

SPECIAL FOCUS: FROM PROBLEMS TO PRAISE

INTRODUCTION

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When God answers the prayers of his children, it provides an opportunity for Him to receive glory. This happens on a personal level when we give Him praise and on a much larger scale when we tell others about it. It would be a terrible display of ingratitude for us to receive an answer to prayer and forget to thank God or fail to proclaim His greatness. In this session, Hezekiah received a life-altering answer to prayer and remembered to thank God and praise Him in the presence of others.

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FROM PROBLEMS TO PRAISE

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THE POINT:
THANK GOD AND
PRAISE HIM FOR HOW HE
ANSWERS PRAYER.

ISAIAH 38:9-20

⁹ A poem by King Hezekiah of Judah after he had been sick and had recovered from his illness:

¹⁰ I said: In the prime of my life I must go to the gates of Sheol; I am deprived of the rest of my years.

¹¹ I said: I will never see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living; I will not look on humanity any longer with the inhabitants of what is passing away.

¹² My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent. I have rolled up my life like a weaver; he cuts me off from the loom. By nightfall you make an end of me.

¹³ I thought until the morning: He will break all my bones like a lion. By nightfall you make an end of me.

¹⁴ I chirp like a swallow or a crane; I moan like a dove. My eyes grow weak looking upward. LORD, I am oppressed; support me.

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¹⁵ What can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk along slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul.

¹⁶ LORD, by such things people live, and in every one of them my spirit finds life; you have restored me to health and let me live.

¹⁷ Indeed, it was for my own well-being that I had such intense bitterness; but your love has delivered me from the Pit of destruction, for you have thrown all my sins behind your back.

.....
¹⁸ For Sheol cannot thank you; Death cannot praise you. Those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.

¹⁹ The living, only the living can thank you, as I do today; a father will make your faithfulness known to children.

²⁰ **The LORD is ready to save me; we will play stringed instruments all the days of our lives at the house of the LORD.**

MEMORY VERSE

KEYWORDS

A poem (v. 9)—The Hebrew may mean this is a song. The same Hebrew word is used to describe Psalms 16; 56–60 in their inscriptions.

Sheol (v. 10)—Sheol refers to the place where dead people are. The word was used like we sometimes use the word grave.

I chirp...I moan (v. 14)—These words describe the weakness of Hezekiah's cries for help.

Ready to save me (v. 20)—These lines both express Hezekiah's confidence that God was saving and healing him and indicate Hezekiah's response to that salvation —namely, worship.

HOW CAN WE REMAIN HOPEFUL DURING LIFE'S STRUGGLES?

None of us enjoy problems. We imagine that a life free from trouble would bring us peace and happiness. Yet, life doesn't work that way. Problems are an inescapable part of our human experience. While we can't choose the challenges we face, we have the power to choose how we respond to them. This truth is illustrated in Isaiah 38, where King Hezekiah is facing imminent death. However, he did not give in to despair or resign himself to defeat. Instead, he turned to God in heartfelt prayer, seeking God's mercy and intervention. His response reminds us

that problems, no matter how intimidating, are opportunities to deepen our trust in God and align ourselves with His will. God heard Hezekiah's prayer and granted him an extension of life, demonstrating His power and faithfulness. As we reflect on this passage, let us examine our own responses to life's challenges. Do we allow them to overwhelm us, or do we bring them to God in faith? Let's discover how His faithfulness can transform even our darkest circumstances into testimonies of His grace.

When Despondent, Look to God // Isaiah 38:9-14

Have you ever looked back on life experience and been able to see how God was working on your behalf? Oftentimes, we're able to see God clearer than when we initially went through the experience. This is the testimony of King Hezekiah. He has written a poem about a period of adversity in his life. In his reflection, he can see the hand of God moving in his circumstances.

He wrote a surprisingly vulnerable and brutally honest poem in which he described his near-death experience. Hebrew poetry is characterized by literary features that can tuck the interpretation just beneath the surface of its figurative language. This requires a closer reading since the message isn't always obvious or intuitive.

The first part of Hezekiah's poem offers a window into his thoughts. He described his experience of walking through the valley of the shadow of death, though he didn't realize it was a mere shadow at the time. While this is considered a poem of thanksgiving, it contains several statements of lament that pave the way for celebration. The king first lamented that he was going to die in the "prime" of his life. If his death happened today, his loved ones might inscribe on his headstone, "Gone too soon," and that pretty much sums up Hezekiah's sentiment as well. He connected his impending death with a place called Sheol, a Hebrew term for the afterlife or the realm of the



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dead. Everybody has a reservation in Sheol, but Hezekiah wanted to postpone his trip.

The word used in verse 10 can be translated as prime or middle, but it can also refer to a season of rest or quiet. Most of us have a plan for all that we want to do when life quietens down, when the kids are grown, or when retirement comes. This was Hezekiah's moment—his bucket-list season—and he felt like it was being stolen from him.

King Hezekiah also lamented the experiences stolen from him by a premature death. He wouldn't see God or hang out with family and friends. Relationships have a way of taking on new significance when death is imminent. When Hezekiah spoke of "seeing God," he was most likely referring to his encounters with God in the temple.

WHICH OF THE PHRASES IN THIS PASSAGE MOST RESONATE WITH YOU?

Hezekiah knew that his body, like a tent, was a temporary dwelling place. He also compared his life to the threads spun together on a weaver's loom. When the product is complete, the weaver cuts the last thread and releases it from the loom. In both analogies, Hezekiah suggests that God is ultimately the one who brings life to an end. The tent does not "pluck" itself up, nor does the garment "cut" itself from the loom. God is the one who determines the length of our days.

It's clear that Hezekiah attributed his sickness and impending death directly to God (vv. 12-13). He finally turned his attention toward the heavens and cried out with the only voice he could muster. He prayed a simple childlike prayer—"Lord, help me!" The words he chose actually portray a courtroom setting where an advocate is needed to defend the accused. The prospect of death almost always causes people to contemplate eternity. Even if Hezekiah's life was extended for a season, it would one day come to an end, and he would need Someone to defend him in the heavenly courtroom.

Acknowledge God's Grace // Isaiah 38:15-17

God answered Hezekiah's prayer. He was unmistakably clear about one thing: his healing came only by the hand of God. He also acknowledged that God had spoken to him. There are times God desires to speak to us, but we are inattentive or too focused on our problems that we are unable—sometimes unwilling to hear from God. Searching for the right words to convey his feelings, Hezekiah began in an attitude of repentance.



DIGGING DEEPER KING HEZEKIAH

King Hezekiah's name means "Yahweh is my strength." It is a profound testament to his reliance on God rather than his earthly status. Though he held the position of king, his strength did not originate from his title, wealth, or military power. Instead, Hezekiah's name served as a constant reminder that God was his true source of power and sustenance. God often allowed Hezekiah to face challenges that stripped away any reliance on himself or his possessions. In these times, Hezekiah discovered that his ultimate security rested in God alone. This reliance not only strengthened his faith but also enabled him to be a source of encouragement for others. Similarly, we are often placed in positions where our own abilities and resources are insufficient. In those moments, we can draw on God's strength, not only to endure our struggles but also to be strong for those around us.

Has there been a time when the strength of others helped you endure? Thank God for them now.



He was not going to be like those who, when the consequences are removed, go right back to life as usual.

He would live (walk) differently with the memory of his anguish always in view. He had been humbled much like Jacob, whose encounter with God left him walking with a limp (Gen. 32:31). Hezekiah's brush with death gave him ample opportunity to consider how his life would change if God restored his health. Near-death experiences have a unique way of reordering our priorities. When Hezekiah was granted an extension of time, he was careful to give all the credit to God for his "new lease on life." It was God's decision to let him live (v. 16).

In His lovingkindness, God assigned Hezekiah to the Pit and then came to his rescue. This was a preview of things to come, when Christ would go to the Pit himself in order to rescue sinners from eternal death. There can only be rescue when there is repentance, and that's where the suffering comes in. It was God's kindness that brought Hezekiah to repentance, but it was a kindness of wounding. God was willing to hurt in order to heal because that's what a perfect loving Father does. It was for Hezekiah's peace (well-being) that God afflicted him with "intense bitterness" (v. 17).

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE HEZEKIAH'S ATTITUDE SHIFT IN THESE VERSES?

Hezekiah's rescue from the Pit was directly linked to God's forgiveness. When confronted with sin, we

can plead innocent or guilty before the Righteous Judge. To claim innocence is to throw our sins behind our own backs and act as if they don't exist, but God always uncovers what we cover (Ps. 32). Whatever we hide behind our backs, God will bring into the light (Ps. 90:8). Hezekiah's suffering produced repentance, and he uncovered his sin before God. Out of his great love, God threw the sins of Hezekiah behind His back, where they would no longer be seen or remembered.

This is a beautiful picture of what the psalmist described when he wrote that God throws our sins "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103:12). He deliberately chose a distance that cannot be measured because God's mercy is infinite. God does not give us what we deserve, or we'd all be in the Pit of destruction. It's not possible for an omniscient God to forget anything, but He chooses to act as if the sin never happened. Hezekiah knew it was reason to express immense gratitude.

Express Your Thanks to God Publicly // Isaiah 38:18-20

Hezekiah's life would be extended so that he could express gratitude to God and publicly proclaim His goodness. His healing wasn't exclusively about Hezekiah but about all those who would hear his praises and join the celebration. Hezekiah reasoned from the psalms that dead people cannot rejoice in God, at least not in the same way that the living delight in him (Ps. 30:9). Hezekiah was not suggesting a "soul sleep" where death brings an end to all conscious activity. The thief dying on the cross next to Jesus was promised a warm welcome into paradise on that very same day (Luke 23:43). Paul also wrote that the absence from our bodies will mean the conscious enjoyment of God's presence (2 Cor. 5:8).

Hezekiah does, however, refer to a time and place in which believers can no longer proclaim God's faithfulness on this earth. Jesus taught about this in a parable where Lazarus could not cross over from death to life, even to share the gospel with a wayward sinner (Luke 16:19-31). Hezekiah understood that his only opportunity to declare the mercies of God to a dark and hopeless world would be in the land of the living.

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The extra time granted to Hezekiah was not for the sake of his own royal pleasures. He was rescued from death so he could do what could not be done from the “Pit”—give thanks, praise, and hope in God. The reality of death and contemplation of the afterlife beautifies the gospel of resurrection. Jesus conquered death, giving us the hope that Hezekiah could only preview as through a cloudy window.

The end of his poem reveals that Hezekiah’s life purpose was radically altered by his return from the brink of death. His answered prayer ignited in him a passion to praise God publicly. The majority of his pronouns up to this point have been personal; Hezekiah had been telling his own story. But in his closing words, he shifted to plural pronouns as he considered the final outcome of his suffering. Hezekiah used his pain and subsequent deliverance as a platform to honor God in the presence of many witnesses. Humbled by his illness, Hezekiah no longer saw his primary role as one of ruling in the palace. Instead, he would devote the remainder of his life to worship in the house of the Lord.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR US TO EXPRESS THANKS BOTH PUBLICLY AND PRIVATELY?

DID YOU KNOW?

There are a myriad of scientific research studies touting the physical and mental benefits of prayer. Researchers have concluded that in addition to being a source of spiritual strength and comfort, prayer can positively impact one’s mental and physical well-being by reducing stress, improving emotional resilience, and even aiding recovery from illness. There are other studies that demonstrate prayer reduces psychological distress and improves overall quality of life. While this is insightful, the true validation of the power of prayer does not come from scientific studies but from a personal relationship with God. Believers who follow the command of Christ when he declares “men ought to always pray” know personally about the power of prayer. It is a command that benefits the believer in immeasurable ways.

Biblical Truth: 1 Peter 5:7 reminds us to cast “all your care on Him, because He cares about you.”

How can understanding the power of prayer help you move from problem to praise?

LIVE IT

How should Christians respond to adversity?

Our relationship with Christ doesn’t shield us from adversity. However, the quality of our relationship with Christ is reflected in how we choose to respond to adversity. There may be times when we become frustrated and discouraged. In these difficult moments, God still loves us, and he has granted us access to Him. When we are tempted to give up, we should develop the habits of prayer, praise, and proclamation.

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- **Pray.** Prayer is a command. God wants you to pray consistently. Do not wait until the urgency of an emergency compels you to pray. Set aside time every day for an uninterrupted conversation with God.
- **Praise.** We should praise God whenever we have a chance. Oftentimes, we praise God on a “wait and see” basis. However, God wants you to praise before, during, and after the trial of life.
- **Proclaim.** When God responds to your prayers, share it with other people, especially unbelievers. This will encourage believers to pray and unbelievers to consider the work of God in their own lives.

DAILY READINGS

1. STRENGTH IN HIS SOVEREIGNTY // ISAIAH 38:10

The sovereignty of God is defined as His absolute right and authority to exercise His ruling power over creation. This means that everything, from the smallest details to the biggest plans, is under His control. God's sovereignty also includes how He chooses to exercise His power—His timing, methods, and purposes, which are always perfect, even when we don't understand them. Sometimes, life presents challenges that seem unfair or painful, and we might feel as though God has made a bad decision. However, Isaiah 55:8-9 reminds us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways." This is the LORD's declaration. Trusting His sovereignty means believing even in times of difficulty.

When we embrace God's sovereignty, we find peace knowing He is in control.

2. BITTER TO BETTER // ISAIAH 38:15

Difficulties in life often leave us bitter. This bitterness doesn't just affect our relationship with God; it seeps into our attitude, our relationships, and our witness for Christ. What makes bitterness particularly dangerous is its tendency to linger. Many people are blessed but are unable to fully experience the goodness of God because of bitterness. Bitterness robs us of the joy God intends for us to have. Through Him, we can exchange bitterness for joy and gratitude. King Hezekiah serves as an example. He didn't let his experience and a temporary feeling of despair stop him from calling on God. Look to Him today.

God does not want us to remain trapped in bitterness.

3. RECOVERED AND RESTORED // ISAIAH 38:16

In the Old Testament, the concept of recovery is deeply rooted in the idea of restoration, both spiritually and physically. Recovery in this context is not simply about regaining what was

lost but about experiencing a profound renewal of faith, trust, and reliance on God. Hezekiah's story demonstrates that even in the midst of unimaginable challenges, God's power can bring about healing. However, his healing was not merely physical but mental and emotional as well. Hezekiah emerged from his trial with deeper trust in God's power and providence. Whether we face health crises, financial difficulties, or relationship wounds, the power of God is able to restore us.

There is no loss that exceeds God's ability to restore.

4. DIFFICULTY TO DELIVERANCE // ISAIAH 38:17

God is our ultimate deliverer. When I was a child, I signed up for swimming lessons. After my first lesson, I decided to venture into the deep end of the pool, even though I was unprepared. I quickly began to struggle. I was powerless, unable to save myself or even call for help. Thankfully, the lifeguard saw me struggling and rescued me. How often does God do the same for us? He sees us in our struggles and rescues us, often before we even call Him. When we face difficult circumstances, we must trust God in life's darkest moments. No situation is too difficult for Him to handle.

God always provides a way out, He is THE ultimate lifesaver.

5. PERSONAL PRAISE // ISAIAH 38:19

Hesitation can cause us to miss opportunities because we tie decisions to others instead of God. Praising God is a personal act that should never depend on others. It is our response to God's goodness, and should flow from our hearts, not anyone else's actions or choices. Even when we praise God in the midst of a crowd, it remains an intimate and personal connection with Him. While praise may occur among others, it is ultimately an individual decision to honor and glorify God.

Do not allow your praise to be dependent on how and when others praise.



HEZEKIAH: King of Judah

BY JEFF S. ANDERSON

The name Hezekiah literally means “Yahweh is my strength” or “Yahweh has strengthened me.” In some respects, we know more about Hezekiah than perhaps any king in the Old Testament. Three major sections of the Old Testament describe his reign (2 Kings 18–20; 2 Chron 29–32; and Isaiah 36–39). Many sources outside of the Bible mention him, such as the Jewish historian Josephus—as well as the annals of Assyria’s King Sennacherib, which describe the military standoff between Sennacherib and Hezekiah. A wealth of additional archaeological evidence also bears witness to this Judean king. Additionally, the Book of Proverbs mentions that some of Hezekiah’s men were responsible for copying at least some of the Proverbs (25:1).

sources are inconsistent regarding Hezekiah’s date of accession, as the chronology of Hezekiah’s accession is notoriously challenging.¹ All sources agree, however, that he was the son of Ahaz, that he was 25 when he began his reign, and that he reigned for 29 years. Depending on how one reads the biblical chronology, he either reigned 715–686 B.C. or 727–699 B.C. In either case, his reign took place during some of the most tumultuous years of Judah’s existence. He was alive, and perhaps even was ruling, when the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Further, he watched fretfully during his own reign as the Assyrians came within a breath of taking his capital city, Jerusalem.

The Book of Isaiah, which describes Hezekiah's colorful interaction with the prophet during this tumultuous time (Isa. 36-39), mirrors the account in the Book of 2 Kings (18-20) in nearly every respect. Scholars have debated whether the Isaiah text is dependent on 2 Kings, whether they shared a common source, or whether the 2 Kings text was in some way dependent on Isaiah.

While scholars have not reached a consensus, many have historically concluded that the 2 Kings text was inserted into the Book of Isaiah at a later time. If this is true, this insertion would thus serve as a historical bridge between Isaiah's prophecies of judgment in chapters 1-35 and those of hope in chapters 40-55. Both 2 Kings and Isaiah focus on the Assyrian threat against Jerusalem by Sennacherib around 701 B.C., and on a mysterious illness that struck Hezekiah from which he was miraculously healed. The Book of Isaiah does add one element not present in the text of 2 Kings; the long prayer of thanksgiving Hezekiah uttered immediately after his healing (Isa. 38:9-20).

Oddly, the Book of 2 Chronicles makes almost no link between Isaiah and Hezekiah. It does, however, go into great detail regarding several religious reforms Hezekiah instituted, including the removal of the high places, refurbishing of the temple, and reestablishment of the Passover (2 Chron. 29-31). Many have argued that

these religious reforms may have been at best superficial attempts to gain independence from Assyria by limiting worship practices in the countryside and restricting all forms of worship to the temple in Jerusalem. In Isaiah's account, the Assyrian commander charges that these merely religious sanctions will have no effect on counteracting Assyria's military might (Isa. 36:7). Archaeological evidence confirms, though, that pagan worship at the high places in the countryside continued uninterrupted before, throughout, and long after Hezekiah's reign.

In addition to the biblical materials, archaeology sheds extensive light on the reign of this famous king. Perhaps the most celebrated discovery, called the Siloam Tunnel, was made in the 1800s. This tunnel was originally designed to protect Jerusalem from the Assyrian siege by bringing water to Jerusalem from the Gihon spring just outside the city, into the Pool of Siloam within the city walls (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chron. 32:30). In accordance with the biblical record, the Siloam Tunnel is now nearly universally dated to Hezekiah's reign.²

The celebration of the project is witnessed by an inscription of six lines of classical Hebrew carved above the tunnel that speak of the final phases, as two excited crews working from opposite ends met one another as the tunnel reached its completion.



Lintel from a rock-cut tomb; dated to 7th cent. B.C.; from Silwan, near Jerusalem. Likely the tomb of Shebna, Hezekiah's royal steward. The inscription reads: "This is _____ yahu, who is Over the House. There is no silver and gold here; only [him] and the bones of his slave-wife. Cursed be the man who opens this."

One of the most striking discoveries is present among sennacherib's annals, which were typically recorded on cylinders or "prisms." One such prism, now called the Oriental Institute Prism, mentions sennacherib's ruthless razing of 46 of the cities of Judah, taking 200,150 captives, and confining Hezekiah the Judean king in Jerusalem "like a caged bird." Afterwards, sennacherib forced the humiliated Hezekiah to pay a heavy tribute.³ For Assyrian annals to mention Hezekiah in this way is actually quite striking. Uncharacteristically, the annals do not boast that sennacherib conquered Jerusalem, as all sources—even those from the Assyrians—agree that Jerusalem was spared. Other cities of Judah were not so lucky. An Assyrian wall relief from the seventh century B.C. graphically portrays the fall of Lachish, one of Judah's



Terracotta foundation record from Nineveh, known as the Oriental Institute Prism, lists the military campaigns of Sennacherib. The inscription includes the description of Hezekiah being confined "like a caged bird" and describes the tribute Hezekiah paid Sennacherib after Assyria's invasion.

strongholds, with depictions of Assyrian soldiers taking the Judean people away into captivity after plundering the city and burning it to the ground. Jerusalem, therefore, survived evidently by the skin of its teeth.

The Book of Isaiah records the prophet's famous pronouncement to Hezekiah that sennacherib would never enter the city, that he would hear a rumor of insurrection from his own home, and that Jerusalem would be spared by Yahweh's direct intervention (2 Kings 19:5-7; Isa. 37:21-35). Biblical and Assyrian accounts confirm that Jerusalem was left intact even though most of Judah's cities were lost.

The biblical account adds that the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrian troops who perished in their beds (37:36), thus adding to sennacherib's urgency to leave. sennacherib returned home and was assassinated years later by his own sons in 682 B.C.

One other piece of archaeological evidence supports the biblical account of Hezekiah's preparation against the Assyrian invasion. On the northern border between Judah and samaria, a number of storage jars from four main storage centers bear the seals in Hebrew, *lamelek*, or "belonging to the king." These storage jars indicate careful preparation to counter sennacherib's likely invasion routes from the north. These seals, typically dated to the reign of Hezekiah, were on storage jars that were probably used to stockpile supplies to defend against an impending invasion.

In spite of the miraculous political deliverance described in the Bible, Hezekiah's foreign policies were ultimately disastrous to Judah. The Scriptures record Hezekiah becoming ill to the point of death. The prophet Isaiah urged the king to put his affairs in order as his death was imminent. Hezekiah prayed earnestly to the Lord. God answered by adding 15 years to Hezekiah's life (2 Kings 20:6; Isa. 38:5).

Hearing of Hezekiah's illness, the king of Babylon sent an envoy to express concern for Judah's king. The Isaiah text ends as Hezekiah showed the Babylonian envoys all of the wealth of his treasures and storehouses. His actions foreshadowed Jerusalem's cataclysmic fall to the Babylonians, an event that would take place a century later. The prophet Isaiah directly confronted Hezekiah with the prophecy that all of Judah's treasures and even the king's own descendants would some day be swept away in exile to Babylon (Isa. 39:6). In a callous reply similar to Louis XV's famous quip, "Après moi le deluge" (after me, the flood), Hezekiah replied, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good! At least there will be peace and truth in my days"⁴ (v. 8).

1. Ian Provan, Hezekiah and the Book of Kings in *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 172 (Berlin: 1988).
2. Contrast John Rogerson and Philip R. Davies, "Was the Siloam Tunnel Built by Hezekiah?" in *Biblical Archaeologist* 59.3 (September 1996): 138-49.
3. William Sanford LaSor, "Sennacherib" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 394.
4. Writer's translation.

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Recognizing the threat and possible invasion from Assyria's King Sennacherib, Hezekiah determined to do two things: to keep water from the Assyrian armies and to make sure Jerusalem had water even if the city was besieged. Laboring from both ends and towards the middle, workers dug a 581-yard long tunnel that diverted water from the Gihon Spring into Jerusalem.