



BETHEL  
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# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Book of Isaiah, Part 3

In Proverbs 29 we are warned against placing our confidence in man.

Proverbs 29:25-26, “The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted. Many seek the ruler’s favor, but justice for man *comes* from the Lord.”

This is an important exhortation, for our tendency is (a) to surround ourselves with men and women whom we can trust, and then (b) to lean on them for support. Yet you must see, in the words of this Proverb, this always “will bring a snare” for man at his best, at best is a sinner. Think of it; the heroes of our faith have some pretty bad character flaws:

- Adam was a joke when it came to being a protector of his home.
- Noah had a drinking problem.

- Abraham was a liar.
- Isaac a weak leader.
- Jacob a deceiver.
- Joseph struggled with arrogance and pride.
- Moses was a murderer.
- David an adulterer, liar, and murder.
- Solomon was a womanizer.
- Peter struggled with pride as well as cowardice.
- Thomas had a critical spirit.
- James and John struggled with a bad temper and so were aptly named, “the Sons of Thunder.”
- Matthew was a tax-collector which meant he learned to get by on manipulation.
- Paul had to be kept by God from his sinful pride.
- Timothy was a weak leader.

Is it no wonder why God warned His people this way:

Jeremiah 17:5-8, “Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord. [Why?] For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant. [This is what happens when you trust in man. But in contrast...] Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. [Why?] For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.”

The book of Isaiah is a glorious reminder of this truth. Through the continuing example of Hezekiah we are encouraged to denounce self-trust and man-trust in favor of relying upon the Lord to bring about our good and His glory in His time. That is the focus of Isaiah 38-39.

Isaiah 1-39 was written by Isaiah concerning the trials and difficulties which confronted Judah in the time in which he lived. Recall that Isaiah intended chapter 40-66 for later generations. <sup>1</sup> Accordingly in this first section (Isaiah 1-39), Isaiah masterfully arranges his work around three crises:

- Isaiah 7- Judah’s conflict with the northern kingdoms in and around 730 B.C.
- Isaiah 36-37- Judah’s conflict with Assyria around 701 B.C.
- Isaiah 38-39- Judah’s association with the Babylonians which also occurred around 701 B.C. <sup>2</sup>

We now turn our focus to the third crisis in Isaiah, specifically Isaiah 38-39, where once again we are exhorted NOT to place our confidence and hope in ourselves or any other created thing, but God alone.

### **Hezekiah’s Mortality**

Isaiah 38:1, “In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. 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 and not live.’”

Some time prior to the invasion of Assyria, Hezekiah became mortally ill. In terms of the dating of his sickness, we know Hezekiah died in 686 B.C. Yet in our passage his life was extended 15 years. That would mean that the events of this text occurred in the months leading up to the siege of Jerusalem in 702/1 B.C.

In terms of the historical context of Hezekiah's sickness, this sickness occurred following Hezekiah's work of restoring the worship of Yahweh in Judah (cf. 2 Chronicles 29). During this endeavor, the temple was maintained, its worship refined, and its people renewed.

Furthermore, war was looming on the horizon as Hezekiah already had ceased sending tribute to the Assyrians. More than anyone, Hezekiah knew that hardship and trial awaited Israel. As such, Hezekiah was burdened with the news of his death! Humanly speaking there couldn't have been a worse time for Hezekiah to fall ill. S. G. De Graaf put it this way:

Hezekiah thought of the danger in which His people found themselves. He had reinstated the service of the Lord in Judah, and he hoped the Lord would use him to bring deliverance to His people and lead them to walk in His ways again. It was Hezekiah's sincere desire to be the deliverer of His people. But now everything was being cut off. What would become of His people? Wouldn't God take his desire to serve into account? (DeGraaf, 1979, pp. 379, Vol 2)

Because Hezekiah was so burdened, he prayed to God.

Isaiah 38:2-3, "Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall [most likely to hide his displeasure from Isaiah], and prayed to the Lord, and said, 'Remember now, O Lord, I beseech Thee, how I have walked before Thee in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Thy sight.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly."

Hezekiah is a mixed example of godliness and folly. That he turned to the Lord in his time of grief and prayed is notable. Truly when push came to shove, Hezekiah turned to the Lord. Yet his prayer revealed a tiny flaw in his character which later would be exposed. Notice, there is an element of pride here, "*God, look what I've done for You; You owe me!*"<sup>3</sup> Now as messed up as Hezekiah's thinking here may have been, nevertheless God was pleased, in His mercy, to answer the prayer. J. Alec Motyer observed:

It is a measure of the Lord's mercy that he hears prayer even when it rests on a false assumption like the bargaining power of good works. (Motyer, 1993, p. 273)

Isaiah 38:4-5, "Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah [2 Kings 20 indicates that by this time Isaiah was on his way out of the palace...], saying, 'Go and say to Hezekiah, "Thus says the Lord, the God of your father David [with this reference God tells us the reason He deigned to answer Hezekiah's prayer here. It wasn't on account of the king's righteousness, but the covenant promises God made to David (cf. 2 Kings 20:6)! In light of these promises, God said...], 'I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life.'""

What a glorious answer: Hezekiah would live another 15 years! Yet this was but half of it! Not only

would Hezekiah's health be restored, but God personally would see to the rising threat of Assyria.

Isaiah 38:6, "And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city."

Prior to the events of Isaiah 36-37; prior to

- The conversation of Rabshakeh at the city walls.
- The threats.
- The letters in which Sennacherib promised personally to depose Hezekiah.
- The ensuing march of Sennacherib toward Jerusalem!

God had given to Hezekiah a most glorious promise. Not only would he be healed, but so would Judah be "healed" from the war looming on its horizon! And in fact, when Hezekiah "asked for a sign" (which he did, Isaiah 38:22) that he might know without any shadow of a doubt that Isaiah had accurately spoken God's word, the Lord was please to give a sign. The sign that would be given was that "the shadow of the sun on a case of stairs would recede." When Hezekiah saw this, he would know that God had indeed lengthened his days.

Well brothers and sisters, "the shadow of the sun" did in fact recede (cf. Isaiah 38:8). And with the receding shadow came a recession in that which both threatened the King and the Nation's well-being! In response, King Hezekiah penned a most glorious Hymn (cf. Isaiah 38:10-20)! In fact, consider the flow of the Psalm..

- Vv. 10-13: Hezekiah's Sorrow- here he described the difficulties he faced and his many regrets that came to his mind as he faced death.
- V. 14: Hezekiah's Hope...

Isaiah 38:14b, "...my eyes look wistfully to the heights; O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security."- while Hezekiah lay on his bed of sickness, this was his disposition. "God, be my security!" Truly, in terms of Isaiah's message to the nation at the time, Hezekiah got it!!! This was where the nation and Hezekiah needed to stay!

- Vv. 15-16: Hezekiah's Plea for the restoration of his health.
- Vv. 17-20: Hezekiah's Gratitude upon being healed. \

Isaiah 38:17-19, "It is Thou who hast kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, for Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back [one of the only places on our bodies we cannot see]. For Sheol cannot thank Thee, death cannot praise Thee; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Thy faithfulness. It is the living who give thanks to Thee, as I do today. A father tells his sons about Thy faithfulness."

Hezekiah knew that God had done far more than simply extend his life. God had forgiven him his sin. It was of this glorious gift which Hezekiah vowed here to tell his sons! Talk about a mini-climax; what a wonderful passage! Yet all of it comes crashing down on account of sin.

## Hezekiah's Immorality

Isaiah 39:1-2, "At that time Merodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. And Hezekiah was pleased, and showed them [the emissaries who delivered the letters] all his treasure house, the silver and the gold and the spices and the precious oil and his whole armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah did not show them."

Let me give you the background of Merodach-baladan.

- He served as a Babylonian king twice- once from 721-710 B.C. and then a second time from 703-702 B.C.
- An able leader, Merodach-baladan proved victorious over the Assyrians in 722/1 B.C. when the Assyrian King, Shalmaneser, died.
- He was the leader of the Chaldean tribe Bit-Yakin southeast of Babylonia around "the great swamp." As the city was close to Elam, during the regency of Merodach, Babylon and Elam enjoyed an alliance which resulted in Elam withstanding the attack of Assyria in 720 B.C.
- Yet in 710 B.C. the Assyrian king Sargon was able to defeat Merodach-baladan and so conquer Babylonia. Consequently, Merodach-baladan retreated to the south and the citizens of Babylonia welcomed Sargon as its deliverer. Baladan continued fighting, yet he saw little result.
- This changed in 705 B.C. when Sargon died. As in 722 B.C. Merodach took advantage of the ensuing chaos that the death of Sargon brought to Assyria, and so rebelled. As a result, Baladan regained Babylon and enjoyed a reign which last around 9 months.
- In 702/701 B.C., Sennacherib overwhelmed the Babylonian leader who once again fled to the southern swamps. Here he took up a "fight and run" tactic which eventually ended with his death in 694 B.C.

It was during his revived regency in 702/701 B.C. that Merodach-baladan sent emissaries to Hezekiah for a very specific purpose, which brings us to our text. The arrival of the delegation from Babylon obviously flattered Hezekiah- the text says that "he was pleased" (v. 2)! In fact, when Isaiah inquired into the purpose of the visit, notice the first thing Hezekiah said:

Isaiah 39:3b, "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon."

The idea conveyed by this statement is one of amazement: *Isaiah, these men came all the way from Babylon just to see me! Isn't that amazing?! Through my leadership, Judah now has become a world power!* In fact "from a far country, from Babylon" receives the emphasis of vv. 1-3! Truly, Hezekiah was floored by the emissaries who came to visit him. *This far off nation had heard of him!*

And that raises a very important question: Why did Merodach-baladan send the delegation? The answer is twofold.

- On the one hand, Hezekiah was healed from a mortal sickness. News of this would have

impressed these particular Babylonians whose religion at the time revolved around the stars and the worship of the lone god, Ahura Mazda. News of “the shadow of the sun receding on a flight of stairs” would have fascinated them.

- On the other hand, Hezekiah also had successfully withstood the attacks and threatenings of both Sargon and Sennacherib. Such a nation would be needed as an ally if Merodach-baladan was to defeat the Assyrians. And this clearly was the purpose of the visit.

In fact if there was any doubt, notice that following the presentation of the letters (of which we do not know the contents), Hezekiah showed the delegation his war room (v. 2)! Alec Motyer describes them this way:

Taking opportunity from the king’s recovery, Merodach-Baladan sent ‘sick visitors’ with a gift and a letter (39:1). We are not told what the letter contained, but we do know how Hezekiah reacted, giving the envoys a conducted tour of his storerooms, money and arsenals. The letter was manifestly an invitation to become a partner in a rebellion, and Hezekiah fell for it. (Motyer, 1993, pp. 261-262)

And so though the text doesn’t say it, it is obvious that Hezekiah forged some sort of an alliance with Babylon. And sadly, this fits the context for at this time we know that Hezekiah also forged an alliance with Egypt (cf. 2 Kings 18:21; Is. 36:6, 9) an alliance that did “pierce Judah’s hand” (Isaiah 36:6)!<sup>4</sup>

How is it that Hezekiah could abandoned the life of faith and so fall into the trap of trusting in man? Think of it; he has just been healed by God and given the assurance that the Lord Himself would deal with the Assyrians! While Isaiah does not give us the answer, the parallel account in 2 Chronicles 32 does: Hezekiah had a character-flaw which the Lord intended to temper through the delegation of Merodach-Baladan!

## The Character of Hezekiah Revealed

2 Chronicles 32:24-25, “In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill; and he prayed to the Lord, and the Lord spoke to him and gave him a sign. But Hezekiah gave no return for the benefit he received, because his heart was proud; therefore wrath came on him and on Judah and Jerusalem.”

Evidently following his healing, Hezekiah turned his back on God! How so? How is it that this man who beheld the power and blessings of the Lord so dramatically could forsake the Lord in this way? The text indicates that Hezekiah’s rebellion was all on account of his sinful pride!

*Yes, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the awesome God had personally visited Hezekiah and healed him. But that was nothing in comparison to the fact that a powerful king like Merodach-Baladan had heard of him!*

Evidently pride was Hezekiah’s “Achilles Heel” and it was this sin which God deigned to reveal here.

2 Chronicles 32:31, "And even *in the matter of* the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, God left him *alone only* to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart."

Understand that the test here was given NOT to trip up the king, BUT to reveal Hezekiah's character- both to himself and to us! Truly, though Hezekiah was a man of God in so many respects, nevertheless he was still a sinner, and so unworthy of God's deliverances!

Did you get that? It is tempting to conclude that:

- The reason David was blessed and Saul was cursed is because they deserved such from the Lord. This is not so! David's wise choices sprung not from his intelligence, but from the grace of God working in the man.
- So it was with Hezekiah. At his best Hezekiah was a sinner whose righteousness remained "as filthy rags" before the Lord (cf. Isaiah 64:6). OUR TEXT DEMONSTRATES THIS.

Now though Hezekiah quickly repented (cf. 2 Chronicles 32:26) nevertheless we behold the wonder of grace. God acted on behalf of Judah delivering them from the Assyrians not on account of the king's or the nation's righteousness, but on account of His own good pleasure.

Deuteronomy 9:6, "Know, then, *it is* not because of your righteousness *that* the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people."

The curse that arises when we make "flesh our strength"? Place your trust in...

- A leader.
- A president.
- A husband.
- A parent.
- An elder/deacon.
- A job.
- A bank account.
- Or any other created thing!

I can say this with certainty- you always will be let down! The fear of man brings a snare! In fact, if there were any doubts at this point, notice how this text ends.

### **The Consequence of Hezekiah's Rebellion**

Isaiah 39:5-7, "Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord of hosts, "Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left," says the Lord. "And *some* of your sons who shall issue from you, whom you shall beget, shall be taken away; and they shall become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.'"

There is an obvious link between what Hezekiah did with regard to the emissaries from Babylon and the curse pronounced here by Isaiah. Hezekiah showed the Babylonians everything in his palace. Isaiah responded with, "Then everything in your palace must go!" Hezekiah delighted in the knowledge that he himself was known in Babylon. Isaiah responded with, "Then to Babylon the nation shall go!"- *You love Babylon? That's the future home of God's people on account of your rebellion!* What a sober prophecy under which Hezekiah was humbled- *I'm so glad we placed our trust in him!*

Isaiah 39:8, "Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'For there will be peace and truth in my days.'"

Commentators are divided over the proper interpretation of this passage. Is Hezekiah here responding as a man of faith?- *God is sovereign and His way good! As the Lord has spoken, so be it! And for the sake of God's people, praise the Lord that the ill prophesied here by Isaiah is still a long way off.* Or is he being selfish? *Whew! I dodged a bullet on this one. Praise God that I don't have to live through the mess my sin has brought upon Judah!*

I can see both sides. We know Hezekiah is a man of God, by and large a faithful servant of Christ. Yet he's also a sinner and therefore not above the ungodly response represented here. So which is it? The answer can be found in the literary structure of this book! Notice that the literary scheme of Isaiah 1-39 lays emphasis on Hezekiah's short-coming as a leader. For example, notice how the very next section begins, written for the people of God in exile:

Isaiah 40:1, "'Comfort, O comfort My people,' says your God."

The contrast and so message couldn't be clearer. The only comfort that can be found in this life is the Person and work of Christ! If we ever are tempted to place our trust in man or any created thing, Isaiah 38-39 ought to remind us that this is folly- even when it comes to a godly man! Yet there is more which indicates that Isaiah 39:8 is a record of Hezekiah's sin and not his godliness. Notice that the three historical accounts of Isaiah 1-39 are Chiastic, Isaiah placed these crises in this section for a reason. I want you to think of a stage and the scene of Isaiah 7- "the conduit of the upper pool" (v. 3). Now the next 30 or so chapters proclaim the sovereignty of God and then once Isaiah confronts us with the scene, "the conduit of the upper pool" (Isaiah 36:2). Recall that it was at this place that Rabshakeh spoke to the servants of Hezekiah. There is no question that Isaiah's/God's intent here was to remind his "viewers" in Isaiah 36 of Ahaz's awful decision to trust man.

Yet Isaiah is not finished. Once again he reminds us of Ahaz in Isaiah 38-39 with the reference to the shadow of the sun receding up "the stairway of Ahaz" (Isaiah 38:8)! Truly, all three historical references in Isaiah 1-39 are linked by Isaiah. Why? Because once again they are Chiastic!

→ A Is. 7: Ahaz: The folly of Making Flesh our Strength!  
→ B Is. 36-37: Hezekiah: the Blessing of Trusting God!  
→ A<sup>1</sup> Is. 38-39: Hezekiah: The Folly of Making Flesh Our Strength!

Clearly, Isaiah not only says it, he shows it!



- *Trust God!*
- *Do not make flesh your strength!*
- *No matter how godly you may think an individual is, they always will let you down!*
- *Yet God will never let you down.*

We need to hear this message! For our tendency is to find godly examples (which is fine (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:1)). But then we take these godly examples and place our confidence and hope in them.

Family of God, listen again to Proverbs 29- it is not simply good advice.

Proverbs 29:25: “The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted.”

May God give us the grace to incarnate this calling!

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Again Isaiah 40-55 was written for those who would be taken into exile 75 years after Isaiah’s death. And Isaiah 56-66 was written to those who would return to Judah following the exile approximately 145 years after Isaiah’s death.

<sup>2</sup> The prayer of Hezekiah in our text resulted in an extension of his life by 15 years. He died in 686 B.C. Accordingly, the prayer must have been offered somewhere around 702/701 B.C.

<sup>3</sup> Family of God, let us be careful when it comes to our following the example of men and women of God. The call is NOT to follow them blindly, BUT to follow them as they follow Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:1). Hezekiah in his prayer is following Christ. Yet his thinking is all messed up. It was self-focused and self-centered revealing a heart of pride.

<sup>4</sup> In 701 when Assyria attacked Israel, the Egyptians came to the aid of the people of God. However, the Egyptians did very little to help Israel. In fact, after inflicting little if no harm to the Assyrian forces, Egypt abandoned Israel in their hour of greatest need. This of course was of the Lord who destroyed Assyria while Israel kept silent (cf. Exodus 14:14).

## Bibliography

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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## About the Preacher

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