

Isaiah Part 21: Hezekiah's Sickness, Recovery and Folly...

Isaiah 38 and 39

Note on chronology

“In those days” (v 1) – there is apparent confusion about dates, but 2 Kings 18 v 2 makes the chronology clear: “[Hezekiah] was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem” – thus Hezekiah would have been 25 + 29 = 54 when he died. The events of Chapter 36 begin “in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah” (v 1) – this was 701 BC, and Hezekiah would have been 25 + 14 = 39 years old. In Chapter 38 v 4, God says he will add 15 years to Hezekiah’s life, and he died when he was 54, so the events of Chapter 38 took place when Hezekiah was 39, i.e. the same year (701 BC), or shortly thereafter. The confusion may have arisen from Chapter 38 v 6, suggesting that the Assyrians had not yet been defeated; therefore, the slaughter of the Assyrian army and the demise of King Sennacherib described in Chapter 37 may have taken place sometime after 701 BC.

Hezekiah's sickness and recovery (Isaiah 38 v 1 to 22)

- In what ways does this chapter demonstrate (a) the power of prayer (v 5 and 6; James 5 v 16b); (b) God’s purposes behind suffering (v 17; Psalm 119 v 71, 75); (c) the completeness of God’s forgiveness (v 17; Psalm 103 v 12); and (d) the importance of praise (v 19 and 20; Psalm 13 v 6)?
- “I have heard your prayer” (v 5) – if Hezekiah had not prayed, his life would not have been extended (v 5), and Jerusalem might not have been delivered from the Assyrians. Prayer really matters!
- What do you make of the phrase “so the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined” (v 8)? See also the parallel passage in 2 Kings 20 v 8 to 11, and note the similarity to the incident described in Joshua 10 v 13b: “The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day” (the so-called ‘long day of Joshua’). How was the length of this day extended? Could it have been a slowing of the earth’s rotation, or a tilting of the earth’s axis? Was it a miracle of reflection, or refraction of light, or was it the presence of God manifested in light?

Nothing is too hard for God (see Jeremiah 32 v 17)! There are other similar incidents and allusions in Scripture: (i) Habakkuk 3 v 11a states: “The sun and moon stood still in their place”; (ii) Job 9 v 7a says that God “commands the sun, and it does not rise”. CS Lewis (in ‘Miracles’) wrote “The mind which asks for a non-miraculous Christianity is a mind in process of relapsing from Christianity into mere ‘religion.’” To deny miracles is the epitome of human arrogance, and a claim to omniscience. To deny miracles would be to deny the birth of a child, or the miracle of Creation itself. All the resources of science cannot create even a single blade of grass. No wonder the Lord asks of mere mortal man, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding” (Job 38 v 4).

Verses 9 to 20 are Hezekiah’s ‘psalm’, which is in two parts: (i) Hezekiah’s lament (v 9 to 14); (ii) Hezekiah’s praise that God has spared his life (v 15 to 20). “I am consigned to the gates of Sheol” (v 10) – שְׁאוֹל (*She’ol*) is the Hebrew word for ‘the place of the dead’. Hezekiah laments the news of his impending death. “I shall not see the Lord... in the land of the living” (v 11) – Hezekiah’s thinking is based on an Old Testament understanding of the world beyond, before life and immortality were brought to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1 v 10). Though there are occasional glimpses of hope of a life after death (Job 19 v 25 to 27), for the most part there is no clear understanding. This explains why Hezekiah does not welcome death as a certain pathway to the presence of God. “O Lord, I am oppressed” (v 14) – since Hezekiah lived before the finished work of Jesus, he lived under the bondage of the fear of death (Hebrews 2 v 14, 15). How different for the believer in Christ, for whom death has no victory or sting (1 Corinthians 15 v 53 to 55)!

[MORE OVER...]

“It was for my welfare, that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction” (v 17) – here Hezekiah is to be admired for his self-awareness and honesty. It was not for God’s glory, or even for the welfare of his kingdom, that he suffered bitterness over his impending death – it was for his own welfare. But in his great love and mercy, God delivered Hezekiah’s life from destruction.

“Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover” (v 21) – God used a ‘medical’ treatment, at least as a sign, to bring about Hezekiah’s healing. “What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the Lord?” (v 22) – why did Hezekiah want a sign that would allow him to go up to the house of the LORD? Because he would not go up to the house of the LORD *until* he was healed...

Envoys from Babylon (Isaiah 39 v 1 to 18)

“Merodach-baladan... king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered” (v 1) – on the surface this was a gesture of kindness from the king of Babylon, showing concern for Hezekiah as fellow royalty. But this was more than just a courtesy call – it was an attempt to bring the kingdom of Judah on to the side of the Babylonians, against the Assyrians. Hezekiah was deeply worried about Assyria, so he welcomed the envoys gladly (v 2). Without consulting either God or Isaiah, he showed them his royal treasures, his abundant supplies of food, and his military armaments. God had given Hezekiah great wealth, so the visitors were duly impressed.

- What was sinful in Hezekiah’s displaying his royal treasures and military might to the envoys of Merodach-baladan? How did this incident reveal what was in his heart? See 2 Chronicles 32 v 25, 31.
- What should Hezekiah have said to the envoys? Perhaps he should have said, “Thank you for coming, and please thank Merodach for his gift and invitation, but the fact is I have a divine promise to lean on; it has been confirmed personally in my return to health, and cosmically in the sign of the sundial. I cannot turn away from faith in the promises of God.”

“All that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon” (v 6) – Hezekiah thought that this display of wealth would impress the Babylonians. But all it did was show them what the kings of Judah had, and what they could get from them. One day the kings of Babylon would come and take it all away. This was fulfilled under the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar – see 2 Kings 24 v 10 to 13 and 2 Kings 25 v 11 to 17. It would be more than a hundred years before the Babylonians carried away the royal treasures of Judah, but it happened, just as Isaiah prophesied...

“The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘There will be peace and security in my days’” (v 8) – this is a sad state of heart for the king of Judah. God announces coming judgment, and all he can do is express relief that it will not happen in his lifetime! In this, Hezekiah shows himself to be almost totally self-centred – all he cares about is his own personal comfort and success. There is no doubt that Hezekiah started out as a godly king, and overall his reign was one of outstanding godliness (2 Kings 18 v 3 to 7). Yet his beginning was better than his end – Hezekiah did not finish well. God gave Hezekiah the gift of 15 more years of life, but the added years did not make him a better, or more godly man. We sometimes say, ‘time will tell’, or ‘time will heal’. But time will do nothing of the sort! Time will only come and go. It is how we *use* time that matters. Hezekiah did not make good use of the extra time God gave him...

Prayer – Lord God, help us to say, like Hezekiah, that it is for our welfare that we sometimes experience great bitterness, and that in your great love you deliver our lives from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all our sins behind your back. Dear Lord, like Hezekiah, we know that you will save us, and so we can praise you all the days of our lives, in your house, and wherever we are. We praise you in Jesus’ name, Amen.