

Prayer

When we are faint-hearted, lift us up, Almighty God. Lift up our senses so that we may see You and hear You, lift up our bodies so that we may be healed, lift up our feelings so that we may be encouraged, and lift up our hearts so that we may praise You. For You are our salvation, for as long as time exists and beyond. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Justice

Pray today for peace and justice in Zimbabwe. The situation there is complex, but God's people there need our prayers at a very uncertain time in the history of their country.

On-going prayers

- Thank God for the good work done by Christian children's workers.
- Pray for China and Tibet, and freedom for all who are oppressed
- Pray for local doctors and nurses

Meditation

(A reflection on Isaiah 40:12-23)

To whom can you compare the Lord our God?

A craftsman who works with exquisite beauty and skill ...
 A parent who rears a child with great care and tender love ...
 An engineer who knows the finest details of how things work ...
 A young person full of potential, energy and drive ...
 A great leader who has the humility to love and serve ...
 A child who challenges us with truth and perception ...
 A professional who knows their business thoroughly ...
 A farmer who gives all to the work that must be done ...

To whom can you compare the Lord our God?

Have you not heard? Have you not known?

He was there from the beginning, and made the whole world:
 He is greater than all things; He is in everything He has made.

Bible Study - Isaiah 38:9-22

⁹ This what Hezekiah King of Judah wrote after he had been sick and recovered from his illness:

¹⁰ I said, 'In the middle of my life must I go to the gates of Sheol and lose the rest of my years?'

¹¹ I said, 'I will not see the LORD Himself in the land of the living; I will no longer look on other people But be with the deceased.

¹² My times will be taken away and removed from me like my shepherd's tent I will roll up my life like a cloth for You have cut me off from the loom;

You have finished with me by day and night.

¹³ I cry out until dawn, and like a lion he has broken all my bones; You have finished with me by day and night.

¹⁴ Like a swallow or thrush I chirp, I "coo" like a mourning dove. My eyes grow weary looking up to the heavens: O Lord, I am oppressed, come to my help!

¹⁵ But what can I say? He has spoken to me; He Himself has done this,

and I will walk humbly all my years
because of this anguish of my soul.

¹⁶ Lord, by such things men live;
and through all of this my spirit has
life.
You have restored my health and let
me live.

¹⁷ Indeed it was for my healing
that I suffered such anguish.
In Your love you kept me from
destruction's pit;
You have thrown all my sins behind
You.

¹⁸ For Sheol cannot praise you,
death cannot sing your praise;
those who go down to the pit

cannot hope for your faithfulness.
¹⁹ The living, the living, they praise you,
as I do this day;
fathers will tell their children
about your faithfulness.

²⁰ The LORD has saved me,
so we will sing with stringed
instruments
all the days of our lives
in the house of the LORD!

²¹ Isaiah had said, 'Prepare a poultice of
figs and apply it to the boil, so that he
will recover.' ²² For Hezekiah had said,
'What will be the sign that I will go up to
the house of the LORD?'

Review

Yesterday, we discovered that Hezekiah's illness had taken place years before the invasion of Judea by Assyria, but it seems that it was a significant event, from which king Hezekiah learned to trust the Lord, his God. This poem by Hezekiah describes his own spiritual and personal journey through the midst of illness, and it ends with a brief description of Isaiah's role in ministering a cure.

Earlier in the book of Isaiah, when Isaiah had confronted King Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, with God's Word, Ahaz had dismissed Isaiah and his prophecy, making Isaiah furious (7:1-8). Here, in contrast, King Hezekiah asked for a sign from God (38:22), and Isaiah immediately responded as a prophet by administering God's Word. In this case, it came in the form of a cure for Hezekiah's illness, which was a 'poultice' applied to Hezekiah's body. In those days, there was little difference in people's minds between the preparation of a poultice and a miraculous healing, for the result of it all was a work of divine deliverance ascribed to the Lord. This much is clear from Hezekiah's song, which is a classic Hebrew song of worship and praise to Almighty God (38:10-20) for His acts of healing and deliverance, using many words and phrases which appear in other famous songs of deliverance (e.g. Psalm 32, 1 Sam 2:1-10; Jonah 2:2-9).

The song itself is in two halves, and is centred on verse 15. This is a statement of humble submission to the Lord, and demonstrates a mature attitude from Hezekiah. The humility of Hezekiah enabled him to be strong and stand firm against Assyrian aggression, trusting in the Lord when all seemed lost (37:1-20). No wonder the apostle Paul wrote 'for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12:9); this is a spiritual principle deeply embedded within scripture, and essential to this story.

The first half of Hezekiah's song (38:10-14) describes his feelings before being healed; he was scared of death (38:10) and of abandonment by God (38:11), and he resented the shortening of his life. To represent this he used pictures of the dismantling of a shepherd's tent and the removal of a cloth from the loom on which it had been weaved (38:12). Hezekiah called out to the Lord in anguish, feeling like prey being tossed around by a lion (38:13)! In comparison, his own call for help was like the twittering of birds (38:14); he called out, '*O Lord, I am oppressed, come to my help*' (38:14)!

The poem may sound strange to us, but there is much wisdom in it. Hezekiah came before the Lord to give Him honour for his healing, and he confirmed his faith going beyond what was traditionally required. By saying; '*Lord, by such things men live*' (38:16) Hezekiah acknowledged illness and trials as a part of life endured by all people. He accepted what

Final Prayer

Great Creator; Powerful Lord!
Glorious Redeemer; Wonderful friend!
You are worthy of our highest praise;
I give you my all, to follow You always.
AMEN

so many of us find so hard, which is that all people suffer in one way or another; but by recognising this he was able to break out of the self-pity and gloom of oppression. Suffering would come before healing, and healing came from God's love (38:17). Then, in a moment of inspiration, Hezekiah perceived the vital truth that illuminates the whole poem; the dead cannot praise the Lord, only 'the living' (38:19). Hezekiah did not know about resurrection and had no way of knowing that those who had died could yet live and praise God. However, his words are a significant step towards the New Testament idea of 'resurrection'.

The testimony of those who have overcome illness and trials are always inspirational, and we tend to listen to those who can tell such stories with interest! Hezekiah's poem of praise in the midst of suffering was used in Old Testament times, and the complexities of the Hebrew text indicate to scholars that the text was heavily used (along with other well loved passages such as Psalm 23, or Jonah (2:2-9). At its heart, this is a simple story of a miracle, but it was a crucial miracle for the future of Jerusalem.

Going Deeper

There are a number of notes on the text itself which are quite important for our understanding of the passage. Beyond that, each half of the poem has its spiritual treasures which can inspire us once we know more clearly what the structure of the poem is and why it says what it does.

Notes on the text and translation

- V10 *'In the middle of my life'. The Hebrew for 'middle' either means 'noontide' or 'quiet times' depending on how the ancient manuscripts are read. I prefer the 'noontime', hence my translation of 'the middle of my life' because it fits the context of the story.*
- V11 *Very strangely, the Hebrew manuscript repeats the name of the Lord. No-one knows what is the right way of translating this, so most attempt to emphasise 'the Lord' in some way, as I have done; though a few write 'the Lord, the Lord'.*
- V11 *'but be with the deceased'. Few translations you read will have this. The trouble is that the last Hebrew word in the sentence is the word 'cessation'. Some scholars think this is a mistake and it should read 'earth' (the words could be mistaken). However, I believe that if you read it as a word which describes those who have ceased life, i.e. 'the deceased', then the whole verse makes sense.*
- V12 *The whole verse is difficult to translate and very few versions give a similar translation. I have simply kept as close as I can to the Hebrew. It is interesting that in the very last line, the word for 'finished with me' derives from the Hebrew word 'shalom' which in this form means 'completed, finished, ended'.*
- V13 *The first word in this sentence is either 'cry out' or 'be at peace' depending on the vowel sounds you put with the words. The ancient text of Hebrew is written with no vowels and these have been added in later years (since the time of Christ), so it is not known what was originally meant here. Again, I have tried to follow the logic of the poem, using the word 'cry out' because of Hezekiah's crying as in 38:5.*
- V15 *'anguish of my soul' The word for 'anguish' comes from the word in Hebrew 'mar' which is usually 'bitterness'. Here it means the bitterness or anguish of what Hezekiah has experienced.*
- V17 *'Indeed it was for my healing' The word 'healing' will not be found in other translations where the word 'peace' or 'welfare' is used. However, because this is a story about healing, and the word here is again 'shalom', I prefer to translate this as 'healing' because that is what physical 'shalom' means.*
- V19 *'... they praise you' The word for praise here comes from 'confess'; but not confess in the sense of confessing sin, but of confessing God's name in faith; hence 'praise'.*

In sickness ...

Hezekiah was distraught at the news of his imminent death (38:1)! He had spent a considerable part of his reign as king attempting to consolidate the Judean state around the city of Jerusalem. In his day, he came closest to the ideal (found in Deuteronomy – 12:5f. 14:23f. etc.) that God's people should worship Him in unity, and in one city; or as Moses said 'the place where the Lord will choose to put his Name'. He felt that he had more to do, perhaps in the 'prime' of life and his middle years (38:10). It is uncertain what the first line of verse 10 means (see notes above), but there is no doubt that Hezekiah felt he had more left in him and he had more to do. When he said 'I will not see the Lord Himself in the land of the living' this was a pious way of saying that he did not think he would be able to attend the Temple worship again because of his illness. Most Judean people believed that they could not 'see' God and live, but they did talk about 'meeting' Him in the Temple and 'seeing' Him there, metaphorically. This is what Hezekiah meant here.

To be unable to worship the Lord in the Temple was a terrible thought for Hezekiah. Elsewhere in scriptures this part of Hezekiah's story is described in 2 Kings 20, and there, Hezekiah received a promise from God that he would indeed be able to 'go up' to the Temple again to worship (2 Kings 20:5) after he had been healed, and this promise is briefly mentioned at the end of our passage today (38:22).

Hezekiah described his feelings about being unable to worship and perform his duties as King as like having his life 'removed from me like my shepherd's tent' or being 'rolled up like a cloth for You have cut me off from the loom' (38:12). Both pictures are significant. In the first, Hezekiah speaks of 'my' shepherd's tent, so we must think of this picture as personal. Hezekiah accepted his role as a 'shepherd' of his people just like his forefather David, and some have wondered whether the King of Judah had some symbolic 'tent' which was used ceremonially to demonstrate this feature of the work of the King. In addition, the idea of being broken off from the loom is one of a work completed. Hezekiah did not believe that his work was complete, so the picture was agonising for him.

The last picture is an astonishing comparison between the strength of a lion's call and the mild twittering and cooing of birds (38:13,14). The one was symbolic of the Lord's authority and the other a description of Hezekiah's low self esteem at this point in his life; he said 'O Lord, I am oppressed, come to my help!' There are few who do not understand such a cry.

... and in health!

We have already seen that verse 15 lies at the heart of the poem, and is Hezekiah's humble prayer accepting the Lord's promise of healing. Notice, however, that in chapter 38, Hezekiah was promised the healing in 38:5 by word of prophecy, and the description of how that healing occurred comes later, after the poem. For this reason, Hezekiah's prayer in verse 15 is one of faith uttered before he was healed, in anticipation. Today, people often expect healing to be instantaneous, as in the example of Jesus' ministry. This sometimes happens, but we must not forget that the Bible give us different examples of healing; like here, where Hezekiah had to receive his healing by faith before it was effected by Isaiah's poultice! Also, Hezekiah received Isaiah's prophecy of healing with a promise that he would commit the rest of his days to the Lord because of what had happened.

From the beginning of the second half of the poem, it is clear that this promise of healing has been fulfilled, and Hezekiah has been transformed; 'Lord, by such things men live ... You have restored my health and let me live' (38:16). He was able to appreciate the perspective that suffering produces endurance (38:17), something which Paul speaks about as part of the character building work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel (Romans 5:3-5). Then glorying in his life and liberty, he spoke about the glory of praising God whilst alive (38:19:20), and although this passage does not speak about resurrection, it does affirm that the intention of the Lord is always to give life, not death. Hezekiah was not a prophet and did not have the insight of one like Isaiah, for example, who had already prophesied about the new creation of God which would give the faithful a permanent home beyond death (e.g. 11:6-9).

Hezekiah's vision of a future with the Lord however is one of praise and thanksgiving (38:19,20), in which the blessings of God are handed on from parent to child and there is continuous praise and song in the presence of the Lord. Clearly, Hezekiah was only able to imagine here something of what he knew, which was the atmosphere of praise and worship in the Temple, but we should note that Hezekiah did not look forward to the sacrifice of animals and the other features of worship which were normal in his day; his vision was of a worship which was far more like that of the New Testament Church. Significantly, he saw praise which was dominated by the thankful heart!

Application

It is important to remember feelings of sickness and distress, not least because this means that we can give thanks for the blessings and freedoms we enjoy when we are well, and give thanks to the Lord for the blessings of life. A poem such as this which speaks so directly about the pain and distress of sickness can therefore become a spur to our own praises of God for the health and deliverance we have, and also for our own salvation. However, the confessions of Hezekiah in the first half of his song are important for what they are; a realistic account of what it is like to suffer. All too often we forget what it is like to be really downhearted because of bad health or for other spiritual reasons, and we are wrong to forget these things when life becomes better. Through remembering the reality of our experiences we can be helped towards two things; firstly the strength of character with which to stand when trials come again, and secondly, the remembrance that the Lord will use all our experiences of life for His good purposes if we will let him. And remember, Hezekiah pleaded with the Lord for his life, and there is nothing wrong with our persistence in prayer to beseech the Lord for his mercy.

Perhaps an amended form of Hezekiah's prayer would be useful as a guide for the prayers we might say to confess our feelings about sickness as well as our celebration of His healing power. The two go hand in hand, and perhaps our 'healing services' in church would be more helpful if they strengthened the heart of those who are well so that they can face difficulties when they come, as well as attempting to deal with the tragic circumstances of illness when they strike unawares.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What did Hezekiah fear when he faced death, and how similar is this to our fears?
2. In your group, discuss the kind of person you believe Hezekiah to be; his characteristics and his qualities as King as found in the book of Isaiah.
3. Would it be helpful if we had some forms of prayers and blessings for those who have recovered from illness? How could this work in the life of the church?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I know what it is like to work through feelings about illness and sickness, and what it is like to be healed and also not to be healed. There is a deep mystery here, and only God knows why some are healed and some are not. Through thinking about my own experiences however, I am confident that whatever happens to me, the Lord is in control. This is the place where all God's people need to be if they are to be 'whole' in body, soul and spirit.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Do you find it easy or hard to pray with people who are ill? If you were to spend some time thinking about how you felt when you were ill, you might be more able to pray for others who are ill now.*
- *Who would you go to for prayer when you feel ill or sick? It is important to know the answer to this question so that when we are ill, the channels are there for our support and prayer.*