

Isaiah 38:1-39:7

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Date: 23 October 2016

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[0 : 00] And turn your Bibles to Psalm 38, sorry, Isaiah 38 and 39.! It's on page 598 and 599.!

In a story that takes the narrative back to the point before the story is reached. If you've any idea, what on earth is he talking about?

It just means flashback. It's just a posh word for flashback. Flashback, it's common, isn't it? You see films or TV programs and it's a common theme.

In the middle of one episode there's a flashback. And Isaiah 38 and 39 is a flashback. Last week, 36 and 37, we saw the Assyrian ruler, Sennacherib, standing on the doorstep of Jerusalem.

And King Hezekiah prays to God and he's amazingly delivered. But when we turn to chapter 38, verse 1, this is how it begins. In those days, notice it's not specific, Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death.

[1 : 26] And the vagueness of those days is such that we don't actually know exactly when Isaiah is writing about here. However, a few days later, a few verses later, without getting ahead of ourselves, we find that Hezekiah prays again.

And Isaiah is told by God, go and tell Hezekiah. Hezekiah, the Lord, the God of your father David, has heard your prayer. He's seen your tears and He will give 15 more years of life to Hezekiah.

I'll deliver you and the city from the hand of King Assyria. And I will defend the city. And as a result of God's mercy and Hezekiah's prayer, God promises, I will not only extend your life to Hezekiah, but I will also rescue Jerusalem from the King Assyria.

And the rescue that you read about in chapter 39, 38, is what you read about also in chapter 36, 37. So here's a flashback. And I want us to come back right at the end of today's sermon and say, why? Why has Isaiah done it like this? Why has he not followed it chronologically? But before that, what I want us to see is an example from, really, 2 Corinthians, where the Apostle Paul talks about walking by faith and not by sight.

[2 : 46] Paul writes that Christians are those who walk by faith and not by sight. And I want us to look at this story and see what does faith look like. Because Hezekiah, in these two chapters, gives us an example of both things.

We're going to look, first of all, at the King walking by faith, and then we will look at the King walking by sight. And then we'll think about why he presents it as a flashback. So first of all, the King walking by faith.

Let's pick it up in verse 1. In those days, Hezekiah became sick and he was at the point of death.

And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Abor, came to him and said to him, Thus says the Lord, set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.

It's not great bedside manner, is it? Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and he prayed to the Lord and he said, Please, O Lord, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart and have done what is good in your sight.

And Hezekiah went bitterly. It looks like, doesn't it, the grim reaper, well, his side is about to get Hezekiah before Sennacherib will. Because God tells the King, the King is probably in his mid-thirties at this point, that you're going to die.

[3 : 55] And you can tell from Hezekiah's response that he doesn't think it terribly well. He turns his face to the wall and he prays and he weeps uncontrollably. And in one sense we know, because this is a flashback, this is going to be a training ground, isn't it?

For Hezekiah to turn to God in prayer. We know that he turned to God in prayer when the Assyrians were on the doorstep. In a little bit of time. But I think what we see in Hezekiah's life is a reminder that it can be harder to trust God and be strong in a personal crisis than in a public one.

Or in Hezekiah's case a national one. Now look at his prayer. Unlike Hezekiah's prayer last week, which was such a great prayer, there's no praise, is there? It's a short prayer.

There's no explicit submission to God's will. There's no explicit desire that God would be glorified. It's just a muted cry. A cry for help on the basis of having lived a life of covenant obedience.

Hezekiah prays here. And he gets a response that he wasn't expecting. Look at verse 4. And the word of the Lord came to Isaiah. Go and say to Hezekiah, And thus says the Lord, the God of your father, the God of David, your father, I've heard your prayer.

[5 : 16] I've seen your tears. Behold, I will add 15 years to your life. I will deliver you with the city out of your hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend the city. Now I want you to see that grace is seeping out of this paragraph everywhere.

Hezekiah in the midst of despair and despondency. And God says to Hezekiah, I've heard your prayer. And not only that, He says to Hezekiah, I've not only heard your prayer, I've seen your tears.

God knows every tear that you and I shed. In fact, we've already seen Isaiah 25. God says one day I'm going to wipe away every single tear. And God has heard Hezekiah's prayer.

He's seen the tears, and he tells the king, I'm going to add 15 years to your life. But you see, God is not just a God that comes along and He gives us the minimum, and leaves it like that.

No, God is not only a God who hears and sees, and a God who adds, but He's a God who promises to defend. And Hezekiah had not said anything in this prayer, about God's deliverance in Jerusalem.

[6 : 23] But God is a God who delights to give beyond what we ask for. Paul says in Ephesians chapter 3, that God is able to do immeasurably, immeasurably more than we ask or imagine.

Do you understand that? That the God we worship today, the God we have worshipped today, is able to do immeasurably more, not only than what you can ask, but what you can dream of.

And so here in Hezekiah, walking by faith, it is not huge faith by any means, is it? But it is faith nonetheless. And God hears, and God defends, and then God confirms it with a sign.

Look at verses 7 and 8. This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do the same for what he's promised. Behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz, turn back ten steps.

So the sun turned back on the dial of ten steps, by which it declines. It's there, isn't it? It's an obvious sign. It's to assure Hezekiah that God can turn back time. And therefore he adds 15 years in his life.

[7 : 30] God makes a shadow go backwards on the stairway of Ahaz. How does he do that? Well, I don't know. What's the point with miracles? A miracle is persuasive as a sign from God, precisely because you cannot explain it.

It can't be a human stunt, can it? It has to be from God. God, in this case, somehow temporarily bends the sunlight.

It's not hard for him. I hope you are unashamed of miracles. God created the sun. He controls it. He can do whatever he wants from it. And he does so here.

And with that, God therefore not only says to Hezekiah, but he shows to Hezekiah, let's see, I'm turning the clock back on your life. Hezekiah, I've heard your prayer. Now I think from this passage, there is one question that we should be asking before we move on, and I hope that it's in some of your minds.

And it's the question of this. Has God changed his mind here? Was God actually planning to bring Hezekiah to death, and then Hezekiah prayed, and he says, oh, has he?

[8 : 41] Okay, you can have 15 more years. Is that what's going on? Is God being like the father whose son is wanting to play outside for another 10 minutes, but it's bedtime.

And the son says, please, please, please, dad. And the dad says, oh, okay, go on. Is that what God is doing here? There is a smooth thought.

There's a movement of theologians called open theists. And they would argue that God does change his mind. And they would say, at times God's intention is to go down that route, but then something happens, circumstances change, and he goes down another route.

But God doesn't know the future. And so God has to wait for you and I to decide what we're going to do, and then he will react. And if necessary, God will change his plans. And that might feel attractive to you.

It might feel that your relationship with God will be more dynamic. Because his actions and your plans will interact. But the main problem with that is the Bible expressly forbids it.

[9 : 45] Let me give you one clear objection. In 1 Samuel 15 verse 29, we read the glory of Israel. It's referring to God. And it says, the glory of Israel will not lie. God will not lie, and he will not change his mind, for he's not a man that he should change his mind.

And I don't know why, that seems, doesn't it, pretty categorical. God does not change his mind. So the question is, if that's the case, well, what is going on in the Bible when it appears that God does change his mind?

The Bible calls it often, God relents. You see that in the Old Testament particularly. And I want to suggest to you that the reason why this is presented to us is actually a lesson for you and I about the role of prayer.

That while God is in complete control of history, and God has ordained from eternity past everything that is going to happen, much that is going to happen, comes to pass because of his people's prayers.

By means of our prayer, to encourage our faith. You think about this. God did not have to tell Hezekiah, did he, about his impending death.

[10 : 58] He could have just done it. So why does God tell him? Well, in part, God tells him, I want you to set your things in order.

But as you go through the Old Testament, you find that God occasionally tells people what he's intending to do, precisely as an invitation to pray. He does it with Abraham.

Regarding Sodom in Genesis 18. He does it with Moses, right after the incidence of the golden calf in Exodus 32. He does it with the prophet Amos in Amos 7. And here God seems to be doing it with Hezekiah.

God is inviting Hezekiah to pray. So as one person has put it, God's prayer is suggested by God, moves God, the ruler of all, God is the one who suggests prayer.

He works through our prayers. But He is sovereign over everything in the end. So God here comes out, He condescends to our level, to allow us to be part of His attainable purposes.

[12 : 04] Through our prayers. Why? Because God wants to build our faith. He wants it to be a strengthener of our faith. Prayer matters to God as we seek to walk by faith as Hezekiah is here.

Now that is unlikely, isn't it? It is unlikely that any of us would have expected at the end of the chapter that by the time we get to verses 5 and 6 we would hear these gracious words from God. Coming out of the sad wrapping of verse 1. Hezekiah didn't expect it either. But in verses 9 to 20, Isaiah gives us the king's prayer, or the king's writing as it's called.

About this experience of walking by faith. And the verses, I don't know if you picked them up as I read them, they read like a psalm in many ways. I think there are a number of parallels. I think Hezekiah plagiarized David at numerous times in this prayer.

I don't have time to look at it in detail, but just look at a few things and what it means to walk by faith. First of all, walking by faith does not gloss over reality. Look at verse 12 to 14. Hezekiah acknowledges some very stark realities about life.

[13 : 15] Number one, he recognizes that life is fragile. He talks about life being like a shepherd's tent. He says, my life has got no more permanence than a tent. He talks about the decisiveness of death.

He uses the picture of tapestry. That once the pole pattern has been woven, the thread is slipped. The tapestry is rolled off. And that is like our lives.

And God is the one who brings that moment. But when the tapestry is rolled up, it is His decision. He talks about that stark reality. He talks about that in the midst of suffering, it sometimes feels that God is against us.

It sometimes feels that God is hostile to us. So he describes here feeling that God is like a devouring lion. He also talks about the reality that our prayer feels feeble.

Absolutely feeble. Hezekiah feels here that he's praying. He's doing absolutely nothing. Hezekiah is unafraid to deal with the stark reality of how he feels.

[14 : 24] And that's a good reminder, isn't it? That when we come to God in prayer, He expects us to come as we are. He wants us to come as a little child comes to their parents.

Tells them what they're thinking and what they want. That's the picture that the Bible has of us coming to God in prayer. And so by walking by faith does not mean you cleaning up your prayers

beforehand.

Because you think that God only wants to hear the sanitized version of your prayers. God already knows the messy version of your life, doesn't He? He knows how much mess you and I are in, so we should tell Him.

And Hezekiah gets that here. He points to the stark reality of how he feels, but then he moves on from that to his perception of God's mysterious ways in his life. Look at verses 15 and 17.

He says, what can I say, God? You've spoken to me. You've done these things, and now I understand that the suffering that I went through, it had a purpose in my life.

[15:27] It's been an incredibly intense thing, but he recognizes it's been for his benefit. Actually, he uses the word shalom there. But this suffering is for my overall peace.

It feels completely counterintuitive. But he says, now I understand that you are doing all these things because I've come to a new awareness of your love, Lord. Does that connect with you? That in the midst of your suffering, or even after your suffering, that you sense that you know God. And you sense, God, I know how much you love me because of what I went through.

It's hard to see it in the midst of it, isn't it? But in hindsight, I think we can often look and see God's grace and his love are apparent in so many ways. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear.

Why? Because you are with me. But I think the most important insight that Hezekiah gets comes in verse 17. In verse 13, he feels God's hostility towards him.

[16:38] But in verse 17, he says, now I understand that I am a recipient of God's love. It was my welfare. And so, the question is, what brought the change?

How do you move from being a recipient of God's wrath to being a recipient of God's love? And the answer to that question comes in the last line of verse 17.

You see what it says? For you have cast all my sins behind your back. You've put all my sins behind your back. The only way for God to move from being a God of wrath towards us to being a God of love towards us is by having our sin dealt with.

Hezekiah doesn't explain how that happens. But he knows that his sin no longer stands between him and God. Because God has taken that sin and He's thrown it behind His back.

Lose your sin, plunge right in. He's thrown it behind His back. He's taken care of it. And so Hezekiah goes from the stark acknowledgement of how he felt to understanding the mysterious ways of God's grace.

[17:54] And then he says, I'm going to tell everyone about it. He wants to tell his offspring. He doesn't actually have a son at this point. But he knows that he's in the land of the living. But he's really alive now.

And he needs to tell everyone how great God is. Here is a testimony of what it looks for a life to walk by faith. It's not clean, is it?

It's certainly messy. But it acknowledges, yes, there is mess in my life, but God, you are at work.

And what a difference a chapter makes. Because chapter 39 appears as if 38 might well never have happened.

Because in chapter 39, Hezekiah begins to walk by sight. Look at the opening two verses of chapter 39. At the time, Meridot Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he assured that he had been sick and had recovered.

Hezekiah welcomed them gladly. And he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious isle, his whole armoury, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house and all his remnant that Hezekiah did not show them.

[19:07] Now, if you've been with us through the series of Isaiah, if you know the book at all, you will know that there are two superpowers in the world. There is Babylon and there is Assyria. And they were vying supremacy at this time.

And when I told you that the king of Babylon now was Meridot Baladan. You think that that name is bad, his friends actually called him Marduk Aplah Adina II. We get the shorter version.

But to the Assyrians, this man was a terrorist. In his own mind, Meridot Baladan was a freedom fighter. He was a freedom fighter, devoting his life to the freedom and the liberation of Babylon from the Assyrian army.

And Meridot Baladan cheers through the grapevine that Hezekiah is becoming home. So being the caring and concerned king of years, he sends Hezekiah letters and a gift. We're not exactly told

what the contents of the letters were, but we can see from Hezekiah's reaction that it wasn't kind of sorry to hear you've been here let's do lunch sometime when you're better.

That wasn't the letter. In fact, the letter led Hezekiah to display all his resources. and all the arm strength of Judah to a ruler like Merodach Baladan.

[20 : 23] It probably means that the letter could only mean one thing. It means that the letter said will you join me in rebellion against Assyria? And Hezekiah falls for it.

The choice could not have been more clear. Walk by faith in the Lord or walk by sight. Have the promises of God or the promises of man.

And Hezekiah falls into a new sickness. But this sickness is spiritual amnesia. And he forgets God's promises. And it's not just forgetfulness it is huge pride.

Look at Hezekiah's response to Isaiah's question in verse 3. Then Isaiah the prophet came to Hezekiah and said what did these men say? And from where did they come to you? And Hezekiah said they have come to me from a far country from Babylon.

And he said what have they seen in your house? Hezekiah answered they have seen it all that's in my house. There's nothing in my store or houses that I could not show them. Isaiah asked three questions interestingly Hezekiah doesn't answer the first one about what the Babylonian delegation had said.

[21 : 31] But look at his answer to the question of where they come from. It's quite weak in our English translation. It basically says they came from the far country to see little old me.

Little old me. There's two points of emphasis. They came from such a far country to see me.

Imagine them coming all this way to see poor little me.

Imagine Merodach Baladan the mighty king of Babylon wanting little old me as an ally. If he'd battered his eyelids at the end of verse 4 it wouldn't have been out of place.

It's totally pathetic. It's as if chapter 38 does not take place. And he demonstrates in all of our lives what does it mean to go from faith in the real crisis to unbelief when you're back in the mundane and your ego gets struck.

All of us we know don't we there's something really gratifying when someone important takes an interest in us. For all of us it's really heartwarming when you matter to important people.

[22 : 47] And he assures Hezekiah's downfall his forgetfulness of God's word and his pride. Alec Mateo puts it forgetfulness of the word of God is the prime enemy of faith.

Pride in one's importance runs in a close second. Isaiah's response could not be more bleak could it in verses 5 to 7 hear the word of the Lord of hosts behold the days are coming when all that is in your house all that your fathers have stored up to this day will be carried off to Babylon nothing will be left.

Some of your own sons who come from you and whom you will father will be taken away and they shall be eunuchs in the place of the kings of Babylon. It couldn't be more clear defeat is coming captivity is coming exile is coming and notice Isaiah's impeccable logic here Hezekiah okay you want to commit all that you have to Hezekiah that all that you have well it will go to Babylon here's what Hezekiah happened when Hezekiah refused to walk by faith and instead he decided he could walk by sight let me finish let me conclude why the flashback why the flashback this all happened didn't it to Hezekiah before his finest hour when he trusted God to defeat Sennacherib and the Assyrians and so the question is why would why would Isaiah change the order wouldn't it have been better a better ending to finish the narrative section with Jerusalem saved and 185,000 of those pesky

Assyrians wiped out and Hezekiah trusting God wouldn't that have been the natural end well it might have been if it was even I but not for Isaiah because Isaiah places these two chapters next to chapter 40 for a reason chapter 40 is a major new section of the book but when chapter 40 begins can you guess where Judah is Judah is in exile in Babylon it's going to pick up the story sometimes after chapter 39 but the point is clear God made a promise here and He will bring it to fulfillment but there's another reason why Isaiah inserts the flashback here and the reason why I think that he puts it here is because Hezekiah was one of the best he was one of the best let me read you what it says in 2 Kings chapter 18 verse 5 it says Hezekiah trusted in the Lord the God of Israel so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him nor among those who were before him

Hezekiah was the great king and it was after his pride and his forgetfulness of God's word that that precipitated the exiles of Babylon Isaiah's point is this it's only a long while I've got there is that

Hezekiah is not the king who is going to save Jerusalem don't put your trust in Hezekiah that even the best of kings is mortal and fallible I've needed an illustration all week of if we can't trust in dot dot dot who can we trust in the best illustration I can think of is Ryan Giggs Ryan Giggs is a Welsh footballer he's a hero to boys of my generation he only retired playing to me about 2 years at the age of 38 or 39 he's a hero and he was so clean living he didn't go to all the parties he wasn't like Lee Sharp and the other man united players he wasn't allowed to do an interview for years he was everybody's hero mothers liked their boys to like Ryan

[26 : 28] Giggs older sisters thought that he was gorgeous boys wanted to be like him everybody loved Ryan Giggs he was a national hero and then it turned out didn't it about 4 years ago that he had been sleeping with his brother's wife and numerous others and the behind this incredible facade was actually a pretty immorally bankrupt man and so there was a blog post I remember reading it that said if we can't trust in Ryan Giggs who can we trust in Isaiah in chapter 39 is leaving us with that same question he's saying if you can't trust in Hezekiah who can you trust in and Isaiah is going to help you answer that question in chapter 40 but let me give you the answer now you look at the last temptation of the Lord Jesus when the devil came to him took him to a high mountain and he said he showed him all the kingdoms of the world and he said

I'll give them to you if you bow down and worship me and Jesus said to him away from me Satan for it is written worship the Lord your God and save him only and Satan dives down to find if he can see any pride in Jesus that might make Jesus grasp for control of the kingdoms of the world and he says all this is for you Jesus if you will only bow down to me but there was no pride in Jesus and in addition Jesus was not quick to forget God's word was he instead he quotes it back at Satan in this case Deuteronomy 6.13 and he says worship the Lord your God and save him only Jesus resists temptation because he wasn't proud and he didn't forget the word of the Lord and he understood that he was the answer to Isaiah's implicit question that if you can't trust in Hezekiah who can you trust in and the answer is only Jesus and it's the message of the Old

New Testament again and again and it's the message of the New Testament over and over again because Jesus is the true king and all the kingdoms that Satan offered Jesus were his already because he's the true king but Jesus understood to secure the crown of being king meant first he would go to the cross why because Jesus is the missing piece of Isaiah 38 verse 17 that we refer to by Hezekiah that how could Hezekiah go from being a recipient of God's wrath to be a recipient of God's grace why because he says God has thrown all my sins behind his back but he doesn't explain how he doesn't explain why and we're not certain he understood why and how but we do because the answer is Jesus because the king is also what we saw last week the servant and this king is also the saviour and he had to come and go to the cross and there on the cross he bore the wrath that you and I deserve because you and I have spiritual amnesia and over and over and over again you and I are proud little people over and over again and he bore it all so that you and I would not be recipients of

God's wrath but recipients of his wrath so that all that God would pour into our lives is grace and mercy and the problem is without Jesus this morning your sins have not been hurled behind God's back you are still under the weight of them you carry them everywhere you go and the penalty for those sins you will carry into eternity unless you can find someone to bear them for you and so who are you going to trust who are you going to trust not the Hezekiahs of this world not the Brian Gibbs of this world whoever else you want to put into that little blank but say I am going to trust Jesus because only Jesus can deliver me from sin only Jesus can rescue you and me from exile because He is the true king He is the true king He is the one brothers