

The Lord's Kindness to Hezekiah: Isaiah 36-39

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This morning we come to a passage in Isaiah that recounts some of God's dealings with King Hezekiah. As is typical, there are highlights and lowlights. Relatively speaking, Hezekiah was a very good king. He led Judah in some very godly ways. But he also had his faults and shortcomings. Through it all, there is the kindness of the Lord upon His life.

So as we learn from Hezekiah's life both positively and negatively, what should stand out most of all is the tender mercy of the Lord. What an encouragement that is for us. Frail and fickle as we are. Faithless sometimes. In our moments of triumph and defeat, the Lord is there as our rock and our salvation. Let's look to Him this morning. Let's hope in Him alone.

One of the great things about the Christian faith, and about the Bible . . . and Fred Higgs mentioned this in his Sunday School lesson a couple weeks ago . . . is that our faith is rooted in historical events. Our story is interwoven with an overarching story that goes back to the beginning of time. And there are stories throughout all of history that give evidence of God's existence, His power, His faithfulness to His people, and therefore give us confidence that He is going to do what He has promised. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sin. Jesus rose on the third day. And He is coming again.

The Bible's storyline leads us through these great events and places us in that grand narrative. We live in the time between Christ's first coming and His second coming. So we can look back to God's powerful acts throughout Old Testament history. We look back to Jesus' earthly ministry, His sacrificial death and His death-destroying triumph over death shown in His resurrection. And we look forward to when He will return and bring us home to be with Him forever.

Well, in this sermon series through Isaiah we are looking hundreds back into history, about 700 years before Christ, and we're seeing the faithfulness of the same God we serve today—the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Let me begin by showing you 3 slides briefly that will situate us geographically and chronologically.

MAP #1

This first slide pictures the growth of the Assyrian Empire. In our story this morning we're going to hear about the intimidating King Sennacherib of Assyria. This was a powerful and power-hungry empire, and they were ruthless in their battles against other peoples. The different colors on this map show how the Assyrian Empire expanded over the course of hundreds of

years. At the heart of it is Nineveh, along the Tigris River in what is today Iraq. Then it expanded in all directions enveloping lands all the way over to the Mediterranean Sea and even into Egypt.

MAP #2

On this second map we zoom in and see the various missions of the Assyrian forces as they took over the northern kingdom of Israel and also attempted to take captive the southern kingdom of Judah. This little blue line here shows the attack on Lachish and then the trek up to Jerusalem, which is what we'll be reading about in Isaiah 36-37.

TIMELINE

And then to situate this chronologically, here's a timeline of Isaiah's ministry. You remember that Isaiah's commissioning was in the year that King Uzziah died. So Uzziah is not shown on this timeline. Jotham came after Uzziah, then Ahaz, and then Hezekiah, who we'll be talking about today. And then you see the kings of Assyria. Tiglath-pileser, Shalmaneser, Sargon, and then Sennacherib, the guy who comes against Hezekiah. And then at the bottom here are some of the key dates. 739 Isaiah's call to ministry, the year King Uzziah died. 734 when Syria and Israel were teaming up to attack Judah. We talked about that earlier in chapter 7 where the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind, because they were afraid of Syria and Israel coming against them. There are some interesting comparisons and contrasts between that situation with Ahaz and the situation we'll look at today with Hezekiah. Then there's the key date of 722 when Israel, the northern kingdom, fell to the Assyrians. And now 701 brings us to the time when Sennacherib comes against Hezekiah and tries to capture Jerusalem. Let's find out what happened.

In these chapters of Isaiah we'll consider Hezekiah's faith, Hezekiah's frailty, and Hezekiah's folly.

Hezekiah's Faith (chapters 36-37)

Remember all of this is under the title, "The Lord's Kindness to Hezekiah." We're going to look at some things that happened to Hezekiah and how he responded, and through all of it we'll see how kind the Lord was to this faithful, but also frail and sometimes foolish king.

And to put ourselves into this story, to see how relevant this is for our lives today, all we need to do is ask ourselves, "Is there any trial or temptation that is facing me right now?" Is there any opposition that presents a crisis of faith? A trial that the Devil is trying to use to make me doubt God's goodness, or a temptation that the Devil is trying to use to make me look for my joy in something other than God? Does anything come to your mind? I

would imagine that if you're human, and if you're a believer, then there are things that come to mind. Maybe there's a financial trial that is standing over you, as if to mock you and intimidate you, beckoning you to turn your back on God and put your hope elsewhere. Or maybe it's an individual in your workplace or in your family who is attacking your character or attacking your Christian convictions. Maybe it's a temptation that taunts you. You so want to be free of its clutches, but you sometimes feel helpless. And the Deceiver knows it. He whispers to you that there is no way of escape.

Sennacherib's Attack

Well, here's how the trial presented itself to Hezekiah. Similar in many ways to the various trials and temptations that we face. In Hezekiah's case, he was the King of Judah, responsible to lead and protect his people, and this power-hungry and vicious King of Assyria is pressing closer and closer to the capital city of Jerusalem. King Sennacherib is determined to conquer. And if you think American politics gets nasty, wait till you get to know Sennacherib and his campaign team.

Read 36:1-3

A few things to say so far. Does the "conduit of the upper pool" ring a bell? This was mentioned in chapter 7 as well. It's the same place Isaiah met King Ahaz and talked to him about the Syrian – Israel invasion.

Another thing to realize is that this conduit is one of the evidences of Hezekiah's wise leadership in Judah. You see, there was a spring of water outside the city walls. Hezekiah knew that if the Assyrian army made it to Jerusalem, which they did, they might easily cut them off from their water source. So Hezekiah had a tunnel built from that spring to bring water inside the city walls. Quite an accomplishment. And folks who are interested can still walk through that tunnel today, if they're not claustrophobic. It's just wide enough for people to go single file wading the waist-deep water.

It's at the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field, outside of the city, where these 3 officials of Judah go out to meet with this official sent by the King of Assyria . . . who has a pretty catchy title, by the way. The Rabshakeh. We've been talking about this story at our house throughout the week, and Micah our 2 year old has latched onto this term. I've been hearing him at breakfast and other times, randomly saying, "Rabshakeh" and laughing. That's the term in the Hebrew. It simply means military officer. Some translations read "Rabshakeh." Other translations say "field commander" or something like that.

Now here comes the big question in verse 4.

Read 36:4-5

This is an audacious address to the officials of Judah. But if you were part of Sennacherib's army you might feel totally justified in speaking this way. It is presumed that Jerusalem will be utterly intimidated by this army and simply give up without a fight. You can see that the officials of Judah are somewhat intimidated. They at least don't want the people of Judah to hear these taunts, lest they lose their nerve.

Read 36:11-12

That is downright dirty intimidation. He's crude. He's cruel. He describes their captivity in a horrible way. And then he goes on, speaking directly to the people. If he can't intimidate King Hezekiah or his officials, he may be able to intimidate the people, so they will rebel against their leaders.

Read 36:13-18

This is ruthless. It was planned out carefully, even spoken in the language everyone would understand. And even though the message contradicts itself at different points and doesn't make sense logically, it's powerful in terms of psychological intimidation. Notice how he speaks so crudely of their captivity in verse 12—eating their own dung and drinking their own urine. And then how he speaks so glowingly about their captivity in verse 17—going to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. Sounds like the Promised Land, right? Except that they're already in the Promised Land. Here's a demonic force tempting them, luring them, intimidating them in the opposite direction.

Also notice the contradiction of him saying in verse 10 that "The Lord said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it." And then the statements in verses 18-19 scoffing at the idea that the Lord could deliver them from Assyria, and putting the Lord on the same level as the gods of other lands.

The Rabshakeh says whatever will sound persuasive. And in the ears of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who knew of Assyria's strength, who knew of all the peoples and cities they had conquered, surely it had an effect.

Hezekiah's Prayer

How will Hezekiah respond? What will his answer be to the question, "On what do you rest this trust of yours? In whom do you now trust?" We should each be asking ourselves the same questions. Whatever temptation or trial is facing you today, this week, those questions are near at hand.

It makes me think of Augustine's testimony, the great leader in the church who lived in the late 300s and early 400s AD. He was in bondage to the sin of lust, and even when he began to

realize that the way he was living his life was wrong, it was very difficult for him to get free from sexual sin.

He began listening to a very famous preacher named Ambrose. And Augustine says that as he listened to Ambrose week after week, he gradually began to realize the truth of what he was saying. And then one day in late August of 386, when Augustine was almost 32, his life was changed forever. He was visiting a friend, and God really began to convict Augustine of his sin. He was in a small garden that was attached to the home where he and his friend were staying, and he writes of the battle that was raging inside of him.

The struggle was between the pleasures of sin and the pleasure of knowing God. And Augustine was so distraught because he knew he must give up the one to gain the other. He must give up the pleasures of sin to gain the pleasure of knowing God. Yet the pleasure of sin was calling to him, taunting him. Like Sennacherib taunting Hezekiah. Like your sin and my sin taunts us oftentimes. Here's how Augustine described it. "My lower instincts, which had taken firm hold of me, were stronger than the higher, which were untried. . . . They plucked at my garment of flesh and whispered, 'Are you going to dismiss us? [do you hear that taunt?] From this moment we shall never be with you again, for ever and ever.'" (VIII, 11). This was the battle for Augustine, and this is the battle for us, not just in conversion, but also in the daily battle of the Christian life. Are we going to give in to the lower instincts? Are we going to be seduced, overpowered, manipulated? Or will we forsake them for higher pleasures? Augustine wrote, "while I stood trembling at the barrier, on the other side I could see the chaste beauty of Continence (meaning abstinence, self-restraint) in all her serene, unsullied joy, as she modestly beckoned me to cross over and to hesitate no more."

What's your battle? How are you doing? Let's not be intimidated by the forces that wage war against us, whether it be the world, the flesh, or the Devil. We have a God who will fight for us. We have a God who will listen to us in our distress. Let's go to Him, as Hezekiah did.

Read 37:15-20

Notice how this prayer is totally God-centered. Hezekiah recognizes that Sennacherib's words were not mainly about Hezekiah or Judah. Ultimately they were aimed against God, Himself. Hezekiah sees that this whole struggle is not merely about him. Hezekiah is not really the one in the crosshairs. It's God who is being attacked here. The One true and living God. He's not a god like the other peoples had—a man-made idol. Of course they were destroyed. But this is the Lord of Hosts, the God

of Israel, who alone is God, who is God of all the kingdoms of the earth, who made heaven and earth.

And then the purpose of the prayer is God-centered as well. Do you see that in verse 20? What is Hezekiah's motivation in praying for deliverance? Again, he's not just seeing it with himself at the center. He sees that God's glory is at stake here. So he's not just pleading for help in a selfish, self-centered way. He is praying with a global and a God-centered focus. He wants God to save His people so that all the kingdoms of the earth will know that He alone is the Lord.

That's a great way to pray. And we see the power of prayer in Hezekiah's life. The Lord responds very positively and powerfully to his prayer.

The Lord's Promise

See in the next verse, verse 21 . . . and then skip down to verses 33-35. The Lord promises to defend Hezekiah and the city of Jerusalem. And look back for moment earlier in the chapter where the Lord makes another promise concerning Sennacherib. Read vv. 5-7

And we find out how that was fulfilled in the last verses of the chapter.

The Lord's Battle

But first we find out the amazing thing that God did to destroy the Assyrian army. This is the climactic event in the story, even though it is recounted here so briefly. We have waited with suspense to find out if and how Jerusalem will avoid destruction. Humanly speaking, Jerusalem didn't stand a chance. Surely they would fall just like the rest. But a miracle happened. A miracle from God.

Read vv. 36-38

And that was the end of proud Sennacherib. He fought his way all the way to the doorstep of Jerusalem. But there he met his match. Not in Hezekiah. But in the Lord God Almighty. The angel of the Lord, in some miraculous, undescribed way, killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night. So Sennacherib went home in defeat and humiliation. And then, just as the Lord promised, he fell by the sword in his own land.

What's intimidating you these days? What is coming against you and challenging your faith in God? Maybe one of your foes is your own past. I had the privilege of hearing Rosaria Butterfield share her testimony Friday night here at the Biblical Counseling conference. Some of you were there. I've listen to her share her testimony before, watching it by video. It was great to hear her in person. Each time I think about what God has done in

her life I'm amazed. As I should be every time I think about what God has done in any one of our lives. She describes her conversion as a train wreck. In very abbreviated form, this is her story. She was a tenured professor at Syracuse University, living with her lesbian partner, when she was befriended by a Reformed Presbyterian pastor and his wife. This couple invited her over for dinner. They listened to her, befriended her, showed hospitality to her. And that led to a deeper friendship which God then used to convert her. Rosaria is now a pastor's wife, mother, writer, and a very effective communicator of the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

One of the things she mentioned toward the end of her talk on Friday night was, "What do you do with your past?" What do you do when you have been entrenched in an ungodly lifestyle, when those memories and emotions return at random times? You know you're forgiven. You know you're a new creature. But those feelings may crash upon you like a tidal wave at times, not accepting no for an answer. Rosaria said that she "takes each ancient token to the cross," and that Christ has never let her down. She also said that "the Gospel is always ahead of you. Home is always forward." Those are great words of hope and healing. Our faith is forward-looking. Don't look back and feel threatened by your past. Don't let your past speak cruelly to you like the Rabshakeh did, trying to make you feel like you're already defeated. Look forward. The Good News is in front of us. We're sojourners in this world. Our hope is not here. Our hope is in Jesus Christ, what He accomplished for us on the cross, and what that means for us for all eternity in the future.

Hezekiah's legacy is mostly very positive. The Lord was kind to Hezekiah, and the Lord was kind to Judah by giving them Hezekiah as king.

"Hezekiah began to reign when he was twenty-five years old, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abijah the daughter of Zechariah. And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done." (2 Chronicles 29:1-2, ESV)

King David was Hezekiah's great, great, great, great, etc. grandfather. He was an imperfect man, but a man after God's own heart. Similarly, Hezekiah was an imperfect man. But he was a man who brought reform to Judah. He cleansed the temple. He destroyed the idols. He sought to turn the people back to the Lord. But he still had his limitations and his shortcomings, like David did.

One day, a Son of David would come along who would be without any limitations and without any shortcomings. He would be the Messiah, the perfect Son of God. That is Jesus Christ.

What Isaiah 38-39 show very clearly, among other things, is that Hezekiah is certainly not the Messiah. As good and godly as he was in many respects, he was far from perfect. Here we see his frailty. Then we see his folly. And we'll just look at each of these briefly.

Hezekiah's Frailty (chapter 38)

The chapter begins with a vague time reference, "In those days . . ." But in verse 6 the Lord says to Hezekiah, "I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city." So it appears that this happened before the events of chapters 36-37, before the Assyrian attack.

We're told in verse 1 that Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And the word of the Lord came to Hezekiah through Isaiah the prophet, saying "you shall die, you shall not recover." As we've seen before, we see here the power of Hezekiah's prayer life. He poured out his heart to the Lord and wept and pleaded with him for his life. And the Lord responded in much kindness. In the middle of verse 5, "I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life."

What are we to make of this? Was God lying when He said that Hezekiah would not recover, indeed, that he would die? Is God's mind undecided on certain things? Is He kind of fickle? He says one thing, and then He sees Hezekiah's tears and changes His mind? No, that's not what we should conclude from this. There are times when God uses declarations like this to provoke a certain response. Like when Jonah declared the word of the Lord to Nineveh, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" What happened? Nineveh believed God, and they repented. And God didn't destroy them.

The situation with Hezekiah is a bit similar. The Lord uses this severe sickness to remind Hezekiah of his mortality, of his frailty. What response does this evoke? It brings Hezekiah to a place of deeply sensing his reliance on God, depending on him for his next breath. The Lord is very kind to him, promising him 15 more years of life.

I have to tell you, God has really been ministering to me through these chapters of Isaiah as I've studied them this week, in many different ways. And there's a detail here that strikes me in a very personal way. Let me show you. As I read a moment ago from 2 Chronicles 29, we know that Hezekiah was 25 years old when he began to reign. And he reigned for 29 years. That means

he was 54 when he died. [This is like a story problem] So how old was he in Isaiah 38 when he came close to death but was then granted 15 more years? $54 - 15 = 39$. He was 39 years old when the Lord, in His kindness, gave Hezekiah this vivid reminder of his frailty and mortality.

Why does that mean something to me? Well, it should mean something to all of us. But it strikes me particularly as I think about my own age. I'm 39. And people like to joke about when you turn 40 you're "over the hill." It's downhill from here. I certainly don't want to have that mentality. But maybe there's something biblical about approaching 40 and being reminded that this life isn't going to last forever. And that should be a lesson not only for 39 year olds, but for 29 year olds, and 19 year olds, too. God holds our lives in His hands. If He wants to take us, that's His prerogative. If He wants to give us 15 or 30 or 60 more years, He can do that. In any case, we should acknowledge His sovereignty over our lives. And we should thank Him for His kindness in every additional day we're given, in every breath we take.

There's this really cool miracle that the Lord performs, as a sign of Hezekiah's days being lengthened. Verse 8 says that the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined. It's like the timer on Hezekiah's life was about to run out, but the Lord turns it back, giving him an extension on life.

For those who have had an experience like Hezekiah, coming very close to death and then surviving, you probably look at life a bit differently now than you did before. Let this be lesson to all of us not to take our lives for granted.

Hezekiah responds with this reflection on the Lord's kindness to him. Jack read this for us earlier in the service. I'll just comment on verse 17. Read

Hezekiah realizes that the Lord has been kind to him even in bringing him to his death bed, and then back again. And he sees a spiritual significance to this as well. He has been physically restored to health. But he also sees a spiritual picture in this—a picture of his sins being cast behind God's back.

That's the Gospel, friends. Through Jesus Christ, our sins are cast away, never to be held against us again. What Good News! And let me say this to anyone here who is not yet a believer in Christ. If your sins are still weighing on you, look to Jesus. Cry out to Him like Hezekiah cried to God. Plead with Him for mercy. And He will cast your sins behind His back, never to be seen again.

Hezekiah's Folly (chapter 39)

I love how the Bible doesn't whitewash anybody's life. We see the good, the bad, and the ugly. Hezekiah was a good

king. But he wasn't perfect. You may remember earlier in our study of Isaiah we learned some things about King Uzziah. He was a mixture of good and bad. He started out very well.

"And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God, and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper." (2 Chronicles 26:4-5, ESV)

But several verses later we read this:

"But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense." (2 Chronicles 26:16, ESV)

It wasn't his place to do that. It was the job of the priests to burn the incense. For his disobedience, the Lord struck Uzziah with leprosy. And he was a leper until the day he died.

That was King Uzziah. King Hezekiah, who we're talking about this morning, had a somewhat similar failure. He, too, grew proud, and it resulted in him doing something very foolish. Read Isaiah 39

To place this chronologically, this too seems to have happened before chapters 36-37. This narrative follows Hezekiah's sickness and recovery. All of this happened before the attack of Assyria. So this isn't the final story in Hezekiah's life. But it's the story we're left with here in the book of Isaiah, preparing us for what is to come in the next section of the book, which is written with the Babylonian captivity in view. We'll talk about that more next Sunday.

So we end on this sad note about Hezekiah. He became caught up with his achievements and his wealth. So when these guys from Babylon came to check out what he had, he naively and proudly showed them everything. A severe lapse in judgment. And not only that, we see a very selfish sentiment expressed in the last verse. Isaiah bursts the bubble, telling Hezekiah that these guys from Babylon weren't there just to applaud his wealth. They were there scoping things out. And they would be back someday to plunder Judah's riches. But Hezekiah shows no remorse. He is simply glad that he won't be around to experience it.

And that demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that this man Hezekiah was, indeed, a frail, and sometimes very foolish, king. He was not the promised Messiah. He was not the King of Kings. He was, at least at this point, a self-centered, uncaring, and unwise leader. Therefore as good as many of his deeds were, we see this side of him as well. And that makes us look beyond him, beyond any mere human leader, to *the* King of Kings who was

never selfish or uncaring, but sacrificially laid down His own life for His people.

We've seen Hezekiah's faith, his frailty, and his folly. And in all of it we've seen the Lord's immense kindness to him. And this is all recorded here in God's Word for our benefit.