

Prayer

We praise You O Lord, for the great blessing which is ours through Your Word, the Bible. We thank you for all those who have worked to translate it and make it available to people throughout the world. May we so treasure this great gift that we pass it on to those who come after us with reverence and awe, knowing that it has the power, through Your Holy Spirit, to change lives. Thanks be to God: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Justice

Continue to pray for the people of Zimbabwe whilst politicians across the world decide how to respond to the political concerns now being expressed. Pray also for the United Nations.

On-going prayers

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

Meditation

I guess we can never know the fullness of God:

How often do we need to seek Your forgiveness,
and how often do we need to forgive others ourselves?

How great is the glory You will one day show us
and how great the honour we must give back to You!

How much more of Your love will You lavish upon us,
and how much more love we will need to give others?

How powerful is the Spirit who strengthens us now,
and how great is the Gospel we have been given to proclaim!

How many great gifts do You still wish to give us,
and how much more of ourselves do we need to give back?

How magnificent the eternity You have waiting for us,
and how limited our view of Your bounty, from here!

But in Christ, we have a glimpse of it all, now!

Bible Study - Isaiah 39:1-8

¹ At that time Merodach-Baladan (son of Baladan), the King of Babylon, sent letters and gifts to Hezekiah, because he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. ² Hezekiah was pleased with them, and he allowed them (the envoys) to see his treasure stores, the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine oil, his whole armoury, all that was to be found in his treasure stores. There was nothing in his house or in his entire realm that Hezekiah did not show them.

³ Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah, and said to him, 'What did these men say? And where did they come from?' Hezekiah said, 'They came to me from a far country, from Babylon.' ⁴ He said, 'What have they seen in your house?' Hezekiah replied, 'They have seen everything that is in my house. There is nothing in my treasure stores that I did not show them.'

⁵ Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: ⁶ Look, the days are coming, when everything in your house, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. ⁷ And some of your own sons, descended from you and who are yet to be born to you, will be taken away to become eunuchs in the palace of the King of Babylon.' ⁸ Then said Hezekiah to Isaiah, 'The word of the LORD that you have spoken is acceptable.' For he thought, 'There will be peace and security in my days.'

Review

This appears to be a simple story, but it is about as dramatic as any in the Bible! However, we do not spot the tense irony of the story and Hezekiah's immense political blunder, because we do not know the politics of the eighth century BC. Also, we lose some of the drama of the passage through having to explain it. Chapter 39 takes place just after Hezekiah had recovered from illness, as indicated by the words '*at that time ...*' (39:1). We know that Hezekiah's illness was around 10 years before the Assyrians invaded (38:5), so today's story happened when Hezekiah was full of confidence after his recovery from illness, and still standing firm against the threats of Assyria. Judah was one of only a few kingdoms still holding out against Assyria at that time, and Israel had already been invaded and overcome (721BC). Another kingdom doing just this was Babylon, a much larger 'mini-empire' some distance away to the east, but events there had been dramatic. The Assyria King Tiglath-Pileser III had conquered Babylon in 745BC, but the resistance leader Merodach-Baladan had seized control of Babylon and the relationship between Assyria and Babylon was tense.

It seemed natural therefore for two of the resistance leaders against the Assyrians to be in contact with one another, and Hezekiah was flattered at the attention of the Babylonian leader (39:2). As a result, he showed the Babylonian envoys all the resources of his kingdom (39:2) because it seemed right to share information with them about what resources were available for resistance against the Assyrian threat. At that time Hezekiah was busy building up the armed forces and Jerusalem's defences (see 2 Chronicles 29-32) and was clearly not worried about revealing the historic wealth of the city.

Nevertheless, Isaiah was not happy at this turn of events at all. He had just helped Hezekiah through his illness, but his terse questions indicated that he expected better of Hezekiah (39:3-7). Why did Isaiah respond like this? It was because he already knew that beyond the threat of Assyria lay another threat, from Babylon herself, and he had already prophesied about this (13:1f. 14:4f.) Isaiah had said that Jerusalem would survive the onslaught of Assyria but not of Babylon (see 10:20f. and 14:1f.), and he was aghast that Hezekiah should reveal the wealth of Jerusalem to the envoys of a country who would one day come and remove everything from Jerusalem! He reiterated his message about the threat posed by Babylon (39:6,7), but Hezekiah was unrepentant and unconcerned. As far as he was concerned, what happened in the future was of no interest to him, or so he thought. He was happy to be alive and survive in a tempestuous world even though his actions paved the way for later catastrophe!

Hezekiah was a man who was something of an enigma. He was undoubtedly more faithful to the Lord than many of his forebears, but he showed weakness in the face of personal suffering (38:1f.), and weakness again in this passage, in the face of the future. He was not concerned about what would happen, providing that no danger came to him (39:9)! Isaiah knew that the time would come later when his prophecies would come true, and Babylon would be the aggressor, not Assyria.

From the days of Hezekiah onwards, the kings and people of Judah came to believe that Jerusalem was impregnable. The Lord had defended it against Assyria and the believed He would defend it against all comers. Isaiah's powerful voice that God's judgement would

one day come against Jerusalem was lost, and only when the Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem in 587 BC did people begin to realise that Isaiah had been right, and his grand view of God's judgement and salvation had more to say. This is why Isaiah does not end here at chapter 39, for there is far more still to come!

Going Deeper

The story itself is relatively easy to follow, but there are a few more details to consider. The big question raised by this text is how it connects with what comes next in Isaiah. Scholarly debate has raged for centuries about the prophecies of Isaiah and whether they all came from the one man we have talked about so far; Isaiah of Jerusalem. Chapter 39 raises these questions, and hints at how we may answer them.

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 *Most translations have the word 'gift' in the singular, indicating that there was only one gift sent to Hezekiah. However, the Hebrew word means 'tribute', a word which means a collection of gifts fit for a king. Although the word 'tribute' is singular, it seems far more likely that this tribute was what we would call 'gifts' rather than one item.*
- V1 *In some translations, verse 2 refers specifically to 'envoys', but my translation does not. The Hebrew text here does not mention envoys, but the reason why many translations do mention them is because it is difficult to tell the story without mentioning them. The other reason why some translations include them is because they are mentioned in 2 Kings 20:12, the section of 2 Kings which tells the same story with almost the same words.*
- V2 *'Treasure-stores' The words in Hebrew are literally 'house of treasure', though there is a certain amount of confusion about the words and their use in this verse.*
- V8 *'The word of the Lord that you have spoken is agreeable' The Hebrew word for 'agreeable' is usually translated 'good', but the word is fairly neutral and means 'good' in the sense of 'agreeable' or 'acceptable' as well as 'pleasant'. No doubt Hezekiah was indeed relieved that Isaiah had prophecies trouble after his reign and not before, but he cannot have been entirely glad about the prophecy (see below)*

The story

From Hezekiah's point of view, this incident represented a good opportunity to make an alliance with a larger kingdom than his own but one which was as much opposed to Assyria as he was. Presents and a personal letter from the famous Merodach-Baladan were something of a coup, that is, from a diplomatic point of view. We know about Merodach-Baladan from other ancient documents, and it is known that he seized Babylon from the rule of Sargon II of Assyria in 721BC. In the politics of the day, if Assyria was to be stopped from extending its borders, alliances had to be made.

As we have seen, Isaiah had already prophesied against Babylon and seen the Babylonian threat from afar; and the prophecies he gave about that threat and its consequences (chapters 13,14) were given after Isaiah had clashed with Hezekiah's father, King Ahaz (7:1f.). It is possible that this was also in Isaiah's mind as he confronted Hezekiah, for Isaiah would not have wanted him to follow the same path as his father, depending on foreign alliances to defend Jerusalem instead of on the Lord. This tense conversation between King and prophet was certainly an indication of Hezekiah's folly and naivety in the face of Isaiah's prophecies and advice, but it also raised the key issue; would Hezekiah trust God completely for the safety of Jerusalem, despite all odds? We know that when the Assyrian threat came, Hezekiah was strong in faith, so it is possible that this incident, together with his illness, was one from which Hezekiah learned. He was allowed to see the deliverance of Jerusalem in his own day, but the future would be another matter.

Isaiah's words were hard. In particular, he prophesied that *'some of your own sons, descended from you and who are yet to be born to you, will be taken away to become eunuchs in the palace of the King of Babylon.'* (39:7). The truth of this was that if the descendants of Hezekiah were to be castrated, then the line of David would one day be brought to an end! This cannot have been comfortable news for Hezekiah, and is why I have not made too much of Hezekiah's satisfaction about 'peace and security' in his own days (39:8), for it came at a cost. From the point of view of the whole Bible, this prophecy is astonishing. It is one of the first direct statements of a prophet which accepts that the physical Davidic line would be broken; but we have already seen that Isaiah had already been given some of the elements of a Messianic prophecy which spoke of a spiritual descendant of David, a new 'King' born as a child (9:6, 11:1f.) who would replace the corrupted physical line. It was indeed necessary that Isaiah prophesied the end of kingly rule in Jerusalem, and what he said came about around 597BC when Hezekiah's great grandson Jehoiakim was taken off to Babylon along with other members of the court in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:5f.)

The significance of this story in Isaiah

The end of this story forms a natural break in the book of Isaiah. Most people who read the book will quickly notice that from chapter 40 onwards, the prophecies of Isaiah change dramatically. The character of the writing is different, and the nature and style of the prophecies is different, developing a message of hope in the midst of unspecified dire circumstances, which are mostly assumed to be those of the Judean exiles in Babylon, around 100 years after the time of Isaiah. Most people assume that as a consequence, we must accept that the later prophecies (40-66) were written by another hand, perhaps someone who valued the heritage of Isaiah or a group of followers.

This all seems entirely straightforward, until you return to the fact that this is presented to us in the Bible as one prophetic book, and its overall theme is indeed something of a unity. Moreover, all the ancient copies we have of the scroll of Isaiah show it to be one book, and never two. It deals with both the Assyrian and the Babylonian threat to Jerusalem and Judea, and as we have often seen in some of the earliest of Isaiah's prophecies, connections are made between the Assyrian invasion in 721BC and the Babylonian threat in 597BC.

Personally, I do not think it helpful for our understanding of the whole of Isaiah to completely separate chapters 1-39 from 40-66. This implies to those who look less closely at the book that the first half concerns Isaiah of Jerusalem in around 720-700 BC and the second half is about later time around 590-580BC or later and therefore written by someone else. None of these assumptions are necessarily true. I prefer to believe that Isaiah of Jerusalem did indeed give many prophecies about the people of Jerusalem and Judah for the time of both the Assyrian invasion and also the Babylonian invasion. I suspect that what he wrote about the second of these was kept after he died, and when it came true, his followers wrote up the fragments and copies of the prophecies they still possessed, to make the second half of Isaiah as we know it. Given that this was done at a time of great upheaval in the life of God's people (the Exile), it is not at all surprising that the second half contains words, phrases and references which connect directly with the time of the exile, and therefore make us think the writer came from later times. However, this is not to say the prophecies were not essentially Isaiah's; rather, it draws attention to the great sense of reverence which Isaiah's later followers had for his work. For them, it had come true and was therefore clearly God's Word, and they wrote it down as such.

Application

In this series of studies, we leave Isaiah now for a little while and return to study the rest of the book in a few of week's time. The connection between the two 'halves' of Isaiah will continue to be an important theme. This passage however contains the same persistent message which Isaiah hammered out time and time again in his prophecies, which is that God's people must trust in Him above all else. It is simple to say, but profoundly difficult to

do. Hezekiah was a King and had to act for the good of his people, and found that as soon as he entered the world of foreign affairs (as we might call it today), he was out of his depth. Isaiah was attempting to tutor him into trusting the Lord for all things, and he certainly needed help; in the previous chapter (38) he had to trust God for his health, and in this chapter (39) he had to trust God for his life and work as King of Judah.

The challenge to us is similar, though our personal circumstances are different. Christian life is a continual round of challenges, and we are constantly tempted to trust anything other than God, especially for our health and our work! Our passage today does not simply say 'trust in the Lord', however. What it says in 'trust in the Lord for what happens in the present, because what we do now will affect what happens in the future.' The difference is important. Often, we take the easy way out of situations when they occur because it is simpler to take the world's answers; but the message from our passage is that this will build up problems for the future, and we do not know what they will be. Hezekiah had the services of a great man of God to warn him about the specific consequences of failing to trust in the Lord. We have the Word of God and the life of Christ to teach us about these things, and we need to heed the advice we receive.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the issues about the possible division of the first and second half of Isaiah, as discussed in the study. What do you think?
2. Is it a sin simply to be a little injudicious? How is Hezekiah's sin more problematic than this?
3. As Christians, how can we best ensure that we do not compromise the future through ill-considered deeds today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have always been concerned that the consensus in scholarly circles about the division of Isaiah prevents us from reading the book as a whole, and also prevents those who depend on their teaching from getting the most out of the book as well. Teachers and scholars bear a heavy responsibility! I feel it necessary to be cautious about theories which have only served to deconstruct Isaiah's important message rather than help us understand it.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What action is being taken by the church of which you are a part which you might feel is more worldly based than spiritually based? Pray about what you could do about this.*
- *Find someone else in your church who has studied the Bible a little, someone like a preacher or lay leader. Ask them about the apparent division in Isaiah, and see what they say about this.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, thank You for the gift of marriage. You have created men and women to find their fulfilment in each other, and demonstrate to the world the love which God has for all people. May all who are married appreciate the great gift they have received in Christ, and testify to its glory; AMEN