he was about to die. In fact Isaiah the prophet went to tell him to put his house in order because he was going to die (38:1). Hezekiah was devastated. He was not yet 40 years old. He was in the prime of life, as he later said (38:10). He was not ready to die, although presumably men did die from such a sickness in those days.

Apart from being in the prime of life, Hezekiah probably had no successor at this time. Manasseh his son was only 12 when he began to reign. ‘If this is so Hezekiah is doubtless worried concerning the continuation of the Davidic line of kings’. In addition to a personal fear that we all understand, there may have been this concern for the continuation of the David line which as we know lead to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2. Sorrow

Hezekiah was sick but the news that he was about to die came as a great shock. He could not accept what he heard. In deep sorrow he turned away from Isaiah towards the wall and prayed to the Lord (38:1). Hezekiah was a good king. He was a wise man. He knew what to do in times of trouble, be it trouble for the people of God or personal trouble. He turned to the Lord in prayer. Apart from the chronology, this chapter is linked to the previous chapter by this detail of Hezekiah praying to the Lord.

The previous prayer asking the Lord to save the city from the hands of Sennacherib (37:20) was not long, but his prayer on this occasion was very brief and succinct. It was
accompanied by bitter weeping (38:3). If the previous prayer was prayed in earnest, this prayer was one that came from even greater depths in the heart of this man.

Earnest prayers are often the shortest prayers. Jesus told a parable about the prayers of a tax collector and a Pharisee. ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ was all the tax collector said (Luke 18:13). Sometimes we do not know what to pray but simply cry out to the Lord for mercy. The Holy Spirit helps us in our prayer (Romans 8:26).

Hezekiah did not exactly ask for mercy but as Harman writes ‘the appeal to ‘remember’ is virtually synonymous with a request for divine mercy’. Hezekiah asked the Lord to remember ‘how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a loyal/whole heart, and done what is good in your sight’ (38:3).

This was not a prayer based on personal merit; far less an accusation of divine injustice. We often hear prayers like that, but this was not the nature of Hezekiah’s prayer. He was examining his life as we do when we pray. ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxieties’ (Psalm 139:23). What Hezekiah said was true. He was not claiming to be perfect.

He may have been asking ‘why?’ He certainly was not ready to die as we have seen. He was not saying with the apostle Paul ‘for me to live is Christ and to die is gain’ (Philippians 1:21). But Paul also said ‘to remain in the flesh is more needful for you’ (Philippians 1:24). Hezekiah may have feared for the house of David if he died at this time.

The Lord heard Hezekiah’s prayer and gave his answer though Isaiah. Isaiah had not even left the building when the word of the Lord came to him (II Kings 20:4). ‘There are few instances on record where prayer was heard so promptly, and the relief provided so decisively’ wrote Leupold.

Isaiah returned to tell Hezekiah the answer from the Lord. ’I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life’ (38:5). Why fifteen years we are not told, but in this time Hezekiah had a son who would succeed him – albeit one of the most wicked kings in the history of Israel.

The Lord’s answer to Hezekiah’s prayer included a reminder that he would deliver Hezekiah and the city from the Assyrians (38:6). From this we know that this sickness was during or before the siege, as we have already mentioned.

The prophet went to Hezekiah with a word from the Lord telling him he was about to die. A short time later he went back with a word from the Lord telling him he would live for another fifteen years. Isaiah saw no problem with the Lord changing his mind, so why should we?

The Lord is omniscient, knowing the end from the beginning. The Lord is sovereign and has ‘foreordained whatsoever comes to pass’. He has ‘determined their (all men) preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwelling’ (Acts 17:26). But this does not stop us from praying that the Lord will change his mind. If the king is wicked we can ask the Lord to remove him.
The Lord was angry with his people when they made the golden calf and said he would destroy them. But Moses pleaded with the Lord and ‘the Lord relented from the harm which he said he would do to his people’ (Exodus 32:14). Hezekiah did not exactly pray that the Lord would change his mind but his prayer was to this effect.

‘Hezekiah’s petition and God’s response demonstrate that divine sovereignty does not make prayer inappropriate, but on the contrary establishes it’. Hezekiah prayed to God because with God all things are possible. He believed God was sovereign and all powerful. He believed in miracles and he saw a miracle, a miracle of healing.

3. Sign

‘And this is the sign to you from the Lord’ (38:8). The Lord would demonstrate his sovereign power to Hezekiah before he actually healed him so he would know that it was the Lord who healed him. The Lord would not have been pleased if Hezekiah got well and praised other gods or the medical people that helped him.

A Hindu lady took her sick baby to a local doctor or ‘quack’ but he got worse. He was at death’s door when she came to us. We prayed with her in the name of Jesus before rushing her and the baby to the city hospital. When the baby lived the mother knew who had healed her baby. She went home and threw all her idols out of the house and has worshipped only Jesus since that day.

Hezekiah might have thanked those who nursed him, but he would know that it was the Lord who healed him. Why? Because the Lord had spoken to him through the prophet, and the Lord gave him a sign. We might adapt the words of the apostle Paul and say, it is the doctors who ‘plant’ and the nurses who ‘water’; but God who heals. It is God who gives to all, life and breath (Acts 17:25) and who heals all our wounds and diseases (Psalm 103:3).

What was the sign the Lord gave? In II Kings we read that Hezekiah asked for a ‘sign that you will heal me and that I will go up to the house of the Lord on the third day’ (II Kings 20:8). When the Lord spoke to King Ahaz offering him a sign he was too proud choose (Isaiah 7). Maybe the reference to the sundial of Ahaz was a reminder of Ahaz and his refusal to ask for a sign.

Hezekiah was asked by Isaiah if the shadow should go forward or back. Hezekiah answered ‘Let it go back ten degrees’ (II Kings 20:9) and that is exactly what happened. ‘The sun returned ten degrees on the dial by which it had gone down’ (38:8). Hezekiah saw this as a sign from the Lord. It was like the time with Joshua when the Lord stopped the sun from going down for a day (Joshua 10:13), except for Hezekiah he made the sun go back for a short while.

He is a brave man, indeed a foolish man, who tries to give a natural explanation for this supernatural phenomenon. We reject suggestions that a refraction of light was all that was involved. The God who put the sun in the sky can intervene in its motion if he so chooses. The laws of nature are established by God are they not?

On the basis of this sign Hezekiah penned a Psalm of thanksgiving. Even by the end of this chapter he is still not healed. Isaiah had said ‘Let them take a lump of figs, and apply it as a poultice on the boil, and he will recover’ (38:21). ‘There is some evidence from the Ancient
Near East that such poultices were used on humans and animals’ according to Harman. But again we note, as Harman does, Hezekiah’s healing was because of the Lord’s hand of mercy even if ‘natural’ means were used.

Jesus sometimes used natural means such as putting clay on a man’s eyes and telling him to wash in the pool; but this did not detract from the supernatural basis of the healing. That particular man told everyone what Jesus had done but no one, not even the Pharisees, attributed the healing to the clay or the saliva used to make the clay. We can imagine some in our generation studying the properties of the clay to see what it was that healed the man’s eyes!

The enemies of Christ had no explanation for the miraculous healing, but the healed man did. He said ‘if the man (Jesus) were not from God he could do nothing’ (John 9:32). Modern man has many questions he cannot answer but he is to proud to see and listen to what God is doing and saying. As men and women of faith let us see beyond the seen to the unseen. Let us remember the living God hears and answers our prayers beyond what we can ask or think (Ephesians 3:20).

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