

We have been looking together at the life of Hezekiah, the most godly of the twenty kings of Judah who followed Saul, David and Solomon. You may remember that his name means, ‘Yahweh is (my) strength’, and Hezekiah could certainly bear witness to that fact in 701 BC.

It was in that year that the Assyrians, the dominant world power at the time, invaded the tiny kingdom of Judah. Their annals record that they overwhelmed nearly fifty “strong walled towns, and innumerable small places around them” and took more than 200,000 people into captivity (Taylor prism, British Museum). Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, then turned his attention to Jerusalem and sent “a great army” to the city (2 Kings 18:17). Hezekiah and God’s people were taunted and threatened, and were greatly distressed by the show of force on their doorstep. By their own efforts, they had no chance of surviving a siege or an assault. But survive they did, and without a single shot having been fired at them.

In answer to Hezekiah’s urgent prayer, which we looked at in the last couple of talks, God did a most remarkable thing. Listen to what He promised to do and at what then happened:

Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. <sup>33</sup>By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. <sup>34</sup>For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”

<sup>35</sup>And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. <sup>36</sup>Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh. **2 Kings 19:32–36**

So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all his enemies, and he provided for them on every side. <sup>23</sup>And many brought gifts to the LORD to Jerusalem and precious things to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from that time onward. **2 Chronicles 32:22,23**

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Today we move forward in the Biblical record, though back just a little in time. **2 Kings 20** starts with the words “in those days”, but verse 6 makes it clear that the city of Jerusalem had not yet been delivered “out of the hand of the king of Assyria.” The scene is still set in 701 BC, therefore, but God had not yet dealt with king Sennacherib and his army. That is the historical context, and this is what happened:

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. 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; you shall not recover.’” <sup>2</sup>Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying, <sup>3</sup>“Now, O LORD, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. <sup>4</sup>And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: <sup>5</sup>“Turn back, and say to Hezekiah the leader of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD, <sup>6</sup>and I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David’s sake.” <sup>7</sup>And Isaiah said, “Bring a cake of figs. And let them take and lay it on the boil, that he may recover.”

<sup>8</sup>And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD on the third day?” <sup>9</sup>And Isaiah said, “This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he has promised: shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or go back ten steps?” <sup>10</sup>And Hezekiah answered, “It is an easy thing for the shadow to lengthen ten steps. Rather let the shadow go back ten steps.” <sup>11</sup>And Isaiah the prophet called to the LORD, and he brought the shadow back ten steps, by which it had gone down on the steps of Ahaz. **2 Kings 20:1–11**

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“In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death.” (2 Kings 20:1) Nothing is so certain as death and taxes, but how surprising it is that Hezekiah was close to death. Why surprising? Well, think of it like this:

- “In those days”, Hezekiah was *a young man*, just thirty-nine years old. In Psalm 90:10, Moses notes that “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty”. Hezekiah had nowhere near reached those ages – in fact, he was only about half way there – and yet he became “sick unto death” (AV).
- “In those days”, Hezekiah was manifestly *a godly man*. In his mini-biography, we read that:  
he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done... <sup>5</sup>He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. <sup>6</sup>For he held fast to the LORD. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. **2 Kings 18:3,5–6**

The Bible speaks of long life as a blessing that God gives to those who honour Him and keep His commandments (e.g. Exodus 20:12/Ephesians 6:1–3, Deuteronomy 4:40, 5:32–33). Yet, godly though he was and still in the prime of life, Hezekiah was “at the point of death”.

- “In those days”, Hezekiah was *a determined man*. From the earliest days of his reign, he had sought to obey the historic law of God. At his instigation, the temple had been reconsecrated and its activities as the house of the Lord restored (2 Chron 29), the Passover was once more being celebrated properly (2 Chron 30), and the priests had been reorganized to lead the worship of God (2 Chron 31:2–19). Idols and other things used for the worship of false gods had been destroyed throughout Judah, and even beyond its borders (2 Kings 18:4; 2 Chron 31:1). “And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart” (2 Chron 31:20,21). Yet, though he was determined to honour God, Hezekiah became “sick unto death”.
- “In those days” he was, *a much-needed man*. The Assyrians had swallowed up many other nations – including Israel, the larger of the two kingdoms of God’s historic people (2 Kings 18:9–12, 19:10–13). Now the Assyrian army under king Sennacherib was sweeping through Judah and closing in on Jerusalem. This was surely the time when God’s people most needed Hezekiah. He had proved himself to be a godly leader; he had done much to prepare the city of Jerusalem for an assault; he had encouraged its people to put their confidence in the Lord (2 Chron 32:1–8). Yet now he lay “at the point of death”.
- “In those days” Hezekiah was *a blessed man*. He had reformed the spiritual life of the kingdom of Judah; he had stood up to the Assyrians; he had defeated the Philistines. And because he “did what was right in the eyes of the LORD”, we read that “the LORD was with him; wherever he went out, he prospered.” (2 Kings 18:7,8; 2 Chron 31:20,21). For years, God had poured out His blessing on Hezekiah and his people. Yet now that blessing seemed suddenly to have come to an end, and Hezekiah was “sick unto death”.

Is it not surprising that Hezekiah – so young a man, so godly a man, so determined a man, so needed a man, so blessed a man – should be “In those days ... at the point of death”? It prompts us to ask the question, “Why?” Why did God allow this to happen? Why did God purpose it to happen? Why did God want to cut short the life of a man who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, who was concerned for the reputation of the Lord, who was such an example and help to the people of the Lord?

We could ask the same questions regarding other godly men and women: think of John the Baptist, who pointed so clearly to Jesus but was cruelly beheaded (Mark 6:14ff); think of Stephen, who was “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5) but was stoned to death (Acts 7:54–60); think of countless ministers, missionaries and quite ordinary believers who were killed by accident, disease or evil intent even though they were in the prime of life and – so it would seem – had years of useful service ahead of them. Think most of all of the Lord Jesus Christ: He was young; He was godly; His remarkable teaching had unique authority; His miracles transformed the lives of thousands of people. And yet He was crucified and, at least to the women who followed Him on the way to His cross, it seemed a crying shame (Luke 23:27)! But, as the Bible makes clear, the death of Jesus was not the waste of life that it might first appear to have been:

- the cross did not mean that Jesus was no longer God’s beloved Son in whom He was well pleased (Matthew 3:16–17, 17:5); it did not mean that God was careless of the needs of His people or distant from the events unfolding in Jerusalem; it did not mean that God was fickle in His hand of blessing or forgetful of His promises;
- the cross did mean that God was effecting the next stage, a vital stage, in His awesome plan of salvation; it did mean that, once and for all, a satisfactory sacrifice for sin was being made (Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 9:26); it did mean that Christians would thereafter be able to proclaim, as Peter did on the day of Pentecost, “Repent ... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...” (Acts 2:38; cf Acts 2:21, 4:11–12, 16:31 etc.)

The truth is that God always acts with a purpose, though we may not always know what that is. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8,9) The cross of Christ was no accident – as Peter said, Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). And nor was it an accident, just over seven hundred years earlier, when “Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death.” His illness was no surprise to God; it did not mean that God had forgotten him or left him; it did not mean that God had no intention further of blessing him. Rather, it was part of the tapestry of Hezekiah’s life that God was weaving so deliberately and so intricately.

Commenting on the life of another Old Testament saint, Alexander Maclaren said, “If one of Joseph’s misfortunes had been omitted, his good fortune would never have come. If his brethren had not hated him, if he had not been sold, if he had not been imprisoned, he would never have ruled Egypt. Not one thread in the tapestry could have been withdrawn without spoiling the pattern. We cannot afford to lose one of our sorrows or trials.” †

All of us get sick and all of us will die. And we know that both sickness and death are part of the consequences of the sin that entered into the world in the days of Adam and Eve. But it is a glorious Biblical truth that God can and does use our times of illness, physical weakness and surprising sickness. In them, just as much as in our times of energetic health, He is weaving the fabric of our lives in the way that always He intended to do. As the apostle Paul noted, every part of our lives unfolds “according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). When, one day in glory, we see the wonderful pattern that God has woven, truly we shall be “Lost in wonder, love and praise.” (from *Love divine, all loves excelling* by Charles Wesley)

† Maclaren, Alexander (1904); *The Book of Genesis*; London, Hodder and Stoughton; p.257

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## prevailing prayer

## 2 Kings 20:1b–7

Reading on, we know that Hezekiah got better quickly and lived actively for a further fifteen years. So we may be tempted to think that his condition was not as critical as had been supposed. But actually his diagnosis was not subjective but objective, it came not from a physician but from a prophet, it was the verdict not of man but of God. Isaiah went to Hezekiah and told him: “Thus says the LORD, ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.’” (2 Kings 20:1b) Hezekiah would have time to set his house in order – to finish any outstanding business, to write his will, to give his parting counsels – but then, without getting better, he would die.

Maybe you know someone who has received a medical prognosis that is just as sobering and unequivocal; maybe you have received or fear receiving such a verdict yourself. “Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.” I wonder, how might we respond a message like that? Whatever our age or occupation,

- we might feel somehow cheated and think that we are too young to die and want at least to see our children, and even our grandchildren, grow up and make a success of their lives;
- we might think of all that we still long to do: we so want to finish the course we are studying, the book we are writing, the house we are building, the work we are doing, the trips we are planning;
- we may think tearfully of others – of those in our family, amongst our neighbours, at our place of work, at our church or elsewhere – who depend on us, who look up to us, who need us, who may be lost without us.

Knowing him as we do, it is no surprise to learn that Hezekiah’s first response was to turn privately – with “his face to the wall” – to prayer. Again we have the privilege of listening in as he prayed, and this time we note that:

- he prayed *promptly*. The word ‘then’, missing from the NIV but present in the Hebrew, is the important link between Hezekiah hearing *from* the LORD via the prophet and responding *to* the LORD in prayer. The fact that he prayed at all is worthy of note: he was desperately ill and had been told that he would not recover, but nonetheless he resorted at once to prayer (2 Kings 20:2). Such a reaction ever remains a barometer of our true spiritual condition: do we, when we receive bad news, turn at once to prayer? Do we recognise that, however advanced medicine may be, it is the Lord who is our healer (Exodus 15:26) and we need urgently to turn to Him?
- he prayed *respectfully*. Hezekiah could have been angry or resentful, but his prayer was actually respectful – “O LORD, please...”. Calling on the LORD (3a), Hezekiah was acknowledging that he was approaching the historic God of his people, the God of revelation and redemption who appeared to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13–15), the creator God “of all the kingdoms of the earth” (2 Kings 19:15).
- he prayed *submissively*. Hezekiah did not pray explicitly for healing but said simply, “O LORD, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.” (2 Kings 20:3a) This does not mean that he believed that he had earned God’s good favour. It does mean that he was happy to commit his entire life and its outcome to God. If we can do that calmly when we receive the worst possible news, then surely we know God and will know that peace of God that passes all understanding (Phil 4:6,7).

- he prayed *earnestly*, for as he prayed “Hezekiah wept bitterly.” (2 Kings 20:3b) He was far from being the only one sometimes to shed tears in prayer. So too did David (Psalm 6); so too did the apostle Paul (Acts 20:19,31); and, we read, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered us prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears...” (Heb 5:7) If truly we are concerned about the things of God, there will be times when, as with Hezekiah, our prayers are short and our weeping is long. And that is nothing to be ashamed about.

In 2 Kings 20, there is also the record of the remarkable answer to Hezekiah’s prayer: Note that:

- his prayer was answered *quickly*, for Isaiah had scarcely left the palace complex when he was told by the Lord to return at once to tell Hezekiah, “Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold I will heal you.” (2 Kings 20:3b) What wonderful good news!
- his prayer was answered *generously*. Remember that Hezekiah was “at the point of death” (2 Kings 20:1). Yet God would heal him so fully and quickly that on “the third day” (which, from a New Testament perspective, is resurrection day) he would be able “to go up to the house of the LORD” (2 Kings 20:5b). There was a medical intervention – a fig poultice, to be laid on his boil (2 Kings 20:7) – but there can be no doubting that Hezekiah’s rapid recovery was a gracious act of God. And there were two other indications of God’s great generosity:
  - a. First, God promised to “add fifteen years” to Hezekiah’s life (2 Kings 20:6a). Now here we must note two important cautions: first, that we should not expect a similar revelation – in fact, this promise of a specific lifespan is unique in Scripture; secondly, that we should not expect invariably the same answer to a prayer relating to sickness, for we are never guaranteed renewed health in answer to prayer. But the incident is of value, for it reminds us that God knows exactly how long each of us will live. As David noted, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” (Psalm 139:16)
  - b. Secondly, Hezekiah’s request for a sign to confirm God’s promise was answered graciously as he requested (2 Kings 20:8–11). Such a request was not without precedent: Joshua prayed that the sun would stand still, and it did – though, as Scripture records, “There has been no day like it before or since” (Joshua 10:12–14); Gideon asked twice for a sign, most famously in relation to a fleece, and God graciously answered his prayer (Judges 6:11–24, 36–40); Samuel asked God for out-of-season thunder and rain to confirm to His people their folly in asking for a king (1 Samuel 12:16–18). Hezekiah himself may have thought of asking for a sign because his father Ahaz had once been invited by the LORD to do so (Isaiah 7:10ff).

In New Testament days, however, Christians were never taught to propose signs as a means of confirmation of the promises and purposes of God. It is true that Peter told the crowd on the day of Pentecost that Jesus was “a man attested ... by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him” (Acts 2:22). But, notice, they were signs that God presented, not signs that man proposed! Jesus told His disciples that the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, would guide them “into all the truth” (John 16:13–15). It is the Holy Spirit who will point out to us the signs that God has chosen to confirm to us His will for our lives; we have absolutely no right to insist that He should perform any sign of our devising.
- his prayer was answered *purposefully*. God delivered Hezekiah from the sentence of death because He had a job for him to do: Hezekiah was to continue to lead the people of God as they bore witness to God’s deliverance of His people from “the hand of the king of Assyria” (2 Kings 20:6).

Praise God again for the life of Hezekiah and for all that it has to teach us. We have seen this time that God’s perfect plan for Hezekiah’s life embraced both his serious sickness and his rapid recovery. This is surely a reminder to us – most appropriately at this time of pandemic – that *our times are in God’s hand* (Psalm 31:14,15).

The rich fool in Jesus’s parable said to himself, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink, be merry.” Yet that very night his soul was required of him and, tragically, the man who had laid up so much treasure for himself was “not rich toward God” – in fact, he had made no preparations at all to meet God. (Luke 12:13–21)

How is it with you? Do you realise that your God-appointed time to die could come at any moment? In preparation for that, have you yet come to Him in repentance and faith? Have you yet learned the secret that Hezekiah knew, that every change in our circumstances – and, not least, every bit of bad news – is an invitation to pray, even if we do so with few words and many tears?

May God grant that we learn the lessons of the life of Hezekiah and, like him, do what is right in the eyes of the Lord.