

Prayer

To You, O Lord, belong all the riches, praise and honour of the magnificent world You have made; and to You, O Lord, belong all the praises of those who have received Your love and grace through Jesus Christ! We rejoice to join this great chorus of praise; so bless us in all of our thanksgiving and worship whether offered at home by ourselves, or with others. Hallelujah! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Justice

Pray today for those charities or groups within your country which advocate and work for justice for the poor, oppressed or disadvantaged. Pray for Christians who work for justice.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for China and Tibet, and freedom for all who are oppressed*
- *Pray for local doctors and nurses*
- *Praise the Lord for people all over the world who are being saved by faith*

Meditation

If I walk in Your way, Lord Jesus, what will happen?

- I will learn honesty and prudence;
- I will acquire wisdom and knowledge;
- I will receive instruction from Your Word;
- I will gain insight and strength.

If I walk in my own way, Lord Jesus, what will happen?

- I will become insensitive and selfish;
- I will learn arrogance and pride;
- I will speak without care and unhelpfully;
- I will be spiritually blind and weak.

For one thing is certain, one way or the other;

- I must walk one way, and one only;
- I, if I try, I can never walk both:
- For my path leads only towards my death,
- But His leads to glory, and life.

Bible Study - Isaiah 38:1-8

¹ Around that time Hezekiah became ill and close to death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, 'This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, for you will die; you will not recover.'² Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD,³ 'O LORD, remember how I have walked before you faithfully and wholeheartedly and have done what is good in your eyes.' Then Hezekiah wept bitterly.

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah, and He said:⁵ 'Go and tell Hezekiah, "This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your

life. ⁶ I will also deliver you and this city from the hand of the King of Assyria. I will defend this city." ⁷ This is the LORD's sign to you that the LORD will do what he has promised: ⁸ "Look, I will make the shadow cast by the sun on Ahaz's stairway go back the ten steps it has gone down." So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.

Review

Isaiah 38 describes a mystery illness which Hezekiah had (38:1-8), and Isaiah's prophecy first of Hezekiah's death, and then of his temporary reprieve and the adding of years to his life. This passage is reasonably well known today because it contains the famous 'sign' of the reversal of time in which the sun goes 'back ten steps' (38:8), which is little understood, though sometimes used as a reading and preached upon in church. The passage is also virtually the same as that found in 2 Kings 20:1-10, with the only difference being that 2 Kings adds the promise that Hezekiah will '*worship in the Temple in three days time*' (2 Kings 20:8), after he has been healed of his illness.

We might expect that this passage is best read as a healing miracle in the Old Testament, but there is something rather strange about it. In the previous chapter, we read about the lifting of the siege of Jerusalem (37:36-38), but here in this story, this event appears to be in the future; for example, in verse 6, the Lord says to Hezekiah '*... I will also deliver you and this city from the hand of the King of Assyria*' suggesting that the deliverance we have just read about in chapter 37 has not yet happened!

Is it possible that for some reason, the events in chapter 38 occurred before those of chapter 37? This seems odd to us, but if we look further at what the Bible says then our suspicions are confirmed. There is no doubt that the deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyria took place in 701BC; and in addition, we know that Hezekiah died only a few years later, around 697BC. In this passage, however, you will read that Hezekiah was given fifteen more years of life because of his repentance, so all in all, this means that this incident must have taken place long before the Assyrian invasion!

Why then does this story appear here in the book of Isaiah? What appears to be happening is this: after the story of the deliverance of Jerusalem, Isaiah records this story about Hezekiah which happened earlier in his life. This was the 'mini-crisis' through which Hezekiah learned spiritual lessons which enabled him to stand firm against the Assyrian invasion. Indeed, Isaiah prophesied to Hezekiah at the time of this illness, saying that the Lord would save the city of Jerusalem from the Assyrians (38:6). In this historically earlier story, Hezekiah shows himself to be faithful to the Lord, but personally weak and afraid of death; so he begs the Lord to spare him from death and argues with the Lord in the same way that Moses and Abraham had done many years previously (38:2,3, see Genesis 18:20f., and Exodus 33:10f.). Though broken in spirit, Hezekiah received what the Lord had to say to him through Isaiah the prophet, and was strengthened. Consequently, not only was he healed (we read more about this tomorrow), he gained sufficient courage to become the godly man who, in the midst of the crisis of the Assyrians siege of Jerusalem, prayed with confidence to the Lord (see Isaiah 37:15-20).

It may be strange to us to read the 'mini-story' about Hezekiah's strengthening as a King after the story of the Assyrian invasion itself; nevertheless, Isaiah records this because it contains an important spiritual principle. Hezekiah was able to be strong in the greater things required of him later in life because he was faithful, receptive and compliant to the Lord's will in the smaller but important matters of his personal life; in this instance, concerning his health.

Lastly, although it is not something I can prove, I wonder whether the sign of the turning back of the sunlight on the dial, is somehow connected with the timing of these events. I

suggest that when Hezekiah was sick, Isaiah prophesied that Hezekiah would see this sign as a verification that he would receive the extra years of life, after the siege of the Assyrians was lifted. The sign of the clock going back is a reminder to Hezekiah of his earlier illness and his repentance, which is the true source of his spiritual strength.

Going Deeper

Nevertheless, what Hezekiah experienced was a crisis of faith due to his health, and as such, this is a powerful story of healing. We will now look at how Hezekiah responded to the news that his health was failing and he was about to die, and go on to look at the meaning of the different signs given to Hezekiah to reassure him of the Lord's will and blessing.

Notes on the text and translation

- V3 *Hezekiah prayed and asked the Lord to accept that he had walked 'faithfully and wholeheartedly.' The Hebrew at this point says literally, 'how I have walked before your face with reliability and a whole heart', and where the word 'whole' is the famous Hebrew word 'shalom' (meaning 'complete', or 'whole' or 'peace'). You will find that different translations treat this passage quite differently.*
- V3 *Where I have written 'Then Hezekiah wept bitterly' most translations have 'And Hezekiah ...' Why would I use the word 'then' and not 'and'? This is because the Hebrew word for 'and' can in fact mean almost anything which logically connects two sentences together, and in this case, Hezekiah's weeping follows his prayer, and it is quite reasonable to translate 'then ...'*
- V6 *I have translated 'I will also deliver you ...' and the word 'also' indicates that as in the previous note, the Hebrew has a small 'particle' (a part of a word) which connects this sentence with the one that went before. Because it is additional to what has already been said, the word 'also' is relevant and therefore correct.*
- V6 *'I will defend this city.' Here, the word 'defend' means 'to cover, surround or defend'. The Lord's protection is like covering; and the same word is also used in Isaiah 37:35*
- V8 *There is some dispute as to whether the Hebrew of this verse refers to ten steps on some palace stairway used as a means of estimating time, or whether this really does refer to a 'sundial' belonging to Ahaz. There is no Hebrew word for 'sun-dial' and no other word which might mean a period of time, but only the word for 'steps'; so I prefer to go with the idea of steps on a palace terrace.*

Hezekiah faces death

It is never an easy thing to be told that you are going to die (38:1). The circumstances under which this might happen to us are very different to that which Hezekiah faced, but we can imagine the reaction of the human heart. Isaiah's story tells us that Hezekiah broke down in his weakness and 'turned his face to the wall' (38:2), a reaction of despair. He 'wept bitterly' (38:3).

The interesting thing about Hezekiah's reaction was that he engaged with the Lord in prayer, and did not accept the prophetic word given him by Isaiah! The prophet told him he was going to die, but he pleaded with the Lord on the basis of his own good works; 'I have walked before you faithfully and wholeheartedly and have done what is good ...' (38:3). These were not the words of a man who was in rebellion against God, however. In this story we should compare Hezekiah with his father, Ahaz, who had stubbornly refused to listen to Isaiah at all (see 7:1-8), and by comparison, Hezekiah's tears and pleading indicated a King who was desperately concerned to do what was right. He did not have the assurance of resurrection with the Lord as we have today, and naturally feared death. In his prayer, Hezekiah did not ask the Lord to change his mind directly, but the Lord heard

Hezekiah's heart and sent Isaiah with a second message telling him that he had a reprieve of fifteen years of life (38:5).

The deliverance and the signs

In verse 6 we learn of God's promise to deliver the city of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army. God promised that He would 'deliver' and 'defend' the city. As we saw in the notes, the word for 'defend' is a fascinating Hebrew word which implies the Lord's special spiritual and physical covering. It is possible that this word along with other ideas of protection found in the Old Testament influenced Paul in his famous description of the 'whole armour of God', most of which protects the Christian from attack and gives security for the use of the only weapon at our disposal, the 'sword of the spirit' (Eph 6:10f.)!

The sign promised to Hezekiah is a little more difficult to work out. Firstly, as you will have read in the notes, it is uncertain whether Isaiah was referring to 'ten steps' on some sundial or time-piece made by Ahaz and therefore at Hezekiah's disposal, or 'ten steps' on a stairway of some part of the Kings palace or courtyards, perhaps built by Ahaz (and therefore having his name). We do not know for certain that the time of day was reckoned according to any 'sun-dial' design or time-piece in Jerusalem at that time, so I prefer to think of the sign as referring to the shadow cast on a stairway in the palace and used for the purpose of telling time. However, this does not change the fact that this miraculous sign was about the sun going backwards!

There are two ways we can interpret this 'sign'. Firstly, we can imagine that on one particular day, the laws of the universe were so organised by God that the miraculous took place and time went backwards! We focus on the miracle itself and wonder at the sheer incredulity of it all, but what could such a sign mean other than act as a personal sign to Hezekiah of God's truthfulness (though what anyone else would have made of it is unknown). Secondly, we can accept that the sign is indeed miraculous but look further at what was going on in the story to try and find some reason why God might do such a sign. Most of the great signs and wonders (though there are a few exceptions) in the Bible all happen for a reason.

In this case, the sign could say to Hezekiah that he had 'time again', for this indeed is what the Lord gave him by allowing him more years of life; though there is no really logical connection between 'ten steps' and 'fifteen years'. Others think that the sign of going back in time is somehow linked to the fact that this story is indeed a 'flash-back' as we might call it today. None of this is certain, but we cannot escape the fact that God did heal Hezekiah and give him back more years of life, years in which he was able to show the true qualities of kingship which his father Ahaz had not done.

Application

All of us face death, but in contrast to Hezekiah, we have the assurance of Jesus' death and resurrection to give us confidence in what lies ahead. It is still daunting for any one of us to face death, nevertheless, and if through any form of miracle or medical intervention we are given any time back, then we will often think differently about our lives as a consequence. John Wesley felt that he lived a special life, given back to him by being plucked from a fire in his youth, and many people today testify to a sense of living life in a different way after being saved from death through medical intervention, perhaps after a coronary by-pass operation.

Every Christian however, is one who has been given back a 'new life' having 'put to death' their old self in baptism. The new life we live is like Hezekiah's new life, and is empowered in a fresh way by God. Like Hezekiah, we can act with confidence against God's enemies and our enemies because we know that our God is Lord of all life and death, and nothing that happens in this world can prevent God's will from being done in our lives. Hezekiah faced the Assyrian threat with confidence because of this reassurance, and if he could do

this in Old Testament times, then we can face everything the enemy threatens us with by the same courage and fortitude. Our God is Lord of all.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Share any experiences you may have of healing from illness of which this story reminds you.
2. Why did God give Hezekiah fifteen more years of life? Are there any other reasons why this was done?
3. Discuss in your group what you think is the meaning of the sun going back 'ten steps'.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Hezekiah was quite a character. The records in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles show that he was a King who put his all into trying to 'do the right thing' for his people, the Lord and the city of Jerusalem. I have often wondered why the Lord responded to Hezekiah's tears and apparently changed his mind. I reckon this is a sign of God's genuine compassion.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If you are aware of anyone who lives near you or who is in your church who is suffering greatly or dying, make them a special subject of your prayers.*
- *Read the passage in 2 Kings 20 which is similar to this passage (verses 1-10) and compare the two carefully.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, in whom the whole world finds its truth and its destiny; lead us who live now to honour everything You have done in the past and all you will do in the future, by working for the Gospel of Salvation today. May we demonstrate the Gospel in our lives, and therefore show others its eternal truth: AMEN