

How (Not) to Finish Well (Isaiah 38–39)

“Our Heart Is Restless Until It Rests in You”

On August 28, 430, Augustine, the bishop of Hippo Regius in Roman North Africa (modern-day Algeria), died at the age of 75. Throughout the previous year, nearly all of Roman North Africa had fallen to the Vandals, a Germanic people that emerged out of modern-day Poland to conquer much of the western Roman Empire. By the summer of AD 430, only a few fortified cities like Hippo remained unconquered by the barbarian hordes, and it was under siege, completely surrounded by land and by sea.¹ Though Augustine urged his priests to man their posts, come what may, many fled ahead of the invasion. One bishop, a man named Honoratus, wrote to Augustine to explain his actions, saying, “I just cannot see how we can be of any use, to ourselves or to our people: we would only stay to witness, before our very eyes, men struck down, women raped, churches going up in flame; and we would be tortured to death for wealth we do not possess.”² For his part, however, Augustine was determined to stay with his flock to the end, fearing, lest he should be a “hireling” who “sees the wolf coming, and flees, because he cares not for the sheep” (Jn 10:12–13).³ Augustine’s biographer, Possidius, described the state of affairs during the last year of Augustine’s life:

The man of God saw whole cities sacked, country villas razed, their owners killed or scattered as refugees, the churches deprived of their bishops and clergy, and the holy virgins and ascetics dispersed; some tortured to death, some killed outright, others, as prisoners, reduced to losing their integrity, in soul and body, to serve an evil and brutal enemy. The hymns of God and praises in the churches had come to a stop; in many places, the church-buildings were burnt to the ground; the sacrifices of God could no longer be celebrated in their proper place, and the divine sacraments were either not sought, or, when sought, no one could be found to give them. . . .⁴

¹ See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; orig. 1967), 423–30.

² Augustine, *Epistle* 228.5; quoted in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 429.

³ Augustine, *Epistle* 228.5; <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102228.htm>.

⁴ Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita Scripta a Possidio Episcopo*, XXVIII.6–8; quoted in Brown, 430.

Augustine spent his final year giving himself to two primary tasks: (1) cataloging and, in some cases, correcting, his many works, preserving them for posterity; and (2) preaching to the frightened and demoralized refugees huddled in the church in Hippo, awaiting the inevitable disaster that was about to fall. In such times, Augustine urged his congregation to look beyond death to resurrection. Preaching from John 21:18, where Jesus told Peter, “When you are old, another will bind you, and take you, and will carry you to where you will not want to go,” Augustine reminded them of the martyrs of old:

They really loved this life; yet they weighed it up. They thought of how much they should love the things eternal; if they were capable of so much love for things that pass away. . . . I know you want to keep on living. You do not want to die. [But] you want to pass from this life to another in such a way that you will not rise again, as a dead man, but fully alive and transformed. This is what you desire.⁵

In short, Augustine urged his congregation to die well. He did not look for deliverance; he had no promise, as did Hezekiah.

“Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.” (Is 37:33–35)

But Hippo was not Jerusalem, and Rome was not Israel. Augustine knew Hippo was going to fall; it was only a matter of time. And he wanted to finish well by helping his congregation to die well. He encouraged his people to examine their hearts, for where there was fear of death and loss, there was surely a love of the world: “Whoever does not want to fear; let him probe his inmost self. Do not just touch the surface; go down into yourself; reach into the farthest corner of your heart. Examine it then with care: see there, whether a poisoned vein of the wasting love of

⁵ Augustine, *Sermon* 344.4; quoted in Brown, 435–36.

the world still does not pulse, whether you are not moved by some physical desires, and are not caught in some law of the senses.”⁶

But it was not the will of God that Augustine should die with his flock. For in August of AD 430, a year before Hippo finally fell to the Vandals, Augustine fell sick with a fever. Knowing he was about to die, Augustine took his own counsel and set about searching his own heart, preparing it for death. Possidius recorded,

Indeed, this holy man . . . was always in the habit of telling us, when we talked as intimates, that even praiseworthy Christians and bishops, though baptized, should still not leave this life without having performed a full and exacting [repentance]. This is what he did in his own last illness: for he had ordered the four psalms of David that deal with [repentance] to be copied out. From his sick-bed he could see these sheets of paper every day, hanging on his walls, and would read them, crying constantly and deeply. And, lest his attention be distracted from this in any way, almost ten days before his death, he asked us that none should come in to see him, except at those hours when the doctors would come to examine him or his meals were brought. This was duly observed: and so he had all that stretch of time to pray. . . .⁷

When Augustine knew his time had come, he prepared his soul to meet his God. After ten days of illness, meditation, and repentance, Augustine experienced the fulness of what he had only known in part thirty years earlier, when he wrote in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*,

You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.⁸

Hezekiah—A Cautionary Tale

This morning, we conclude what is the fifth major section of the book of Isaiah. By way of reminder:

⁶ Augustine, *Sermon* 348.2; quoted in Brown, 436.

⁷ Possidius, *Sancti Augustini Vita*, XXXI.1–3; quoted in Brown, 436.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; orig., 1991), 1.1 (p. 3).

- Isaiah 1–5 forms the book’s prologue, establishing the context of Isaiah’s fifty-year prophetic ministry, describing the sorry state of Israel (specifically, the southern kingdom of Judah) during the years 740–690 BC, and providing a glimpse of eschatological salvation for a redeemed remnant in Zion.
- Isaiah 6 describes the prophet’s personal conversion and prophetic commission that occurred in 740 BC.
- Isaiah 7–12 is a prophetic oracle set against the backdrop of the Syro-Ephraimite invasion of Judah in 734 BC.
- Isaiah 13–27 declares the judgment of God upon the nations of the world, and the salvation of a redeemed remnant gathered from among all nations.
- Isaiah 28–39 is set against the backdrop of the Assyrian invasion and siege of Jerusalem that occurred during the reign of Hezekiah. This section reached its dramatic climax last week in chapters 36–37 with the deliverance of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Assyrian army, and the death of Sennacherib the Assyrian king. Isaiah 38–39 forms a kind of epilogue to this section, describing two events that occurred in the final stage of Hezekiah’s reign. Hezekiah is an enigmatic figure, as was David. This ought not surprise, nor particularly trouble us, for “even the best of men are men at best.”⁹

Before we jump into the text, there is one issue that needs to be addressed. When did the events of Isaiah 38–39 take place? Because of the sequence in which Isaiah placed them, our default position is probably to understand the events of Isaiah 38–39 as occurring after the events of Isaiah 36–37. However, there are three problems with this position:¹⁰

- The first problem is that the LORD promises Hezekiah in Isaiah 38:6,

⁹ Motyer writes, “Hezekiah was one of the most truly human of the kings, and his portrait here accords with what is recorded elsewhere. He was a man whose heart was genuinely moved towards the Lord but whose will was fickle under the pressures and temptations of life. Like the David who was his ancestor, and unlike the greater David who was his descendant, his first thoughts were for himself”; J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1993), 290.

¹⁰ Those scholars locating the events of Isaiah 38–39 *before* the events of Isaiah 36–37 include: Motyer, 289–97; Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, NAC 15A (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 635–60; Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, Volume 2, Chapters 19–39 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 507–39; John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 424–39. Andrew Davis, on the other hand, is convinced that the ordering is chronological: “Hezekiah’s illness and miraculous healing are given in three different places in Scripture (Isa 38; 2 Kgs 20; 2 Chr 32), and in all three places, the order is Assyrian invasion/defeat, then Hezekiah’s illness and healing, then the Babylonian envoys (Isa 39). Therefore, we should accept this sequence”; Andrew M. Davis, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Isaiah* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 218.

I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.” (38:6)

The most natural reading is to understand this promise to refer to the deliverance described in the previous two chapters (cf. Is 37:35). This, of course, would mean that the events of Isaiah 38–39 occurred *before* the events of Isaiah 36–37.

- The second problem with locating the events of Isaiah 38–39 after the events of Isaiah 36–37 is that Isaiah 39:1 says that the Babylonian envoys were sent to Hezekiah by Merodach-baladan, king of Babylon. But Merodach-baladan reigned as king of Babylon from 722–710 BC, at which point he was driven from Babylon by Sargon king of Assyria. He returned to the throne briefly for about nine months in 703–702 BC, before being defeated by Sennacherib and fleeing to Elam where he died in exile about 694 BC. Yet the destruction of the Assyrian army outside the gates of Jerusalem occurred in 701 BC. How could Merodach-baladan, king of Babylon, send envoys to Hezekiah when he was no longer king of Babylon? For this reason, many scholars believe Merodach-baladan must have sent envoys *before* the siege of Jerusalem, which means Hezekiah’s illness and recovery must have occurred *before* those events as well.
- The third problem with locating the events of Isaiah 38–39 after the events of Isaiah 36–37 is that by most accounts Hezekiah died in the year 687 BC. Since God promised to add fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life, this would place Hezekiah’s illness and recovery in 703/2 BC, *before* the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC.

IF all of these factors are accurate, then I must agree with the majority of scholars and suggest a date around 703/2 BC for the events of Isaiah 38–39.¹¹ This` would not trouble me, for I recognize that Isaiah has organized his book theologically rather than chronologically, and Isaiah 38–39 shifts the focus from Assyria to Babylon, which will become the prominent enemy of God’s people in the next section of Isaiah.¹² Problem solved, right?!

But wait a second... There are problems with this view as well. I can think of three:

¹¹ Motyer dates Hezekiah’s illness and recovery to 702 BC; Motyer, 291. Smith dates Hezekiah’s illness and recovery to 704 BC; Smith, 638. Young dates Hezekiah’s illness and recovery to 713 BC, and Hezekiah’s death to 698 BC; Young, 507–8.

¹² This is Motyer’s explanation; Motyer, 289.

- First, if we look at the parallel account in 2 Chronicles 32, the chronicler connects Hezekiah's riches to Jerusalem's deliverance:

So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all his enemies, and he provided for them on every side. And many brought gifts to the LORD to Jerusalem and precious things to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from that time onward. (2 Chr 32:23)

These same riches Hezekiah then showed to the envoys from Babylon. Why?

And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart. (2 Chr 32:31)

Hezekiah certainly was not exceedingly wealthy prior to the siege of Jerusalem, not if he had to strip the gold from the temple doors in order to try to buy off Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18:16). So his great wealth would appear to have been a gift of God's grace after Judah's deliverance from Egypt (cf. 2 Chr 32:22), perhaps given by the surrounding nations in gratitude for the end of the Assyrian threat. This would mean the events of Isaiah 38–39 occurred *after* the events of Isaiah 36–37.

- Second, when the LORD swore that Israel would be plundered by Babylon and her sons carried into exile (Is 39:5–7), Hezekiah comforted himself with the thought that there would at least be peace and security in his lifetime (Is 39:8). However, “peace and security” would not describe the Assyrian invasion or the siege of Jerusalem, of which the LORD makes no mention. This would likewise imply that the events of Isaiah 38–39 occurred *after* the events of Isaiah 36–37.
- Third, in every place in Scripture these events are described (2 Kgs 18–20; 2 Chr 32; Is 36–39), the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of Sennacherib's army are located *before* Hezekiah's illness and recovery and visit from the Babylonian envoys.

But if Isaiah has given these events in their chronological order, what about God's promise to deliver the city from the hand of Sennacherib in Isaiah 38:6? Perhaps Hezekiah's sickness (Isaiah 38) occurred during the siege of Jerusalem, but Merodach-baladan did not send envoys (Isaiah 39) until after God had destroyed the Assyrian army and the surrounding nations had sent their treasures to Hezekiah. But wasn't Merodach-baladan defeated in 702 BC, before the siege of Jerusalem? Yes, but he was not killed. Perhaps he sent the envoys from his exile in Elam.¹³ But God promised Hezekiah fifteen more years (38:5). Didn't Hezekiah die in 687 BC? Perhaps that date is off by a few years, or perhaps the promise of fifteen years was intended as a round number and not a precise calculation. The fact is, there is a lot about dates (of Hezekiah's reign,¹⁴ of Hezekiah's illness, of Hezekiah's death) that we don't know with certainty, and I think the problem resists a simple solution. I very tentatively hold to the view that Hezekiah's illness (Isaiah 38) occurred during ("In those days" [39:1]) the siege of Jerusalem and that the fateful visit of the envoys from Babylon (Isaiah 39) occurred sometime after the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Assyrian army (Isaiah 36–37).

You may be wondering, was all that necessary? Actually, the question is relevant to today's sermon. For as we saw last week, Hezekiah finally exhibits true repentance and faith in the face of the Assyrian siege (37:1–4, 14–20), after failing to trust in the LORD and instead looking for alternative sources of salvation (Isaiah 28–35). If the events of Isaiah 38–39 occurred before Isaiah 36–37, then we would be justified in thinking that Hezekiah's repentance and prayer of faith in Isaiah 37 marked a turning point in his life, and that he finished well. This would be particularly true if, as some commentators suggest, Hezekiah died in 698 BC rather than 687 BC.¹⁵ That would truly be ending life on a high note. But if the events of Isaiah 38–39 (especially Isaiah 39) occurred during/after the events of Isaiah 36–37, then the less-than-flattering picture of Hezekiah displayed in these chapters would come after his triumph of faith in the face of the siege of Jerusalem, and he would *not* have finished well.

Because I am tentatively opting for the latter view, I am also tentatively using Hezekiah as a warning against not finishing well. But even if I am wrong, and Hezekiah's illness and

¹³ Motyer notes that "some suggest that even outside these two periods [of Merodach-baladan's rule in Babylon] he was still an anti-Assyrian agitator of a high order; Motyer, 291n1.

¹⁴ See Young, 540–55, for an examination of the dates of Hezekiah's reign.

¹⁵ Young, 507–8, seems to prefer this date. Gleason Archer dates Hezekiah's death to between 698 and 696 BC; Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 212.

recovery and the visit from the envoys of Babylon occurred before the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Assyrian forces, Hezekiah's life was still one of both faith and failure. Clearly, Hezekiah began well. In the first year of his reign, he cleansed the temple and restored temple worship (2 Chronicles 29). Soon thereafter, he restored the Passover celebration (2 Chronicles 30), destroyed the high places and altars (2 Chr 31:1), and reorganized the priesthood (2 Chr 31:2–18). Second Chronicles 31 ends with this summary:

Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered. (2 Chr 31:20–21)

That was *definitely* before both the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Assyrian army (Isaiah 36–37), and before Hezekiah's illness, recovery, and the visit from the Babylonian envoys (Isaiah 38–39), whatever order they may have taken. In other words, after this high point there was *definitely* a decline in his faithfulness. Then, there is the problem of Hezekiah's son Manasseh, with whom (by some accounts, at least) Hezekiah reigned as co-regent from 696–687 BC. Manasseh was the wickedest king in Israel's history (2 Kgs 21:1–18; 2 Chr 33:1–9). Though even the best of fathers have prodigal sons, this at least provides some cause for concern as regards Hezekiah's character near the end of his life. Therefore, whether or not the events of Isaiah 38–39 occurred chronologically prior to Isaiah 36–37, I still think it is appropriate to take Hezekiah as a cautionary tale, and to derive from him a challenge to finish well.

With that in mind, what can we learn from these later episodes in Hezekiah's life? I think there are two: there is a lesson on how to approach death (Isaiah 38), and a lesson in how to approach wealth (Isaiah 39). Learning these two lessons will go a long way in helping us finish well.

It Is Not Death to Die

In Isaiah 38, Hezekiah stares death in the face, and—from my perspective, at least—blinks. Let's begin by looking at Hezekiah's *plea* in vv. 1–3:

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. 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 not recover.” Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, and said, “Please, O LORD, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight. And Hezekiah wept bitterly. (38:1–3)

Let me begin by saying that Hezekiah’s problem was not in praying to the LORD for healing; that is a perfectly faithful response to illness—particularly serious illness (Jas 5:14–15). Rather, my concern is two-fold. First, Hezekiah seems utterly undone by the news of his imminent death. He turned his face to the wall (v. 2) and wept bitterly (v. 3). Again, there is nothing wrong with grieving the loss of life. We were created for life, and death is an enemy. But for those whose hope in God transcends this life, for those with a doctrine of resurrection, Hezekiah’s grief seems excessive and unfaithful. How should a believer respond to the news of terminal illness and imminent death? I suggest that a believer should respond as the apostle Paul responded:

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. (Phil 1:20–23)

To die and be with Christ is “far better” than to live; for the believer, death is “gain.” To the extent that we rage against death, to the extent that we bitterly lament death, to the degree that we view death as “loss,” to that degree we are failing to stand in the hope of resurrection. And Hezekiah clearly viewed death as loss, not gain. How do you view death? To you, is death loss or gain? And if you say that death is “gain,” then how ought you to approach a terminal diagnosis? I doubt you would answer “by bitter weeping and bargaining with God.” Rather, how does the believer approach death?

It is not death to die, to leave this weary road,
and join the saints who dwell on high, who've found their home in God.

It is not death to close the eyes long-dimmed by tears,
and wake in joy before your throne, delivered from our fears.

It is not death to fling aside this earthly dust,
and rise with strong and noble wing to live among the just.

It is not death to hear the key unlock the door
that sets us free from mortal years to praise you ever more.

O Jesus, conquering the grave, your precious blood has pow'r to save.

Those who trust in you will in your mercy find
that it is not death to die.¹⁶

If you would finish well, you need to reckon with the reality of resurrection until you view death, not as loss, but as gain.

The second issue I take with Hezekiah's response to the news of his impending death is that he bases his plea on his own righteousness. "I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." Now, I want to be careful here, for David frequently appealed to God for salvation from his enemies on the basis of his integrity (Ps 7:8; 18:20; 26:1; 35:24; etc.). I think there is a way of understanding those pleas that does not amount to self-righteousness. When David pleads for salvation from his enemies, He is not pleading for justification before God; rather, he is pleading for God to judge between his enemies and him: "Judge between us," he pleads. "Which of us seeks to walk in integrity before You?" I think that is a perfectly appropriate way to pray when the enemies you face are wicked people. But Hezekiah is not here pleading for deliverance from wicked people; he is pleading for deliverance from death. And death relates to God's judgment for sin. In other words, Hezekiah appears to be arguing that he does not deserve to die, at least not yet. Oswalt thinks that Hezekiah is appealing to God's general requirements for long life stated in Psalm 34:¹⁷

¹⁶ H. A. César Malan, 1832; tr. George W. Bethune, 1847; alt. Bob Kauflin.

¹⁷ Oswalt, 427, 432–34.

*What man is there who desires life
and loves many days, that he may see good?
Keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from speaking deceit.
Turn away from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it. (Ps 34:12–14)*

Hezekiah is saying, “I’ve done that! So why are You taking my life so early?” But do you see the difference? David says, “LORD, you should act on my behalf against my enemies, because I worship you with a sincere heart and they don’t.” The standard of comparison is the unbelieving wicked. Hezekiah says, “LORD, you should not take my life now because I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.” But now what is the standard of comparison? It is not the unbelieving wicked; it is the perfect law of God. And how faithful, how righteous do you have to be in order for death to be unjust? You have to be perfect. Again, I do not want to make too big a deal out of Hezekiah’s words, but I am troubled by them. It sounds like bargaining with God, yet if all Hezekiah has to bargain with is his own righteousness, that is no leverage at all. And that is putting, I believe, the best spin on Hezekiah’s words. At worst, his words accuse God of injustice.¹⁸ But God is not unjust if he takes our life at five years old, fifty-five years old, or a hundred and five years old. Every year, every day, every breath is a gift of grace.

Next, we turn to the LORD’s *provision* in vv. 4–8.

Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: “Go and say to Hezekiah. Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.

¹⁸ “[Hezekiah] also prays that God might remember all the faithful service and wholehearted devotion he’s displayed throughout his life. This is not the best ground on which an individual should stand before a holy God. For us as Christians, the best place to stand is the perfection of the Savior, Jesus Christ. At worst, Hezekiah’s prayer may imply that he believes God has dealt with him unjustly, that God owes him a better outcome after all the many ways he’s served him”; Davis, 218. Motyer agrees, saying, “Sennacherib would not have come had Hezekiah kept himself free from the worldly expedient of arms, alliances and rebellion. It is an indication of our limited self-awareness that Hezekiah should plead on the basis of his integrity of heart”; Motyer, 291.

This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that he has 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 the ten steps by which it had declined. (38:4–8)

The LORD heard Hezekiah’s prayer and answered, not because He was convinced by Hezekiah’s argument from his own faithfulness, and not because He changed his mind, but because of His own free mercy. For some, this passage presents a challenge to the doctrine of God’s sovereignty and omniscience. How can all of our days be written in God’s book before any of them come to be (Ps 139:16), and yet God add fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life in response to Hezekiah’s prayer? Well, there is a right way and a wrong way to interpret what happens in this passage. The wrong way is to say, “God was going to take Hezekiah’s life through this illness, but then Hezekiah prayed, so God changed His mind and gave Hezekiah fifteen more years.” An omniscient God *cannot* change His mind, for what could an omniscient God learn that would in any way alter His reasoning and decision? A God who changes His mind would be like a square circle or a four-sided triangle. It is a logical contradiction, an impossibility. A God who changes His mind would not be God. The biblical way to understand this passage (and others like it in Scripture where God *appears* to change course due to some prayer or plea) is that God ordained Hezekiah’s illness, ordained Hezekiah’s prayer, and ordained Hezekiah’s healing. Why would God do that? Because it is His will to employ means in the accomplishment of His sovereign purpose. This places us directly in the middle of the biblical tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Though there is tension, that tension is entirely on our part due to our finite minds. God sees no such tension. For Him, there is no contradiction, for His sovereignty and our responsibility are entirely compatible. For us, however, it is best simply to affirm what God has revealed: (1) the omniscient, sovereign God does not and cannot change His mind (Nm 23:19; Mal 3:6); and (2) the prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective (Jas 5:16). So trust the God who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph 1:11), including all things for our good and His glory (Rom 8:28). And pray for His mercy, for it is indeed great.¹⁹

¹⁹ Davis notes, “The original statement by Isaiah was not false, merely incomplete. It seems the fuller statement would be something like this: ‘Put your house in order because you are going to die unless you seek me in prayer and ask me to extend your life. But if you do, I will!’ But it was best for Isaiah to leave that last part out and allow Hezekiah to decide to come to God in prayer. The bottom line is, we should not imagine that the omniscient

The LORD not only answers Hezekiah's prayer by adding fifteen years to his life, He gives Hezekiah a sign of His promise, a miracle of cosmic proportions. God causes the sun to retreat ten steps on the "dial of Ahaz" (מַעְלֹת אַחָז), which could either refer to a sundial (ESV, KJV) or to a stairwell (NIV, NASB). I think "stairwell" is better. The idea is that there was a stairwell (the "stairs of Ahaz") that had a window through which the sun shone, casting a shadow that moved up the stairs as the day progressed. The miracle God performed, then, was nothing less than rotating the earth in reverse. And if you are trying to figure out the astrophysical ramifications of this, stop. It will blow your mind. Just remember that it is not the law of gravity that holds the heavenly bodies in orbit; it is the word of God, and He can move them however He wills. But do not miss the parallel contrast between Hezekiah and his father, Ahaz. You will remember that in Isaiah 7, God promised Ahaz deliverance from the Syro-Ephraimite invasion and offered to give Ahaz a sign of His promise. Ahaz could ask anything, "let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven" (Is 7:11). You will recall that Ahaz, in false humility, declined God's offer. Hezekiah does not make the same mistake (in 2 Kgs 20:10 Hezekiah is given the choice between moving the shadow forward or backward, and Hezekiah chooses the more difficult of the two).²⁰ He asks for and receives a sign, a sign that was noticed even in Babylon (2 Chr 20:31); indeed, this sign would have been observed the world over. Such is God's provision for His people; He will move heaven and earth to do them good.

Finally, we will look at Hezekiah's *psalm* in vv. 9–22.

A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness: (38:9)

This psalm was obviously written after the event, probably after the events of Isaiah 39 as well, for it reflects back upon Hezekiah's stages of processing the illness and his miraculous recovery.²¹ The first stage through which Hezekiah moves is *grief*.

God who never must learn a single thing that he didn't already know should change his eternal plans based on input from fallible human beings"; Davis, 218–19.

²⁰ Motyer points this out; Motyer, 292.

²¹ "From verse 9 it is clear this is a poem Hezekiah writes later, showing a mature reflection on his experience of illness and healing"; Davis, 219.

*I said, In the middle of my days
I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol
for the rest of my years.
I said, I shall not see the LORD,
the LORD in the land of the living;
I shall look on man no more
among the inhabitants of the world. (38:10–11)*

Upon receiving his terminal diagnosis, Hezekiah grieves the loss of the rest of his life (“in the middle of my days I must depart”). He does not look forward to death; he certainly does not see death as gain. When Hezekiah speaks of “Sheol” (שאול), we must remember that at this point he imagines himself afflicted by God for his sin, and therefore to die would be to die unforgiven.²² For Hezekiah, therefore, Sheol was a place of terror. It is clear he does not relish going there. It is also clear he does not view Sheol as a place where he will have fellowship with the LORD or with man. Now, I want to emphasize that it is not wrong to grieve death; Motyer comments, “In both Testaments this life has its own peculiar preciousness which not even the illumination of immortality (2 Tim. 1:10) takes away.”²³ In other words, God has wired us to want to live; therefore, news of impending death will naturally produce grief. My point is that we must not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thes 4:13). We must work through the grief by means of the gospel until we can say with Paul that death is gain. For until you are able to view death as gain, you are not prepared to die well.

Hezekiah’s grief then turns to *anger*. Each of the four similes Hezekiah employs in vv. 12–13 accuse God of perpetrating some manner of violent, unjust action.

*My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me
like a shepherd’s tent;
like a weaver I have rolled up my life;*

²² “Pss. 6:5; 30:9; 88:10–12 are often used to suggest that the Old Testament lacked any hope after death. In each case, however, the context is the same as in Hezekiah’s psalm: the prospect of death out of favour with God”; Motyer, 295n1. See also Young, 526–27.

²³ Motyer, 293.

*he cuts me off from the loom;
from day to night you bring me to an end;
I calmed myself until morning;
like a lion he breaks all my bones;
from day to night you bring me to an end. (38:12–13)*

God has plucked up and removed Hezekiah's tent (i.e. his body [v. 12a]). God has severed Hezekiah's thread from the loom of life (v. 12b). God dangles death over Hezekiah's head all day and all night (v. 12c). God stalks Hezekiah like a lion to crush all his bones (v. 13b).

From anger, Hezekiah turns to *despair*.

*Like a swallow or a crane I chirp;
I moan like a dove.
My eyes are weary with looking upward.
O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety!
What shall I say? For he has spoken to me,
and he himself has done it.
I walk slowly all my years
because of the bitterness of my soul. (38:14–15)*

Prayer is useless, just chirping like a swallow or crane, just moaning like a dove (v. 14a). He looks upward, but there is nothing. No answer; no deliverance (v. 14b). Hezekiah feels the futility of fighting with the Almighty (v. 15a). There is nothing left for him but to trudge on towards death in bitterness of soul (v. 15). I've known people like this, and I do not want to be one of them. I don't want to talk like this when I'm on hospice, and neither do you. This is not what it looks like to finish well.

In v. 16, Hezekiah utters one final cry of *desperation*:

*O Lord, by these things men live,
and in all these is the life of my spirit.
Oh restore me to health and make me live! (38:16)*

Verse 16 is difficult because we don't know to what the repeated "these" refers. By what things do men live? In what things is the life of Hezekiah's spirit? I don't know exactly, but it must mean something like, "By your power men live, and in your power is the life of my spirit," for Hezekiah then makes one final appeal for healing.²⁴

At that point, the LORD must have answered Hezekiah's prayer for healing, for vv. 17–19 record Hezekiah's *reflection* upon his deliverance and give thanks and praise to God.

*Behold, it was for my welfare
that I had great bitterness;
but in love you have delivered my life
from the pit of destruction,
for you have cast all my sins
behind your back.
For Sheol does not thank you;
death does not praise you;
those who go down to the pit do not hope
for your faithfulness. (38:17–19)*

With the perspective gained from looking at this ordeal through the rearview mirror, Hezekiah can see how it was for his good that the LORD afflicted him; he needed the lessons he learned through the ordeal (v. 17a). Motyer claims—and I think he is right—that despite his earlier protests to faithfulness, Hezekiah came to believe that his sickness was the result of sin. Therefore, Hezekiah interpreted his healing as a sign that his sins were forgiven (v. 17bc).²⁵ This also helps to explain v. 18. For had Hezekiah died under God's curse, his existence in Sheol would not have been one of thanksgiving and praise and hope, but one of utter despair.²⁶

²⁴ Motyer has a different understanding of v. 16: "Difficulties attend the precise understanding of this verse but its thrust is clear—'By reference to such things people should live,' *i.e.* others should take note of Hezekiah's experience and many such similar things and order their lives accordingly"; Motyer, 294. This seems to me unlikely, for it does not logically connect with Hezekiah's plea at the end of the verse.

²⁵ "Here is a window into Hezekiah's self-understanding—and therefore into his view of death. He saw his illness as a divine judicial visitation on sin and his death in such circumstances as dying unforgiven"; Motyer, 294. See also Young, 526–27.

²⁶ Motyer, 294–95.

Therefore, Hezekiah rejoices that he lives to thank God, and to make known God's faithfulness to his children.

Finally, Hezekiah proceeds to *worship*.

*The LORD will save me,
and we will play my music on stringed instruments
all the days of our lives
at the house of the LORD. (38:20)*

Salvation inevitably and always leads to worship. Those who have experienced the LORD's mercy must sing (and play instruments, which must shock the Church of Christ folks).

Verses 21–22 provide two details that were not included in the earlier narrative.

Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover." Hezekiah also had said, "What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?" (38:21–22)

Isaiah's treatment was simply a visible sign of the LORD's invisible intervention; fig cakes have no medicinal value of which I'm aware. What Hezekiah's malady was is impossible to say, but it manifested itself in a localized infection of some kind. Whatever it was, it would have prohibited Hezekiah from worshipping in the temple, which appears to be his heart's desire. I know I have been hard on Hezekiah this morning, but let's not forget that he was a sincere worshiper of God. Though deeply flawed, he was deeply faithful (2 Kgs 18:3; 2 Chr 29:2; 32:32). And maybe... just maybe... he finished well. If Hezekiah composed this psalm (38:9–20) *after* the events of Isaiah 39, then maybe the last image we have of Hezekiah is of a man healed in body and soul, worshipping in the house of His God.

It Is Not Life to Gain

If the first lesson to learn from this text about finish well is that it is not death to die (Isaiah 38), the second lesson is that it is not life to gain (Isaiah 39). I find in this text two primary sins of which we must beware if we would finish well, both of which are rooted in pride.

First, we must avoid the pride that turns God's gifts into man's achievements.

At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. And Hezekiah welcomed them gladly. And he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm 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 did they come to you?" Hezekiah said, "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon." He said, "What have they seen in your house?" Hezekiah answered, "They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them." (39:1-4)

What brought the envoys of Babylon to Hezekiah? There are three ways to answer this question. First, and most apparent, Merodach-baladan had heard of Hezekiah's illness and recovery, as well as the sign that had been done in Israel (2 Chr 32:31). But why would Merodach-baladan send greeting and a present to Hezekiah? Second, Merodach-baladan probably wished to forge an alliance with Hezekiah to finish off Assyria and regain the throne of Babylon.²⁷ You will recall that Hezekiah was peculiarly tempted to form alliances with wicked nations rather than trusting in the LORD. Finally, though, the chronicler writes,

And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart. (2 Chr 32:31)

In other words, God brought the envoys in order to reveal the pride that had infected Hezekiah's heart even as the illness had once infected Hezekiah's body. It didn't take long, for when they arrived and presented their gift, Hezekiah could not help himself but show off all the other gifts he had received and the massive treasure he had accumulated. But how did Hezekiah attain all this wealth? He had emptied the treasuries in order to buy the Egyptians, and when that didn't

²⁷ Davis, 224.

work, to bribe the Assyrians. So whence came these sudden riches? Undoubtedly, the 185,000 dead Assyrians had been carrying an extraordinary amount of plunder, for they had already defeated numerous enemies on their way to Jerusalem. But whose victory was that? It was the LORD's. And as though that were not gracious enough, the chronicler writes,

So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all his enemies, and he provided for them on every side. And many brought gifts to the LORD to Jerusalem and precious things to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from that time onward. (2 Chr 32:22–23)

After the defeat of Assyria, the surrounding nations kept bringing Hezekiah treasures. Question: did Hezekiah do *anything* to achieve this vast wealth? No! Every bit of it was a gift of grace. Yet Hezekiah took pride in his treasures as though they had been won by his own hand. There is no mention in the narratives of Hezekiah giving glory to God as he showed off his storehouses.²⁸ If he had, it is doubtful Isaiah would have been waiting for Hezekiah upon his return. It is an immense wickedness to look upon your prosperity and fail to give glory to God, as though it were your own power, your own wisdom, your own entrepreneurial spirit that had achieved it. What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it (1 Cor 4:7)? Everything we have, we have as a gift. If we would finish well, we must remember that.

Second, if we would finish well, we must avoid the pride that cares nothing for the future, but is content to gain in the present.

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. And some of your

²⁸ “Hezekiah received the envoys from Babylon gladly and showed them everything in his treasuries and his armories: the gold, the silver, spices, precious oil, weaponry—everything. It was a prideful tour and greatly dishonoring to God because evidently Hezekiah made no mention of the power of the Lord in defending and so enriching Judah. He (amazingly) took credit for the works God had accomplished! But what had Hezekiah done? When Assyria invaded, he begged for his life. When threatened with a terminal illness, he begged for his life again. What pride could there be in this?”; Davis, 224.

own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.” For he thought, “There will be peace and security in my days.” (39:5–8)

In vv. 5–7, Isaiah prophesies the Babylon conquest with amazing accuracy, over one hundred years before it takes place. Babylon will plunder Israel, destroy Jerusalem, and carry the sons of Israel into exile, especially those of the royal line and the members of the royal court, men like Daniel. We will have occasion to speak to that in the coming weeks, for beginning in Isaiah 40, Babylon will replace Assyria as the focal point of Isaiah’s prophecy.²⁹

Let’s conclude then with Hezekiah’s disturbing, apathetic response. “Who cares about the nation of Israel? Who cares about the line of David? Who cares about the messianic promise? Who cares about my own children? As long as I have my health and my treasures, I’m content.” I sure hope Isaiah 38:9–20 was written after the events of this chapter, because this would be a terribly dangerous condition of heart with which to meet God (though cf. 2 Chr 32:24–26). At this late point in his life, Hezekiah’s sole focus is himself. Don’t finish like that. Work hard to leave a legacy of faithfulness for future generations, that, so far as it depends upon you, there may be peace and security in their days as well.

Dying when Death Is Gain

I want you to finish well; I want you to die in faith. If you would do that, you must get to place where you look upon death as gain. And in order to look upon death as gain, you must receive and rest upon Jesus Christ, who says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:25–26). Christ died so that those who trust in Him would never taste death (Jn 8:51), which does not mean they won’t experience physical death; rather, it means they will experience death as gain. For those who trust in Christ, death has lost its sting. For those who trust in Christ, death is the door to life. For those who trust in Christ, death is gain.

²⁹ “Isaiah’s prophecy here in this chapter stands as a hinge for the entire book of Isaiah. For the first major section of Isaiah, chapters 1–39, the focus has been on Assyria. Now that Assyria is behind us, chapters 40–66 will focus much more on the exile to Babylon and the restoration of Judah from that exile”; Davis, 225.