

The Book of Isaiah

Lesson 15: Hezekiah's Illness and Babylon's Warning -- Isaiah 38:1–39:8

Imagine the prophet walking into the sickroom of a king. Hezekiah has just been delivered from the Assyrian army in a way that left the whole world talking, and now, at the height of his reputation, he lies on his bed gravely ill. Isaiah comes with a word that is hard to hear: "Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover." There is no softening it. The man who watched God strike down an empire is told that his own life is almost over. He turns his face to the wall and weeps.

These two short chapters, Isaiah 38 and 39, form a quiet, searching close to this section of the book before the great comfort of chapter 40. Chapter 38 tells of Hezekiah's sickness, his desperate prayer, the astonishing answer that adds fifteen years to his life, and the song of thanksgiving he writes when he comes back from the edge of the grave. It is one of the most personal passages in all of Isaiah, a window into a believer's heart as he wrestles with mortality and then with gratitude.

Chapter 39 follows with a darker turn. Envoys arrive from far-off Babylon, ostensibly to congratulate Hezekiah on his recovery, and the king, flattered and proud, shows them everything, all his treasure, his armory, his whole house, holding nothing back. Isaiah confronts him with a chilling prophecy: the day is coming when everything he has shown off, and even his own descendants, will be carried away to Babylon. The very nation Hezekiah courted will one day plunder his house.

Together these chapters press home some of the most personal questions in the book. How do we face the brevity of our own lives? What do we do with the years God gives us? And what happens to the heart after a great deliverance, when the danger has passed and we are tempted to relax, to take credit, to grow proud and complacent? Hezekiah's response, "Is it not good, if there shall be peace in my days?" exposes a self-centered comfort that we know all too well. These are not distant lessons. They are mirrors.

Group Discussion: Read Isaiah 39:5–8 aloud, Isaiah's warning and Hezekiah's reply. As a group, discuss what Hezekiah's words, "Is it not good, if there shall be peace and security in my days?" reveal about his heart, and how the same self-centered, short-term thinking can quietly creep into our own faith after God has been good to us.

Personal Reflection: Hezekiah's song says, "The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day" (38:19), born from a fresh awareness that his days were numbered. If you took seriously that your own days are limited, what is one thing you would start doing, or stop doing, this week?

Read Isaiah 38:1–39:8

Study Questions

1. In Isaiah 38:1 Isaiah tells Hezekiah plainly, "Set your house in order, for you shall die." What does it teach us about God's kindness that He sometimes confronts us honestly with the nearness of death rather than letting us live in denial?
2. When Hezekiah received the news of his death, he turned his face to the wall and wept and prayed (38:2-3). When you face frightening news, do you tend to turn toward God or away from Him, and what would turning toward Him look like for you right now?
3. God heard Hezekiah's prayer and added fifteen years to his life (38:5), and He even gave a sign by turning back the shadow on the steps (38:7-8). What do these verses teach us about God as the One who hears prayer and holds the length of our lives in His hands?
4. In his song Hezekiah confesses, "I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul" (38:15), describing how the brush with death humbled and changed him. How has a hard experience in your life made you walk more humbly and gratefully before God?
5. Hezekiah's song moves from despair to praise, declaring, "The living, the living, he thanks you" (38:19), and resolves to make God's faithfulness known to his children. Why is gratitude such an essential mark of genuine faith, and how does remembering our mortality fuel it?

6. Hezekiah says the grave cannot praise God, but the living can (38:18–19), so the gift of more years is a gift of more time to worship and witness. How are you using the time God has given you to praise Him and to make Him known to the next generation?
7. In Isaiah 39:1–2 the Babylonian envoys arrive and Hezekiah shows them all his treasures, his silver, gold, armory, and storehouses, holding nothing back. What does this eager display reveal about how success and flattery can expose pride that adversity never touched?
8. After the warning of judgment, Hezekiah says, “Is it not good, if there shall be peace and security in my days?” (39:8). Where are you tempted to settle for comfort in your own days while neglecting your responsibility to those who come after you?
9. In Isaiah 39:5–7 Isaiah warns that everything Hezekiah proudly displayed, and even his own sons, will one day be carried away to Babylon. How does this warning expose the danger of pride and self-centered complacency after a great deliverance, and what does it teach about the consequences of trusting in our treasures and our own glory rather than in God?
10. Hezekiah began these chapters weeping toward God in dependence and ended them complacent and self-satisfied after his recovery. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is teaching you to guard your heart against pride and complacency in the very seasons when life is going well.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 2 Kings 20, the parallel account of Hezekiah's illness, recovery, and the Babylonian envoys; 2 Chronicles 32:24–31, which adds that God left Hezekiah to test him and reveal what was in his heart; Psalm 90:12, a prayer to number our days and gain a heart of wisdom, the very lesson Hezekiah's illness taught; James 4:13–16, the brevity of life and the folly of presuming on tomorrow, echoing Hezekiah's song; Luke 12:16–21, the rich fool who stored up treasure for himself but was not rich toward God, a warning that parallels Hezekiah's display of his wealth.

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