

"A Boil Healed . . . Babylon Hosted"
Isaiah 38:1-39:8
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The Bible is full of miracles. Charles Swindoll defined a miracle as "a humanly impossible event that occurs in the natural realm apart from natural causes for the glory of God." I'm sure you can think of several – the parting of the Red Sea; the sun standing still a full day as the Israelites battled the Amorites; the fire from heaven consuming the wet offering as Elijah stood toe-to-toe with idol priests; and even perhaps 185,000 warriors alive at night but dead in the morning.

Sometime during the events we studied in last week's lesson, when Jerusalem was being threatened with invasion but was delivered miraculously by God, another miracle took place. . . Hezekiah's illness and recovery. To get the full story, we have to look back at the books of Kings and Chronicles. We usually study those books in our series on the Divided Kingdom because they go back and forth between the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom giving us the history of the kings. In fact, when you finish reading Kings and begin Chronicles, you begin thinking "I just read that." The difference between the two accounts is that Kings is a record of the historical events and Chronicles is a record of those same events from the priestly viewpoint.

King Hezekiah was ill to the point of death. He tells us in Isaiah 38 how he was feeling – "I'm too young to die." (He was about 38 or 39) "It's like my tent has collapsed in on me, the beautiful tapestry of my life is being cut off from the loom before it's finished . . . I cried, and wept, and begged the Lord to remember what I'd done, my faithfulness and wholehearted devotion. I begged Him to come to my aid."

When confronted with death, those are natural feelings, aren't they? No matter what your age today, the life force within us tells us that "we're too young to die." We have dreams and goals, people to care for, work to do for the Lord . . . any number of reasons why we too might beg the Lord to postpone His calling us home.

But Hezekiah was told to put his house in order. That meant he was to give his last will and testament to the high officials and palace administrator so there would not be any confusion about succession if he were to die. As we found out, as yet Hezekiah had no heir to the throne.

Well, Isaiah was barely out of the palace having delivered the decree that this illness would lead to death, when the Lord told him to go back and tell Hezekiah that He'd heard his prayer and in answer would do several things: 1) heal his body, 2) prolong his life for 15 years and 3) give Hezekiah a sign to increase his faith. Not only that, but God promised deliverance from the Assyrians and the liberation of Jerusalem. Let's break that remarkable answer to prayer down a little.

The miracle of Hezekiah's healing was not in the method used (applying a poultice of figs), but in God curing the incurable illness. Some of you may have had personal experience with just such a marvelous healing, and certainly we know that Jesus performed many healing miracles in His time here on earth. That is why we pray for ourselves and others suffering in their health . . . because we KNOW that our God can and does heal. We also know that God in His sovereignty may choose at this time to give us our ultimate healing and take us to be with Him in heaven.

I have to confess when I did this lecture 26 years ago it was also near my birthday and I was thinking then about "What would I do if I knew I had 15 years to live? Would I intensify or procrastinate in getting my house in order?" Thankfully, I was then, and am now, spiritually perfectly ready to meet my Savior. I know the Lord Jesus Christ and have accepted His blood atonement for my sins. I am "in Christ" and my salvation is secure.

Physically, however, that was a reminder that, although I'd taken care of some things, it was time to take action on some unfinished and necessary business. How about you? Is your house in order? Have you made a will or a trust? Have you made an advance directive for your health care if you are unable to make decisions for yourself? Do your heirs know where your important papers are and what your wishes are? Have you had "that talk" with your loved ones? Those are things hard to think about, but we need to do it. I took the message to heart and all arrangements have been made.

Hezekiah took care of business by addressing the issue of an heir. We learned he had a son Manasseh who was 12 years old when he became king. We'll talk more about him later.

Now what about the sign given to Hezekiah? We remember that Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, was challenged to ask God for a sign but he refused. But Isaiah 7:14 says, "The Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." That verse of Scripture reminds us that the sign was offered to strengthen the faith of Ahaz.

Well, now his son, Hezekiah, accepted the challenge of naming a sign. One commentator wrote, "The existence of sundials in ancient Babylon and Assyria are well known. Ahaz, who was a pro-Assyrian ruler, had brought back the Assyrian sundial to Jerusalem. What this sundial looked like is not totally clear; however, it had steps as time indicators and the shadow of the sundial would fall on these steps. Following the daily course of the sun, the shadow would move clockwise from one step to another. Naturally, it would be impossible for the shadow to move back counterclockwise." Or perhaps another explanation was that it was just a stairway in the palace that Ahaz had constructed. Either way, Hezekiah's request was that the shadow would go back ten steps on the stairway of Ahaz.

Just as the sign prophesied for Ahaz would benefit the whole world, here then was another sign that would be manifest throughout the whole world, for to cause the shadow of the sun to turn backward meant that some major physical change had to occur on the earth.

Scientists now know that a shift in the axis of the earth (which is a slant of the earth in relationship to the sun) would have such a result. This miracle brings us to the link with chapter 39.

According to 2 Chronicles 32:31, the ambassadors from Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon, came to see Hezekiah because they saw the sign which was given Hezekiah. They wanted to investigate what was going on in Israel that resulted in such dramatic changes in the course of nature. What an indication of the tremendous interest God has in what happens to the house of David. God was willing to adjust the forces of nature to encourage the faith of Hezekiah.

When you think about it, **the test of adversity** tells a lot about the character of a person doesn't it? When the tough times come do you seek the Lord? Examine yourself to see if sin in your life contributes to the problems at hand? Do you rely on God's sovereignty to select what's best for you when adversity or suffering strikes?

Aren't we all encouraged by those who persevere . . . who continue to praise the Lord in all circumstances of life? Aren't we encouraged by those who suffer with grace and seem to just keep reaching out even when life would have them withdraw into a shell of self-pity? We know people like that right here in People of the Word. Those friends have come from first-hand experience and are definitely an encouragement to us. In their suffering, God is teaching us by their examples of grace and perseverance in the face of enormous obstacles.

Hezekiah said, "Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish." That is a truth that we can only learn by looking back on the tough times.

My mother died when I was ten of lung cancer. She never smoked, but both my grandparents smoked heavily and no doubt she was a victim of second-hand smoke even though they didn't know much about that in 1950. Of course, my Dad had to work and I assumed a self-imposed responsibility for my younger sister.

My father was married four times so I learned about death, divorce, blended families and even came to appreciate how hard it was to be a stepmother, especially to a strong-willed child . . . because I was that child.

Chuck and I married 66 years ago at age 19 and had our shoestring years of putting him through college at USC. Our home burnt down in 1972 and we lost everything. A year later we went through corporate bankruptcy when our fledgling

business failed as the aerospace industry collapsed. Two of our children have suffered painful divorces, we've lost loved ones to an early death, and I know what it's like to be a caregiver for an extended illness. I took care of Beverly, Chuck's sister, for almost 30 years as she suffered from mental illness and was moved from institution to institution. In our near and extended families, we've been touched by suicide, adultery, adoption, inter-racial relationships, mental illness, homosexuality, cancer, amputation, strokes, debilitating depression, deeply fractured friendships . . . and the list goes on and on.

Hezekiah said, "Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish." I'm sure God has used all those experiences in my life not only to deepen my faith, but also to prepare me for whatever is yet ahead. It's in those tough times that we grow the most spiritually and draw closest to the Lord.

So, it's true: Adversity is hard on a man . . . but prosperity may be even harder.

Restoration of health, the promise of extended life and the promise that the Lord Himself would defeat the threat to the kingdom from Assyria – who wouldn't be rejoicing in this great good fortune as Hezekiah did! But again 2 Chronicles 32:31 says, "God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart." It's no surprise that Isaiah 39 reveals the results of the **test of prosperity – pride.**

Doesn't that just break your heart? Doesn't that touch us right where we live? How often has God delivered us only to see us skipping away in our relief from misery and returning to our reliance on ourselves until we desperately need Him again.

When Hezekiah received a letter from the king of Assyria, he handled the threat by spreading it before the Lord. But now when he received the letter from Babylon – a flattering letter and a present with it, Hezekiah acted very differently.

Isaiah **39:2** says, "Hezekiah received the envoys gladly and showed them what was in his storehouses – the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine oil, his entire armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in all his palaces, or in all his kingdom, that Hezekiah did not show them."

He didn't consult Isaiah, who had already warned about Babylon, and we don't read a word about Hezekiah extolling God's faithfulness and wonderful blessings. In fact, when Isaiah learned of the visit and Hezekiah's actions, he predicted:

39:6-7 "The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your own descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." That prophecy was made 160 years before it happened.

Do you ever wish you could take back something you've done or said?

Omar Khyam wrote, "The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on. Nor all your piety nor wit can lure it back to cancel even half a line of it."

What you do will have consequences . . . sin may be fully forgiven at the foot of the cross under the blood of Jesus, but the consequences of sin may have to be lived with. Hezekiah responded, "The word of the Lord you have spoken is good." But he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."

Only God knows the thoughts and intents of Hezekiah's heart. Was that a callous attitude – "At least it doesn't affect me personally" statement? Or was it gratitude that – "At least my eyes won't have to see the full consequences that my sin has caused my children." Only God knows what he was thinking. We just have to remember that Scriptures call Hezekiah a "good" king who came from Ahaz, an "evil" king.

In these last few minutes, I want to address the subject of Hezekiah's son, Manasseh. Again, we need to return to the historical record. An "evil" king, Ahaz, had a good son, Hezekiah. A "good" king, Hezekiah, had an "evil" son, Manasseh. 2 Kings 21 portrays Manasseh as the worst ruler ever to sit on David's throne. He completely undid everything Hezekiah had done right by rebuilding the high places, desecrating the Temple, practicing sorcery and sacrificing his own son in the fire. In fact, 2 Kings 21:16 says, "Moreover, Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end – besides the sin that he had caused Judah to commit, so that they did evil in the eyes of the Lord." He not only sinned himself, but caused others to sin. What a tragedy!

Tradition tells us that some of that shed innocent blood was that of the prophet Isaiah. Manasseh had Isaiah sawn in two in a martyr's death.

There is no doubt that there is a great deal that could be said about evil parents having good children and good parents having evil children. But that's not what I want to challenge you with. I want to focus on another miracle we might overlook. A miracle of God's grace. Let me read from **2 Chronicles 33:9-34:2** . . .

"But Manasseh led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites. The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. So, the Lord brought against them the army commander of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty

and listened to his plea; so, he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God.

“Afterwards he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon Spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah.

“He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel. The people, however, continued to sacrifice at the high places but only to the Lord their God.

“The other events of Manasseh’s reign, including his prayer to his God and the words the seers spoke to him in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, are written in the annals of the kings of Israel. His prayer and how God was moved by his entreaty, as well as all his sins and unfaithfulness, and the sites where he built high places and set up Asherah poles and idols before he humbled himself – all are written in the records of the seers. Manasseh rested with his fathers and was buried in his palace. And Amon his son succeeded him as king.

“Amon was twenty-two years old when he became king and he reigned in Jerusalem two years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshiped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the Lord; Amon increased his guilt.

“Amon’s officials conspired against him and assassinated him in his palace. Then the people of the land killed all who had plotted against King Amon and they made Josiah his son in his place.

“Josiah was eight years old when he became king and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in the ways of his father David, not turning to the right or to the left.”

When you think about it, this repentance of such an evil king as Manasseh ranks right up there in dramatic impact in the Bible along with the experience of Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul) – a remarkable, remarkable story! Although Manasseh’s son, Amon, imitated the evil acts of his father, we’re gratified to see that his grandson, Josiah, imitated and followed the good he had seen lived out before him when Manasseh repented.

I began by talking about miracles and I guess I might ask the question, "Is God still a God of miracles?" I believe He is. There is no limit to what He is able to do. He performs miracles of physical healing as He did for Hezekiah and He performs miracles of spiritual healing as He did for Manasseh . . . both of the restorations came through the anguish of suffering. Again, the truth of our memory verse. . .

"Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In Your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; You have put all my sins behind Your back."

The grace of God – the forgiveness of God – the grace of salvation from God - the greatest miracle of all!

Let's close with prayer. Thank you, Lord, for what you teach us in both adversity and prosperity. We need you in the tough times and perhaps even more in the tranquil prosperous times. We are forever grateful for the grace of Your love, Your forgiveness, Your salvation. Keep us ever mindful that You are able work the miracle of repentance in hearts that are hard, especially those hearts of the ones we love that are not walking with You. We thank you for each day of life You are pleased to give us. May we use each one fully to serve others and work for your honor and glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.