

SUMMER 3 - In Whom Shall We Trust?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 January 1999

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] Almighty God, you indeed are the King of the universe and the Lord of the ages. We thank you that you are sovereign over all nations and all times in history and that you are working things out in and through history to bring about the consummation and fulfilment of all your good purposes for us and for your glory through Jesus Christ.

We praise you for that and pray that you may open our eyes and ears and hearts to receive your word, that our trust and faith in you may be strengthened and that we may exercise that with faithfulness and good works.

For your glory we pray. Amen. Well, in many ways Isaiah 38 and 39 are intriguing chapters, perhaps even a little anticlimactic in some sense.

Last week we saw the great story of Hezekiah's trust in God and how that trust in God and answered prayer by God averted the destruction of Jerusalem by Sennacherib and saw the defeat of his army, his retreat back to Nineveh.

In many ways those two chapters marked a fitting climax for all the first part of the book of Isaiah, pinnacing there with that wonderful illustration of faith that Isaiah has been exhorting kings and people all the way through his book as though climactically, here is the illustration to show you what I'm on about and to show you how God answers prayers and answers those who place their trust in him.

[1 : 5 0] Now we come to two other chapters also about King Hezekiah and like last week's chapters they also are mostly narrative, that is story or prose rather than poetry apart from the writing prayer or psalm of Hezekiah in the middle of today's section.

In some ways these are anticlimactic. They tell us two sides of Hezekiah. The first is again an exercise of some trust. The second is an exercise lacking in trust in chapter 39.

But the first doesn't come really equal or match what we saw last week. Even though it is Hezekiah under crisis, finding some deliverance in that crisis, it falls short of the greatness of the deliverance and trust we saw last week.

So in a sense we get three episodes of Hezekiah last week and then 38 and then 39 and each of them marks a downward step, if you like, of what's going on.

Last week's great trust and deliverance. The second chapter is sort of middling, a bit of trust and a bit of deliverance and then chapter 39 is Hezekiah's failure and the judgement that is sentenced on the people from that.

[3 : 1 0] But what's going on in these chapters actually is very significant within the structure of the whole book of Isaiah. It's a transitional point as we will see. The first 37 chapters in many senses have argued trust God.

But now we're beginning to move into the area of, well, how can that happen when people are so lacking in trust? Pinnaced with Hezekiah's good example, but we see that even he failed.

And the question at the end of tonight's section is, well, how can there be a good future for God's people? How can they trust in God? And they are the issues that 40 to 66 of Isaiah pick up.

The other theme that's perhaps running through these little chapters is to do with the whole issue of who is the Messiah Saviour promised. Way back early in chapters 7, 9, 11 of Isaiah, little glimpses of promises about a child Emmanuel who's about to be born, about the king or the prince of peace, the wonderful counsellor, the one who's from the stump of Jesse, clearly a royal figure, and then a few other glimpses in chapters subsequent to that.

And in some respects, as you read through the book of Isaiah, when you get to Hezekiah, especially what we saw last week, you could be excused for thinking, he's the one. He's the one that's promised.

[4 : 36] He's the royal figure. He's the Davidic descendant. And he's done here, in chapters 36 and 37 we saw last week, exactly what he ought to do. Now in these two chapters, we find that that misconception is put aside.

And we realise, yes, okay, though probably great hopes were pinned on Hezekiah, that's not who those chapters in the early parts are talking about.

And that becomes clearer also in the second half of the book. Especially in chapters 42 to 53. The other question, I suppose, that's still begging at the end of what we saw last week is, if God can save God's people, Judah, Israel, from Assyria, then what about the future?

And why do they end up in exile? That question also gets hints of answers tonight. So then, Hezekiah, two lights, positive, negative, but typical of any of God's people, surely.

Because we also, in some respects, are seen in good light by God, and in other respects, not so. We're a mixture, aren't we? People who are, as Martin Luther said, simultaneously justified, and yet still sinners.

[5 : 54] Because Hezekiah is just like one of us in that respect, I think. The two issues are firstly his illness, and secondly the visit of some Babylonian officials.

Now it's important to say, I think, at this point, that it seems most likely that these two chapters chronologically fit before last week's stories.

That is, what the events of the illness and the envoys from Babylon occurred before Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. Now that ought not to make us think, oh gosh, Isaiah's got it wrong.

No history book is strictly chronological, and ancient histories, like modern histories, weren't. We know in the Gospels, there are things that are put into place, not for their chronology, but for their themes and issues, and that's certainly what Isaiah's doing here.

I don't think you can read any history or any biography of a person that will have every detail in chronological order. It would be so boring. But when you read a biography or a history, it will draw out the themes.

[6 : 57] So you'll read a chapter about their family life, or a chapter about their work life, and so on. And themes are drawn together. That's what's happening here. Now some of the reasons for thinking that these chapters are certainly before what we saw last week in Sennacherib, is that part of the promise in verse 6 is that they will find deliverance from Assyria.

That had already happened at the end of last week's chapter. This is clearly earlier. We're also told that this is 15 years before Hezekiah's death. Now 15 years before his death places him before the events of 701 BC last week.

And also he goes and shows his treasury off to the Babylonian visitors in 39. And we already know that some of that treasure at least had been given to Sennacherib as a payment to try and keep him away from Jerusalem.

So it's more likely that those events all happened before the events of last week. Now that's helpful to bear in mind as we go through. Because it's not so much Hezekiah getting worse in his life that actually in some sense he gets better.

It's just the way Isaiah structured it is leading into the chapters that follow. Alright, enough preamble I think. Verse 1.

[8 : 13] In those days, a fairly general term really, and Hezekiah became sick. It's not just a cold, he's at the point of death. Isaiah's own words confirm that in the same verse.

Because Isaiah comes to him. We're not told that he was called by Hezekiah but he turns up there and probably prompted by God I guess. And he came to him and said to him, Thus says the Lord, Set your house in order for you shall die, you shall not recover.

Now they're not very comforting words. This is a serious illness at the point of death. So we've got to think in terms of if you were Hezekiah, this is a major crisis in your life.

It's probably in many respects just as major as the threat of war that we saw last week. This is not a trivial case by comparison to the besieging of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in Hezekiah's eyes.

They are each life-threatening and in each case he's really on the point of death. Now we know that at the end of the chapter it's to do with a boil. Now that might sound a little bit trivial but clearly it's something that's very serious indeed and he's about to die.

[9 : 30] And Isaiah's words are to him, Set your house in order. Now I discovered in preparing this that in the Book of Common Prayer, which for those who aren't Anglicans, was the original prayer book of 1611 for the Anglican Church in England, when I as an ordained minister visit people who are sick, this is what I'm supposed to do.

And if the person who's sick hath not before disposed of his goods, let him then be admonished by me to make his will and to declare his debts, what he oweth and what is owing unto him, for the better discharging of his conscience and the quietness of his executors.

That men should often be put in remembrance to take order for the settling of their temple estates whilst they are in health. I must say that threatens me and I think it would threaten those because if I turn up and you're sick and I start giving all that to you, you will think, I'm like the prophet Isaiah, you will not recover.

Well, it's a bit quaint, I guess. But in many respects, Isaiah was acting like a Reformation Anglican priest, I suppose.

One of the extraordinary things about the verse though, when Isaiah says to him, you will not recover, is that he did. Has Isaiah got it wrong?

[11 : 01] Is Isaiah speaking off the cuff without waiting for God's word? Or maybe God's got it wrong? Or is something else the case? Maybe God changes his mind when he says to Hezekiah, you'll live for 15 more years.

Or is it rather something perhaps a bit more subtle? That God is using a situation to test or train or discipline or sharpen Hezekiah.

And that God is sovereign, it's not as though He just changes his mind and suddenly takes pity on him, but rather using a situation, He knows what He's going to do in a sense, He's sovereign, His plan is there, but in effect, He's revealing it in part.

Now in some sense, I think that's probably right. That I think is how God works several times in the Bible, that He brings His people to a situation of some dilemma or crisis in order to test or train us or discipline us who provoke us to righteousness or to provoke us to faith or repentance or whatever the situation may be.

Now in Hezekiah's case, it was to provoke him to pray, to exercise faith, and that faith was then answered. And the whole event, because remember this comes before last week's story, is to lead him to greater faith, because last week's prayer was a great prayer of faith.

[12 : 31] So it seems to me that this incident is a faith-provoking incident for Hezekiah. And we see the fruit of it in last week's section, because the order is the reverse.

Now in our own lives, I think that often happens. God, in a sense, may direct us into a crisis or situation, but in order to lead us to see anew His mercy or grace or to stimulate our faith.

Now if that is the case, as I'm sure it is, and many times in the Bible is, then it behoves us to respond to crises in a godly way. And rather by jumping the gun and complaining and shaking our fist at God and mumbling and moaning, rather to think and ask and pray, what am I to learn in this situation?

How am I to grow in this situation? What faith is being provoked in this situation? How can I keep on trusting God in this situation? And so on. That seemed to be the case for Hezekiah.

His response to these words is to turn his face to the wall, which seems to be an act of sorrow and pray. He doesn't rage against God and nowhere in the words of Hezekiah that follow in this chapter is there any complaint that it's undeserved.

[14 : 01] Indeed, we'll see hints that it's Hezekiah thought that this was probably deserved. But notice that he does pray too. They say that, you know, a huge percentage of the population even today prays, but they pray in times of crisis.

They're probably not prayers of faith and they're probably not all that well formed either. Hezekiah prays, which is a positive thing, surely. But his prayer isn't a great prayer here.

Remember, O Lord, he says in verse 3, I implore you how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart and have done what is good in your sight. And that's his prayer.

Then he weeps. It's almost as if he begins his prayer and then can't continue because he just breaks down in tears. Because in a sense his prayer doesn't really quite ask for anything.

There's not really a petition. The only request or command is God remember. Now, when Moses prays to God remember in Exodus 32, he goes on to give a basis for that and to hint at what that remembering will accomplish.

[15 : 11] But that doesn't happen here. Hezekiah's prayer is a prayer of faith, but it's a weak prayer. I'm not meaning to be too critical of that because we'll actually see that it's answered far and above what Hezekiah expected.

But it's not a solid prayer in many respects. To ask God to remember though is not just that God will have something, thoughts in His mind.

When God remembers and indeed when God's people remember, they act. So there is a sense in which it's calling God to act. When God remembers the covenant He made with Noah in Genesis 8 verse 1, He stops the rain.

When God remembers the covenant He made with Abraham in Exodus chapter 2 when the people are crying out in their slavery, He begins a process to bring about their redemption. So when Hezekiah does call God to remember, He is in one sense calling Him to act, but the specifics of that are not stated here.

Now part of what he's thinking is is that he's desperate to live, but he's not old. He's in the prime of his life. And that's hinted at in some of the verses here.

[16 : 27] He's probably about 39 years old. And when he says, remember I have, I implore you, how I've walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart and have done what is good in your sight, I think we ought not to think, well, that's a boastful man.

We may be reluctant to say that about ourselves, but nonetheless there is truth in what Hezekiah is saying. When the writer of Kings sums up Hezekiah's life after his death, he said this about him, Hezekiah did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his ancestor David had done.

He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, cut down the sacred pole, broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it. He trusted in the Lord God of Israel so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him or among those who were before him, for he held fast to the Lord.

He did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses. Now, at one level, if you read that, you think this guy was perfect. But even though that description is so full of praise of Hezekiah, it does not say this is a perfect person.

Notice how he was compared to David who did all the things, good things that David did. But David, of course, was an adulterer and a murderer. Hezekiah is being put on his level. That is a sinner who has done great things, by and large, whose life has been faithful, but whose sins are forgiven.

[17 : 58] So, Hezekiah's statement in verse 3 is not a boast of sinlessness. It is a statement of faith. And that, in the end, is what the Bible asks of us.

Yes, in one sense we could say, it's asking for us to be sinless. But it is asking us, really, to be faithful. That is, to do good, walk after God's ways, obey Him, but be forgiven for our failures, because the Bible knows that we fail.

So, here and now, in this life, that sums up what we are meant to be like. Hezekiah's weeping shows that he's desperate also to live.

And one of the reasons for that may be that he's childless at this point. According to the chronology in the Book of Kings, his son is yet to be born another three years before that happens.

Bad son, though he was, Manasseh. So, there's a sense here in which his desperation at this sentence of death is maybe bound up with the fact that he's childless.

[18 : 59] Now, for anybody, in one sense, to die childless in that day and age was also sort of cutting off of their line. But for the Davidic king to die childless was more than that, because where would God's promise of a king be fulfilled if the king dies without a son?

So, there's a sense in which Hezekiah's grief at the sentence of death is multifaceted in a way. He's also, no doubt, in distress, because remember, this is happening just before Sennacherib besieges Jerusalem in the year, two years, maybe three, before that happens.

So, if he dies now, he leaves his nation without an heir and very vulnerable to the Assyrian threat, apart from the fact that Hezekiah's still in his thirties and in the prime of life.

Well, that little prayer, maybe it's just a half prayer before he broke down crying, is instantaneously answered, it seems, in Kings, which has a parallel account to this.

We're told that before Isaiah even got out of the palace, the word of the Lord came to him. He's told by God to say to Hezekiah, thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David, I've heard your prayer, I've seen your tears, I'll add 15 years to your life.

[20 : 22] In many ways, that's an astonishing answer. Hezekiah's prayer is not particularly well formed, I mean, it's okay, but it's not really one of the great prayers of the Bible.

Hezekiah, it seems, from later on in this chapter, probably deserves death for his sins. And yet God says, well, I've heard you and I'll give you 15 more years.

Undeserved, really. Admittedly, in the answer, notice that God says, I am the Lord, the God of your ancestor David. Now, often in the Old Testament, it'll be I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham.

But here it's David, because David's the king. Or was the king, 200, 300 years before. And that mention of God being the father of David is an allusion to the promises to David, that there would always be a Davidic king.

So in a sense, God is saying to Hezekiah, the reason I will answer your prayer positively and give you 15 more years is because I'm going to be faithful to the promises I made to David.

[21 : 43] It's not because you're a good chap. It's because of my faithfulness to my promises. Now, that's alluded there. I know it's not spelled out in great detail. But in many other prayers of the Old Testament, that is the issue that's going on.

When Moses prays on Mount Sinai for rebellious Israel who've made the golden calf, it's the same situation. Moses prays, remember the covenant that you've made with Abraham.

And God's answer is to say, yes, I will keep the promises I've made to Abraham and I will not destroy this nation now. Although there will be some punishment for their sin.

You see, the grounds of answered prayer are God's faithfulness to His promises, not the merit of the prayer, in this case Hezekiah, even though he's talked about his own godly life.

Now, that's always worth bearing in mind when we pray. But we don't pray, God, heal me of this illness because, you know, I'm a good person or you could do with me here on earth or because I'd miss out on a lot of nice things.

[22 : 47] Although some of those things no doubt were running through Hezekiah's mind. In the end, the reason God would answer a prayer like that and bring mercy is because of His faithfulness to His promises.

So it's always worth thinking in those terms because it puts our own strife and dilemmas into a much bigger perspective. And that bigger perspective would be a greater encouragement to us to faith in Jesus Christ.

Notice too that God says, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears. They're little words that we would just skip over because we assume them and know them. But in the book of Isaiah, one of the things that's an undercurrent in the early chapters and comes to the fore in chapters 40 to 55 is that God is the powerful God above all the idols of the other nations.

And the idols of other nations are just made of wood and stone and they do not have eyes to see or ears to hear. But God here says, I have seen, I have heard.

You see, it's just another reminder of the uniqueness of the God of the Bible compared to other so-called gods and a reminder of His power and ability to act.

[24 : 03] Now I said at the prologue that this incident, even though there is answered prayer and some deliverance, is a sort of step down from last week. Not because the issue is a minor issue.

I think it's a major issue. It's a step down because all Hezekiah gets is a reprieve, not unconditional, absolute deliverance.

So He's told, I will add 15 years to your life. That is, He's still going to die. He's still going to die. He's mortal. He's not the Messiah of the earlier chapters.

He's still going to die anyway. And one of the themes that runs through the prayer and psalm that follows is this issue of mortality.

Hezekiah is just a mortal. The promised one lies yet further in the future. In verse 6, we get something even more astonishing, perhaps, than the fact that God answered the prayer in the first place and that is to say, and, moreover, I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria and defend this city.

[25 : 17] Now, Hezekiah hasn't even mentioned that. Clearly, the city is coming under threat. We're not quite sure how long exactly before Sennacherib's siege this is, but it would be fairly obvious for the two to three years before that siege that Sennacherib was on his way.

So, here is God promising a big thing that wasn't even asked for and is not part of the initial crisis. Now, I think that what this is showing is God's grace being manifest far and above what you'd expect.

I mean, there's grace there in giving him 15 years. But this shows God's grace in a sharper light or a bigger light. Something that's extraordinary, not even asked for and yet God would do for Hezekiah and for the people.

God gives far more than you can ask or even imagine, St. Paul says. And here's an example of that. No wonder you see that in the last week's passage, which happened after this week's, Hezekiah prays with so much faith.

Because if you'd prayed a sort of feeble prayer, and got an answer like this, then the next time you prayed, surely you'd pray with more confidence. And God kept His promise because no king of Assyria ever defeated Jerusalem in history.

[26 : 48] When Jerusalem fell 120 years later, it was the Babylonians, not the Assyrians. Now, the other thing that's going on here, I think, is this.

The mention of the city, Jerusalem, in this verse, brings in, sort of, makes Hezekiah the king and his own reprieve of life run parallel with Jerusalem.

That is, I will give you a reprieve, you'll live for a while. And in a sense, it's saying, I will give Jerusalem a reprieve as well. So in a sense, Hezekiah and Jerusalem sort of parallel each other.

Now, that theme comes out later in the book as well because Jerusalem's being defended here against the Assyrians isn't forever.

It's only against the Assyrians. But as I say, 120 years later, it was another group of people, the Babylonians, and Jerusalem in that case fell. That's the reprieve. It's not saying Jerusalem will never fall.

[27 : 56] It's saying that I will prevent it from falling to the Assyrians. So there's a sense in which both Hezekiah and Jerusalem get a reprieve from God, but it's not an absolute, everlasting deliverance.

It's limited, great though it is. And that, you see, gives us just a little glimpse, a little hint. We know Hezekiah's going to die. The implication could be that, well, Jerusalem's going to fall, not to the Assyrians but someone else.

And that becomes more specific in the next chapter as we'll see in a few minutes. And that becomes the whole basis and undergirding of all the chapters that follow in Isaiah. So you see, what's happening here is a transition.

Now one of the reasons I'm saying that is partly to help you see how some of the themes are developing, but also because so many scholars just divide Isaiah at the end of chapter 39 and treat them as two completely almost unrelated books.

Far from it, it seems to me. They're very heavily related. Well then comes the statement of a sign being given to you in verse 7. In the book of Kings we're told that Hezekiah asked for a sign and the last verse of this chapter, verse 22, tells us that Hezekiah also had said, what is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the Lord?

[29 : 20] Isaiah tells him this will be the sign and that the Lord will do this thing that He's promised. I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps.

And so it happened. Now what's going on here? Because that sounds rather strange. Firstly, we saw last week how Hezekiah and his father Ahaz are contrasted.

Ahaz refused to take a sign. Here again we find Hezekiah asking for a sign. Hezekiah is clearly a man of some faith. Ahaz, his father, was not.

And the sign is a strange one. The sun will turn back on the dial of Ahaz in the NRSV. Probably what that is is a set of steps.

Nobody is quite certain about this. It may have been deliberately built as a sundial or it may have been a set of steps that in practice acted as a sundial.

[30 : 30] Because clearly when sun lands on steps you can see very clearly the march of the sun as it declines or as it rises. The other day, Friday, I was at the MCG for the cricket.

It was stifflingly hot, so hot that periodically I would turn around and look up the aisle way next to me to see has the sun come down the steps any? And it didn't.

It just stayed still. And we just sort of kept sweltering. But here clearly is a set of steps where the direction the steps in relation to the sun show that as the sun sets the shadow comes down the steps further and further.

So whether deliberately or unintentionally it is acting it seems as a sundial. The mention of Ahaz is probably these are the steps of Ahaz. Probably some steps in Jerusalem he built.

They're known probably in Hezekiah's day as Ahaz's steps. That's what it's referring to it seems from what I've read. Now it could be that what this sign is is that God actually stopped the sun and moved the sun or maybe moved the earth in relationship to the sun.

[31 : 41] That of course is possible though most of the commentators sort of shy away from that radicalness. Or it could just be that somehow the refraction of light they say changed so that the shadow didn't extend and actually went up the steps.

In one sense I don't think it matters how it happened. It is clearly strange and unusual not to be expected. One older commentators sort of pondered the fact that Hezekiah in his sickbed may have even been able to see these steps from his window as he lay in bed.

That's a little bit fanciful but nonetheless it could be true. And what he sees is yes the sun setting and the shadows coming down and down and down and all of a sudden he sees the shadow reversing ten steps.

Now whatever happens here and anything is possible with God it is clearly something odd unexpected and strange. It's a miracle we might say that's happening here.

Sometimes people tell us oh the miracles only happened in three particular points in the Bible Moses and Joshua Elijah Elisha Jesus and the book of Acts but here's one that doesn't fit that pattern. I think that's a very limited view of miracles.

[32 : 53] They are gathered in places but they are scattered as well throughout the old Bible as a whole. well that's the sign and it's to affirm Hezekiah's faith.

It's to give him confidence in what God has promised will happen. Then we get the rest of the chapter virtually is a psalm or song or writing of Hezekiah.

It's after this whole incident's over he's up and about and he's well and now he writes this hymn or psalm it's very much like a psalm of lament in the Old Testament.

It's not quite like that it's various differences to that we won't worry about tonight. The emphasis in it is on mortality not deliverance so it doesn't quite end with the same strength of praise though that's there as a lament psalm does.

Well what does this little psalm say? The first four verses or five verses 10 to 14 tell us about what it was like to be sick.

[33 : 57] Not only that what it was like to be on the point of death. In the noontide of my days verse 10 says which is in the prime of his life age 39 as I said I must depart consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years.

There's a sense in which that statement is complaining that life is being robbed from him, taken from him and that would be unfair I think to say because the essence of this whole section tells us, reminds us as other places in the Bible do that life is in the end a gift.

It's not our right. It's God's gift. And Hezekiah is wrong to think that God has robbed him of his life. Life is always God's gift.

That's a way of we should be thinking as well about our lives. So often when people are terminally ill in young life they complain, they say it's not fair.

I think in one sense you can understand that of course and sympathize with it. But in another sense life was never ours by right in the first place. It's God's gift, small or long, short or long.

[35 : 13] He's at the gates of Sheol, that is the entrance point to the place of the dead. Now Sheol is a strange place. It's never really described in the Old Testament and it has slightly different connotations which make it very hard to quite define.

It does seem to be ill defined probably because God hasn't told these people in the Old Testament all that much about it, to be honest. It's not like hell but it has lots of negative connotations.

It's certainly not heaven. But then you see because the resurrection had yet to happen there is a sense in which there was uncertainty in the Old Testament about what happened after death. There's very little expectation of real life after death.

Some glimpses of it here and there, Daniel 12 for example, but Sheol is a shady sort of area. The psalmist tells us that it's under God's domain and rule.

Of course that must be the case. He made everything. The sense of gates may suggest an openness to go in but it's also a sense of perhaps a prison. And we find more often than not Sheol described in slightly negative terms and that's what we find in this course of this psalm here.

[36 : 29] So it's not perhaps quite as bad as hell but then it may not be much better either. He says in verse 11, I said I shall not see the Lord in the land of the living.

I shall look upon mortals no more among the inhabitants of the world. I think he's ruining there or mourning what he's going to miss in life. It's not actually quite saying God's not going to be there.

It's saying I will miss seeing God in the land of the living. It's not saying I will miss seeing God but it's all missing God here on earth.

Now it leaves open the question of well what relationship do you have with God there? I don't think there's much probably and a later verse we'll get to in a minute seems to imply that as well.

And nor will he have fellowship with other people it seems at least in the same way as living on earth. His dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent.

[37 : 31] A tent which is always temporary of course but often in the ancient world would be much more permanent than you and I going down to Rosebud and pitching our tent for a week. A tent would be something a bit more permanent than that.

But all of a sudden this tent is being taken up. A house being taken down. That's the analogy of death here. And the next analogy he uses in verse 12 is like a weaver I've rolled up my life.

He cuts me up off from the room. Two people at work there. The weaver, Hezekiah, the one who's weaving out his life and carrying on enjoying the patterns that he's making.

But all of a sudden he, God, presumably, cuts him off from the loo. That is it's God who determines the limits of life. The weaver, Hezekiah, is happily weaving his life along and then God suddenly says stop, that's it, end.

They're the analogies he uses. But notice how there's a sense in which he acknowledges God's control over life and death. death, you see, is removing what looks permanent and taking it away.

[38 : 43] And then in verse 13, he's crying for help until morning. Like a lion, he, God, breaks all my bones. Metaphorically, I'm sure, is what's being spoken about there.

It's pain. He's longing for relief from this. But there's never a sense in which I deserve relief. I deserve to live my three score years and ten.

None of that. He's suffering, he's bemoaning his plight, but he's not blaming God for it. I think that's worth remembering.

In verse 14, he likens his cries to just a bird, which probably is a suggestion of helplessness. He's just like a little bird, fairly trivial perhaps.

his eyes are weary with looking upward. He's tired, he's sore eyes, he's giving up really, looking to God for help it seems. Perhaps that's suggesting that he's been sick for some time.

[39 : 45] He's losing his strength, his cry is futile. He's acknowledging here his absolute helplessness, something we saw last week as a commendable thing to do.

Oh Lord, I'm oppressed. Be my security. This prayer, thus far, acknowledges that death has a sting to it.

That death is not just the passing into a glorious heaven. And from the beginning of Genesis 3, I was going to say Genesis, but I shouldn't do that, from Genesis 3 onwards, death has come into the world through sin.

So there is an underlying expectation that death does have a sting to it throughout the Bible and throughout life. Not many of us at death jump up with joy and say, yes, we're sad.

Everybody's sad. Even Christians are sad. Because of the acknowledgement that death is not quite right. It's got a sting. It's not part of God's best intentions initially here.

[40 : 54] Well then, from verse 15, there's a slight change in mood. It doesn't quite burst into praise and triumphant relief.

But nonetheless, 15 and 16 seem to be a slightly different mood. What can I say? For he's spoken to me. That is, God's spoken. What can I do? God's word is irrevocable.

What's the point of me even saying or speaking or praying? All my sleep has fled because of the bitterness of my soul.

Now that's a tricky line. It's a slightly different translation in the NIV. Some of the Hebrew in these sections is very difficult.

Nobody's quite sure on a couple of words and a couple of expressions. I think the issue that's going on here is not so much sleep fleeing but what am I going to do?

[42 : 01] The NIV has I will walk humbly all my years. God's spoken to me. And I think he's saying that that's all we can do is walk humbly before God.

That's the sum total of what God demands of us. Seems to be what he's saying there. And then he goes on in verse 16. Oh Lord, by these things people live.

That is, I think, by walking humbly. That's where life is found, by walking humbly before God. And in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh, restore me to health and make me live.

He acknowledges that life is in God's hands and it is only up to God to grant life or bring death. He himself is helpless.

But now in verse 17 we move mood again. And this now is into more confidence after the relief. So the first part of this psalm is clearly what was like when he was suffering.

[43 : 02] Now comes the relief. Surely it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness. But you have held back my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back.

Now the point there that Hezekiah is making is that this suffering that he's gone through, this illness to the point of death is ultimately for his benefit. He's now able to see, but in retrospect, how God is bringing good out of evil.

Why God has brought it about in the first place, in order to train and discipline and provoke him to faith. After the event, Hezekiah can see it. So we, if we're going to be wise Christians in the midst of an event, ought to be cautious, ought not to be too, perhaps demanding of God, why is this happening to me, but rather first saying, well how should I respond properly to this situation, and maybe in retrospect I might understand and see more of why this has happened and what good has come out of it.

Now that's never a promise that we understand, but it is a promise that good comes out of evil for those who love the Lord, in Romans 8. so understanding ought not to be our prayer so much as how do I respond with faith and godliness in this situation.

And verse 17 finishes by acknowledging sins forgiven. Yes, he said back in the early part that he was a person who walked before God and was faithful, but he also knows that he's a person who's a sinner, and he knows that his sins are forgiven, because in the Old Testament especially, but in the New as well, there is an association of sin and death, a sickness and sin, sorry, is what I mean to say.

[44 : 51] Now, we can't always say that every sickness is a direct result of that person's sin. John 9, I think it is, tells us otherwise in the case of the man born blind.

But by and large, all sickness in our world, directly or indirectly, is a cause of sin. The world in the first place was perfect. And so Hezekiah sees the fact that he's being given relief here as indicating his sins are forgiven, just like the lame man in Mark chapter 2, the same sort of thing, when Jesus healed him and told him, rise, your sins are forgiven.

And then in verse 18, 4, that is a reason being given here for God's answer. Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you, those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.

Now, this, I think, is probably specific to Hezekiah, who saw himself as dying a sinner outside the love of God, before God gave him this relief.

There are other places in the Old Testament where God can be praised in Sheol. So it seems to me that the concept here of Hezekiah is of a sinner dying without being forgiven.

[46 : 43] And therefore, there will be no praise of God in Sheol, or the pit, or the place of the dead, or whatever it's called. Now, the point of the verse, though, is not so much to tell us about Sheol, but to tell us about why God has given him relief.

The reason God's given him his relief is because Hezekiah will not be able to praise God in the place of the dead. That is, God has answered the prayer for God's sake, for the praise of his own glory's sake.

That seems to be the implication of that verse. That's what goes on to say in verse 19, the living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day.

God is the God of the living, not the dead. Jesus said that. And Hezekiah is saying the same thing here. That by preserving his life, he is increasing his praise of God.

Now, the New Testament, of course, fills this out in a bigger way. It tells us that the place of the dead is more specifically, in the end, heaven or hell, and that in heaven it's full of God's praise.

[47 : 54] So we ought not to see here a complete doctrine of the life after death, but rather a preliminary step before the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. There's irony, too, in the end of the verse when he says fathers make known to children your faithfulness, because he's childless at this point.

So there's a sense in which he can't even live on through his children praising God. Then in verse 20, the Lord will save me and we'll sing to stringed instruments all the days of our lives at the house of the Lord, a statement of now confident praise.

So this psalm has been moving from gloom to uncertainty to resignation to muted praise and now more and more confident praise.

God will save. Singing is always a statement of joy. We saw that at the end of chapter 35 two weeks ago with the redeemed coming into Zion, singing with joy and playing music and so on.

And that's what's going to happen here. And notice that it's at the house of the Lord as well, the temple. That's the focus of this. We ought not to think, oh, the temple, it's so sort of strange and foreign to us.

[49 : 04] The temple is where God meets people. And so to have a temple focus in the Old Testament is very positive because singing will always be where God meets his people.

Now, of course, for that, that doesn't mean a building, but through a person, Jesus Christ. So we ought not to shy away from Old Testament temple imagery just because it seems to imply sort of maybe a ritualism or sacrifice that's foreign to us.

I think we've got to see in the temple a foretaste of heaven, God and his people perfectly together. In 2 Kings 20, Isaiah gives Hezekiah in this context a prophecy that he will be restored to health and within three days praising God in the temple.

So clearly this psalm is alluding to that. Now, the last two verses of this chapter are strange in a sense because they seem out of place and they seem really in Isaiah to be explanatory notes.

The first one is that Isaiah had said, let them take a lump of figs and apply it to the boil so that he may recover. Now, that would have happened earlier on, but it's put here to show the means of recovery.

[50 : 17] It's a poultice of figs and sweet, sugary substances that figs would be part of or produce would help kill the bacterial germs and help the pus come out in some way that I don't understand.

Doesn't sound all that pleasant to me, but it's interesting, isn't it, that the miraculous healing that God gives is brought about through a poultice of figs, something that even today in the Middle East is sometimes used for medicinal purposes.

You see, God's healing isn't always what we might say supernaturally miraculous. God uses the natural and the supernatural. After all, in God's eyes, it's all natural.

So we ought not to think that somehow natural healing, medicinal healing, is not God at work or not God's good provision at work either.

We ought to give thanks to God as much for that sort of healing as the extraordinary, inexplicable healings as well, and not think that one is better than the other.

[51 : 27] And then verse 22 is, Hezekiah had also said, what is the sign? And I presume that that's explaining why a sign was given to him in verse 7 as well. We ought to be cautious about asking God for signs because we are told in the Bible that we ought not to test God.

But there are other times like here in chapter 7 of Ahaz and with Ahaz and Gideon in Judges where they do ask for signs and are commended for it. Or they should have asked for signs.

So it seems to be that a sign can be asked for on two points. Fundamentally, if you're a person of some faith, asking for a sign is to confirm faith and strengthen it and that seemed to be a good thing. But fundamentally, if you're an unbeliever, a real doubter, then asking for a sign is probably not going to work and is in fact testing God.

Sometimes people will say to us Christians, show me a miracle and then I'll believe in God. I don't think they would even if they saw one. It seems to me that the function of miracles is not so much to bring unbelief into belief, so much as to confirm belief.

Now this little chapter brings us back with a jolt down to earth, I guess, from the heights of healing, of illness, we now come to a great act of lack of faith and trust.

[52 : 55] If we're reading this without realising the original chronology, we think Hezekiah's just fallen here. I mean, he's had so much faith there and even in the last chapter, now he abandons it all.

But remember that this event also preceded what we saw last week. In a sense, it's been put here as the transition into the second half of the book.

It's to answer a question about why does Babylon become the enemy later on and why is it therefore that we go into exile? It's to prepare us therefore for the later chapters of the book.

It's to also tell us that the rescue of Jerusalem by the Assyrians was not the sort of final act of salvation as though it's now a closed book.

Everything's all hunky-dory forever and ever, end of story. That was a reprieve, remember. There is more to come and Babylon becomes the second movement in a sense of this book of Isaiah.

[53 : 55] So it's to show us that the deliverance we saw last week is really just temporary. It's also to dispel the false hopes probably placed upon Hezekiah.

It shows him in a very fallen way. And it's also, in the end, to move into another theme.

The first half of the book we saw is the theme of God can be trusted. But now we see, as we've seen in other glimpses, people don't trust Him.

So the issue now is not so much God can be trusted as, well, how are people going to trust God? How can they exercise trust? What will achieve that?

And that's what the second half of the book, I suppose, in a sense, addresses. Now this chap, I think the Bible is a great place to find children's names, Merodach Baladan.

[54 : 52] I defy any of you to call your child Merodach Baladan, but if you do have one, then I'll baptise him or her. And he's son of Baladan.

You'd think if you had your name Baladan, you wouldn't give it to your child, but he does. And he sent letters to him. Now he's the king of Babylon. Now at this time, Babylon was not all that strong.

Babylon is sort of Kuwait's southern Iraq area, the swampy area above the Persian Gulf. 1750 BC, it was a great power, and well before that as well, Sumer and so on.

Hamur Rabbi was perhaps the last great leader. But then it began to weigh. And periodically it flares up as always a nation or nation state. But by and large, it was fairly much weak for those thousand years or so.

Now this chap, Merodach Baladan, when Sennacherib's father was the Assyrian emperor, he resisted him. That guy's, the Assyrian guy's name was Sargon. And for about 10 or 11 years, Merodach Baladan ruled over an independent Babylon.

[55 : 58] Not a major world power, mind you, a small country. But then he lost power to Sargon the Assyrian. When Sargon died in 705, Merodach Baladan seizes his chance.

And that of course happens throughout history. Powerful ruler dies, and every man and his dog jump in to get their chance to take some power. So he reclaimed Babylon again and ruled it for about two years when Sennacherib came and defeated him.

And there were little brief tussles for a couple of years after that. So it seems that this is before Sennacherib comes to Jerusalem. Because by that stage, Babylon's no longer really an independent nation.

It becomes strong again. This is sort of jumping ahead, but for the sake of completeness. Only in 625. So another, what, 75 years later, Nabopolassar was the emperor at the time, a great man.

And he built up Babylon to be the world power. He conquered Assyria. And then his son, Nebuchadnezzar, was the man who furthered that and conquered Jerusalem as well. That's another story.

[57 : 07] Now this man seems to send a letter and a present to Hezekiah, trying to get in his good books, and congratulating him on his recovery. And it could well be, we're told in 2 Chronicles, that he also heard about the sundial and the sun standing still or moving backwards.

And no doubt, as astrology was so influential in Babylon, he wanted to find out more, so he sent this envoy over. But it's not just a kind gesture.

It is no doubt a political one as well. He's wanting to form an alliance with Judah against Assyria. They are both relatively weak countries. And they are needing desperately to stay independent from the Assyrians.

So he sends his envoys over. Now, Hezekiah welcomed them in verse 2. He showed them the treasure house, silver, gold, spices, oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouse. That's emphatic there.

There's nothing that he didn't show him. That's fairly unwise, we would think, initially, and it was right. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.

[58 : 13] Now probably Hezekiah has fallen to flattery. I mean, Babylon's come to us, little old us. Oh, isn't it great that they think so highly of us?

I'm going to show them that we're a worthy ally. I'm going to show them that we're something. Let's show them all the temple treasury and so on. No doubt Hezekiah is being flattered here.

And so often flattery diffuses faith. Surely that happened for him as well. Must have been an honour to have the envoys of Babylon come to call on you.

So he seeks to impress, whether it's a motive of pride or political alliance or combination of motives, probably. Certainly the treasure in the temple was great.

Isaiah went to him, unbidden by Hezekiah, that is, but sent, no doubt, by God. And he asks questions. Because so often when God comes to a sinner doing something wrong, he asks questions.

[59 : 17] The first thing that God said to Adam and Eve, a question. To Cain, a question. To Hezekiah through the prophet, a question.

I think that's an act of grace. I think God doesn't jump down with a statement of condemnation and judgment initially. He gives an opportunity to confess or to repent.

Usually it's not taken. But God's wanting to get the situation right and clear before he'll make his statement of judgment. So I think it's a statement of grace.

And Hezekiah maybe feels ashamed. It's hard to say. He's a bit coy in his response. Isaiah's questions are, what do those men say? Where do they come from? And Hezekiah says, from a distant land.

And then maybe he thinks better of that. We're not quite sure, but they came to me from Babylon. Maybe he's proud, indeed, that they've come all that way from a far country, from Babylon.

[60 : 16] And Isaiah asks, what have they seen in your house? I mean, they may not have seen anything, but clearly he knows, just like God knows when he approaches Adam with questions as well.

And Hezekiah answers, they've seen all that's in my house. There's nothing in my storehouse that I did not show them. Boastful, maybe. Pride, probably. And then comes the word of judgment. No confession here.

No acknowledgement of stupidity. I mean, it's political stupidity as much as spiritual stupidity. And then the rebuke follows in verse 6. Days are coming when all that's in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon.

Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away. Well, they were great, great, great, great grandsons, but that expression covers them in the Hebrew Bible.

They shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. Statement of judgment and one that came true. These words probably 703 BC, 697, sorry, 597 BC, just over 100 years later, Nebuchadnezzar comes to Jerusalem and takes away the leaders, replaces the king with a puppet king, cuts off the wealthy, including people like Ezekiel, all the way to exile.

[61 : 38] Ten years later, Judah rebelled, Nebuchadnezzar comes back, this time he doesn't leave Jerusalem standing, he destroys it in 587 BC. God's words of judgment fulfilled.

Not just because of Hezekiah's folly. This is a typical folly, I think, because elsewhere in the Old Testament we see that it's also because of his son Manasseh's sin, we find that it's the people's sin, and so on.

It's a culmination of things. But it's lack of faith in the end in God that brings about his judgment. So Hezekiah's lack of faith in God here is just typical of other sins that are committed in other times leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem.

And so often, of course, God's judgment's appropriate. Okay, you want to show the Babylonians all your treasure? Well, I'll give it to them. They'll take it away. You want to toss your lot in with the Babylonians?

Okay, they'll come and they'll kill you and defeat you, and they will rule over you. You want to toss your lot in with the Babylonians? Then you'll go there in exile.

[62 : 47] And that's what happened. So often we find in Isaiah the adage that comes true that that which we trust in will one day turn against us and destroy us.

And it happened to Ahaz with Assyria, and it happens to Hezekiah with Babylon. We see, of course, these verses are a bridge into what follows because the context of chapter 40, one of the great chapters of the Bible we'll look at next week, is of exile in Babylon, a hundred and more years later.

And we know that there were kings carried or king carried off to exile. Daniel became a courtier or eunuch in the house of the Babylonian emperor.

So often God's word is fulfilled so precisely. And then to top it all off, Hezekiah responds by saying, the word of the Lord that you have spoken is good. And he's not saying, yes, that's a fair judgment.

He's saying good because we're told he thought there will be peace and security in my days. I want rest. It doesn't matter what happens after I've gone. I've only got 15 years left.

[63 : 53] But I'll have peace. What a selfish statement or response. I don't think it's a positive statement to say that God's word's good. It's clearly meant to be a selfish and wrong response.

We also know it's ironic because in Hezekiah's remaining 15 years, there wasn't peace. He was besieged within two years and that's hardly peace. Well, let me finish by reminding us of where we're at.

Hezekiah is not the Messiah. He's not the agent of salvation. At one point, he's a model of trust in God, but he's fallible. And his failure leads to, in the end, the exile that will come 100 years down the track.

It's a reminder of trusting in God in good and bad times. That trusting God is not just sort of a once-off affair, but something that should be practiced all the time in every situation.

It's a reminder too, especially this last chapter, that the world's values are seductive. They will lead us away from faith. And God's people in any age are easily diverted by wealth or the allure of gold and treasury and flattery, for that matter as well.

[65 : 11] We've seen in this first half of the book that God is trustworthy. Isaiah keeps exhorting them to trust in him. Hezekiah is in part an example of that. That's foundational to the book.

But what we now see is the issue of, well, nobody does seem to trust God rightly. How can that situation be rectified? And we'll begin to see the answer next week in chapter 40.

Well, let's... Please be seated. And there may be a couple of people who've got some questions from what I've said.

Anything you'd like to ask? In my lectures, I sometimes think lack of questions mean everybody's either asleep, totally satisfied, or so confused.

They are. I think...

[66 : 22] I think I'd be reticent to say that. In Luke 16, there's the parable of Lazarus and Dives, I think. That's what you're referring to. Where there is a chasm between the two.

Good and bad on either side. I think... I think I'd probably say that in that, we have a parable to try and make a point.

And it may not be exactly what Hades or Sheol is like. And I think that's fair in a parable, because Jesus is making a point not so much about what it's like, but about the fact that people won't listen even if he rises from the dead and so on.

So I'm not sure that you would... We should ground an understanding of Sheol as having two compartments on the basis of that. I'm not sure that there's anything in the Old Testament that indicates two compartments in Sheol.

There are indications, though, that the death of the wicked and the death of the righteous are perhaps somehow different, but it's never really filled out in any detail.

[67 : 32] And I think that's awaiting the resurrection. And remember, that parable's told pre-resurrection as well. Any other questions? It's extraordinary, isn't it?

Hezekiah's son, for those who don't know, was Manasseh, who reigned for a long time and was very bad. Probably the worst of Judah. And it is ironic. It's ironic that an evil king would be the longest reigning king.

So it doesn't always work, does it? But then the psalmist tells us that sort of thing as well. You know, the evil seemed to prosper in this world and the righteous seemed to suffer. The point is, I guess, is that the Davidic dynasty was kept alive.

And if Hezekiah's life had not been preserved, then there wouldn't have been any Davidic king to follow him. I suppose it would have gone to some cousin or nephew or somebody, but there was no direct descendant.

I guess that's the main point. So can there be appropriate law for the husband's psychotherapy? That's a loaded question.

[68 : 55] Because it comes from a psychotherapist. And I wouldn't want to make you unemployed. Oh, I think of course there will be.

Because I think as Christians living in this world, before the second coming, we are a mixture of righteousness and sinfulness.

We will never be perfect this side of heaven. So there will always be a need for agencies of healing, as well as agencies, of course, of preaching and holiness and a whole host of other things as well, I think.

I don't think that you get a clear-cut suggestion within the whole scope of the Bible that with enough faith and repentance, now you won't be sick or ill or won't need healing now.

I think that that's a simplification, I think, of what the Bible is saying. One last question, if there's one. Or if there's not, we might pray.