

Terminal!

II Kings 20; II Chronicles 32

Introduction

In 1994, do you know who won the prestigious “Woman of the World” award? She is the same woman who won a similar, international award for three consecutive years. If you guessed Margaret Thatcher or Sandra Day O’Conner, you missed it by a mile. The winner is the same woman who has authored six best-selling books. She is a syndicated columnist for more than four hundred newspapers. She has been the personal confidante to presidents and heads of state for years. Her name is Jeanne Dixon, the world’s most well-known astrologer and “voice of prophesy”.

Some time ago, the Franklin Mint issued an offer in which you could purchase a replica of Jeanne Dixon’s crystal ball. It was described as, “intricately sculptured and crafted with 24 karat gold and crystal”. The advertisement said that the crystal ball was “an heirloom work of art to enhance your home and your future”. In Ms. Dixon’s own words, it would help to, “behold the revelation of your destiny.”

What was once part hoax and part superstition and hocus-pocus is now “big-time” business. Psychic telephone lines are ringing up million dollar profits.

While the Bible seriously warns us against and forbids us from soliciting the fortune tellers, can you imagine having someone come to your home; let us say, Isaiah himself, representing God, and telling your future? And, as proof of his authenticity, he supernaturally turns the clocks back a few hours and then, does not charge you a dime for any of it.

Today, we are going to study the life of King Hezekiah. He was the son of a wicked man, whose

reputation was intertwined with child sacrifice and idolatry. Yet, when twenty-five year old Hezekiah took the throne, he brought the people of Judah back to God.

Review – A National Crisis

In II Kings, chapter 19, Hezekiah is in anguish over the invasion of Syria, as he unfolds an intimidating Assyrian letter before the Lord and prays. This invasion occurred in the life of Hezekiah after he had served God faithfully for fourteen years. In fact, we learn in Ezra’s written account, in II Chronicles, chapter 32, verse 1a,

After these acts of faithfulness Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah . . .

Truths to learn

We discover from Hezekiah, a couple of truths that we would rather not learn. Let me give them to you.

1. The first is that faithfulness to God does not guarantee the absence of trouble, it may create trouble.
2. The second truth we learn in the temple during those difficult days as Hezekiah poured his heart out to God and God met him there. It is that sometimes the Lord calms the storm, but most of the time, He lets the storm rage and calms His child.

In the case of Hezekiah, God intervened and Judah was miraculously spared.

The Pain of a Personal Crisis

As I studied this man's life, I was surprised to learn that something else had been going on. During the same time Hezekiah was struggling with a national crisis, he was also struggling with a personal crisis. Look with me at II Kings, chapter 20. We will begin in verse 1a.

In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. .

..

In what days? Well, if you put all the clues together, you discover that Hezekiah was thirty-nine years of age at this time, and it is the fourteenth year of his reign. II Kings, chapter 18, informs us that it was also in his fourteenth year that Sennacherib marched against Hezekiah's capital city, Jerusalem.

Can you imagine? They were being terrorized from without by an enemy that was so brutal as to be known for piling skulls around the borders of the cities that they defeated in battle. Archeologists discovered a mural of Sennacherib that pictured him as victorious over his enemies. He had pierced the enemy's nostrils with rings and leather straps. The mural shows his soldiers leading the captives away. Sennacherib, the terrible Ninevite warlord, was in full battle array.

Have you ever thought, "Why does trouble always come in pairs?"

That is not an original thought. In fact, an author of a book in my library wrote, nearly two hundred years ago, the words, "Misfortunes never come singly."

The announcement from Isaiah

Sennacherib was not the only problem, however. During this fourteenth year, Hezekiah also faced a different challenge, a personal crisis. This was a crisis in which Hezekiah would gladly have given his kingdom and his throne away, in order to solve; a crises of life and death. Notice verse 1 again.

In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.'"

Imagine the prophet of God coming to your doorstep and announcing, "Hezekiah, make sure your insurance papers are in order, pick out your grave plot and the hymns you want to be sung at your funeral, for you are going to die."

The agony of Hezekiah

Some of you have heard the words, "Terminal and incurable". Some of you today, have a far greater appreciation of life than others because you have been given the grim prophecy, "It won't be long."

Perhaps you can identify with Hezekiah as he responds to Isaiah. Look at verses 2 and 3.

Then he turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, saying, "Remember now, O Lord, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart and have done what is good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

You could write four words about his prayer that will summarize all of his prayers and all of his tears, and they are, "I don't understand why."

Understand that the Old Covenant promised a long life, if the Israelite obeyed God. Hezekiah is thirty-nine years old and says, "Lord, I've walked in truth and with a whole heart."

Also understand the lack of understanding in the Old Testament saint's mind, about life hereafter. Sheol was a grim, foreboding place to them. They knew nothing of what we know about heaven. Death to us is still disturbing, even though we know to be absent from the body is to present with the Lord. Hezekiah was reeling from the report.

Look at the book of Isaiah and read the poem that he composes in light of his terminal illness and recovery, in chapter 38, verse 10.

I said, . . .

(that is, this is how I felt; this is what I said to God . . .)

. . . In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of Sheol; I am to be deprived of the rest of my years.

Can you hear the anguish? Skip to verse 12a.

Like a shepherd's tent my dwelling is pulled up and removed from me . . .

In other words, "Lord, You've just pulled up the stakes. It happened so fast. There was a tent; that is, life, and now it's gone."

Notice verse 14.

Like a swallow, like a crane, so I twitter; I moan like a dove; my eyes look wistfully to the heights; . . .

(that is, I find myself staring off into space with misty eyes . . .)

. . . O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.

Aren't you glad the Lord does not take us to the home of a terminally ill man to only let us hear the words, "Praise God! Hallelujah!"?

Look at verses 18 and 19a,

For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness. It is the living who give thanks to You, as I do today

Now remember, Hezekiah does not know the future like we know the future. He has no idea what glory is in store for him. Yet, in spite of that, he says the same thing that we say, "Lord, why take the life of a godly person who can praise You with their life and lips? What good does that do?"

Why end the pastorate of Peter Marshall, when he was a shining life? Why take the life of a missionary like Jim Elliot, with so much promise and potential?

Before we go too far into despair, let me read what Jim Elliot wrote, as he struggled with the same question.

I must not think it strange if God takes in youth those whom I would have kept on earth until they were older. God is peopling eternity, and I must not restrict Him to old men and women.

Look back at II Kings, chapter 20. Did you notice the last phrase of verse 3?

. . . And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Someone wrote, "If tears were made of indelible ink instead of clear fluid, all of us would be stained for life."

It would not be long in life until every human being had little paths of stain that ran from their eyes, down their cheeks, and off the edge of their faces. Misfortunes never come singly. There are times when all you can do is cry.

What I appreciate about Hezekiah is the fact that he had a relationship with the Lord that was refreshingly bold and transparent. You may remember from a previous study, that he took a threatening letter from Sennacherib and went into the temple and unfolded it before the Lord and prayed. Now, on what he believes to be his deathbed, he prays again with boldness and frankness. There is no

pietism, mysticism, or false spirituality, he is literally praying for his life.

Two lessons on prayer

Hezekiah has something to teach all of us about prayer. Let me give you at least two lessons.

The prayer motive is as important to God as the prayer request

1. First, the prayer motive is as important to God as the prayer request.

Motives, for one thing, are critical in prayer. Did you catch the underlying thought from Isaiah, chapter 38? He was saying, in verses 18 and 19a, "Lord, I can't praise You in death like I can praise You in life. Let me live so that I can honor Your name."

His motive in praying, as he unfolded Sennacherib's letter and asked for national protection, was revealed, in II Kings, chapter 19, verse 19, as he prayed,

Now, O Lord our God, I pray, deliver us . . . that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, O Lord, are God.

Why do we pray?

A couple of weeks ago, a man in our church told me a funny story of a woman who owned a parrot. The trouble was, the only thing her parrot would say were the words, "Let's kiss. Let's kiss."

It embarrassed this woman to no end. People would come to her home for a visit and as soon as the parrot saw them, she would say, "Let's kiss. Let's kiss."

The woman's church got a new pastor and she discovered that he also had a parrot. His parrot, however, only said the words, "Let's pray. Let's pray."

The woman thought, "This is my answer! I'll take my parrot over and let the pastor's parrot influence mine into saying something more spiritual than, "Let's kiss."

The pastor agreed. She brought her parrot over and put her in the bird cage with the other parrot. Her parrot immediately sidled over to the pastor's parrot and said, "Let's kiss. Let's kiss."

Then, the pastor's parrot said, "My prayers have been answered."

It may sound spiritual to say the words, “Let’s pray,” but the question is, “What are you really wanting from God? Do you want comfort, ease, prosperity, or fame? Or do you want His glory to be revealed through your suffering; for His character to be developed in you through your crisis?”

Prayer is not just a transaction, it is an interaction

2. The second thing we can learn from the open, honest, “no-holds-barred” prayer life of Hezekiah is that prayer is not just a transaction, it is an interaction.

For most of us, most of the time, we view prayer as a transaction between us and God. We go to Him with our needs; we have our requisition form filled out, “Lord this is what I need,” and then, we expect Him to look it over, sign it, and hand over what we need.

The truth is, prayer is not a transaction alone, it is interaction. And prayer interaction is communication on the deepest level. It, in of itself, is the most important part of praying.

George MacDonald wrote these fascinating words,

What if God knows prayer to be the thing we need first and most? What if the main object in God’s idea of prayer is a supplying of our great and endless need – the need of Himself. Hunger may drive the runaway child home, and he may or may not be fed at once, but he needs his parents more than his dinner. Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other need. Prayer is the beginning of that communion, of talking with God, of coming to oneness with God.

The truth of the matter is, when crisis occurs and we run to God, we find in Him far more than we knew existed.

The answer to prayer

Now notice verses 4 through 7 of II Kings, chapter 20.

Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Return and say to Hezekiah the leader of My people, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of your father David, ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold,

I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.’” Then Isaiah said, “Take a cake of figs.” And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.

Evidently, this disease that would have taken his life is, with the additional use of medicine, cured. Continue to verses 8 through 11.

Now Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “What will be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord the third day?” Isaiah said, “This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do the thing that He has spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten steps or go back ten steps?” So Hezekiah answered, “It is easy for the shadow to decline ten steps; no, but let the shadow turn backward ten steps.” Isaiah the prophet cried to the Lord, and He brought the shadow on the stairway back ten steps by which it had gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.

Now, I have read a half a dozen explanations of this miracle. They include:

- the earth actually reversed on its axis,
- there was an earthquake that moved the steps of the sun dial,
- Isaiah pulled a slick trick on Hezekiah of some sort,
- there was a refraction of the sun’s rays, or
- there was an eclipse which temporarily obscured the sun’s rays.

These were profoundly exciting explanations. I was so glad to have read them.

God chose to remain quiet on the subject. There is no explanation given. We are simply not told how this was done. We are told, in verse 11, that:

- Isaiah prayed it,
- God did it, and
- Hezekiah saw it.

I suppose the most validating thing about the miracle was the other miracle; that is, Hezekiah recovered from his illness and lived fifteen more years.

The aftermath of deliverance

Now, I have also read a lot of debate on whether or not Hezekiah should have prayed to live. That seems strange to me, since all of us would have prayed the same thing! I have never visited anyone in the hospital who asked me, “Pastor, would you pray that I don’t recover.”

Two problems resulting from God’s guarantee

There are, however, two things that are written about Hezekiah, after his recovery, that teach the truth that it is best that we do not know how much time we have left on planet earth. It is best that we are not given guarantees or the same two problems would probably invade our lives as well.

The threat of self-sufficiency

1. The first problem is the threat of self-sufficiency.

Look at verses 12 through 15.

At that time Berodach-baladan a son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that Hezekiah had been sick. Hezekiah listened to them, and showed them all his treasure house, the silver and the gold and the spices and the precious oil and the house of his armor and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah and said to him, “What did these men say, and from where have they come to you?” And Hezekiah said, “They have come from a far country, from Babylon.” He said, “What have they seen in your house?” So Hezekiah answered, “They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shown them.”

Notice the references to himself, “my house, my treasures . . .”. We see that,

Guaranteed health brought a loss of perspective.

Hezekiah lost the edge that comes from having to rely on the power of God. He said, “Look at my treasures. Look at my house. Look at my kingdom.”

There was not one reference to God in his conversations with Babylon. Little did Hezekiah know that it would be Babylon who would overthrow Judah, not Assyria. Little did Hezekiah know that the Babylonians would take their notes and snapshots back to their king and begin to plan for the day when they would grow strong enough to conquer Hezekiah’s land. Little did Hezekiah know that Babylon would lead the Jews into captivity, which would include, among those captives, a young man named Daniel.

The threat of spiritual complacency

2. The second problem is the threat of spiritual complacency.

Look at verses 16 through 19.

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the Lord. ‘Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,’ says the Lord, ‘Some of your sons who shall issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away; and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.’” Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good.” For he thought, “Is it not so, if there will be peace and truth in my days?”

Hezekiah went soft; he got comfortable, and he thinks, “Hey, I’m going to live for another fifteen years, so even the worst news isn’t all that bad. I’ve got a guarantee on safety and protection. Let the next generation deal with the problem.”

We see that,

Guaranteed safety brought about a sense of apathy.

At that moment, Hezekiah lost his ability to communicate to the next generation what it takes to stand firm in the Lord. For the next fifteen years, Hezekiah “coasted”.

I find it interesting that during this fifteen year period, Hezekiah’s son was born. When he later ascended his father’s throne, he had no spiritual vitality whatsoever. He never saw his father agonize over the will of God. He never saw his father wrestle with the suffering of life. The only thing he had ever seen his father do was “coast”.

A life void of the tension of danger or death might sound like “the life,” but, in reality, it may not be much of a life worth living. We will grow spiritually mushy and soft.

Chuck Swindoll refers to the value of tension in his book, *Come before Winter*. He wrote a chapter entitled, “Tension in the Tank,” and I would like to read some of it to you. He said,

It takes tension to develop the right texture.

That peaked my interest, so I read further. He continued,

In the northeastern United States, codfish are not only delectable, they are a big commercial business. There is a market for eastern cod all over, especially in sections farthest removed from the northeast coastline. But, the public demand poses a problem to the shippers.

First, they froze the cod and then, shipped them elsewhere. But, the freeze took away much of the flavor. So, they experimented with shipping them alive in tanks of seawater. But, that proved even worse. Not only was it more expensive, but the cod lost its flavor and, in addition, became mushy and soft. The texture was seriously affected.

Finally, some creative soul solved the problem in a most innovative manner. The codfish were placed in the tank of water along with their natural enemy, the catfish. From the time the cod left the east coast until it arrived at its westernmost destination, those ornery catfish chased the cod all over the tank. As you guessed it, when the cod arrived at the market, they were as fresh as when they were first caught. There was no loss of flavor, nor was the texture affected.

A couple of questions seemed worth asking. First, can you name some catfish swimming in your tank? Maybe you live with one of them. Or, it is somebody at work whose irritating presence drives you to your knees several times a week. Every church has a few catfish, as well. They are there to keep

all the cod from getting soft, mushy, and tasteless.

Have you given thanks for them lately? Just think, it is that tension in the tank that helps the image of Christ emerge. With the right attitude, we can learn how to keep from resenting them as intruders, as the chase continues. To do so, we will need to put an end to pity parties and whine clubs and gripe gatherings. When we do, it is nothing short of remarkable how closely the chase begins to resemble the race.

Isn't that great? What are the catfish in your tank? Where is the tension that requires you to depend on the strength of the Lord?

To Hezekiah, Sennacherib was one giant catfish. His personal illness was another. Together, these two fish drove Hezekiah to God.

A Lasting Challenge

Finally, notice verses 20 through 21.

Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah and all his might, and how he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah? So Hezekiah slept with his fathers, and Manasseh his son became king in his place.

Right on schedule, according to the promise of God, fifteen years after his miraculous healing, Hezekiah's delayed funeral was finally held.

Hezekiah was given the rare opportunity to see into the future. He was given a piece of information that every human being craves; that is, “How long will I live? When will I die?”. And we observed that Hezekiah was closer to the Lord when he did not know the answer, than when he did.

The challenge to us is this,

You do not get to choose how you are going to die, or when; you do get to choose how you are going to live.

Ladies and gentlemen, every one of us are terminal, we just do not know when. Let us choose today, to live to honor and glorify the Lord, whom we will one day see face to face. And that, my friends, is guaranteed.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/16/1996 by Stephen Davey.

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