

Lesson 19 Isaiah 38-39 Hezekiah's Fateful Choice

Introduction

What's going on with Hezekiah? Why is this story here? It is an intriguing narrative. Hezekiah, the good king, a son of David, displays some very human emotions and behaviors.

You can approach any Biblical narrative from three different perspectives. You can focus on the human experience. You can focus on the theological truths. Or you can focus on the literary significance. That's the wonderful depth of, sometimes deceptively, simple-looking Biblical narrative. All three of those perspectives stand out in this Hezekiah narrative. We can consider what we learn from Hezekiah the man: through his sickness, through his healing and through his interaction with the Babylonian emissaries. That's looking from the perspective of human experience. We can also consider what theological truths Isaiah wants to teach us through this particular story, truths about the nature of man and the sovereignty of God. That's the theological perspective. And we can ask, why this story in this particular place in this piece of literature? That's the literary perspective. It helps us recognize the art of the Bible, while also making sure we are following the author's lead in our interpretation of the other two perspectives of human experience and theological truth.

The Human Experience Angle

From the human experience angle, the contrast in this narrative with the previous narrative is one of the things that makes it so intriguing. Hezekiah is called a "good king" in the Biblical "Book of Kings." But it is never that simple. Human beings are never always good. Human beings are flawed. We don't want to whitewash Hezekiah in our interpretation. Isaiah certainly doesn't. There are going to be things in this narrative that don't sound right. We should think maybe that's the point. Hezekiah, though good, could never be the Messiah. We need a new kind of king. A king who can overcome the fallenness of humanity.

The Theological Truth Angle

The inadequacy of human kingship that comes out by looking at Hezekiah's personal experience is one of the major theological themes in this first major section of Isaiah that I have been calling, "The Book of the King." chapters 1-39. God's people are called to be righteous, but they cannot be righteous. They need a new kind of society led by a new kind of King. But no human king can fit the bill. God will judge humankind for wickedness and sin. And yet, God still offers a hope of salvation that comes through a son of David.

The Literary Significance Angle

From the literary perspective we have to ask, what's the relationship between the narrative about Hezekiah in 36-37, and our narrative of Hezekiah in 38-39? This narrative in chapters 36-37 would be a great place to end the Book of the King. We see the sovereignty of God. We see the inadequacy of Hezekiah. He is not the promised child from chapter 7. We shouldn't look to Hezekiah for salvation. But we should want to be like the Hezekiah, at least the Hezekiah in these chapters, you know, even while we look ahead to a more excellent new kind of king who will lead us into a new kind of society. We could end here. And maybe that is Isaiah's intention. We do not have an exact marker for where the Book of the King ends and the Book of the Servant begins. I can't decide whether our present narrative, chapters 38-39, ends the Book of the King or begins the Book of the Servant. That's why I'm calling this section, "a bridge." It connects both books.

We see it connecting back to what has come before. Hezekiah asked for a sign, which then occurs on a place called, "the stairway of Ahaz," and that's got to chapter 7, when Ahaz was told to ask for a sign. That's a wonderful, clear literary connection. We are supposed to be think of this father and son, good king-bad king. So we could view the story of the signs as a chiastic envelope of the main body of the Book of the King. So, the enveloping could begin with Ahaz in chapter 7, and end with Hezekiah in chapter 39, covering all four chapters of Hezekiah narrative here, at the end of the book. But we can also understand that enveloping to occur from chapter 7 through the first Hezekiah narrative, chapter 36-37, and then see the second narrative in chapters 38-39 as the introduction to

the Book of the Servant. If so, ending the Book of the King with a narrative about Hezekiah and starting the Book of the Servant with a narrative about Hezekiah makes a nice interleaving, or overlapping of the two books. And we do have to recognize that the end of the Hezekiah story in chapter 39 introduces the major threat of the Book of the Servant. Chapters 1-37 have occurred in the context of the Assyrian threat. Chapters 40-55 will occur in the context of a future Babylonian threat. This second narrative about Hezekiah foreshadows the future Babylonian threat. In fact, the words, “Comfort, O comfort my people,” in 40:1 do not make much sense separated from the prophecy of exile at the end of chapter 39. What do they need comforting from? They need comforting from this prophetic reality that they are all going to go into exile. Chapter 40 is a response to the prophecy at the end of 39. It is why God’s people need comforting.

So, chapters 38-39 are a bridge, connecting both backward with Ahaz and forward with Babylon. In the structure chart on the website at observetheword.com, I have left chapters 38-39 in the Book of the King as a bridge, almost as an epilogue. That’s my one major departure in the overall structure from Alec Motyer. He places these chapters as the introduction to the Book of the Servant. I left them at the end of the Book of the King because they really are a transitional bridge and could fit in either place. And because Isaiah is almost always divided by scholars at chapters 39 and 40, I thought it best to go with the traditional division.

The Structure of 38 and 39



Alec Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (InterVarsity Press, 1996).
*Motyer views 38 and 39 as preface to the Book of the Servant.

That is our literary overview. When we recognize the structure, we see that these chapters play an important part from a literary perspective, an important part from a theological perspective, and an important part from the human perspective. Now to the text. I’ll divide our narrative into four parts, using Motyer’s titles, Hezekiah’s Illness, Hezekiah’s Psalm, Hezekiah’s Healing, and the Moment of Decision.

Bridge: Hezekiah’s Fateful Choice (Isaiah 38-39)

Hezekiah’s Illness (38:1-8)

The narrative begins with Hezekiah’s illness. Isaiah 38:1-8.

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.’” ² Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, ³ and said, “Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. ⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah, saying, ⁵ “Go and say to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶ “I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city.”’ ⁷ “This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that He has spoken: ⁸ “Behold, I will cause the shadow on the stairway, which has gone down with the sun on the stairway of Ahaz, to go back ten steps.” So the sun’s *shadow* went back ten steps on the stairway on which it had gone down.

How would you feel if today you received that word from God, “Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.”? Two details give us a sense of what Hezekiah is feeling. The first thing he did was turn his face to the wall. What does that communicate to you? Why would you turn your face to the wall? Does he not want anyone to see his emotion? Or does he feel despondent? Have you ever turned in your bed to the wall? What feeling does that communicate?

If we’re not sure what Hezekiah is feeling, the second detail is more direct. After praying, Hezekiah wept bitterly. So if that’s what you thought the turning to the wall meant, that it had been some kind of despondence or depression, you’re right. That picture evokes emotion in us of turning to the wall, but we get directly: it was in bitterness. The news of his death is a stomach punch. He does not take it with serenity, or stoicism, or faithful acceptance. He seems to feel betrayed. He pleads with God, reminding Him of all the good he has done. “Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” You know, it’s like a bartering with God. “God, you owe me, remember? I’ve been good. How can you let me die now?”

We see here what seems to be God changing His mind, maybe even going back on His word. He told Hezekiah he would surely die. Then he told Hezekiah, “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life.” We might notice God never said when Hezekiah would die. He told him he would die, and he will. It’s just not going to be for another 15 years.

That’s true, God doesn’t say it, but that solution does not really get to what is going on here. Verbal communication often comes with unspoken implications or conditionals. Hezekiah rightly understood that when God said, “Get your house in order for you shall die,” God meant that with the unspoken, “You shall die soon.” That’s why you need to get your house in order.

I believe there is also an unspoken condition; one that Hezekiah could be sure about, because God left it unspoken. God said, “Get your house in order for you shall die,” without including the unspoken condition, “unless you pray to me sincerely, seek me from your heart, and request life. If you do that, I will give you another 15 years.” We can always assume that there might be an unspoken condition when God declares judgment. For example, we can always repent and pray, and it may be that God plans to relent if we repent and pray. It doesn’t mean for sure the unspoken condition is there. God is not saying to everybody, “If you pray, I will heal you.” We may be ill and it may be that God has decided it is time for us to go home and be with Him. We may ask for more life, and He may say, “No. Now is your time. When I said you will surely die, I meant now, unqualified.” But we are always welcome to pray and ask for life. And it may or may not be granted. We don’t know what else is in the mind of God, the wisdom of God.

God was ready to heal Hezekiah, but He did not tell him that in the beginning. Why not? Why would God not tell Hezekiah? He just says, “You’re going to die.” Why doesn’t it say, “But if you really believe and pray to me, you’ll live”? Why doesn’t God say that? Well, because if He says it, then of course Hezekiah is going to do it. But it’s going to be going through a religious formula to get life. I think God doesn’t say it because He wants it to come from the heart. He wants Hezekiah to seek God in his suffering. And that is so often true for us. God doesn’t tell us how things are going to turn out, because our suffering become a testing place to burn off dross, to burn away the things that don’t matter, so that we are left with the gold of our relationship with God and our faith in God. Now, what kind of faith is required that God would then relent and heal?

If a high level of dependence and insight, control and courage is necessary for deliverance, for healing, Hezekiah’s prayer would not have been received, I’m convinced. This is not super-spiritual prayer. This is very emotional, human, hurt, despondent prayer. He was bitter. And he gave in to the impulse to remind God of all his good merit, as if that would prove he deserved more life. This is not a spiritually heroic prayer. This is not the three young man thrown in the fiery furnace, who say, “You know, our God can save us but if He doesn’t, He is still God. You know, whatever. We are ready to die, we are ready to live.” That’s not Hezekiah here.

I am not trying to beat down on Hezekiah. I am sure I would not have responded any better to the news that I only had a short time to get my affairs in order and say my goodbyes. I would certainly have turned to the wall and groaned bitterly. I imagine I would be tempted to remind God of how much I have given up for Him and how important it is for my girls that they have a father - "God, my children need a father!" - how much Brenda would miss me; my mom should not have to see her son die first. I could make quite a list. I am not down on Hezekiah. I think he sounds very human. But I don't think that humanness impresses God so much that it causes God to change His mind.

Hezekiah does not change God's mind through the argument of a good life. But God did see what He wanted to see. God saw what He was looking for. I believe He saw sincerity and honesty; the interaction of real relationship. Hezekiah was not just going through the motions of ritual prayer. He spoke to God, believing God is real. He believed God's prophet when he told him he would die. He believed that word. And he believed God could do something about it. And we know Hezekiah prayed with sincerity because God answered the prayer. I've talked about that a lot in the podcast. We can't always know what exactly is in the heart of a person. We didn't really know what was in Ahaz' heart when he said, "Oh, far from me to ask for a sign!" But the response of God through His prophet Isaiah showed us the hypocrisy of Ahaz. And in the same way, we don't really know if Hezekiah's prayer just a formula to try to move God, or if Hezekiah really interacting out of a sincere heart in sincere belief, even in his weakness. How do we know that? Well, we know it because of how God responds. God sees and judges the heart and so we know there was something sincere and pleasing to God in Hezekiah's prayer.

God's answer adds 15 years to Hezekiah's life. That puts this prayer right around the time of Sennacherib's invasion in 701 BC. God also promises in verse 6, "I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city." Did you catch that? That's interesting because God already did that. That was chapters 36-37. Sennacherib's army is wiped out. He has gone back to Assyria. The city is not threatened anymore from Assyria. And it's not going to be significantly threatened by Assyria in Hezekiah's lifetime. The two narratives are not in chronological order. The city has not yet been delivered. That's interesting.

Why would an author switch the order of events? I assume it has to do with the theological points that he is making with the stories. He is using the stories as illustrations to make points. In the Lord of History section, six woes showed us unfaithful Judah depending on treaty with Egypt ahead of their covenant with God. The narrative of invasion and deliverance is a great illustration of repentance and faith that gives emphasis to God's faithfulness and God's power to save, God's sovereignty over super-powers like Assyria. So that was a great narrative to end that section with.

Our present narrative works better as a bridge between the Book of the King and the Book of the Servant. The story of sickness and healing links us back to Ahaz and the visit of the Babylonians foreshadows the next major threat. That is why these stories are switched.

Recognizing that the order is switched does make me wonder how this sickness fit into Hezekiah's period of weakness leading up to the invasion of Sennacherib. We just don't know a lot about what Hezekiah was thinking and feeling in turning to trust in Egypt and how much he was involved in that. Isaiah's prophecy and the woes don't get into Hezekiah's state of heart. This sickness may have been a work in Hezekiah's life to turn him back to faithful dependence on God.

It's very interesting what Hezekiah prays. He prays as though he is reminding God of three things. "I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart and have done what is good in Your sight." That's a great way of life, to walk for God, in truth, with the whole heart, and to do what is good according to God: good in God's sight. Hezekiah thinks he is reminding God. I think God allowed the sickness so that Hezekiah would be forced to remind himself. Assyria has invaded. Hezekiah's counselors have put trust in treaty with Egypt. It is Hezekiah, not God, who needs to remember to walk in truth and with a whole heart and to do what is good in God's sight.

That's often the way of prayer in times of suffering. We may start by crying out to God in bitterness. But if we persevere in that honest lament, truly seeking God, we start reminding ourselves of truth. And at some point – and at some point, and this may take a lot of time - but as we go through the emotions, our eyes are lifted off our own trials and we truly see God in a new way. We see God through the lens of suffering. And over time we begin to see our reality from His eyes with a new perspective.

That's what I think is happening to Hezekiah. This experience is going to have a real effect on him. It is not going to be final. He is going to have to be broken again during the siege of Jerusalem. Still, this breaking through the sickness, is a real part of the process. God caused Hezekiah to fall ill because Hezekiah needed to be shaken, so that he might remember his former commitment to God and see things again from God's perspective.

Hezekiah is given a sign, just as his father Ahaz had been given a sign. For Hezekiah, the sign is a miracle of sunlight moving backwards. Ahaz failed to trust in God's offer of a sign. He pretended sincerity. Hezekiah has communicated to God honestly and sincerely. We need to see where that is going to take Hezekiah. How does this experience: the miracle of his healing and the miracle of the sign help him as he continues his walk with God?

Before we get to that, the next story in his life, we have a very special opportunity of hearing from Hezekiah himself about his sickness and healing. Hezekiah wrote a Psalm as a testimony to God. And Isaiah included it here in the narrative. This is fascinating, it's wonderful. We get to kind of see into his heart.

Hezekiah's Psalm (38:9-20)

The Psalm is reminiscent of some of David's Psalms that gave witness to specific, identifiable experiences. As is typical in a lament, the Psalm moves from complaint, to request, to trust and a sense of assurance.

Complaint (9-14)

The first half of the Psalm communicates Hezekiah's complaint. This is an expression of how Hezekiah felt when he was first told he would die, when he turned his face to the wall and wept bitterly. Isaiah 38:9-14.

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

¹⁰ I said, "In the middle of my life I am to go.	To the gates of Sheol, I am to be deprived of the rest of my years."
¹¹ I said, "I will not see the LORD, in the land of the living;	I will look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world.
¹² "My dwelling is pulled up and removed from me; As a weaver I rolled up my life.	like a shepherd's tent. He cuts me off from the loom;
	From day until night You make an end of me.
¹³ "I composed <i>my soul</i> until morning. From day until night You make an end of me.	Like a lion—so He breaks all my bones,
¹⁴ "Like a swallow, <i>like</i> a crane, so I twitter; My eyes look wistfully to the heights;	I moan like a dove; O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.

Hezekiah feels wronged. "I am to be deprived of the rest of my years." He is about 40 years old. Being told to put his house in order applies both to his family and to his role as king. His family relationships are ending. His kingship is being removed.

Hezekiah does not look forward to Heaven. His focus is very much on his present earthly reality. Now, Sheol does not carry the same connotation as either Heaven or Hell. It is simply the place of death. Hezekiah is mourning the opportunity he could still have in life. He mourns lost experiences. He has more to do for God. He can be a better king. This is a very Old-Covenant believer perspective.

Hezekiah does not say that he will never see the Lord again. He says he will not see the Lord again in the land of the living, in the present earthly reality. And Old Covenant teaching focuses on the importance of relating to God and serving God on earth. The focus is on the physical, present kingdom of Israel. Heaven is not emphasized in the Old Testament. It would be wrong to say that Old Testament believers had no sense of a spiritual restoration that comes after death. Hebrews 11:10 tells us Abraham was comforted by looking forward to “the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Isaiah has spoken of a future renewed Zion. Still, those future prophecies of Heaven are not frequent in the Old Testament, they are not very clear, and they are not the emphasis. In some truths God holds back. This is the idea of progressive revelation. Not all truths are communicated in the Old Covenant. It’s certainly true about Jesus. It is not all made known. Some things are hinted at in the Law of Moses, suggested in the prophets, and then clarified in the New Covenant.

Hezekiah is not denying life with God after death. He is communicating the typical Old Covenant emphasis on experiencing God in the present, earthly reality. And by the way, that’s not an emphasis we are supposed to lose in the New Covenant. We are supposed to maintain that sense of purposefulness as representatives of God’s Kingdom on Earth. We are to be His witnesses in our families and communities as long as we live. Death is a loss. As New Covenant believers, we add on a more developed sense of the fulfillment that comes in the eternal Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. Death is a homecoming.

Hezekiah despondency is very human, very easy to relate to. He artfully expresses his sense of life’s abrupt finality in the two images of verse 12.

¹² “My dwelling is pulled up and removed from me; like a shepherd’s tent.

That his dwelling is pulled up and removed communicates the belief that this is something being done to him: this is not of his own choosing. The removal of a shepherd’s tent is the removal of something semi-permanent. It was in place just long enough to get used to as the sheep eat all the grass in the area, but then abruptly, when the grass is gone, that tent is taken down and moved. That’s how Hezekiah feels about the end of his life.

He brings out that semi-permanence again with the image of a weaver who has been working for some time on a roll of cloth, just long enough to get used to what he is doing, but then he is done. He roles the cloth up, cuts off the threads, and moves on.

As a weaver I rolled up my life. He cuts me off from the loom;
From day until night You make an end of me.

With the semi-permanence you also get what is being done to him. So instead of the weaver cutting of the threads, “He cuts me off from the loom.” God is doing this. According to Motyer, “From day until night,” means “Before the day is out.” “Before the day is out you make an end of me.”

Verse 13 emphasizes God is the cause of suffering.

¹³ “I composed *my soul* until morning. Like a lion—so He breaks all my bones,
From day until night You make an end of me.

Commentators have trouble with the phrase, “I composed my soul.” Motyer thinks Hezekiah tried to be composed and at peace but was in such anguish he could not. Oswalt and Alter both translate the phrase as, “I cried out until morning.” So, he is not trying to be composed. Either way, the reference to a lion gnawing on you all the way to the point of cracking your bones to lick out the marrow is an intense image of emotional agony. You can imagine Hezekiah crying out, “God, why are you doing this to me?!”

The complaint section ends with verse 14. Hezekiah was not able to compose himself. His prayer was like the warbling of a bird, feeble and inconsistent. You can imagine him groaning at the news of his death when he turned to face the wall.

¹⁴ “Like a swallow, *like* a crane, so I twitter; I moan like a dove;

14b gives us the beginnings of a changed perspective. In his moaning, Hezekiah says, “My eyes look wistfully to the heights.” Combined with the imagery of the birds, we can take this looking to the heights as a longing to fly again, a longing to be healthy and alive, with a future on Earth. But then he goes on to say, “O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.” So, looking up to the heights of what he has lost, he sees God. Seeing God, he makes his request. “O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.”

Request and Assurance (15-20)

This request signals a shift in the Psalm. In the rest of the Psalm, Hezekiah moves from complaint to request and then to assurance in God’s willingness to save. Isaiah 38:15-20.

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| <p>15 “What shall I say? For He has spoken to me,
and He Himself has done it;</p> <p>16 “O Lord, by <i>these things men</i> live,
O restore me to health and let me live!</p> <p>17 “Lo, for <i>my own</i> welfare I had great bitterness;

For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.

Those who go down to the pit</p> <p>19 “It is the living who give thanks to You,
A father tells his sons about</p> <p>20 “The LORD will surely save me;
All <i>the</i> days of our life</p> | <p>I will wander about all my years because of
the bitterness of my soul.</p> <p>And in all these is the life of my spirit;</p> <p>It is You who has kept my soul from the pit
of nothingness,</p> <p>18 “For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot
praise You;
cannot hope for Your faithfulness.
as I do today;
Your faithfulness.</p> <p>So we will play my songs on stringed instruments
at the house of the LORD.”</p> |
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Verses 15 and 16 are difficult to translate. It’s not clear whether Hezekiah has turned the corner and is making a statement of trust, or whether he still feels the bitterness of his illness. We have to make a decision in the first verset of 15. “What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it.” It is clear who has spoken: God has spoken, but what has God done? If Hezekiah is referring to his illness, then he is acknowledging God as the source of his coming death. That’s what God has done. God has made him terminally ill. The next verse is an overstatement since he does not have years to live, but he expects the rest of his days to be full of bitterness. If we continue this line of interpretation, the phrase, “by these things men live,” in verse 16 is an expression of resignation. Men live by the will of God. In God’s hands is the life of my spirit, whether good or bad. That is just the way it is. If that’s the right interpretation, 15 and 16 continue the twittering and moaning described in verse 14 and we do not turn from the complaint until the end of verse 16.

A second interpretation takes 15 and 16 as having already turned the corner towards request and trust. The “he himself has done it” could be the healing or the assurance of healing. Instead of “God has made me sick,” Hezekiah might be saying, “God has returned my health.” The next verset, instead of “wandering about all my years,” could be translated, “I will walk humbly.” He is not walking the rest of his years in bitterness, but because of this experience of bitterness, which ended with God’s deliverance, he now has a new perspective of humility. He expects to come out a changed man. “By these things men live” in verse 16 would, then, be a commendation to the type of experience Hezekiah has had in his prayer. We live by turning to God when we suffer, by lamentation, by pouring ourselves out sincerely until we are able to move through the trial and see God from a new perspective.

Whichever way we take these two verses, the more negative or the more positive, the last verset is clear. “O restore me to health and let me live!” That’s definitely request.

Verses 17-19 express deliverance. Hezekiah has not yet been healed. He will say in verse 20, “The Lord will surely save me.” The healing is still future. Lament psalms are usually written after the Psalmist has passed through the process of grief and has arrived at a place of assurance, but hasn’t yet seen the deliverance. Sometimes, that assurance is expressed in the present, making it sound like the deliverance has already taken place but that is to emphasize how sure the Psalmist is that the

deliverance will take place. In a sense it has. God said Hezekiah would live another 15 years. He may still be sick, but trusting in the word of God, he believes he will surely be delivered.

At the time of writing this Psalm, Hezekiah has already been saved from his pit of bitterness. That happened before the healing. He has come out of his depression and he believes God will surely heal. Verses 17-19.

<p>¹⁷ “Lo, for <i>my own</i> welfare I had great bitterness; For You have cast all my sins behind Your back. Those who go down to the pit</p>	<p>It is You who has kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, ¹⁸ “For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; cannot hope for Your faithfulness. as I do today; Your faithfulness.</p>
<p>¹⁹ “It is the living who give thanks to You, A father tells his sons about</p>	

The purpose of Hezekiah’s healing is that he might praise God among the living, that he might be a witness to the next generation. That is not an argument to God for why Hezekiah should be healed. This is Hezekiah recognizing, again, those three things he tried to remind God of, “I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” Hezekiah is being healed so that he’ll have another chance to continue living like that. He has recognized that his sin had become a barrier between him and God. He does not tell us what sin specifically. Maybe it included trusting his counselors who made covenant with Egypt. We do not know. But he does say that whatever those sins are, God has thrust them behind His back. God has dealt with them. God has put them out of sight. His sins are no longer between him and God. His sins have been cast behind God. Now Hezekiah can, again, walk in truth with a whole heart by giving thanks to God and testifying to the next generation.

Verse 20 brings together Hezekiah’s assurance of salvation from death and commitment to live a life of praise.

<p>²⁰ “The LORD will surely save me; All <i>the</i> days of our life</p>	<p>So we will play my songs on stringed instruments at the house of the LORD.”</p>
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I don’t know how much Psalm-writing Hezekiah did before his illness, but he is ready to do some now. The Psalm itself is proof that Hezekiah intends to carry out his promise to praise God. He has put to words his experience, not holding back his initial despondency and grief. This is not just a happy song of praise. It takes us from the initial bitterness to an assurance in God. In the end, Hezekiah’s response to God’s grace is praise. And so, he wrote down a song for everyone to sing about his own experience of God’s faithfulness.

Hezekiah’s Healing (38:21-22)

The first section was Hezekiah’s sickness. The second was Hezekiah’s Psalm. The third is Hezekiah’s healing. This is just two verses, and these two verses focus us back on Hezekiah’s healing. In verse 22 Hezekiah oddly asks for a sign, even though he already received the sign of the shadow moving backwards on the stairs.

²¹ Now Isaiah had said, “Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover.” ²² Then Hezekiah had said, “What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?”

This whole story of Hezekiah’s sickness told here in Isaiah is also told in 2 Kings 20. That passage does not include Hezekiah’s hymn. And these verses of the cake of figs and request for a sign to come after the promise of healing are put before the sign of the shadow going backwards. That would be between our earlier verses 6 and 7.

A lot of commentators assume this is a mistake in Isaiah’s text, or that a scribe came later and added these two verses to bring the story more in line with 2 Kings 20. They reason the scribe would have put the verses at the end, so as not to change Isaiah’s version.

Motyer believes Isaiah intentionally shifted this part of the story after the Psalm to make a point. I agree with Motyer. When you see weird things in the narrative of the Bible, it's so often intentional. Isaiah is not saying these two things happened in this order: after the sign had been given. He is referring back to something he left out of the story. My NASB translation uses the past perfect tense to indicate an action that had already been completed in the past.

²¹ Now Isaiah *had said*, "Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover." ²² Then Hezekiah *had said*, "What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?"

I think that's the right way to understand this. These events occurred earlier, but Isaiah wants to bring them to our attention before he transitions on to the next episode in our narrative. The cake of figs was an outward sign of faith. Figs could not heal a terminal sickness. But when God tells you to do something, you do it, and that's an expression of faith.

Hezekiah had then asked for a sign. Isaiah's word should have been enough for Hezekiah. "You will be healed. Apply a cake of figs and trust God." Hezekiah wants more confirmation. God does not always appreciate being pressed for a sign. His word should be enough. God also understands our weakness. He sees a positive desire in the heart of Hezekiah and decides to give Hezekiah a sign.

And as we have said, that request for a sign reminds us of Ahaz. Isaiah wants us to make this connection before we move on. Ahaz had been offered a sign. He pretended to be spiritual, but God could tell he was being hypocritical. Hezekiah now asks for a sign. In that, he does better than his father. God sees his heart and approves.

Hezekiah has done well, trusting God for the sign and trusting God for healing. He has done well in his response, writing a Psalm as a witness to the faithfulness of God. Hezekiah has shown himself to have greater quality than his father. How will that translate into his performance as king? He started great at the beginning of his reign, but got side-tracked. He has gotten back on track now after the healing, and looks to be doing well. Will he persevere in that?

Let's see how he does when an emissary comes from Babylon. This is the final section in our narrative, The Moment of Decision, Isaiah 39:1-8.

The Moment of Decision (39:1-8)

¹ 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. ² Hezekiah was pleased, and showed them *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. ³ Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah and said to him, "What did these men say, and from where have they come to you?" And Hezekiah said, "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon." ⁴ He said, "What have they seen in your house?" So Hezekiah answered, "They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasuries that I have not shown them." ⁵ Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD of hosts, ⁶ '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 will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the LORD. ⁷ 'And *some* of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.' " 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."

Hezekiah appears very proud in the opportunity to show off his wealth. The text does not tell us directly that Hezekiah is acting out of pride. Again, it is typical of Biblical narrative to not tell us what is going on inside a person's heart, but we have to get it from the context. And you get that feeling. It's similar to visiting a little kid's house and he wants to show you all his Legos he has put together, and every trophy he has gotten, and his science project, and all his drawings, and his motorized car, and his new helicopter drone. He is trying to impress, or to show off. One thing is fine. Two things are

fine. That's normal enthusiasm when you have a visitor. But Isaiah emphasizes how much Hezekiah puts on display for his visitors. "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." That really sounds like showing off, a desire to look good in front of these emissaries. And when Isaiah asks about it, the "all" is emphasized again, "They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasuries that I have not shown them."

Hezekiah's pride got the better of him. The emissary from Merodach-Baladan has stirred up his vanity. He is driven to impress the emissaries of such an ancient court as Babylon that he is no minor regional king. He shows off. And in doing so he acts unwisely as a king, revealing way too much information about his wealth and dominion to this foreign power.

This is the kind of heart attitude that quickly leads away from dependence on God to dependence on self and on worldly power. God responds to Hezekiah's ill behavior with a prophecy of doom.

⁶ '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 will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the LORD. ⁷ 'And some of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.' "

Again, the "all" is used to reveal Hezekiah's pride. As he had shown all to the Babylonians, the Babylonians will come one day and carry all that is left to Babylon. Faced with a decision about whether to trust in God or whether to court worldly power, Hezekiah, again, has stepped off course.

I do not think the curse, the penalty of exile is a direct consequence of Hezekiah's pride. But Hezekiah's pride is not going to help stop the inevitable decline of Judah. Exile will be a consequence of a faithless and immoral Judah, exemplified by Hezekiah's son Manasseh. Manasseh's behavior is going to mark the point of no return. That's the word given in 2 Kings 21:11–13.

¹¹ "Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who were before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; ¹² therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am bringing such calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears will tingle. ¹³ 'I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.

That image sounds like something Isaiah might write. Instead of just saying that Jerusalem will be destroyed, he says, "God will wipe it like a dish, turning it upside down." That's a promise of exile, a cleansing of the land from the sins of Judah, just like the land had been cleansed before from the sins of the Amorites.

The pride of Hezekiah does not cause the exile. But the prophecy of exile given to Hezekiah during a moment of pride with a foreign emissary is meant to remind Hezekiah of the critical need for spiritual dependence. Every generation is in danger of turning away. And when enough turning away has filled the land with oppression, injustice, and immorality, God will wipe it clean. Hezekiah may not be the cause, but his foot has just moved in that direction.

Hezekiah responds 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.'" How do you feel about that response? "The word of the Lord is good. There will be peace and truth in my days."

Some commentators interpret Hezekiah's statement as an act of submission to the will of God. I think that works with the first half. "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." When God speaks blessing, it's good. When God speaks judgment, it is good. It is the will of God. It is good. But I have trouble reconciling Hezekiah's thoughts with an attitude of faith. "For he thought, 'For there will be peace and truth in my days.'" It's not, "For he thought, 'God is good in suffering and in blessing.'" It's, he thought about his own days, not about future days. Well, yes, Hezekiah, there will

be peace and truth in your day, but what about the days of the next generation, or the generation after that? This statement sounds at odds with the ending of his Psalm. He said,

¹⁹ “It is the living who give thanks to You, as I do today;
A father tells his sons about Your faithfulness.

That sounds like care for the next generation. Hezekiah’s thoughts sound self-centered. I believe Isaiah’s intention here is not to leave us with the picture of faithful Hezekiah, but to leave us with the reality of Hezekiah’s spiritual weakness.

And it’s not the end of Hezekiah’s personal story. Merodach-Baladan is the Babylonian king who just would never die. He was defeated by Sargon, but never captured. He was defeated by Sennacherib in 703 before Sennacherib turned towards Judah. He was not captured. He keeps raising up armies. This emissary from Merodach-Baladan could have come when he was still in Babylon in 703, before Sennacherib put him down. Or he could have come after he had fled and raised up another army. Either way, he would have still considered himself king of Babylon. But again, that goes with this story happening together with the sickness before the deliverance of Jerusalem. So even if Hezekiah has had another moment of weakness here in interacting with Babylonians, he is going to show his quality later when he trusts God for deliverance from Sennacherib. Like with all of us, Hezekiah’s life map reveals spiritual ups and downs. He began his reign full of faith, initiating widespread spiritual reform. You know, go, Hezekiah! He became sidetracked by the Assyrian threat, forgetting his dependence on God, turning to Egypt for security. We are disappointed in Hezekiah. But as Assyria threatens, he became seriously ill. During that illness, he experiences God removing a barrier of sin and he rededicates himself to a life of thanksgiving. He experienced two miracles – his healing and the Sun going backwards. His heart was sincere, but not strong enough to persevere. When an emissary comes from Babylon, he is tempted by worldly pride to make a good impression, probably also considering help from Babylon without consulting God. He is rebuked with a prophecy of doom, but in that rebuke, he shows the present threat of Assyria to dominate his thoughts and desires. He hears the word, “You are going to have peace. You are going to be rescued from the threat.” But he doesn’t have sympathy for future generations. The Babylonians leave. Sennacherib marches into Judah, capturing 46 fortified towns, laying siege to the second largest Judean city Lachish. This national crisis creates another spiritual crisis for Hezekiah. He responds by calling on God. He lays himself out in the Temple. He prays. He trusts Isaiah. He does well. He is able to enjoy God’s promised deliverance of Jerusalem and years of rest and security for Judah.

That’s the way I think the story should be told if we did it in order. Our last report of Hezekiah would be the positive one of trust and deliverance. Isaiah has not told the stories in order. So, we end here with a reminder of Hezekiah’s spiritual weakness and a prophecy of persistent faithlessness by Judah that is going to end in exile to Babylon.

Conclusion

Hezekiah does let us down here. And that’s very human. In fact, it’s a guarantee. There can be no true Camelot, no ideal city, no perfect king, president, prime minister, government. A righteous Zion is not possible while human beings still govern. Human leaders stumble.

We end the Book of the King with that truth. Hezekiah is a son of David, a good son of David as far as sons of David go. But he is not the promised child. He is not the divine King. As we turn next to the Book of the Servant, we are left with some pretty big unanswered questions. Who will this divine king be? When will He come? And how will He save a people so intent on turning to their own way? In our next lesson we turn to the Book of the Servant.