

Hezekiah's Failure

Isaiah 38-39

Turn to Isaiah 38 please. Last week we looked at Isaiah 36 and 37. That was Hezekiah at his best, the story of Hezekiah's faith. This week we'll look at Isaiah 38-39, which is Hezekiah at his worst, the story of Hezekiah's failure, his failure to trust God and live in God's ways.

Today we look at Hezekiah's failure. Keep in mind, though, that God overall gives Hezekiah high praise. Listen to this from Kings, which knows all about Hezekiah's failure.

(2Kgs18,3-6) Hezekiah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done....⁵ Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him.⁶ He held fast to the Lord and did not stop following him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses.

Now, let's go through Isaiah 38-39.

38:1 In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover."

2 Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 3 "Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Hezekiah was about 40 years old when this happened. He was very sick, and God said, "This is it, Hezekiah, make the necessary arrangements. Hezekiah responded to God: "God, you're not being fair, I've been faithful to you, this is not fair." What Hezekiah said about himself here is true. He had lived faithfully and wholeheartedly for God.

38:4-6 Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: 5 "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. 6 And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.

The most significant thing here is that Hezekiah asked for one thing, and God promised Hezekiah two things: God promised that Hezekiah would live 15 more years, that's what he asked for; but God also promised that he would rescue Hezekiah and Jerusalem from the king of Assyria.

Assyria was the superpower of the day, and they were hostile and cruel. Hezekiah was probably worried about them.

This second promise is how we know that the story of Hezekiah's illness and healing actually happens **before** the story in chapters 36-37. Isaiah tells us the two stories out of sequence, because Isaiah wants to end the Hezekiah stories with what happens at the end of chapter 39, captivity to Babylon. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

God promised to heal Hezekiah, and God also promised rescue from the Assyrians. And God gave Hezekiah a sign: V7 “*This is the Lord's sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised: 8 I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.*” So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.

In Vv9-20, we have a song that Hezekiah wrote. We will not read that. He describes how sad he was when he thought he was going to die, and how grateful he is to God that God healed him.

There is one curious thing in this song of Hezekiah: there is not one word about God's promise to defend Jerusalem from the Assyrians. It's almost like Hezekiah did not hear that promise.

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

10 I said, “In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?” 11 I said, “I will not again see the Lord himself in the land of the living; no longer will I look on my fellow man, or be with those who now dwell in this world. 12 Like a shepherd's tent my house has been pulled down and taken from me. Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom; day and night you made an end of me. 13 I waited patiently till dawn, but like a lion he broke all my bones; day and night you made an end of me. 14 I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am being threatened; Lord, come to my aid!”

15 But what can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this. I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul. 16 Lord, by such things people live; and my spirit finds life in them too. You restored me to health and let me live. 17 Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back. 18 For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. 19 The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; parents tell their children about your faithfulness. 20 The Lord will save me, and we will sing with stringed instruments all the days of our lives in the temple of the Lord.

Now to 38:21-22

Isaiah had said, “Prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover.”

22 Hezekiah had asked, “What will be the sign that I will go up to the temple of the Lord?”

Isaiah the writer is up to something here. These two verses should have come between v6 and v7. In v6, God promised healing. In v7-8, God promised a sign. In between v6 and v7, two things happened. One, Isaiah said to prepare a poultice, put it on the boil, and Hezekiah will recover.

God's miraculous healing was not separate from proper medical care. Good to remember.

Then v22. Fifteen verses **after** we learn about the sign and the shadow going backwards down the stairs, in v7, we find out what Hezekiah asked in v22. Let's read carefully.

In v7, Isaiah said, “*this is the sign that the Lord will do what he promised.*” 15 verses later we read what Hezekiah asked: *What will be the sign that I will go up to the temple of the Lord?* In different words, “*What will be the sign that God will heal me?*”

Hezekiah asked, “what will be the sign **that God will heal me?**” Isaiah said, “this is the sign **that the Lord will do what he promised.**” Can you hear the difference? Hezekiah ignores God's second promise, that God will defend Jerusalem. Isaiah writes Hezekiah's question out of sequence, right at the end of the healing episode, which tells us to pay attention to what he asked.

Hezekiah seems totally self-centered. He does not care about Jerusalem right now, only about himself. He heard the second promise, but it didn't matter to him. Something like that here.

Isaiah 39:1 *At that time Marduk-Baladan son of Baladan king of Babylon sent Hezekiah letters and a gift, because he had heard of his illness and recovery. 2 Hezekiah received the envoys gladly and showed them what was in his storehouses—the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine olive oil—his entire armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them.*

Verse 1 is fine, but v2 is weird. Why would Hezekiah show the Babylonians his entire armory, all his weapons, and all his wealth and treasure? What would move him to do that?

Babylon was one of many nations conquered by the Assyrians. They had rebelled against Assyria, and would do so again, and 100 years after this Hezekiah story, the Babylonians would defeat the Assyrians and become the Babylonians superpower.

War takes weapons, and costs a lot of money. It seems that Babylon wants to make a treaty with Hezekiah and Judah, so Babylon and Judah can be partners in rebelling against Assyria. It seems that Babylon wants this, and it also seems that Hezekiah thinks it's a good idea.

BUT what had God said, in 38:6? *I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.* And God had given Hezekiah a sign that he would do what he promised, a most impressive sign: middle of the day, the shadows of the sun go backwards! Hezekiah ignored the promise. Did he not trust it?

Later, when the Assyrians actually come, in chs 36-37, Hezekiah seems to remember the promise, and hang onto it. But at this point, God might as well have never said it.

Hezekiah is doing almost exactly what his father Ahaz did, in Isaiah 7. God promised Ahaz that he did not need to fear the kings that Ahaz feared, God would take care of those kings. But Ahaz rejected God's offer, and made a treaty with a foreign nation, in order to protect himself. Hezekiah was much better than his father; but in this story, Hezekiah is like his father.

3 Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah and asked, "What did those men say, and where did they come from?" "From a distant land," Hezekiah replied. "They came to me from Babylon." 4 The prophet asked, "What did they see in your palace?" "They saw everything in my palace," Hezekiah said. "There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them."

Hezekiah seems flattered by this visit from the Babylonians. In v2 it says he received them gladly. He tells Isaiah, "They came from far away to congratulate me and talk to me, they came all the way from Babylon! Can you see how famous I am?"

Isaiah's first question was, "What did those men say?" Hezekiah did not answer that, because Isaiah speaks for God, and Hezekiah knows God does not want him to make a treaty with those Babylonians. The Babylonian king wants to make a treaty with king Hezekiah, that's what they said, and Hezekiah knows Isaiah will not approve of that.

So, again, what happened to God's promise? 38:6-8 *I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city. "This is the Lord's sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised: I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz." So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.*

Hezekiah did not have confidence in what God had said. How confident Hezekiah did or did not **feel** is not the issue. His **actions** with the Babylonians showed that he did not trust God's promise. This is most unusual for Hezekiah. His whole life, he was a man that trusted God and lived out his faith. His actions show that he did not trust God's promise to protect Jerusalem.

Hezekiah's failure has two parts. (1) Isa 38-39, he's completely self-centered. (2) He ignored a promise of God, did not trust it, would not act on it.

Hezekiah was king of Judah, a king in David's line. God had assigned to him a role, a task, to be king of Judah. The promise to protect Jerusalem from the Assyrians was to guide him in calling, which was to be king. But he was self-centered, and he would not act on God's promise.

God did something personal for Hezekiah, healed his fatal illness. Hezekiah praised God for that, but lost interest in trusting God for the place God had assigned him.

5 Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: 6 The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. 7 And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

One hundred years later, Babylon defeated the Assyrians, and had records describing all Hezekiah's treasures, and they would come and take it all. His own great-grandsons would be captured by the Babylonians, and castrated, and would become slaves to the king of Babylon.

Jerusalem would be ransacked, and David's royal line reduced to eunuchs.

8 *"The word of the Lord you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."*

If there was ever any doubt that Hezekiah had become self-centered, there isn't doubt anymore after reading that line. It is a hard line to read. Hezekiah didn't care about Jerusalem, didn't care about David's royal line, did not care about his own great-grandchildren. Too bad about all of that, so sad, but it's actually good news, because there will be peace and security in my lifetime.

The story of Hezekiah's failure puts two things together, a two part failure: one, Hezekiah became self-centered, only interested in what was good for him, just him, no one else; and two, Hezekiah did not trust a promise God had given him, he did not act on that promise.

And this got Judah into trouble. This was one of the failures of God's people that led to the Babylonians captivity 100 years later. Hezekiah did not personally suffer for his failure. Peace and security in his lifetime. But there was a price to pay down the road.

What if, instead of saying, "this is good," Hezekiah had turned his face to the wall and prayed, and wept? Hezekiah did that at the beginning of this story, and God answered the prayer. In Isa 36-39, God answered all Hezekiah's prayers. What if Hezekiah had done this at the end? He did not try. When dying, he could weep bitterly; but if it wasn't him: "the word of the Lord is good."

Look at this from God's side. God kept his promises to Hezekiah, took care of him, and answered his prayers. Still, Hezekiah would not trust him. What else could God do? (We can't make Hezekiah alone the reason for the Babylonian captivity. The whole of Isa 1-39 explains why Judah was exiled to Babylon.)

My brothers and sisters, there are enough times in my own life that are no better than this. Self-centered? Don't act on God's promises? All of a sudden this is not about Hezekiah, it is about me. I can see my own face in all these scenes, doing what Hezekiah did.

But, do you know what the next words of Isaiah are? 40:1 *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed.*

This is God speaking to Jews who've been taken to Babylon. God sends messengers to them: *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed.* Hezekiah's failure was not the end of the story. More on that in two weeks.

But now we'll end with how Kings summarizes the life of Hezekiah. And remember that Kings has the same story of Hezekiah's failure (2Kg20). Here is God's verdict on Hezekiah.

2Kg18: *Hezekiah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done. Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not stop following him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses.*

God is gracious. Most heroes in the kingdom of God have dark days, selfish days, disobedient days, times of ignoring God's promises. That happens to people who wholeheartedly love and trust God, as Hezekiah did.

But our life overall will show a direction, a basic choice, that we want to love and serve God. This sad story did **not** change the report on his whole life: Hezekiah did what was right, and trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. No king of Judah was like him, before or after.

Remember that by God's doing, our lives are bound together. Our choices affect others, we all have a role to play in each other's lives, our lives affect each other. It is true even when we don't think about it.

And remember God's promises to be with us and take care of us and guide us in the right path. Peter writes that God "*has given us his very great and precious promises.*" May our words and actions be guided by God's very great and precious promises."

God, we ourselves own Hezekiah's failures. We are self-centered, and we live as if you had not made the promises that we know very well you have made. You know we are like this. Help us to follow you. Lead us in all we do. Lead us farther into love for you and one another. Lead us to always speak and live out of your great and precious promises.

Thank you for your faithfulness. You remember all your promises, and you keep them all. Even when *we* doubt, even when *we* forget, you do what you said. Your words never pass away, Lord. Thank you for your grace to us, you forgive our failure, and you celebrate our success. We are so fortunate to serve such a God.