

The Prayer of Righteousness Isaiah 38:1-22

Our sermon text this morning is Isaiah chapter 38, and we will be taking the whole chapter. Before I read that chapter, we will pray and ask God's blessing. So please do join me in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we do pray and ask that you would bless your word to us. We pray that we would be given ears to hear, and eyes to see, and hearts that are understanding and willing to obey. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Isaiah 38, starting at verse 1: ¹“In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. 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, you shall not recover.’ ² Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³ and said, ‘Please, O LORD, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.’ And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

⁴“Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ⁵ ‘Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶ I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city. ⁷ This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that he has promised: ⁸ Behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps.’ So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined.

⁹“A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness: ¹⁰ I said, In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. ¹¹ I said, I shall not see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world. ¹² My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end; ¹³ I calmed myself until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end. ¹⁴ Like a swallow or a crane I chirp; I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety! ¹⁵ What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul.

¹⁶“O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh restore me to health and make me live! ¹⁷ Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. ¹⁸ For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. ¹⁹ The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness. ²⁰ The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD.

²¹“Now Isaiah had said, ‘Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.’ ²² Hezekiah also had said, ‘What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?’” Amen. May God bless His holy word to us.

Once again, we're in narrative in the book of Isaiah, narrative specifically and particularly concerning the king, Hezekiah. We found out last week when we looked at chapter 37, that finally in that time of trial, when Hezekiah had nothing left, when all of his best ideas and attempts and all of his best attempts at using worldly wisdom, all his best attempts at using statecraft had failed, finally he did what he ought to have done in the first place, and that is, he went into the house of God, he repented, and he prayed. And he sent for the word of the Lord from the prophet Isaiah. Finally, it seems, Hezekiah got to the place where God wanted him to be. He got to that place of humility, where he'd given up on all his own abilities, and he laid everything before God. If you remember, he literally laid that letter from the King Sennacherib on the floor, in the presence of the Lord. He gave everything over to God.

Well this week, we're still dealing with that same Hezekiah, and we see that Hezekiah is a man who has been driven to prayer. It's a simple fact that for many of us, we don't actually do the right thing until we have no other option. And I'm not saying that we're particularly wicked or evil people, but what I'm saying is that according to the wisdom of the world, and according to the way we've been raised, we all tend to think that we've got the best ideas—I know the best way to do things, I know what would be best for me.

Have you ever, as I confess, prayed, "Lord, why are you making things so tough? Why is it that my job is not so great? Why is it that my money seems to slip through my fingers? Why is it that things just don't seem to go right all the time?" Have you ever thought those thoughts, prayed those prayers? What we're actually saying when we say those things is, "God, I think I could run your providence better than you can." That's what we're saying. "I think I could do it better than you can. I think I would be a better god than you are."

Luckily for us, our God is patient and He's loving. Our God does not treat us the way that we deserve to be treated. In Psalm 103, the psalmist celebrates that. He says he does not deal with us according to our sins. He knows our frame. He knows our makeup. He knows what we're like. He understands that we are dust. Praise God! Praise God that He does not deal with us as we deserve to be dealt with. Praise God that He does not hear our prayers.

The truth is, how many times have we prayed for something that we ought not to have prayed for, and the truth is, if we got it, it may well have ruined us? How many times? I tell you, I think if I had become wealthy—and I'm not wealthy now, but I used to want to be wealthy, when I was young, when I'd left high school and I was working, I wanted to be wealthy. I wanted to make lots of money. I wanted to get into business. I wanted to be an entrepreneur. I wanted to make big bucks. I think if I had succeeded, if I had made the money, I'm not sure I ever would have become a Christian. I'm not sure I ever would have pursued a meek and gentle young Christian girl. I think I would have pursued the trophy wife, the artificial wife, because my head would have been so filled with my own, what I would have thought at that time, was greatness. I would have thought, "I'm a success story. I'm a great guy. I'm wonderful. Therefore, I've got to have a wife who is a success story." Think of all the things that would have changed if I had gotten, when I was younger, what I thought I wanted. God knew better. He knew me better. He knows all of us better.

And though we often ask for things that we ought not to desire, He doesn't cast us off and He doesn't reject us and He doesn't say, "You're a fool. I no longer love you." In love, He continues to love us, and He changes our desires so that ultimately, we become truly His people, desiring what He desires. We want what He wants.

In another place in Psalm 103, it says "He will satisfy you with good." You want the right things. You desire the right things. We don't always get what we ask for because we often ask amiss, as it says in the book of James. We often ask for the wrong things. God is wiser than we are. You don't get the easy road. You're attached to Jesus. You're in Christ. If you are God's, you are Christ's. Did He get the easy road? The answer is No. He got to carry a cross to a hill called Calvary, and there He got to die in obedience to the will of God.

God gives nobody the easy road. One way or another, everybody suffers something who is a servant of God. And you might look at some people and say that they seem to be getting the ride. Notice I said they "seem"—they seem. I know people who are Christians who seem to be getting the easy ride, and yet there are problems, deep problems, real problems. Just because someone's business goes well and they're driving a nice car and they live in a nice house, don't necessarily assume that they are getting the easy ride. We judge too much by worldly things. Often those people who have worldly success have deep-lying problems that we know nothing about, whether they're to do with their health, or their family—their close family and their extended family—they have problems that we know nothing of.

God knows what's best. Sometimes to get us to know what's best, we have to be driven into a corner, where there's no other option. And then when you get there, finally, then and there, you start to pray according to God's will, and you start to do according to God's will. Sometimes it takes a lot of work to make a person give up on what they think is their own wisdom.

Well God's cornered Hezekiah. I love the line in our reading. It says, "He turned to the wall." I've just got this picture of a man trapped in his bedroom, so unwell that he can't walk. He can see out the window—I'll make a point of that in a moment. Why do I say he can see out the window? He can see out a window, but he can't even get up and leave his room. All he could do when he heard that news of Isaiah, "This is the sickness that will lead you to death," all he could do was roll over and face the wall. He couldn't get up and shut the door. He couldn't go to a quiet place. Perhaps he had a place in his own home where he liked to pray and to worship. He couldn't do that. He couldn't go to the temple. All he could do was roll, face the wall, and pray facing the wall—driven to pray.

Now there's a few questions we need to answer to just understand a few more details in our portion this morning. When did this happen? Though chapter 38 in the book obviously comes after chapter 37, the story does not necessarily fall in chronological order. We tell stories chronologically. That's the way our society works. You ask me to tell you how something happened, I'll go back to a certain time: In the morning, this happened; at 10:00 a.m., this happened; at 12:00 p.m., that happened; at 3:00 p.m., that happened. You know what I'm saying. We tell the story chronologically and forwards and try to weave everything together and get one smooth narrative.

A Jewish author tends to tell the story for the point that it's making. So in chapter 37, he tells the story of Jerusalem under siege. In chapter 38, he tells the story of Hezekiah under siege, Hezekiah himself under the siege of death. These things happened, apparently, at about the same time. Notice what God promises to Hezekiah. Look at chapter 38, verse 6: "I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city."

So you see, Jerusalem is actually under threat from the king of Assyria, Sennacherib, as this was happening. So not only was Jerusalem under threat from the Assyrian king, but at that very moment, the Jewish king, the king of Judah Hezekiah, was under threat from illness and was told that his illness would bring death.

It says also that Hezekiah wept bitterly, if you look at verse 3: "And Hezekiah wept bitterly." That's just how verse 3 finishes. Ask the question: Why? Why did he weep bitterly? We know that Hezekiah was a man of faith. We know that Hezekiah was one of the few good kings of Judah, who was a reformer, who hated idolatry, who cleansed the temple, who cleansed the city of Jerusalem, who worshiped only God, and, you would think, was a Christian, a believer. Now obviously he wasn't a "Christian" because Jesus hadn't died on the cross, but he was a true believer, a faithful man, who believed in the coming Saviour.

You would think that a true believer could face his death with a bit of courage, wouldn't you, with a bit of resignation? "Oh well, God says I'm coming home? I'm coming home. I can handle that." You would think. So why would he have wept bitterly? Well you've just got to think a little bit about it. Who is he? He's the king of the household of David. If you turn back in your Bibles to Second Kings chapter 21, verse 1—and you don't have to turn there, I'll read it to you. Hezekiah has a son whose name is Manasseh.

Second Kings chapter 21, verse 1: "Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign." Think about that. Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign. What was the promise given to Hezekiah? He would have fifteen more years of life. So we can assume, therefore, that King Hezekiah at this point in time, when he's suffering his sickness, has no heir. He has no son to pass the crown on to. Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and we know that from this day forward, Hezekiah had fifteen years of life.

What's the obsession of a king? To have an heir, someone to whom he can pass the throne, the crown. What's especially the obsession of a king who is a son of David? What's God's promise to David, if we were to turn back into Second Samuel chapter 7? What's God's promise to David? That David would have a son on the throne forever and ever and ever. So Hezekiah, therefore, considers it to be incredibly important that he, as a son of David, has a son of his own to be on the throne in Judah so that the promise of God made to David could be fulfilled. So Hezekiah weeps bitterly. Isaiah has walked into him and said, "This is a sickness unto death, my friend. Put your house in order. You're going to die." And Hezekiah weeps bitterly, because he knows, at this point in time, he has no son.

The next question that I want us to see coming from this text is the question, Did God change His mind; or, did God deceive Hezekiah? Think of it—look at it. Isaiah the prophet goes to Hezekiah, looking at the second half of verse 1 of our passage, Isaiah chapter 38, verse 1: "Thus

says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.” That’s pretty blunt and straightforward, isn’t it? It’s not hard to interpret. We know what that means—You’re about to die. Death is death.

Then have a look at verse 4: “Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ⁵ ‘Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶ I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.’”

So there’s two questions to ask: Did God change His mind? And, Did God deceive Hezekiah? Let’s answer our questions.

First of all, Did God change His mind? Malachi 3:6 reads: “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” For I the Lord do not change. The idea that God could change His mind is ridiculous. It’s foolishness. It’s nonsense. God is all-knowing. At every given moment of our feeble little lives, God is all-knowing and unchanging in that knowledge. It’s so hard for us to understand this. He knows everything. He knows the movement of every speck of dust. He knows the movement of every atom that we can’t even see. He knows all of these things. He knows everything at every given moment. How could He not have known that He was going to heal Hezekiah? It’s crazy to say that God is all-knowing and God knows everything, and then at the same moment, say that God didn’t know that He was going to answer Hezekiah’s prayer. You see that makes no sense at all.

So God did not change His mind. He does not change His mind. That’s how come Scripture can say to us that concerning the people who are saved, God had their names written in His book of life from before the foundation of the earth. He knew, before He even created, that people would be saved. And He knows who those people are. God’s love for us comes, we would say, from eternity, and continues on into eternity. He knows all things. He knew what Hezekiah was going to do. He knew that Hezekiah was going to pray, and He knew that He was going to answer Hezekiah’s prayer.

So the next question to ask is, Did God deceive Hezekiah? Did God send a lie to Hezekiah? I suppose you might say, in some way, Yes. But I don’t think you should. God tested Hezekiah. What we’ve got to understand is that we are sinners, and God is not. God, therefore, has the right to deal with people in any way He so chooses.

I’ll make this personal. Myself, I don’t deserve anything from God. I can make no claim on God from my own personal being, from my own personality. The only claims I can make on God are on the basis of His promises and His goodness. Why? I’m a sinner. I was born a sinner. Though I am saved and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the truth is, sadly, I remain a sinner. Like any true Christian, I can say I am not what I once was, but I am not yet what I ought to be. It’s coming—total sanctification, total glorification, true Christ-likeness is coming. Scripture tells me that when I enter into His presence and I see Him as He is, I will be transformed. The same applies to all of us, to each one of us here. When we enter into His presence and see Him as He is, we will finally be transformed into His likeness.

But in the meantime, upon this earth, God has the right to deal with all humanity in whatsoever way He pleases. He has the right to test the hearts of humanity. And when I say “test,” He’s not testing because He doesn’t know the result; He’s testing to make us know the result.

Think, for example, of Abraham in the book of Genesis, chapter 22. “Take your son Isaac. Take him up the mountain. Slay him. Offer him as a burnt offering.” Testing. Abraham takes his son, he chops the wood. It says he rose early in the morning to chop the wood. He rose early. There’s obedience for you. I don’t know about you, but if I was told to sacrifice a son, I might just be looking at the clock. “Okay, God said sacrifice a son. Is there really any need for me to start doing this at 5:00 a.m. in the morning? Perhaps I could chop the wood at six o’clock tomorrow night, and perhaps at mid-day the day after, we could start our journey. Who knows? It might take five days to get to the top of that mountain. And in the meantime, maybe God’ll change His mind!”

No. Scripture says Abraham rose early in the morning to chop the wood. He rose early in the morning, and it doesn’t tell us that he delayed or wasted any time. The narrative, if we went back to read that, seems to indicate that he got moving. He headed for that mountain straight on up there, and he said to his servants, “You wait here. I’m taking the boy. We’re going to sacrifice. We will come back to you.” And along the way, we’re told, that he reasoned that God could bring the dead back to life. The faith of Abraham. And when Isaac asked the question, “Daddy, Father—I see the wood. You’ve got something to light a fire. What are we sacrificing?” What was Abraham’s answer? “God will provide the sacrifice.” God will provide. That’s the faith of Abraham.

But God was testing Abraham, and it tells us that Abraham took the knife in his hand to slay his son. He was certain he was supposed to kill that boy. It says he raised the knife in his hand. And at the moment, God said, “Stop! Stop. Stop. Now we know. Now we know you truly are a faithful man. Now we know that there is nothing that you have held back from me. And not only we know, but you know, and all the world knows.” God tested Abraham.

Or how about King David? He was tested. Think of the issue. I don’t know if you’re familiar with it or not, but in Scripture David had this big idea. He said, “I want to count the number of soldiers I’ve got. I want to see how great a king I am, how big my army is.” Scripture tells us that Satan incited David. In another place, Scripture tells us that God allowed David to do this. David was tested. He was tested, he wasn’t deceived.

We as people have no right to make any claim on God. We as people have no right to give any answer back to God concerning anything that He ordains that we suffer, concerning any testing that He says we are to suffer. He has the right, as God, to do this. Our only claim on God is the promise of His word. God promises that He is faithful and just, and that He forgives our sins, that He restores us to life, that He will carry us through the test of death, and on into eternal life. God makes all of these promises. And my friends, the person of faith clings to those promises. No matter what comes into their life, the person of faith clings to those promises. I will trust in God.

Sometimes you're at the point where you're simply saying, "I don't understand. Why did this happen to me? Why? I don't understand. Here I am. I've done all that I can do. I've obeyed as far as I know how to obey, and everything has gone wrong, and I don't understand."

There was a man like that, wasn't there? His name was Job. Remember Job?—the most righteous man on the face of the earth. God boasted about Job. "See my servant Job? He's righteous in all that he does." And Satan said, "It's only because you look after him. You stop looking after him, you let me get at him, and we'll see how righteous he is." And everything went wrong for Job—lost his health, lost his wealth, lost his family, sitting on a pile of rubbish, scraping pusty sores with broken clay pots. You can just see this man scraping scabs and pus and stuff off his arms and legs. Disgusting. Vile. He said, "I smell bad. I've got bad breath. No one comes near me, not even my wife! My friends are lousy comforters. Nothing good is happening in my life. I curse the day I was born. Why has all this happened?"

Turn to the book of Job, chapter 42. Why has all this happened? Here's the thing. Job never got told why all that happened. All he got told by God is, "I am God, and you are a man, and I can do with you as I please." That's what he got told. "I am God, and you are a man, and I can do with you as I please." Job 42, starting at verse 1:

"¹ Then Job answered the LORD and said: ² 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ³ "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ⁴ "Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me." ⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'"

You hear what he's saying to God? He's saying, "I understand. I understand this: I am a man, you are God. You can do with me as you please. I repent of ever complaining about your dealings with me."

So God has the right to test His king, Hezekiah. God has the right to tell his king, Hezekiah, "Put your house in order, you're about to die," and see how Hezekiah responds, to draw from Hezekiah the prayer of faith. And Hezekiah prays, and he prays a prayer of faith. And then God says to Hezekiah, "And now I've heard your prayer. I've heard your prayer."

We're supposed to notice something about hearing that prayer. Scripture keeps telling us that idols don't hear, they don't see, and they don't speak. What's happened here for Hezekiah? Have a look. God says, "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears, and my servant Isaiah is speaking to you." God hears, He sees, He speaks. He's a living God, as compared to a dumb idol, to a thing made by the hands of man, of stone or metal or wood. He's a true God.

So God gives Hezekiah fifteen years. God has tested Hezekiah, Hezekiah has responded in faith, and God has said to Hezekiah, "You are a son of David." Notice that answer. It's very important there. Isaiah 38, verse 5: "Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father."

You hear what the Lord is saying to Hezekiah? “I recognize your claim upon the promises that I made to David. I recognize you as a son of David. I recognize you as a messiah”—small “m” not capital “M”. I recognize you as a messiah. “A” messiah, not “the” Messiah. He’s not *the* promised Son who would set His people free from their sins. But he’s “a” messiah. He’s an anointed one. “I recognize you as a son of David.” God is gracious.

So then we come to Hezekiah’s actual prayer. What you see here is a man who has been taught to praise God. We don’t know when he wrote this prayer, this psalm. It says he wrote it after he had been sick and after he had recovered from sickness. Sometime afterwards, he took pen in hand and sat down and wrote this song of praise. What should we notice? Let’s have a look. There’s a few things in it, there is a lot in it, but I’m just going to draw a few points out of it.

Look at the second half of verse 12 of our chapter: “He cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end; ¹³ I calmed myself until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end.” I don’t know if you understand it, but those are the words of faith. Here’s a man who’s been told that his sickness is unto death, and he talks to the one who has the power to do something about it.

Notice what he’s not saying. He’s not saying, “God, I’m suffering because Satan is trying to kill me. God, I’m suffering because something has slipped through your fingers.” That’s the way a lot of people like to think. They say things like, “Well, what did God have to do with that crime? What did God have to do with it?” I’ll tell you, my friends. The moment you let something slip through the fingers of God in your mind, the moment you start to think that God is not in control of everything that comes your way, the god in whom you believe is not the God of the Scriptures. The God of the Scriptures is Almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing. Nothing comes our way apart from what He sends our way, both good and bad—both good and bad.

Remember the Apostle Paul in Second Corinthians. What does he say? He says, “I’m being buffeted by a messenger of Satan.” Buffeted by a messenger of Satan. “And when I prayed that that thorn in my flesh be removed, God said, ‘No. No, it’s good for you to suffer. It keeps you humble. It stops you from becoming proud.’” In other words, Paul’s suffering at the hands of a messenger of Satan had been ordained by God.

Hezekiah speaks of God: “God cuts me off from the loom. Like a lion, He breaks all my bones. From day to night, *you*”—that’s God—“bring me to an end.” “God, I’m suffering because you have ordained that I am to die.” They’re the words of faith. Those aren’t the words of a complainer or a fool. They’re the words of somebody who understands something. “God deals with me as He sees fit, and there is nothing in my life that has not been sent to me from God.” So Hezekiah speaks to God as the one who is doing what he is suffering at this very moment.

Looking at verse 14, he says he chirps and moans. We could paraphrase that, “he twitters and mutters,” and in the tense of the verb, it’s an ongoing kind of tense. In other words, what that means is he just keeps talking to God. “I am constantly muttering my prayers to God”—praying, praying, praying, on and on and on.

Have you ever been in a situation where you just prayed and prayed and prayed? Whatever you were doing, there was a prayer running along in the back of your mind. There was something on your heart. There was a trouble, there was a problem, whatever it might have been, and you prayed and you prayed and you prayed and you prayed. That's what Hezekiah is saying: "I prayed and I prayed and I prayed. I prayed. I just kept praying."

Have a look at verse 16. "O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit." By what things do men live? What's he saying? Well look at what he says back in verse 15. "What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it." The things that he's living by are the words that were spoken to him by God through Isaiah. "By these things men live." People live by what? They live by the word of God.

What was the answer that Jesus gave to Satan in one of the temptations? "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Deuteronomy chapter 8, verse 3. By every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Hezekiah is saying, "I live because you spoke. I live because you sent words to me. I live upon your words. Your very words are my life." "Restore me to health," he asks.

Let's have a look at verse 17. There's three things to see there in verse 17. The first thing is that he suffered for his own good. First part of the verse: "Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness." For my welfare. "I suffered for my own good. I suffered this bitter blow because it was good for me." We'll leave it there—"I suffered for my own goodness."

The second part. He is loved by God, therefore he is delivered by God. Look at that: "But in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction." In love. What does a man do to earn the love of God? Absolutely nothing. God loves him because God loves him. That's what grace is. When we talk about the grace of God, what are we saying? We are saying that God loves for no particular reason, other than He chooses to love.

But it's not just unmerited favour. That's a good definition of grace, by the way—Grace is unmerited favour. It's favour granted when what we actually merit is punishment, we merit God's judgment. We were enemies of God when Christ died on the cross. That's grace—unmerited favour when what we merited was death. What we get given is life in Jesus Christ. Why was Hezekiah delivered from this threat of death? Because God loved him. Because God keeps His promises. Because God is faithful.

Having a look at the third part of verse 17, he says, "For you have cast all my sins behind your back." You see the connection that Hezekiah has made there. His life has been delivered from the pit of destruction. "For you have cast all my sins behind your back." The wages of sin are death. The wages of sin are death. How is that he knows that he is therefore secure in the presence of God? It's not because he actually claims to be perfectly righteous. I mean, look back at the prayer he prayed, verse 3 of chapter 38: "Remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." He's not claiming to be sinless. He's claiming to be faithful. He's claiming to be one who has been saved and who has, in being saved, obeyed the Lord his God.

But look here. He says in verse 17, the last clause, “You have cast all my sins behind your back.” God no longer looks upon his sins. There’s so many places in Scripture that that makes me want to go. Let’s go to a few of them. Go to Psalm 103. We’ll start reading there at verse 8. “⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”

As far as the east is from the west. I’m glad he said from east to west. I’m glad he said from east to west, because if had said from north to south, I could get a map, and I could measure the distance from the North Pole to the South Pole, and I could say, “Okay. Well our sins are,” what is it, “8,000, 9,000, 12,000 kilometers separated from us,” something like that? But you see, there’s no dot on the map that is the East Pole and West Pole. East just keeps going and west just keeps going. As far as the east is from the west—that’s how far away my sins are. In other words, they’re so far away from me, you can forget about them. They’re so far away from anyone here who is in Christ, that you can forget about them. Our sins have been cast behind God’s back. They have been cast so far away, as far as the east is from the west.

Or think, for example, of the start of Psalm 32: “Blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity.” The Lord counts no iniquity. He doesn’t count our sins, He casts them away—casts them off, throws them away. Our God is gracious. He loves His people. He justifies us in His sight. The doctrine of justification—there you go. You can find it back in the Old Testament. You’ve just got to know where you’re looking and what you’re looking for. Hezekiah was justified. He was counted as righteous in the sight of God. God cast his sins behind His back, and He counted Hezekiah as righteous. He counted him as being faithful.

Let’s keep looking. Verse 18: “For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness.” We need to think about that. You find statements like that often in Scripture. Psalm 6, verse 5, for example speaks in a very similar way. Psalm 6, verse 5 says, “For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?”

This causes some people to say that in the Old Testament, the saints of the Old Testament had no hope of the resurrection; they had no hope of eternal life; they did not expect that there was such a thing as eternal life. There are other places like that. We need to think about this. But also remember, for example, how does Psalm 23 end? “And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”—eternally. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Or think, for example, of Psalm 16. We’ll read verses 9 and 10. “Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” Now that’s a psalm and a passage that the Apostle Peter used to preach about the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the grave, saying that He was resurrected from the dead, as it was promised in the Psalms. So it’s not necessarily true to say that Old Testament believers had no hope of eternal life, and no belief in the resurrection.

So what are they saying, then, when they say things like, “In death there is no hope,” or, “In death no one gives you praise,” or, as Hezekiah has said, “Those who could go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness”? Well you’ve got to sort of take into account some context. Hezekiah is speaking of those who are *not* faithful. He’s speaking of those whom the Lord has not cast their sins behind His back. Remember, Hezekiah’s spoken of himself saying, “But in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction. For you have cast all my sins behind your back. For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. ¹⁹ The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day.”

Interesting there, that start of verse 19. Literally, it just says, “Living, living, that one thanks you.” My mind actually goes back into the book of Genesis, where God told Adam that he would die if he ate of the forbidden fruit. If you don’t know what it literally says, it is, “You will die, die.” You will die, die. And often when we try to interpret that literally, we’ll say, “Dying, you will die,” or, “Dying, you will be dead,” something along those lines to try and communicate the thing that’s spoken twice—“Die, die.” Well, Hezekiah here says, “Living, living,” twice. There’s no “the,” it just literally says, “Living, living! that one praises you.” Living, living!

So what’s he saying? The one who lives—the one whose sins have been cast behind God’s back, so to speak—that one lives. That one lives. “Those who go down to the pit”—remember, he’s already said he’s been rescued from the pit. In a manner of speaking, he’s speaking of his recovery from illness, but he’s also speaking of what he learnt in this testing. What did he learn? He learned that God is eternally faithful. He learned that in God’s sight, he, Hezekiah, has life. He says it there twice—“Life, life,” or “Living, living! that one praises you, as I do this day.” Why? Because he’s counting himself as one of the living, living ones. He’s one of the ones upon whom that curse of death has been removed. Dying, you will die? No, Hezekiah is now living and he will live. The living, living!

“²⁰ The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD.” And remember this, “the house of the Lord.” There was a temple in Jerusalem, and in the first instance, when a Jew of Jerusalem, of the ancient ages, spoke of the house of the Lord, he was speaking of the temple in Jerusalem. But when David wrote Psalm 23 and said, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” there was no temple in Jerusalem. When David wrote Psalm 5 and said that he will worship in God’s holy temple, there was no temple in Jerusalem. David didn’t build the temple, Solomon built the temple.

Why do I make that point? Because the temple that was on earth was nothing other than a copy, or a type, a pointer to the eternal temple that is to be found in the presence of God, in heaven. That temple on earth, that was the copy. Once again, there’s a way that a Christian ought to learn to think. We often think that this is permanent, that the stuff we’re standing on, and the pulpit here, and the seat you’re sitting on, and the car you drive—these things are real, these things are permanent.

No. The real stuff is in the presence of God. The permanent stuff is in the presence of God. These things are temporary. It’s only that we have this physical body that we seem to think that this physical world is reality—not that there’s anything wrong with having a body. I mean,

Scripture promises that one of these days, we'll be resurrected into a perfect body, a perfected body. We will be people living in the presence of God, with a body suited for eternal life. That sounds good to me. It sounds really good. That which is in the presence of God, that is the permanent thing. The things that are in the presence of God are the things that last forever. Therefore, they are more real than the things that we walk among, the bodies we walk in. The presence of God is more real than that. It's more real than the ground upon which we stand.

So when Hezekiah says he'll spend all his days playing in the house of the Lord, don't just think that all he ever thought of was the temple in Jerusalem. If he knows his Scripture, and it would appear to me from this Psalm that he certainly knows his Scripture, he knows that there is a permanent temple in the presence of God Himself, and that the house that was in Jerusalem was just a copy. It wasn't actually the real thing.

Finally, we come to the last part of it, verses 21 and 22. ²¹ Now Isaiah had said, 'Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.' ²² Hezekiah also had said, 'What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?'" What are we looking at here? Well I want us to just draw a few thoughts from this.

First of all, I don't think there's any science to support the idea that figs heal people of deadly diseases. I don't think that that's a scientific fact. I'm pretty sure it's not. But God uses means. God uses means, and the means by which He worked the healing of Hezekiah was figs.

You know what? There's no science to support the fact that prayer is effective. Our prayer life is scientifically untenable. Some skeptical scientist says to you, "Prove that God hears you when you speak to Him," and I can say I know that God hears me when I speak to Him. I can say that Scripture tells me God hears me when I speak to Him.

But you want scientific proof? You want things you can measure, you can taste, you can discern? Got none. Either you believe it or you don't. Either you hear it or you don't. Either you hear this word or you don't. Prayer is scientifically untenable, as indeed is trying to treat a sickness unto death with figs. But prayer works, and in this instance, figs worked.

And the other thing is, Hezekiah asked for a sign. If we were to turn back to Isaiah chapter 7, verses 10 to 12, we would see that Hezekiah's father Ahaz refused to ask for a sign. Hezekiah's father Ahaz was a faithless man who wanted no sign. An Old Testament saint, in asking for a sign, is not necessarily doing a wrong thing. We've got to understand that. Remember, for example, Gideon sought a sign. Many others sought signs.

Why is that we don't seek signs? We've got one. Think about it. We've got the greatest sign of them all. Our sign is the resurrection of our Saviour from the grave. We don't need any piffling little sign. We don't need any silly little sign. We've got the sign of the life of our Saviour. He rose from the dead. We've got the ultimate sign.

You want to know that your sins are paid for? Jesus is alive. You want to know that you've got hope for the future, for eternal life? Jesus is alive. You want to know that He was the Saviour, that He was sinless, that He was the one sent forth by God? Jesus is alive.

The Apostle Paul says Jesus was raised for our justification. What did he mean by that? He meant that those who trust in the word of God, and those who believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, those people have justifying faith—the kind of faith that God says, “I count this person as righteous, for he believes in me”—as Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. We have the ultimate sign.

Prayer is scientifically untenable, and we don't get any little sign anymore. It's rather impressive when you think about it. The reason that I said earlier that I'm imagining Hezekiah laying on a bed in his bedroom looking out a window, is that as he looked out the window, he could see a shadow. Perhaps he could see a sundial, because God said to him, “Here's the sign. Watch that shadow. It's going to go backwards.” That was his sign that his prayers were to be answered.

But that's nothing compared to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. He really died. So many witnesses stood around that place of crucifixion and saw that He died. So many witnesses saw the Roman spear pierce His side, opening His flesh to the depth of His heart. Water and blood flowed forth. They knew He was dead. Believe you me, if there's one thing the Romans knew how to do, it was to make sure a prisoner died when they wanted to kill him. They were really good at killing. There was no mistake—He was dead. You don't come down off a Roman cross unless you're dead.

Think of those women who went to that grave, to that tomb early in the morning. They weren't expecting to find a living Saviour. They were expecting to finish the job of dressing the body. They were expecting to finish the job of laying spices upon the body. They wanted to pay their last respects to the body of the one they loved. They weren't expecting a living Saviour. What did they find? A living Saviour, one raised from the dead.

And how many saw that one raised from the dead? Well Paul says, not only did the apostles see the one raised from the dead, and not only did many in Jerusalem see the one raised from the dead, but on one day in particular He showed Himself to around about 500 people, many of whom at the time he was writing, were still alive. Do you get what he was saying when he wrote that in First Corinthians? He's saying, “Look, if you don't believe what I'm saying, get in a boat, go across to Judah, go to the city of Jerusalem, ask around. You will find eyewitnesses. You will find eyewitnesses to the fact that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.” My friends, that's our sign. That's the only sign a Christian should need. Jesus was raised from the dead.

So we have prayer and we have a God who hears our prayers, who sees our tears, who loves His people, and we have the sign, the seal, the certainty, the absolute guarantee that we have life in His sight. Jesus was raised from the dead. I think we'll just close there. Let's close in prayer.

Father in heaven, we do indeed thank you that you are a God who hears our prayers, who sees our tears and sufferings, and who speaks to His people. Father, it is our hope and our prayer that you have spoken to your people this very morning, from and by your word, and from and by my attempts to preach. Lord, I pray that our hearts will have been found receptive to your word, and that by your word we will be conformed into the image and the likeness of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we ask these things. Amen.