

## *Grace for the Weak*

Isaiah 38:1-22

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This morning in Isaiah 38:1-22, we are going to cover another one of Hezekiah's prayers. The events in Isaiah 38 actually occurred before Isaiah 36-37. So, it can be a bit confusing.

Isaiah was not trying to be chronologically accurate when he included the account of Hezekiah's prayer. Isaiah's goal was to give a record of God's power and mercy that He shows to His people who love and trust Him. He wants us to know that when we are stunned by bad news in our lives, we can go to our gracious God in prayer, and He will provide grace to the weak.

Last Sunday, we saw how Hezekiah led the nation of Judah to trust God even when there was no hope of winning the battle with Assyria. He went to the temple and laid out the bad news before the Lord in prayer. Then God did something amazing and saved His people because Hezekiah turned to Him in faith.

But, before Hezekiah humbled himself to ask for the Lord to deliver Judah from Assyria, he first humbled himself and asked the Lord to heal him from his illness and preserve his life. Let me paint the picture of what is going on in Isaiah 38.

In Isaiah 38:1-3, we see that Hezekiah became very sick. Isaiah came to him and told him that his illness was terminal and that he would not recover. What he needed to do was get his house in order. In other words, prepare to die.

Friends, if you have ever received bad news in a medical report, then you know it can be crushing news. However, if you have never received a bad medical report, you need to be prepared because almost all of us one day will receive some crushing news. It will either be a report about your condition or about someone you dearly love. It will be very hard news to hear that may lead to very depressing days, weeks of sadness, months of grief, and perhaps even years that are dark. But, it does not have to be a medical report that is a gut punch. It might be some other kind of news that simply leaves you stunned and overwhelmed.

Verse 2 says that Hezekiah did the most natural thing that we should do when we receive bad news, and, in this case, it was the report that his illness was going to take his life. We should humble ourselves and go before the Lord.

Verse 2 says that Hezekiah *"set his face to the wall and prayed."* This phrase means he humbled himself. Then, in v. 3, we see that he begged the Lord to spare his life.

Look in v. 3:

*He said, "Please, Lord, remember how I have walked before you faithfully and wholeheartedly and have done what pleases you." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.*

Hezekiah began his prayer by pleading to the Lord that he had been faithful to Him. He pleaded his godly past to Yahweh.

Most likely, we would not begin our prayers by pleading our godliness to the Lord. However, the Bible does not hesitate to give us examples of people who prayed that way.

How should we consider Hezekiah's prayer and other prayers in the Bible where men and women plead their faithfulness to the Lord as a basis for hearing and answering that prayer?

First, let's think of Hezekiah's prayer in general. When it comes to prayers in the Bible, we should never take one prayer and try to make it some kind of prayer that is a *"silver bullet"* kind of prayer that always gets answered.

Some of you may remember that a few years ago, a writer wrote about the prayer of Jabez in the Bible and how it was a good prayer to pray. Then everyone began to pray the prayer of Jabez for themselves as if it was some kind of magic prayer that God always answers.

People focused on the prayer of Jabez to the exclusion of all other prayers in the Bible. People even neglected the model prayer that Jesus gave us. They prayed like Jabez instead of Jesus. That's not good.

Bottom line: We can learn some things from Hezekiah's prayer. However, his prayer is not some kind of magic prayer that means we will always get our way with God. Let's be clear about this right up front.

Second, and specifically, what about how he proclaimed his godliness to the Lord? There are many examples of people in the Old Testament who began their prayers by laying a foundation of their righteousness before the Lord. That was all they knew at that time. Now, in Christ, we have a fuller revelation that God hears our prayers and answer them.

Our righteousness is not the basis for our prayers being heard. Our prayers are heard based on Christ's righteousness. God hears our prayers on the basis of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not our godliness that bends God's ear; it is Jesus' godliness and holiness.

Bottom line: It is the blood of Christ that makes our prayers a sweet aroma to our Father in Heaven. On top of that, Jesus is also our Great High priest. He intercedes for us when we pray. Then the Holy Spirit helps us pray even when we do not know what to say and helps us pray according to the will of God.

So, when you pray, do not plead your righteousness to the Lord as a basis for being heard. Instead, plead the righteousness of Christ as the basis for God hearing your prayers. This is how the gospel shapes our prayer lives.

Verses 4-6 are incredibly revealing. On the surface, it seems like God simply told Isaiah to go back and tell Hezekiah He heard his prayer, and He was going to add 15 years to his life. It seems God saw his tears, heard his prayer, and then He changed His mind. But, there is more going on here. Listen to vv. 4-6 again:

*Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: <sup>5</sup> "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the Lord God of your ancestor David says: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Look, I am going to add fifteen years to your life.' <sup>6</sup> And I will rescue you and this city from the grasp of the king of Assyria; I will defend this city.*

First of all, the Lord had a superior promise that God intended to keep. This promise came in the form of a covenant He had made with King David. This covenant said that David would never lack a man on his throne. The problem was that Hezekiah did not yet have an heir. In other words, his house was not in order.

During the 15 years, the Lord added to Hezekiah's life; He gave him a son to be his heir, Manasseh. In a sense, for Hezekiah to get his house in order meant he needed an heir.

Second, by adding 15 years, it signaled to King Hezekiah that God was going to deliver Judah from the Assyrian threat. Remember, Judah had not yet been delivered from Assyria, but it was coming.

Finally, how should we think of the Lord's interaction with Hezekiah? Does God actually change His mind on things? How can God make sovereign plans and yet change His mind?

We should think of God's interaction with Hezekiah in the way Abraham interceded for Sodom in Genesis 18. Remember, the Lord revealed to Abraham that He was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Then Abraham prayed and asked the Lord not to destroy Sodom. Abraham said if there were 50 righteous people in Sodom, would you spare the city? He said He would. Then Abraham's prayers counted down by ten. Finally, he asked the Lord if he would not destroy it if there were ten righteous people in it, and He said He would not.

Brothers and sisters, we have a relationship with the Lord God. Our relationship with Him is dynamic, not static. He calls us to pray and seek Him and make our petitions before Him.

The Lord was teaching Hezekiah to trust Him. He was strengthening his weak faith. He taught Hezekiah that he could come to Him in prayer. We know the whole story and what we know was that Assyria kept inching closer to Jerusalem; Hezekiah was going to need to trust God and lead the people of God to trust God.

So, eventually, when the Rabshakeh made his blasphemous speech, Hezekiah knew that he could trust God. So, he went straight to the temple and laid it all out before the Lord as he fell on his face in prayer.

*Friends, we are in a relationship with the Lord. We are taught to pray without ceasing. We are called to pour out our hearts before the Lord. We are taught that in prayer, we are to make our requests known to God, who knows what we need, even before we ask. We are called to pray in faith that the Lord's will be done. We are called to trust that God is sovereign and has a plan and that our prayers are part of that sovereign plan. We are called to pray, believing the Lord will answer and act on our behalf. This is how we should pray.*

Next, in vv. 7-8, we see that Isaiah gave Hezekiah a sign to show him that God would keep His promise to him. The sign was that the shadow would go back 10 steps on the stairway of Ahaz.

The stairway of Ahaz most likely functioned as a sundial. Isaiah's account of the sign is abbreviated and simply says that the shadow would go back 10 steps. However, 2 Kings 20:9-11 gives a fuller account:

*Isaiah said, "This is the sign to you from the Lord that he will do what he has promised: Should the shadow go ahead ten steps or go back ten steps?"<sup>10</sup> Then Hezekiah answered, "It's easy for the shadow to lengthen ten steps. No, let the shadow go back ten steps."<sup>11</sup> So the prophet Isaiah called out to the Lord, and he brought the shadow back the ten steps it had descended on the stairway of Ahaz.*

We do not know how this happened. All we know is that the Lord did it, and it was a miraculous sign.

What is our takeaway? Our takeaway is that God's promises are so secure and dependable that He will move heaven and earth to make sure His word is fulfilled. *Just as we said together after God's word was read this morning: The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of our Lord endures forever.* God's promises are sure.

Next, we will look at Hezekiah's prayer in vv. 9-20. His prayer is a poem that he journaled after he had gotten well. We do not know how long it took for him to get well, but while it was miraculous it was not immediate.

According to v. 21, his healing took time and involved medicine. The people who attended him pressed a lump of figs into the boils on Hezekiah's skin. We are not told what his illness was, but most likely, he had leprosy.

Apparently, when Hezekiah was convinced that he was fully healed, he wrote a very candid poem as a prayer of faith and gratitude. I say candid because Hezekiah was crushed when he heard the news that he was going to die.

His prayer breaks down into three sections: *destruction, restoration, and devotion*. Let's walk through the prayer.

Destruction: (vv. 10-14) Here we see the news that brought crushed, Hezekiah. He was stunned by the news he would die. He basically said:

*I am deprived of life. I will never look upon the living again. My life is being folded up like someone folds up a towel. The sun is setting on my life. The Lord will devour me like a lion. My voice is so weak I chirp like a bird and moan like of dove. All I do is cry and plead with the Lord. He has crushed me. I am destroyed.*

Friends, let me encourage you to pour out your hearts to the Lord when you get news that crushes you. Don't wait until everything is better, like Hezekiah did in Isaiah 38. Just take what you know and do what he did in Isaiah 37—lay it all out before the Lord in prayer.

Yet, you have to love what Hezekiah wrote as he reflected on his illness and healing. He didn't try to make himself sound super spiritual. His prayer was honest and raw. He gave us a peek inside his heart as he wrestled with the news that simply left him stunned and in tears all night long.

King Hezekiah didn't write a poem that depicted himself as some kind of strong king. He teaches us how to be weak and how to humble ourselves before the Lord. He shows us that grace is for the weak.

Restoration: (vv. 15-19) Now, Hezekiah's lament of destruction is turned into a prayer of gratitude when he is restored. Again, he is stunned, but this time he is stunned that the Lord had shown him grace.

In v. 15, we see his transparency as he opens up about how he had changed:

*What can I say? He has spoken to me,  
and he himself has done it.  
I walk along slowly all my years  
because of the bitterness of my soul.*

Let me smooth out v. 15 for us. Here is a good rendering:

*What am I to say? He has spoken to me  
And He himself has healed me.  
On account of my bitter experience  
I will be careful how I live for the rest of my life.*

Hezekiah was a changed man. His experience humbled him. His healing was an act of God. Now, from this time forward, his experience is going to govern his future life.

In v. 16, Hezekiah reiterates how this experience has changed him.

*Lord, by such things people live,  
and in every one of them my spirit finds life;  
you have restored me to health and let me live.*

Finally, in v. 17, Hezekiah comes full circle when he says,

*"My bitter experience was worth it.  
Because it was for my good."*

His affliction has caused him to turn from his sin and turn to God in trust. He realized God had saved him and forgiven him his sin. His illness brought him to true faith in God.

Hezekiah's word sound like Psalm 119:71:

*It is good for me that I was afflicted,  
that I might learn your statutes.*

In the same manner, the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:28:

*We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who  
are called according to his purpose.*

Affliction that brings restoration is for our good. God's purpose for his people is always for restoration and a deeper relationship with Him. The Lord never destroys His people. We may suffer as all people will at some point, but our suffering always is for our good and His glory, and eventually, we are swallowed up by the weight of His glory. This is when our restoration will be fully complete and magnificently beautiful. Weeping may remain for a night, but the joy that comes in the morning will overwhelm the grief because Jesus will wipe away every tear.

Devotion (vv. 18-20). In vv. 18-19, Hezekiah confesses that it is not the dead who give glory to God but the living. Since the Lord saved his life, he will praise His name with those who worship Yahweh.

Then v. 20 ends on a high note of praise and moves from private praise to public worship. Now, the whole community of faith rejoiced in his healing and salvation. Look in v. 20:

*The Lord is ready to save me;  
we will play stringed instruments  
all the days of our lives  
at the house of the Lord.*

This is always how we want our bad news to end. Wouldn't it be great if every bad report ended with restoration and devotion? Friends, not every illness is going to be healed. Not everyone is going to be restored on this side of heaven. This is hard news for us, and it is painful. We are reminded that the world is broken when we see illnesses that end in death. No one wants that. Even Jesus grieves with us when we suffer, and that is why in His ultimate plan, He will restore all things for those who are His devoted children.

Friends, when bad news comes, be honest with the Lord Jesus. Lay it all out before Him. Pray for restoration and remain devoted to Him in faith. Trust Him, and when you are weak—don't pretend to be strong. Confess your weakness and call on Jesus to strengthen you and ask the body of Christ to lift you up before the Lord.

Now, let's consider the final two verses. Verses 20-21 seem to be out of sync with the rest of the narrative and even the poem. Remember, Hezekiah wrote his poem after he was healed.

So, vv. 21-22 actually occurred before he was healed. Remember, his healing was not instantaneous. It was divine and miraculous but not immediate.

Healings that occur in the Bible are often different, and each one is unique. Some healings take time, some are immediate, and some people, like the Apostle Paul, are never healed at all. Paul had to live with chronic pain for the rest of his life.

Look in v. 21:

*Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a lump of pressed figs and apply it to his infected skin so that he may recover."*

God could have told Isaiah to tell Hezekiah that he would speak the word and he would be healed immediately, but God didn't do that. God told Isaiah to tell those caring for Hezekiah to apply a lump of figs to the boils, and he would be healed. Hezekiah's healing took time.

The main point here is not the use of a lump of figs. So, don't stop by Walmart on the way home and buy figs if you are feeling bad. Figs will work on you but probably not in the way you want them to work.

The point is to obey the Lord, and the Lord will heal in His way and in His time. Our part is to trust Him as we go through our illnesses or difficult circumstances.

I think our next takeaway is that the Lord sometimes uses medicine as a part of our healing. Our faith is never in medicine or the hospitals or the doctors—our faith is in God. Yet, the Lord equips doctors and nurses and provides amazing technology for healing purposes. We are grateful for that.

And, yet, sometimes, the Lord does something absolutely stunning. Sometimes without any intervention from doctors, nurses, and hospitals at all—He simply heals us.

Bottom line: All healing is from God, no matter how it comes to us, and this is where our faith lies.

Here is the deal: There is nothing wrong with praying for the Lord to heal by either of these means. This is how I am praying for little Madeline. I am praying and pleading for the Lord to do a miracle that can only be explained by the grace of God touching her little body and healing it of that cancer. That's my prayer, as I am sure it is yours.

The Lord may choose to heal Madeline through the means of the doctors and nurses at Iowa Children's Hospital. He may use them. In whatever way Madeline is healed—it will be from the Lord.

My prayer is that the Lord will do all that pleases Him in her life, in David and Linsey's lives, and in Tim and Darlene's lives. Our desire is to see the Lord Jesus' name made famous in our church, city, state, and the world.

As with all things, we pray, and we ask for a miracle, and at the same time, we submit in faith to the Lord's will. It is no lack of faith to pray this way. For our faith will be challenged just as Hezekiah's was.

Look in v. 22. Apparently, his healing took long enough that he began to stumble in his faith. In other words, when things did not go as he thought they should, he began to struggle. Verse 22 says he wanted another sign:

*And Hezekiah had asked, "What is the sign that I will go up to the Lord's temple?"*

Here is the good news for those with weak faith, which probably includes all of us. Hezekiah had been given a promise of healing, and then Isaiah provided an outward sign of the shadow being moved 10 steps backward. So, he has been given a promise and a sign.

Hezekiah's faith had a double resting place: The Lord's word and the Lord's act. Yet, he still struggled in his faith as he was healed. The slow, painful dark days of healing caused him to waver in his faith.

The good news is that even though Hezekiah had weak faith, he was still healed. His weak faith did not prevent the Lord God from doing what He had planned to do, and that was to heal Hezekiah.

Friends, I have good news for you this morning: *God gives grace to those with weak faith, and that is a comforting thought.*