

Isaiah 38:9-21 Meditations on Death and Life (part 2 from last week)

This week we continue the story of Hezekiah, one of the greatest kings of Judah. He was an amazing man of faith . . . most of the time. At other times, we see him making bad decisions, trusting the ways of the world, more than the ways of faith. Yet, behind his faith, we see the faithfulness of God to keep his promise. In this next part, we see Hezekiah's response to God's decision to heal his body and give him 15 more years of life. I have 4 truths.

1. Death is certain. This is an implication from the text. Of course, Hezekiah knows he will die, at some point. For we are all dying men. For the wages of sin is death. Look at v. 10: **"I must depart,"** and **"I am consigned to the gates of Sheol."** This word in Greek is Hades, or hell. However, when we hear the word "hell" we immediately think of a place of punishment, a place where people are cut off from the presence of God. And this is true. However, I don't think this is how Hezekiah is using the word. As I studied this word in the OT, over and over it is used to refer to the place where dead go. It is translated as *"underworld," "abode of the dead," "grave," "place of departed spirits,"* and even *"unknown region."* Notice Hezekiah does not say he will not see God there. But, it is simply the place where ALL those who die must go. This is why David says about his son, born by Bathsheba, **"But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me"** (2 Sam. 12:23). He is speaking of the land of the dead where all men are *"consigned"* (v. 10).

This is why we need context, especially when we come to the NT, where "hades" is used. In one place Jesus says, **"the gates of hades (hell) will not prevail against the church"** (Matt. 16:18). In other places, especially when eternal punishment is referenced, we see the word *"Gehenna."* For example, in Matt. 5:30 Jesus says: **"And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell (Gehenna)."** I point this out because we must be careful and always consider the context. Hezekiah is contrasting the place of the living (here, now, on earth) with the place of the dead, which is certain. And all of us will go to the land of the dead . . . if the Lord Jesus doesn't return first.

Let me add another quick truth here. We will not see God or men in the same way here as we will in the next life. Look at v. 11: **"I said, I shall not see the Lord, the Lord in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world."** Hezekiah realizes that his experience will completely change after death. I think the point is that life here will finish. Death is certain.

2. Death comes quickly and easily. Look at v. 12: **"My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end . . ."** If we think about the context, Hezekiah, apparently in the middle of his life somewhere (at least he wasn't an old man), gets really sick and he contemplates his imminent death. And this sickness and impending death came suddenly. One day, he was having dinner with his family, meeting with his advisors, actively engaged in the politics of his world, going to the royal gym for some good exercise, etc. And all

of a sudden, boom! He gets the news that his sickness is terminal. Isaiah says, “**Get your house in order.**”

This is our experience! Kristen’s dad, that I have often wanted to meet in the land of the living, was taken suddenly in a helicopter accident. And he had absolutely no control. The news of cancer comes to the healthy young woman or the fit man in his 40s, and within months, they are gone. A child is born, the beginning of life as the parents are so excited, only to be told a few minutes later their child has a terminal disease and will not live but a few days. And these things are out of our control. Hezekiah uses some pictures. Death is like a shepherd’s tent, who pitches it and picks it quickly as he goes to new pastures. Death is sudden like a weaver who cuts his thread from the loom. Life is here in the morning and death comes in the evening. One moment we are calm, thinking “*look how healthy I am.*” But this calmness doesn’t last past the morning (v. 13).

And death is like a lion leaping upon its prey. I remember an African trip with BP. We were in the game park, looking at a herd of Thompson Gazelles. They were happily grazing . . . until the leopards showed up, chased them down, pounced on one of them and crushed its bones. Brothers and sisters, this is our experience. In Johnathan Edwards famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, he says we are hanging on to a spider web, suspended over death and hell. I know this is difficult! But, this is true. And these words of truth are for us! James says, “**Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” — ¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin**” (James 4:13-17). Life is too short! Death comes quickly and easily!

So what do we do? I think of one of Johnathan Edwards’ resolutions when he says, I am “*Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.*” This is good advice. This will help us keep perspective, putting into practice what we just heard from James, saying “if the Lord wills.” This perspective will also help us with choices in life. “**The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light**” (Rom. 13:12). Also, as Christians, we must know that Christ also died. But, death could not hold him. He rose from the dead. He conquered death. And this is our hope.

3. Death brings uneasy thoughts and feelings. What I mean here is that when we think of death, we become uneasy, uncomfortable, fearful, bitter, etc. Look at v. 14: “**Like a swallow or a crane I chirp; I moan like a dove.**” When compared to the surety of death and how quickly and easily it comes, we become very helpless. All we can do is chirp like a small bird or moan like a helpless dove. Look also at the end of v. 15. Hezekiah has “bitterness in his soul.” Have you ever found a baby bird in the yard that may have been hurt, and you take it in, you feed it, you care for it, you do all you can do to save it? That bird has absolutely no chance on its own. Outside by itself, the next storm, a day or so of no food, the wandering cat; there is no hope.

As regards death, we are the same. And there can be much fear and anxiety. When Job considers his sickness and the death coming to him, he says: **“My days are past; my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart. They make night into day: ‘The light,’ they say, ‘is near to the darkness.’ If I hope for Sheol as my house, if I make my bed in darkness, if I say to the pit, ‘You are my father,’ and to the worm, ‘My mother,’ or ‘My sister,’ where then is my hope? Who will see my hope? Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust?”** (Job 17:11-16).

Application: The One who has cursed this world with death is the only one who can bring life. The One from whom the world flees, is the One we must run to . . . if we are to be saved. Look at vv. 14-15 **“My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed: be my pledge of safety! What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it.”** Look also at v. 20: **“The Lord will save me . . .”** This means our ONLY hope is found in the faithfulness of God who says, **“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other”** (Is. 45:22). This is why Christians do not fear death. Are we uneasy? Are we uncomfortable? Do we fear the unknown? From one perspective, I think the extent of our faith determines the levels of these emotions. However, we look to the ONE and ONLY ONE who can save us.

4. The Reality of Death and the results of this curse upon our lives works for our good.

Throughout this passage I believe we see a man of faith who looked to God no matter what. And when he thinks about the reality of death and all the emotions and thoughts that went with it, he knew that God would work things for his good. In v. 14 he says, **“My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety!”** Then in v. 17: **“Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness . . .”** Now, at this point we do know that God works a miracle. He heals Hezekiah from his sickness and his bitterness goes away. But, there is more. Notice the rest of v. 17: **“but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back.”** Here, we see two very important truths showing the REAL work of God in Hezekiah’s life. He mentions the “love of God” in his life. And then he mentions the “forgiveness of sins.”

This truth is for the Christian. If you are not a Christian, love and forgiveness of sins do not come in this life or the next. “But, if you are a Christian God has set his love upon you to do you good. And he does this through the forgiveness of sins. Just this week, we saw this in the passing of Mr. Russell. In her grieving and sadness, Debbie said to me and Kristen, **“He’s in a better place. He’s with God.”** Here, we see the faithfulness of God to love and save his people. And as we saw last week, this is God’s covenant with his people to do them good and bring salvation. Though death awaits us all, and all the bitter and awful thoughts relating to the curse of death fills this world, for the Christian, God is faithful to work these for our good. What does Romans 8:28 say? **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”**

Let me ask, *“What do you do when you don’t ‘feel’ like God loves you or that your sins are forgiven?”* Do you ever feel like this? Of course! We are not sure when this sickness and healing came for Hezekiah. We don’t know at what stage he was in the war with Assyria and the politics that were taking place. We do know Hezekiah looked to Egypt, and to Babylon, and to other

powers instead of God. Here, it seems to me that Hezekiah didn't feel like a forgiven sinner. And, frankly, we don't know the progression of his faith. But when he says, "*God, cut me off from the loom*" (v. 12), and "*like a lion he breaks all my bones,*" and "*from day to night you bring me to an end,*" it sounds like man who feels like he is the object of divine hostility. Notice what he does. He moves from the circumstances of life to something much deeper: the faithfulness of God to save. And this is God working all things for his good.

Now, for Hezekiah, he looked to the future; he looked forward. He had God's promise, but was yet to see the fulfillment of this promise. Let me ask, how do we know God will do good to his; that He will love us and forgive our sins. Look with me to Rom. 8. Let's begin with the verse right after 28. As I read, consider the goodness of God in Christ for us: "**For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**" This truth includes ALL things, ALL difficulties, trials, and temptations. Let's continue: "**Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."** No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." The same loving God who saved Hezekiah is the same one who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

Let me end with a quick application: As God works in our lives, we tell others. Look at v. 19: "**The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness.**" Fathers teach their children of the faithfulness of God in the midst of life and death.

Today, death is certain. Death comes quickly and easily. Death brings uneasy thoughts and feelings. But for the Christian, all of this will work for our good.