

## **The Prayer of Righteousness** **Isaiah 39:1-8**

Our text this morning is Isaiah chapter 39, verses 1 to 8, which is the whole chapter. Before the reading, we'll pray. Please join me in prayer. Father in heaven, I do pray that you would bless your word to us now. Please help me as I speak to speak your words. Please help us all as we hear, to hear your words, to have ears that hear, eyes that see, and hearts that understand and obey. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Isaiah 39, starting at verse 1: “<sup>1</sup> At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. <sup>2</sup> And Hezekiah welcomed them gladly. And he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.

“<sup>3</sup> Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah, and said to him, ‘What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?’ Hezekiah said, ‘They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon.’ <sup>4</sup> He said, ‘What have they seen in your house?’ Hezekiah answered, ‘They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.’

“<sup>5</sup> Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, ‘Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: <sup>6</sup> Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. <sup>7</sup> And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.’ <sup>8</sup> Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘There will be peace and security in my days.’ Amen. And may God bless His word to us.

In some ways, as a Christian, the easiest things to survive, or the easiest things to overcome as a Christian and not to suffer any great damage from, are frontal attacks and personal attacks. Most of us are on our guard against frontal attacks. You know, the kind of thing you hear or you see on the TV, some supposed expert, some Richard Dawkins unbeliever. Or perhaps some of you—what's the other guy's name, Bart Ehrman?—have heard of that guy. He's an apostate Christian who hates Christianity and preaches unbelief, basically. Most of us are on guard against that type of thing, we're ready to resist that type of thing, we know how to answer that type of thing.

You know, most of us who study, basically prepare ourselves for that battle, the frontal assault, and also for the personal attack. When someone says, “You're nothing but a fool,” it's easy to shrug your shoulders and say, “Well, you don't know the half of it.” You know, like Christian did in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, when Satan accused him of being a sinner. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian said, “Everything that you say is true, and you don't know the half of it. But my God is gracious.” Frontal assaults, personal attacks—I'm not saying they can't at times be annoying. I'm not saying that at times they're not in some ways hurtful. The truth is, our Christian faith doesn't often get shaken up too badly by these things.

But the flatterer, the seducer, the person who comes to you with praise on their lips, the person who comes to you claiming to be a friend, the person who seems to be interested in your well-being—they get in close, they do damage. They're the ones that do the most harm of all.

In Revelation chapter 17, where basically a kingdom called Babylon is described to us, the description that we're given is a whore, or a prostitute riding on a beast—a prostitute riding a beast. Now I think we can draw two ideas from that. This kingdom that is called Babylon in the book of Revelation comes with great power and force. That's the frontal assault. That's the beast. The beast is mighty. The question is asked, "Who can stand against the power of the beast?" But the whore comes seducing. It says that the prostitute is dressed in great finery. Apparently she's beautiful. And it says that she trades in the souls of men, comes with seduction, comes with flattery, comes with an appearance that appears to be attractive.

Come back and look at King Hezekiah, and think. He's had the frontal assault—the armies outside the gate, the force of the enemy there threatening to destroy his nation, his city, his very life. And he turned to God in prayer. He's had the personal attack—sickness, illness. And he even had a word from the Lord: "This illness? It's the illness that's going to kill you." And he turned to God in prayer. He had the frontal assault, he had the personal assault.

Well now he has another kind of assault. Now we have envoys from this nation that's called Babylon. Isaiah has already spoken of Babylon. Just turn quickly back on your Bibles to Isaiah chapter 13. We'll start reading at verse 1: "<sup>1</sup>The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. <sup>2</sup>On a bare hill raise a signal; cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. <sup>3</sup>I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones. <sup>4</sup>The sound of a tumult is on the mountains as of a great multitude! The sound of an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! The LORD of hosts is mustering host for battle. <sup>5</sup>They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the LORD and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land."

Notice what it says about those people from Babylon, who are God's servants of destruction. They're proud and they exalt themselves. They come from a distant land. What did Hezekiah say to Isaiah. Isaiah said, "Who just spoke to you? Where did they come from?" "They come from a faaar country. They come from a distant land."

There's a bit of irony there. You know, it's kind of like Isaiah's saying, "Well I have written that on a scroll." You know, they didn't have a Bible with pages, they had a collection of scrolls. "I've written about this, and you've actually almost repeated my words verbatim. These people of Babylon who are coming, they are tools in the hand of the living God to execute His judgment and His discipline upon the nations." Indeed, in Scripture, Babylon goes on to become the symbolic enemy of God.

And though at this point in time, Babylon was a nation, as Hezekiah said, "Far, far away"—you know, you sort of had to go north and east, and go quite a distance before you got to a city that was actually called Babylon, where there was a Babylonian king. But Babylon was coming, and Babylon was going to take over the Assyrian empire. That invading force that had surrounded Jerusalem in Isaiah chapter 37 was the Assyrians. And Babylon was way off over on the other side of the Assyrian empire.

But what was going to happen in history was that Babylon was going to conquer the Assyrians, and basically take total control of the empire that the Assyrians had previously had. And it was Babylon which was the nation to where God's people would be carried in punishment and in judgment for their sins of idolatry, though they had the revelation of the true and the living God, and though they had the temple in their city. It was Babylon that would finally administer that punishment.

Then in the New Testament, the idea of Babylon is picked up again, as I've already mentioned, particularly in Revelation chapter 17 and 18, the great political-religious conglomeration of power that stands in rebellion against God, the great evil religion that claims to be, pretends to be, appears to be, a religion of the worship of the living God, but actually is not.

You know, there's a reason why our Confession says the Pope is that Antichrist. Our Confession says the Pope is that Antichrist. There's a reason why our Confession has so many statements written into it that are directly against the Roman Catholic Church. Those who founded the Reformed Baptists, those who prepared that Confession, were deliberately, in a calculated way, step-by-step, doctrine-by-doctrine, separating themselves from the influence of Rome, which they clearly considered to be Babylon in their present age—Babylon, the enemy of God's people.

Turning back to our passage this morning, we have here Hezekiah, who should have known better, because Isaiah had already spoken of Babylon, and he's already told the people of God that Babylon was a far-off country. Yet, the Babylonians come to Hezekiah and we're told elsewhere that the reason that they came was that they also had seen the sign of the shadow receding, the reverse of the sun's shadow. And they wanted to know why and how that had happened. And so they came and heard that it was because it was a sign for Hezekiah. Hezekiah here is shown in his worst possible light, isn't he?

Think about the reason I took our reading from Joshua chapter 9. Joshua had done so well so far in his leadership. He'd led the people into the Promised Land, he'd conquered cities, done great works, and then along comes some people who flatter him. They tell him "how well we've seen you've been doing. You've gone so well so far. You've invaded. No one has been able to stand against you. We come from a far country. We've come from far away." Remember that closing comment in our reading: "No one consulted with the Lord." No one consulted with the Lord.

And that's why I thought here of Hezekiah. He didn't consult with the Lord. Once again, as I've said in the last two sermons as we've looked at the narrative of Hezekiah through the eyes of Isaiah, it seems that Hezekiah's last resort was always, "Pray." It's good that he came down to prayer as a last resort, but it's the thing that he should have put as his first resort.

Basically, what should have happened? Let's play the "what-if" game. Here's what should have happened: Envoys arrive from Babylon, and Hezekiah thinks to himself, "Okay, I've received a word of the Lord concerning the rescue of the city, I've received a word of the Lord concerning my restoration to good health. You know, I better go and just send a message to Isaiah." Send a servant off down to Isaiah, "Isaiah, people have arrived from a foreign country seeking a covenant with us, seeking peace. What do you think?" He should have sought the word of God. He should have sought wise counsel, but—I've called this "Old habits die hard."

Isaiah has rebuked the people of God, and particularly the leadership of Judah, again and again and again. What has his rebuke been? “Do not seek alliances with idolatrous foreigners. Do not seek alliances with Egypt. Do not seek alliances with the Philistines. Do not seek alliances with the Syrians. Do not seek alliances with foreigners. Rely on the Lord your God.”

Hezekiah here had had two literal lessons before his very eyes. God has rescued the city, or was in the process of rescuing the city. The timeframe is a little bit general, but we know that it’s after he was ill, though we don’t know whether it’s before the 185,000 soldiers were killed in the Assyrian army. But it’s all around about that time. Once again, the author’s not worrying about trying to give us a perfectly dated chronological record. What he’s trying to give us is a particular narrative that demonstrates something to us.

What this particular narrative demonstrates to us is why we’ve got Isaiah chapters 40 through to 66. Isaiah chapters 40 through to 66 is almost a gospel. It’s almost the fifth gospel in the Bible, or the first written gospel in the Bible. Just look at where Isaiah chapter 40 starts: “<sup>1</sup> Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

How does your New Testament start? How do Matthew, Mark, and Luke start? Who’s the first preacher in the New Testament? John the Baptist. What are the first words quoted from John the Baptist? “‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.’” And they said to John, “Who are you,” etc., etc., and John said, “A voice cries in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

You see, the gospel starts at Isaiah chapter 40, in a way. It’s been built into the whole book, but it becomes very explicit from Isaiah chapter 40 through to Isaiah chapter 66. In Isaiah chapter 66, we end up at the end of all things, with the revelation of the new creation. In other words, from Isaiah 40 to 66 is almost a mini-New Testament. And when I think of the book of Isaiah, just in general terms, I’m usually thinking of verses 44 through 66. In 44 through 66, we get the revelation of Yahweh, the covenant God; we get the revelation of the suffering servant; we get the revelation of the way of salvation; we even get revelation concerning the Holy Spirit of God. From Isaiah 40 through to Isaiah 66, three persons are called God—the Spirit of the Lord, the Servant of the Lord, and Yahweh Himself. It’s a wonderful book.

So Isaiah 39, this illustration of the failure of Hezekiah, tells us why Isaiah 40 to 66 is necessary. You see, Hezekiah is a faithful king, he’s a righteous king, he is not idolater, he will not tolerate evil in his presence. Scripture tells us that he did what was right. It tells us that he was a king like no other. But he was not *the* King. He was not the King that was needed, the King with power, the King who could truly rescue God’s people from slavery, the King who could truly usher in the kingdom of God. He was a king, and he was a good king, and there is no doubt about it that he was human. He was a man who failed. He was a man who made mistakes. In this instance, we see him at his worst. We see his biggest mistake, so to speak.

The envoys come from Babylon. Hezekiah does not seek for the word of the Lord; instead, it appears that he’s very flattered. “Oh, wow! These guys have come four or five hundred miles just to say hello to me. They heard that I got better, and they were so impressed, they sent gifts and presents.” In other words, they’re hoping to form a covenant.

You see, how does Babylon take over Assyria? Well, Babylon was always a rebellious nation against the Assyrians, and eventually Babylon became powerful enough to conquer the nation that had conquered it. Babylon took over Assyria. So Babylon, the Babylonian king, may well be thinking, “You know, I’m here on the northeastern side of the Assyrian empire. The Judahites? They’re there on the southwestern side of the Assyrian empire. If we were allies, and we both rebelled at the same time, we’re putting pressure on them from either side.”

And Hezekiah might well have been thinking, “You know, maybe God’s opened this door for me. Maybe *God* opened this door for me. Maybe this is how God gives us peace, and on and into the future, we have an ally who’s far away, and that ally draws the heat away from us.” He didn’t consult with God, he just sort of thought in his own mind how this might be happening.

Hezekiah welcomed them gladly. He was flattered. He was so pleased that he was considered to be important enough to send ambassadors from so far away. He was flattered, and this is the danger of the Christian life—flattery. People really don’t us any favours when they tell us how good they think we are. They don’t.

You know, there’s an old guy—I won’t mention his name—but he’s an old retired minister, a faithful man. He lives over on the coast near Wollongong. I’d never met this guy, and I was preaching in a different church, and he and his wife turned up at a service. They sat maybe two rows back, just there on my right. Both of them got out big yellow legal pads, sat with the legal pad on their knee, and as I was preaching, they’re taking notes—for the whole sermon! Pages of notes. I had no idea who this guy was, but he was in a way a little intimidating.

Anyway, after the service, he came and introduced himself to me, and it turns out he was a man in semi-retirement. He’d been a pastor for many years, a reformed man, a good pastor, a good preacher. He had been a teacher at one of our seminaries here in Australia—a good seminary. He said, “Can I speak to you for a while?” And he took me down and he sat me in the back corner. And he said, “Okay, this you do well.” And he told me something that he thought I did well. He said, “And these three things you really need to work on.” And he listed it out. He had it written down for me. “You need to work on this”—and I won’t tell you what he said were my weaknesses. “You need to work on this, and you need to work on that, and you need to work on this.” He said, “Now, I always give young preachers a score out of ten. I don’t want you to be discouraged. I’m known as a very hard marker. I’ve given you five out of ten.” He said, “Don’t be too upset, because most young preachers only get three from me. But you work on these three things, you’ll see me again sometime soon, and we’ll go through it again.” That was so helpful! I worked on those three things. He actually gave me good, solid, constructive criticism. That was far more helpful than having ten people come and shine sunshine on my face—tell me how great it was. That was so much more helpful to have that man honestly break down what I was doing, and tell me how to improve.

He did come back again. Exactly the same thing—sat there, in my sight, his legal pad on his knee, and took pages and pages of notes. And we went down the back and sat down, and went through it all over again. He said, “Okay, you listened to me. This you did better. This you did better. But you still need to work on this, that, and the other.” He said, “I’m scoring you now six out of ten. Don’t be upset. Six out of ten is the highest score I’ve given anyone this year.”

That was helpful. And you know what, he came back and did the same thing all over again about three months later. Did the same thing all over again. I won't tell you what he said the third time. The point is, his constructive criticism was far more helpful to me, as a Christian, as a man trying to grow as a preacher, as a man who was trying to learn to minister the word of God. It was far more helpful to me than any praise that a person brings my way. It was so useful to have him break it down to me like that and speak to me in that way.

As a Christian, sometimes the most useful things you're ever going to have is the slap in the face from a friend. Now who knows their book of Proverbs? Who knows what I'm referring to? What does it say? "It's better to be struck in the face by a friend than stabbed by an enemy." It's better to have a friend tell you straight up front what's wrong, what you're doing wrong, what correction you need, than it is to suffer the pain of having your weakness exposed to an enemy.

Hezekiah here basically dropped his guard, looking at verse 2 of our passage. He "welcomed them gladly. And he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses." Now I wonder—you know, I gave you that illustration—I wonder if they were carrying a yellow legal pad and were taking notes. "This is where you find it. This is where you find the good stuff. The treasure house—turn right down a certain street, third building on the left. That's where the gold is stored. Turn left up another street, fourth building on your right, that's where the silver is stored. If you want to stop the soldiers from getting to their weapons, you need to surround this place immediately." I wonder if they're taking notes, you know what I mean? That's the picture we get. Hezekiah in his simplicity is showing them everything, and the picture we're getting of them is that they're thinking, "Wouldn't it be nice if all this stuff got carried back to Babylon? Wouldn't that be good." He showed them everything. He showed off.

Turn to Second Chronicles chapter 32. It's important that we see this in Scripture, just in case you think I'm possibly being a little bit too hard on Hezekiah. It tells us in Scripture that he did this in pride. Second Chronicles chapter 32, verse 24: "In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death, and he prayed to the LORD, and he answered him and gave him a sign.<sup>25</sup> But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> But Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah."

So there we have it. There's the accusation of Scripture, or, it's not really an accusation, it's the diagnosis of God the Holy Spirit. Hezekiah became proud in his heart, and that's what we're seeing here—Hezekiah, proud in his heart.

Have you ever met people who are obsessed with the beauty of their home? They want you to know how much they've spent? "I've got double-glazed windows. I've got double-brick walls. That paneling you see? That paneling you see, that's antique cedar. I scouted all over Victoria, and I found an old house filled with antique cedar, and I got the best cabinet maker in Australia to produce this antique cedar paneling." On and on and on they go. You've had them, you've met them, they show you around their house and they tell you how special everything is, and how wonderful everything they've got is.

And I know some people like that. They bought a block of land. They bought the block of land at that top of the town's highest hill. They had absolute guarantees, they felt, that the zoning around that hill would never be changed, that high-rises would never be built. Therefore, they had this block of land on the top of the highest hill in town, with ocean views. They could see twenty, thirty miles out to sea from this hill.

Guess what. Some multi-billionaire developer started to grease a few palms at Council. He wanted to build some high-rise units. And after a few years, he finally got his zoning approval, and he surrounded that house with high-rise units, thirty-nine, forty stories high. And their view was now no longer anything but the side of tall buildings. It can happen.

A lot of things can happen in the providence of God. Don't put your trust in money, don't put your trust in possessions, don't show off the good things that God gives you. If God gives you good things, God bless you. I'm happy for you to have the good things that God gives you. You should be happy to receive the good things that God gives you, and receive them with thanksgiving.

But understand, the Lord who gives is the Lord who can take away. And if it's good for you that He takes it away, He'll take it away, because He cares most of all that you make it into heaven a humble, faithful, and obedient servant. God does not want you to have idols upon this earth. He does not want you to trust in your own power, He does not want you to trust in your own goodness, He does not want you to trust in wealth. He wants you to trust in Him alone, and if you start to trust in the things that He gives you, believe you me, He will take them away from you—even children. Even children.

Another thing I've noticed over the years is those who have the most unreasonable pride in their children are often those whose children end up apostate in their early twenties. And once again, I see the nodding of a few heads. You see it in some churches. You know, the golden-head boy and the golden-head girl, and they're always being pushed to the front of the church, and they're always, you know, playing a number, they're singing, they're doing something—whatever, and at twenty-two, they're a mess, absolute mess. They've been destroyed by their pride. That can happen too. So even children—thank the Lord for our children, praise God for our children. They're a blessing from God and gift from God. But I'm telling you, if we put our pride in our children, He'll take them. He will, if not by killing them, by turning them into faithless sinners, crazy sinners.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 reads, “<sup>23</sup> Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, <sup>24</sup> but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” Don't boast in any of these things. God gives, God can take away. Boast in the fact that you are blest by God. Boast in the fact that God loves you.

So, Isaiah comes to Hezekiah, verse 3 of our passage. “What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?” As I said, I can't help but be a little bit sarcastic here. “They have come to me from a faaar country.” They've come from so far away. How important am I! They traveled five, six hundred miles just to see little ol' me. They've come from a faaar country, from Babylon.

Isaiah doesn't seem impressed. <sup>4</sup> "What have they seen in your house?" Hezekiah answered, "They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them." <sup>5</sup> Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD of hosts." Here we have the third word that Hezekiah receives from the Lord by the prophet Isaiah. <sup>6</sup> "Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. <sup>7</sup> And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." <sup>8</sup> Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good." For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my days."

Proverbs 13:22 tells us that a good man leaves an inheritance to his children. That's not necessarily promising that we're passing down to them wealth. Once again, if God gives you something to pass down, praise God. It is promising that we're passing down to them a spiritual inheritance. It is promising that we're passing down to them a blessing, a grace, that comes from God. And as I've said, I really think this is Hezekiah at his worst moment. Look at how it closes: "There will be peace and security in my days."

It would break my heart to think that I could sit here and say, "Well, I know I'm secure in the blessings of God. And my children? Whatever." Honestly, that would crush me. And here's Hezekiah. He's just been told that his sons—and he hasn't even got children yet; remember he cried bitterly because he had no children—"The sons that you will father will be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." That was one of the signs and symbols of complete and utter domination in ancient times, when a nation conquered a nation, to take the very best of the young men, the cream of the crop, and turn them into eunuchs who will never, ever father children—to cull a line to its end, to finish a line off. And Hezekiah says, "Aahh, they'll be peace and security in my days. Nothing to worry about here."

Is it any surprise, if we were to read Scripture, that Hezekiah's son was a man named Manasseh, and Manasseh goes down as one of the most evil kings that Jerusalem ever had? He even sacrificed children in the flames to Moloch. That's how low Hezekiah's son goes—one of the most evil kings that ever reigned from the throne of David. Is it any surprise?

So we've pretty much come to the end of our passage. What are we going to take away from this? What are our thoughts, or what are the applications that I want to make? I've made some of them as we've gone along, but let's cover it again.

First, beware of flatterers. Beware of people who praise you. Do not listen too much to people who praise you. I know it's nice to have people say good things. I know it's good to have people say good things to you. But in the end, the honest critic, the friend that sharpens iron—"iron sharpens iron as one man talks to another"—the friend that sharpens your iron is doing you a greater favour than the flatterer that lowers your guard. Be on guard at all times. Beware of your mortality, beware of your humanity, beware of how easily people like you and I are led astray, how blind pride can make us. The things that you are proud of can be taken from you, for they were given to you. You own nothing. You know, never a wiser thing was said in Scripture than, "Naked I came into the world, and naked will I depart. I brought nothing in, I will take nothing out." Pride will destroy us. It will destroy anybody, at any time. It will blind you.



The second thing, then, that I want us to think of concerning our passage: Seek the guidance of God. Always seek the guidance of God. Now God doesn't speak to you as He spoke to Isaiah, all right? It appears to me that when God spoke to Isaiah, Isaiah was hearing something like an audible voice. You know, looking back, for example, into chapter 38, verse 4: "Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: <sup>5</sup> 'Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father.'" It's as though God was just speaking the way I'm speaking to you here now. Do not expect that in your life these days; you'll get led astray, I promise you. You seek the Lord in prayer, and you act according to what is revealed in Scripture. There's more than enough revealed in Scripture to keep us out of trouble, and we so often forget that. You know, we ask questions. "What am I to do for the future? What am I to do for a job? What am I to do for a wife, or a husband? What am I to do?"

Listen, worry about the things that are of God. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God," as Jesus said. Ask these kinds of questions. Okay, you've got an option of taking two different jobs. Will one of them take me away from a gospel-preaching fellowship? Yes, or No? You know, if I take this job and I live in this certain town, is there a church in this town where I can sit under the gospel, a faithful preacher of the gospel? Yes, or No? If the answer's No, maybe you should say to yourself, "I won't go there. I will fellowship with God's people." That doesn't mean Christians shouldn't go to places where there are no churches—they go there as missionaries. But not everyone's called to be a missionary.

Ask yourself another question: Does this person tend to lead me into sin, or into faithful obedience? You know, some of you people ask the question, "Am I to get more serious with this boyfriend, girlfriend? Is our relationship to go forwards," etc., etc., etc. All right, is this person leading you closer to the presence of God or not? Is this person encouraging you in Scripture or not? Is this person good for you, in Christian terms, or not? And if the answer is "Not," well then my friends, maybe you need to be saying, No. "No, I'm not actually going to draw any closer to this person. I will remain friends. I'm not necessarily here to make enemies, but I will not draw any closer to this person, because this person draws me away from my God, and I will not be drawn away from my God." Does this person encourage me to sin? If Yes, maybe it's time you changed the nature of the friendship or the relationship.

They're the things that matter the most. Questions like that matter the most. If you sort out the things concerning your walk with God, if you sort out the things concerning your Christian fellowship, well, when it comes down to making a choice, choose what you most prefer. If both jobs are basically the same, if both towns are basically the same, if both towns have what you consider to be a good solid church, let's talk about the employment option. If they're both basically the same, well then you just come down to, "What do I feel the most comfortable with? What do I like the most? Where can I see myself living?" Just go on your personal preference, and go. Take your choice and go.

Don't expect divine supernatural guidance. You get that from Scripture. Scripture tells you how to make your choices. Choose the things that are pleasing to God, and then once you've made sure you've chosen the things that are pleasing to God, trust God, trust His providence, and choose the things that are pleasing to yourself. Put God first, put yourself second. Seek God's word first. Seek God's will first. Commit your way to prayer first.

You know, many of us have memorized Proverbs 3, verses 5 and 6. Lean not on your own understanding, but trust in the Lord with all your heart, and He will make straight your paths. It's a very good passage. It's a very good thing to know. Lean not on your own understanding, but trust in the Lord. Let God's word be the thing that defines what you do. Let God's word be the thing through which you filter the choices and the options that come before you in life. If we did that, if all of us did that, we would have a much better walk in our Christian life, a much stronger walk. We would save ourselves from so much trouble if we did it that way, if we put the word of God first.

Third application: What are your habits? As I said, I've called this sermon, "Old habits die hard." Hezekiah had a habit. He was a king, and he wanted to deal with other kings. He had a habit of relying on the powers of the world around him, rather than relying upon God. What are your habits? Are your habits godly habits, or are your habits foolish habits? What is the sin that most easily tempts you, and what are you doing to combat that sin?

All of us have got something in mind here as I speak of these things. There's something which, if you had a moment of absolute honesty, or I had a moment of absolute honesty, I could tell you, "I am always tempted by this thing. This just keeps coming back. I find it so difficult to press down this desire, to push it away. It always is tempting me, and it was based upon a habit that I built up over many years." That's my life. That's your life as a Christian.

What are your habits? What is habitually your problem? What is habitually your problem in your mind, in your imagination, in your fantasy life, in the things that you dream of? What is your bad, habitual problem that you need to deal with? That's why I took that reading from the book of Romans. Just turn back there to Romans chapter 8, reading verses 12 to 15:

“<sup>12</sup> So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. <sup>13</sup> For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. <sup>15</sup> For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”

Looking there again at verse 13: "If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Now what does it mean to live according to the flesh? Let's just jump back up a bit. Look for example at Romans chapter 8, starting at verse 5:

“<sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh,” so here's the first thing that they do—they “set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

So what is it, then, to be living according to the dictates of the flesh? Well, it starts in your mind. Your mind is set upon something that it ought not to be set upon. Pornography is destroying our society. Pornography is destroying our nation. It's destroying families, it's destroying young people. Pornography is, I think at the moment, that which is destroying our nation.

Back when I was in high school in the early 1980s, it was actually hard to get hold of hard-core pornography. It was illegal, and every now and then, the police forces of the states of our nation did actually enforce those laws. I don't think that it's any coincidence that around twenty years ago, by the end of the eighties, when our government stopped enforcing the laws concerning the distribution of pornography, those hard-core pornography shops were all over the place. The laws were still on the books, but the government no longer went after it.

Go forward twenty years, and suddenly you've got a nation of people that say, "I don't care if homosexuals are homosexuals, and I don't care if they're homosexuals in public, and I don't care that the gay Mardi Gras walks down the middle of the street, and I don't care that we have gay marriage, and I don't care what God's law is, and I don't care what's right or wrong, and I don't care what the Scripture says is perversity. I don't care about any of those things."

What changed their attitude? I'll take a guess. Can I prove this through detailed research? No, I can't. But here's what I know. Almost everybody in our nation today has some involvement with hard-core pornography, and it has destroyed the basis of their morality. It's destroyed the way that they think. It's destroyed their revulsion against sin.

Go back to 1979 and 1980, when I was at the early part of the teens. People were revolted by homosexuality and lesbianism. People outright simply declared this to be revolting, perverse behaviour—"Keep your children away from such people." Why? Because the word of God said it was an abomination. The problem is, of course, many of them didn't understand that their morality was actually built on a Christian foundation. They didn't understand that it is Scripture that tells us those things are perversity and an abomination. You go twenty years later, and people say, "Anything goes. Do as you please."

You know, what's the message of the world today? You're here for a short time, enjoy that short time, because there's no eternity. Therefore, whatever makes you happy at this moment, do whatever it is that makes you happy at this moment, and if being a pervert at this moment makes you happy, do it, and pretend there's no such thing as perversion.

My friends, what is your mind set on? What's the weakness of your heart? And it may not be pornography, it may simply be pride—human pride. That's another one. That's one that children raised in Christian households can often suffer. You tend to look at the sins of the world. I've seen this again and again and again. You've been restrained from the wickedness you see around you, and after a while you can't help but think, "I'm not as bad as those guys. You don't see me out drunk in the gutter on Friday night. You don't see me half-naked on Saturday morning. You don't see me with a string of broken relationships—having live-in relationships with every second person I've ever met. I'm not as bad a sinner as those guys. I don't need saving quite as badly." You know what that is—that's just outright pride. That's just outright blindness. That's pride.

Go back to my first application. My first application was, Don't be proud. Be humble. That's outright pride, my Christian friends. Be very careful if you think you're better than the people around you because you haven't sinned as badly as the people around you. What you should be is very thankful, because the only reason that you haven't sinned as badly as the people around you is, God put you in a family that restrained your wickedness. God put you in a place where

your inner wickedness was held back by the discipline of godly parenting, and the discipline of God's word. And that's the only thing that sets you apart—the grace of God.

So what does that tell me? And what should that tell you? Your every sin is a sin against actual knowledge. It's a sin against the light of the word of God. Therefore, your every sin is actually worse than the sin of the poor ignorant sot out there who's been raised by a pair of drunken, drug-addicted idiot parents that have taught them nothing in their whole life.

If you've grown up under the word of God, the truth is, every little sin of your mind and heart, every little wicked thought that's ever gone across your heart, is easily as sinful as the sins of the most perverse and out-there homosexual in our society, whoever that may be. It's easily as wicked. You just as desperately need to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. You just as desperately need to be forgiven by God through Jesus Christ. Your pride will destroy you.

My friends, what is the old habit that is dying hard in your life, and what are you doing to destroy that habit? What is your actual program? What is your deliberate Christian program to destroy the old habit that's dying hard? What are you doing to put to death the deeds of your body, to use the phrase here in Romans chapter 8, verse 13?

What can I suggest to you? How do you put to death the deeds of the body? Well, the first thing I recommend to you is the internalization of Scripture. In other words, the memorization of Scripture. What is your greatest problem, and what in the Bible speaks directly to your greatest problem? Memorize that so it is at the tip of your tongue any time you need it—any time you need it, so that you can draw it to mind and pray through it at any time you need to hear the word of God concerning that issue. That's an enormous help. That's a powerful help to any Christian.

There's a list of sins in Galatians chapter 5. I memorized them. Galatians 5, 16 to 26: The works of the flesh, which are evident, which are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambition, heresy, envy, murder, drunkenness, revelries, and the like. I'm not good because I memorized that. I didn't do that to impress God. I didn't do that as a legalist. I did that because I knew that I needed to hear those words when I was tempted to sin. You know, I was converted at I think 21, and I was a young man of the world before that time, and I indulged in all the sins of my generation. I needed that word of God to be on the tip of my tongue at any time.

Internalize Scripture. That which speaks to the sin of your heart, that which speaks to your habitual sin, I recommend to you, memorize it, internalize it, bring it to mind as often as you can. That's one way that you move towards putting to death the deeds of the flesh.

What's another one? If you're fighting, fighting, fighting, fighting, and you find you're not really getting far, find someone to talk to—someone you trust, someone who will not be judgmental, someone whom you will not be tempting. Don't choose a weak Christian. You know, it's no good talking to someone about some particular lust or sin of the flesh if that someone is being tempted by the fact that you're talking to them. Be careful who you call into your close counsel. But talk to someone, and pray with that somebody, and make yourself answerable to that somebody.

Have a friend who is a trusted friend and a counselor. Have someone that you make yourself answerable to. Confess your sins, one to another. Once again, I'm telling you, be careful who you choose, but if you need that help, it works. It really helps to have confessed your sins to a fellow Christian and pray over them. It's amazing how much strength you get from that, how much help you get from God.

Internalize Scripture; have a trusted confessor. And what other things can we do? Well the next one that I recommend is you start to fight the battle of your mind. Most people let their mind run free. Most people don't try to discipline their thoughts and their imagination, and so their thoughts and their imagination are basically like a train off its tracks. They're just going anywhere, at any time. Recognize what your thought patterns are, and have your thought patterns renewed by the word of God.

Turn to Romans chapter 12. We'll read verses 1 and 2: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Take control of your mind. Take control of your thought life. That's hard, because often you've been in habits of thinking bad ways for so many years.

From my own life, when I was first converted, for three years I listened to no other music than Christian hymnody, because up until that time, I had been a rabid heavy-metal fan. The bands I loved were at that time Iron Maiden and Black Sabbath. They were then about the most wicked bands you could imagine. And what I found was, I did not actually have control of my own thought life. I knew that I was a Christian, I knew that I was converted, but when I wanted to be thinking godly thoughts, I had the lyrics of songs running through my head that were anything but godly. The truth is, they were devilish. And I couldn't stop it. I just couldn't stop it. I went on a three-year music strike. Didn't turn the radio on. It took three years. Didn't turn the radio on. I literally burnt my CD collection.

Now I don't say that you have to do those things, but I had to do them. My conscience was very tender concerning those things. I was convicted that this was the idolatry in my life that had almost destroyed me, and so I destroyed them. I cleansed my mind of that music. It took three years, but one day I actually realized something. I'd just walked through a shopping centre, at that time you had your record stores, or by then they were CD stores—and there was something blasting out of the speakers in that record shop, which was something that three or four years ago, I would've gone to the concert and banged my head like every other fool. I walked past it, and I forgot at the moment that I was past it. It was gone. I could barely even remember what the song was. I realized that my mind thinks now in different ways. Those songs do not dominate my thought life. Those lyrics are no longer always turning over in my head.

Take control of your mind. Take control of your imagination. What stirs your mind and imagination to evil and wicked thoughts? What is it? Is it a TV show, is it your favourite TV show? Is it certain books that you read? Is it certain movies that you watch? Is it certain friendships that you keep? What leads your mind off the path that is the word of God? Take control of your own mind. Cleanse those things from your life. Turn your mind back to the word of God. That's another place where the memorization of Scripture really helps.

Christian, you must have a regular Bible reading program. I'm not saying you have to read the amount of Scripture that I read, and I'm not telling you how much I read. That's not the point. The point is that you must have a regular, consistent, Christian habit of studying the Scripture, however much it may be, according to—and I'll say this—your intellectual ability.

There are many people who read through two chapters of Scripture straightaway, and the truth is they're not very good with words, and by the time they get to the end of the second chapter, they've forgotten what was even said at the start of the first chapter. Well, it's no good telling that person to have a massive Bible-reading program that takes in six chapters a day. Yeah, sure, they might read six chapters a day, but they've forgotten what the first five said, they've forgotten half of the sixth one, and they only barely remember where they finished at the end of the sixth one. That's not helpful.

You need things in your mind. If your capacity is to read two paragraphs, read two paragraphs, read them carefully, read them a few times, study them deeply, bookmark your Bible, start there again tomorrow. Study the Scripture, but have a regular program. I know what I read last night; I know what I'm reading tonight; I know exactly what I'm reading tomorrow. I have a program. I have a disciplined program. It's good for you as a Christian to be regularly in God's word.

As I've said, a lot of people really like the "Through the Bible in a Year" programs. You can download them off the Internet, and they're pretty good. There's one that was put out by Robert Murray McCheyne, the McCheyne program, in which every day, you have a passage from the Old Testament, a passage from the Psalms, and a passage from the New Testament, so you get variety. And he doesn't take you through one thing after another, he takes you through combining various themes and stuff, so that every reading is some way associated with everything that you read. You follow that program, and by the end of the year, you've read the whole Bible. Many people really like the McCheyne reading program.

Whatever it is that you adopt, discipline yourself to it, do it, don't find excuses not to do it. When I'm tired, I do it. Sometimes I slap myself in the face—not joking. I work nights, you know, twelve hours overnight, 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. Sometimes my Bible reading requires me to literally slap myself to wake up. Do your Bible reading, my friends. The word of God is more important than the food that you're eating. It really is more important than the food that you're eating.

And if you fill your mind with the word of God, you will find that you are receiving the power to take control of your thought life, that even the most hardened habits in your mind, those mental habits that always seem to be leading you down the pathway to sin, with the help of Scripture, with the help of prayer, with the help of repentance and the power of the Holy Spirit, you can take control of your thought life. You can put to death the deeds of the flesh. You can make sure that that old habit is on the pathway to dying.

It'll keep coming back—you know, the flesh doesn't want to die. The flesh wants to imitate God and tries to resurrect itself every day. It's a daily battle. It never finishes. No one achieves perfection in this life. The battle continues til the day we meet the Lord face to face. But you can have victory every day. You can be victorious over the sins of the body, the sins of your mind, the sins of your flesh. You can put them to death, day by day by day, if as a Christian, you truly dedicate yourself to obeying God.

So my friends, be wary of pride. Fight the battle, fight it daily, be humble in the presence of God, take control of your mind, and you will start to have victory over these old habits that die hard. You will start to be wise in God's sight. You will have what God calls wisdom. Now, God's wisdom is not what the world calls wisdom. God's wisdom is based upon obedience to His will, holiness, and righteousness.

Notice, if you read the book of Proverbs, what it says the biggest difference is between the wise and the fool. The wise man lives a holy life. The wise man lives righteously. The wise man lives according to God's word. The fool lives in disobedience to the law of God. And that still applies. When Paul spoke of the renewing of your mind, he was speaking of being able to obey, and live in obedience to the will of God. We live in submission to the law of God, not because we're working for salvation, but in terms of our sanctification, in terms of our growth in Christ-likeness. You can't work for salvation. You can't earn your salvation. It's a freely given gift of God. You receive salvation by grace and by grace alone.

Let's have a look at one last Scripture reference. Turn to the book of Philippians chapter 2, starting at verse 12: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Does it say that you passively work out your salvation? No, it doesn't. It says, "You work out your salvation with fear and trembling." You put an effort into growing as a Christian. Why? Why? Because God is working in you. You see what he's saying? If God is doing something, you, Christian, therefore should be doing it. If God is sanctifying you, you should therefore be working for your sanctification.

We're granted positional sanctification. When you're saved, you're placed in a position of being a son of God, of being holy in the eyes of God, of being righteous in the eyes of God. You can never lose that. But from that moment on, God is renewing His people and making them into the likeness and the image of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. From that moment on, you are being transformed so that not only are you positionally sanctified, not only are you given the position of sanctification, but sanctification becomes reality in your life.

So my friends, we have to make an effort. We have to be disciplined, I stress it again, not because it earns us salvation, but because God is working in us. If God is not working in you, you are not striving for sanctification. It's as simple as that. Those who are not striving for sanctification, God is not working in them. I don't care what they say about how they believe in Jesus—not interested. You know, it's not a credible profession if it does not come with a desire for holiness, a motivating desire for righteousness, and a desire to do what is right.

A Christian can be a terribly weak Christian. It can take years for someone to actually get some real strength in their Christian battle. It can take years for someone to change those thought habits. But a Christian is someone who is striving and fighting with sin, confessing their sins, being forgiven of their sins, repenting of their sins, and striving not to repeat them. A Christian is not like the dog that returns to its own vomit, or the pig that returns to the mud hole. A Christian is someone on the pathway of righteousness, heading towards eternal life, purifying

ourselves as He is pure, because we want to see Him face to face, and have that final purification that is promised to us at the start of First John chapter 3.

Let's close in prayer. Father in heaven, I do indeed pray that you would help us not to be a proud and foolish people. I pray, Father, that you would help us to be a faithful and obedient people, putting you first in all things, seeking guidance from your word in all things, obeying you. Father in heaven, we thank you for your word, the Scriptures, and we pray, Father, that you would help us to grow in them, and to grow in the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is in His name that we ask these things. Amen.