

Isaiah 38-39

Overview

These are the second two chapters in the narrative hinge that joins the two sections of the book. Key points we considered at the start of 36-37:

- Distinctive literary genre (mostly historical narrative with only a few oracles; contrast the rest of the book, mostly oracles)
- Largely duplicated in 2 Kings 18:13-20:21.
- All concern the same period of time, the 14th year of King Hezekiah, 701 BC
- Structurally, a hinge, between the first half of the book (which anticipates the Assyrian invasion) and the second half (anticipating the Babylonian captivity). 36-37 is the culmination of the Assyrian story, while 38-39 lays the foundation for the Babylonian story.

38:1-22, Hezekiah's Illness

1, *The Prophetic Warning*

38:1 In those days--There is some question about whether ch. 38-39 might actually have happened several years before ch. 36-37, and been inverted by Isaiah to provide his hinge. Kings presents the same order (without any motivation for inversion), and the various anomalies that lead to the hypothesis of reversal (e.g., v. 6, which we will discuss in its place) all have other possible explanations, so I will keep to the order in the narrative. We need to remember that Sennacherib's withdrawal from the land took some time (37:30). There is some evidence that the illness may fall between the two embassies, which are discussed together because of their common theme, followed by this note of something else that happened "in those days."

was Hezekiah sick unto death.—The stress of the invasion, the destruction of Lachish, even the intense drama of the final confrontation, all took their toll.

Calvin urges us to take a lesson from his experience.

[Hezekiah] scarcely had leisure to breathe, but, after having scarcely reached the shore from one ship-wreck, suddenly fell into another equally dangerous. Let us therefore remember that believers must endure various temptations, so that they are assailed sometimes by wars, sometimes by diseases, sometimes by other calamities, and sometimes one calamity follows another in unbroken succession, and they are laid under the necessity of maintaining uninterrupted warfare during their whole life; so that, when they have escaped from one danger, they are on the eve of enduring another. They ought to be prepared in such a manner, that when the Lord shall be pleased to add sorrow to sorrow, they may bear it patiently, and may not be discouraged by any calamity.

We are not to expect rest and comfort in this life. God may bless us with it, and we should be grateful, but we are children under discipline, and the sufferings he allows are evidence of his love and parental care for us (Heb 12).

And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him,--There is no evidence that Hezekiah sent for Isaiah (as, for example, Ahaziah did to the sanctuary of Baalzebul in 2 Kings 1:2). God graciously advises him of what is in store, so that he may prepare himself.

and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Set thine house in order:--“give command to your house,” i.e., on how they should manage your estate once you are gone. Write your will. In 2 Sam 17:23, Ahithophel does this in preparation for killing himself.

for thou shalt die, and not live.--Your life is at an end.

2-3, Hezekiah's Prayer for Healing

2 Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall,--Commendably, he does not intercede through Isaiah (as in the first challenge in 37:2-4), but himself retires to speak to the Lord. However, the motive he presents for his prayer is much weaker than in his direct prayer to the Lord in 37:15-20. In 37:35, the Lord confirmed the motive for Hezekiah's prayer about the messengers in 37:14-20. Here, we will see that his response gently reminds Hezekiah of the defect of his prayer. This prayer is thus intermediate between the other two in its maturity.

Note three features of his response:

and prayed unto the LORD,--First, he asks for the Lord's help.

3 And said, Remember now, O LORD, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done *that which is good in thy sight.*--Second, he appeals to his righteous deeds in leading a great revival upon coming to the throne. The beginning of his reign was marked by a thoroughgoing reform, restoring the temple, sponsoring a great celebration of the passover, and abolishing the high places.

2Ki 18:3-6 And he did *that which was* right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that David his father did. 4 He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan. 5 He trusted in the LORD God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor *any* that were before him. 6 For he clave to the LORD, *and* departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the LORD commanded Moses.

He presents his record as an argument that God should hear him.

And Hezekiah wept sore.--Third, he gives evidence that he is deeply engaged in the issue that he brings.

One chronological detail may help us understand his distress. We learn in v. 5 that his life is extended 15 more years. At the time of his death, his son Manasseh is only 12 years old (2 Kings 21:1). Thus, at the time of this illness, Hezekiah has no heir. The land is in shambles from the Assyrian invasion, and without a successor the peaceful transition of the government is in question.

Unlike the prayer of 37:15-20, his motive is based entirely on himself, and not on the Lord's glory.

Hezekiah's prayer here is thus intermediate between the prayer of 37:4 (offered through Isaiah) and that of 37:15-20 (offered personally, and pleading the Lord's glory). This might be a clue to the timing of the illness, between the two embassies from Assyria.

4-8, The Answer (Healing and Sign)

This paragraph is a detailed account of the Lord's response to his petition, and (with summaries of its two main elements) frames the Psalm that Hezekiah answered in vv. 9-20.

4 Then came the word of the LORD to Isaiah,--According to 2 Kings 20:4, the Lord spoke to Isaiah before Isaiah made it out of the palace, as he was leaving after giving his first prophecy.

saying,--The Lord makes two promises, one concerning Hezekiah, and the other concerning the threat of Assyria.

5 Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears:--Recall the three components of Hezekiah's plea: prayer, righteousness, tears. God ignores the second one. There is no reference to his claim of personal virtue. God responds to prayer and humility. He is not impressed with our puny efforts at virtue. And in fact, as we saw in ch. 28-35, Hezekiah's pursuit of the alliance with Egypt was not at all pleasing to the Lord.

Our Lord tells us how we are to regard our own righteous actions:

Luk 17:10 So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

They are nothing about which to boast, no currency with which to purchase heaven's favor. Any good that we receive from the hand of God is due to his grace alone.

When Hezekiah looks back on the whole experience and composes his psalm (vv. 9-20), he recognizes that his claims are overstated, v. 17, "thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back."

behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years.--This promise effectively doubles his reign, which is now in its 14th year, and provides the interval in which the davidic heir is born (though in fact Manasseh turns out to be a terrible king).

It's worth noting the reversal of the original prophecy in v. 1. According to Deut 18:20-22, a failed prophecy is the mark of a false prophet, who is to be put to death:

Deu 18:20-22 But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. 21 And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? 22 When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that *is* the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, *but* the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

Why is Isaiah not subject to this sanction?

There is a deeper principle at work, one that the Lord articulates through Jeremiah a century later.

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Jer 18:7-10 *At what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy *it*; 8 If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will relent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. 9 And *at what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant *it*; 10 If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will relent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.

God's promises of blessing and cursing are always conditioned on the behavior of those who are blessed or cursed. Every threat of judgment carries with it the implied promise, "Unless you repent," and every promise of blessing is subject to retraction if the recipient despises it and rebels.

6 And I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria: and I will defend this city.--Those who see an inverted chronology cite this as evidence that the confrontations of ch. 36-37 have not yet happened. If the sickness falls between the embassies, the threat would still be very tangible. Alternatively, recall from 37:30 that the impact of the Assyrian presence would persist for another year, and Sennacherib would not die for another 20 years. An assurance that Assyria really is not a threat would not be out of place.

2 Kings inserts vv. 21-22 here. Isaiah displaces them to form an inclusio framing Hezekiah's prayer (not, as Delitzsch thinks, because they dropped out and got added back from the margin).

7 And this shall be a sign unto thee from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that he hath spoken;--As in ch. 37, God provides a sign to back up his promise.

8 Behold, I will bring again the shadow of the degrees, which is gone down in the sun dial of Ahaz, ten degrees backward. So the sun returned ten degrees, by which degrees it was gone down.--The words "degrees" and "sun dial" are actually is actually "steps." See the images for a reconstruction of how a flight of stairs can serve as a solar timepiece.

The sign is appropriate to the Lord's promise to Hezekiah. God has set the clock of his life back fifteen years, and symbolizes this by moving the sundial back.

If the shadow has gone down, we can fix the time as late morning. Through the morning the shadow goes down on one side of the sundial; through the afternoon it goes up on the other.

9-20, Hezekiah's Psalm of Thanksgiving

This Psalm is chiasmic, centered on his cry to the Lord. The structure leads from his preoccupation with his own fate, to his awareness that the Lord is dealing with him, and then to his cry for help.

Formal opening and closing ¹	9 (author, circumstance)	20b (instruments, dedication to temple service)
Hezekiah's Dealings with Men ²	10-12a	18-20a
God's Dealings with Hezekiah	12b-13	15-17
Hezekiah's Petition	14	

1 Per James Thirtle, *The Titles of the Psalms* (http://books.google.com/books?id=T7AsAAAAYAAJ&dq=thirtle&source=gbs_navlinks_s); cf. Hab. 3.

2 Formally, the repetition יה יה in v. 11 anticipates the repetition יה יה in v. 19.

9, 20b, Formal Opening and Closing

The formal opening and closing reflect the structure of many of the Psalms. James Thirtle observed that in Habakkuk's psalm (Hab 3), references to the chief musician and musical instruments or tunes, now found at the very start of some psalms, actually comes at the end, and this division makes excellent sense in the psalms as well. Ps 3:1-4:1a is a particularly apt comparison with Hezekiah's psalm.

Psalm 3	Isaiah 38
1 A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.	9 The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness:
2-8 <<body of the psalm>>	10-20a <<body of the psalm>>
4:1 To the chief Musician on Neginoth	20b therefore we will sing my songs-to-the-stringed-instruments [neginoth] all the days of our life in the house of the LORD

9 The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness:--As often in David's psalms, the formal opening identifies the occasion on which the psalm was written:

Psa 3:1 A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.

Psa 34:1 *A Psalm* of David, when he changed his behaviour before Abimelech; who drove him away, and he departed.

Psa 51:1 A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Psa 52:1 *A Psalm* of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, and said unto him, David is come to the house of Ahimelech.

Psa 54:1 *A Psalm* of David, when the Ziphims came and said to Saul, Doth not David hide himself with us?

Psa 63:1 A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.

Hezekiah's psalm is written after his healing, looking back on the experience. As we move to the center of the chiasm, the three sections appear to reflect a chronological development in his thinking.

- He begins in self-centered despair,
- then recognizes the Lord's hand in his suffering,
- and finally, at the center, casts himself on the Lord.

10-12a, Hezekiah's Dealings with Men

In approaching death, he dreaded leaving the domain of human interaction. The focus here is entirely on himself, his desires, and his disappointment. By itself, this paragraph falls short of the potential of Old Testament faith, but when we see it as the first step in his progression, we are not surprised at this.

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Structurally, note the repetition יה יה in v. 11, and the similar repetition חי חי in v. 19. In modern characters as well as in those current in the 7th century (reproduced on the slide from the Siloam inscription of Hezekiah's reign), the instances present a striking visual similarity.

10 I said, “In the cutting-off quiet of my days I shall go, to the gates of the grave:--“Quiet of my days” suggests that Hezekiah feels that things have just settled down, and now he is being called away. This expression would be consistent with the time after ch. 37.

I am deprived of the residue of my years.--Literally, “I have been inventoried with respect to the remnant of my years.” My days have been counted up, and are complete.

The next two lines reflect the limited understanding of the Old Testament saint concerning the experience after death. One possible derivation of Sheol שאול is from שאל “to ask.” It is the big question mark. The believer under the new covenant knows that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8), but the OT saint was much less clear about the prospects. To him, it was the end of his hope of seeing God, and the termination of his fellowship with other people.

11 I said, I shall not see the LORD, even the LORD, in the land of the living:--The judgment of Eden was to be cast out of the presence of the Lord, and the great longing of the human heart is to return to intimate fellowship with our creator. We think of seeing God after death, but in the OT, it is in this life that people hope to see God. Some OT saints did enjoy this privilege, though they were often terrified by it:

Gen 32:30 And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.

(Moses) Exo 33:18; 34:5 And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. ... 5 And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there,

Jdg 13:22 And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God.

(David) Psa 63:2 To see thy power and thy glory, so *as* I have seen thee in the sanctuary.

Psa 68:24 They have seen thy goings, O God; *even* the goings of my God, my King, in the sanctuary.

To others, the vision of God in this life was something devoutly hoped after:

Job 19:26 And *though* after my skin *worms* destroy this *body*, yet in my flesh shall I see God:

(Elihu) Job 33:26 He shall pray unto God, and he will be favourable unto him: and he shall see his face with joy: for he will render unto man his righteousness.

Isaiah promises it as a feature of the coming day of the Lord:

Isa 12:6 Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great *is* the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.

Isa 24:23 Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.

Our Lord reflects this hope in his promise,

Mat 5:8 Blessed *are* the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Job 19:26 looks forward to resurrection, something that Isaiah had preached (26:19), but Hezekiah reports that at the start of his trial, his faith does not extend this far. He desires to see God, but death seems the end of this hope.

I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world.--Not only does he despair of being granted a vision of the Lord, but he will also be cut off from human contact. Again, we expect to see our loved ones in glory, but the OT saint had no such assurance.

12 Mine age dwelling³ is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd's tent:--The word translated "age" can be used in poetic contexts to mean "dwelling," and that sense yield a better parallel here. Nomadic shepherds often pitch their tents within view of the walls of established cities in the Middle East. Hezekiah lived all his life in Solomon's beautiful palace of stone and cedar, but in his sickness he realizes that this gives no security. In the end, he is more Bedouin than city dweller. His body is nothing more than a tent. One day it is there, the next it has moved away.

12b-13, God's Dealings with Hezekiah

In this section, Hezekiah's attention moves from himself as the sufferer, to God as the one who is causing his suffering. Twice, Hezekiah shifts the pronouns from "I" to "he" to "thou." He gives two images of how God is dealing with him.

I have ~~cut-off~~ rolled up like a weaver my life:--As a weaver produces cloth, it is rolled up to keep it out of the way. He has been weaving his life and rolling it up.

he will cut me off with ~~pining~~ sickness from the thrum [AV margin; the warp threads of the loom]:--Now someone else has decided that the fabric is finished, and snips it off from the threads.

from day *even* to night wilt thou make an end of me.--Suddenly (cf. Job 4:20), in the course of a single day, God will "finish" him. The verb might be taken in either a good or a bad sense; in keeping with the image of the weaver, perhaps here it is good, but bad in the next.

The next triplet offers a second image, of a wild beast ravaging him. Again, we see the transition from "I" through "he" to "thou," as his attention is drawn to the Lord.

13 I reckoned till morning,--All night long he lies awake, contemplating his fate.

as a lion, so will he break all my bones:--One thinks of the lions in Daniel's den,

Dan 6:24 the lions had the mastery of them, and brake all their bones in pieces or ever they came at the bottom of the den.

The lion does not merely tear its prey, but violently smashes its bones with strong jaws.

from day *even* to night wilt thou make an end of me.--Now the expression has a negative sense. He is gobbled up.

3 The common meaning of דור is "generation," and the verse might mean that his generation, his period of life, is finished. But this root is used verbally in the Targum as a synonym for גור "to dwell," and occurs in Ps 84:11 (ET v. 10) in this sense. A nominal form would then mean "dwelling," here as a metaphor for the body. Alexander suggests that the noun in Ps 49:20 (ET v. 19) should be understood in this sense. I prefer this sense because it continues the theme of the place common in vv. 10-11.

14, Hezekiah's Petition

At the center of the chiasm, his focus is on the Lord, and he summarizes his petition to him.

14 Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter: I did mourn as a dove:--We have noted the weakness of his petition in vv. 2-3, and Hezekiah, looking back, recognizes that it was no more substantial than the chirping of birds.

mine eyes fail with looking upward:--Like the disciples in the garden, he did not have the strength to persist in prayer.

O LORD, I am oppressed;--He recalls that he prayed, and that he was emotionally stressed, the two points that the Lord acknowledged in v. 5. Like the Lord, he now says nothing of the claim of righteousness from v. 3.

“Lord” here is אֲדֹנָי “sovereign Lord.” He cried out to the Lord as the only one who had the strength to deliver him.

undertake for me.--Literally, “be surety for me,” “cosign for my debt.” Not only does Hezekiah say nothing of his earlier boasts of righteousness, he now acknowledges his complete dependence on God. He sees himself as a debtor, and begs God to take responsibility for it. His petition is the same as that of Job in 17:1, and of the Psalmist in 119:122.

Solomon warns about the danger of being surety for someone (Pr 6:1; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; 27:13).

Pro 22:26 Be not thou *one* of them that strike hands, *or* of them that are sureties for debts.

But there is no way that we can possibly satisfy the debt we owe to God. Our only hope is that he would become our surety. This was the prayer of Job, Hezekiah, and the Psalmist. And in fact, it is what God does. We have often noted that when the OT says that God “forgives sin,” it uses the same verb נָשָׂא that describes what a sinner or sacrifice does in bearing sin. God can forgive our sin only because he bears the burden himself, in the person of his son the Lord Jesus. Thus Hebrews says of our Savior,

Heb 7:22 By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.

Bruce, drawing on the parallel between surety and savior in Sir 29:15f, notes

The old covenant had a mediator [Moses] (cf. Gal 3:19) but no surety; there was no one to guarantee the fulfilment of the people's undertaking: “All that Jehovah has spoken will we do, and be obedient” (Ex. 24:7). But Jesus guarantees the perpetual fulfilment of the covenant which He mediates, on the manward side as well as on the Godward side. As the Son of God, he confirms God's eternal covenant with His people; as His people's representative, He satisfies its terms with perfect acceptance in God's sight” (F.F. Bruce, NICNT on Hebrews, p. 151 on Heb 7:22).

15-17, God's Dealings with Hezekiah

Now he understands how God has dealt with him. As in the first half, this section is marked by shifts in person, from first to third to second. However, the first person references are much less prominent, and do not fall in strict order. His focus is much less on himself, and much more on the Lord.

15 What shall I say?--He is speechless at what God has done. Like David when God promised him an everlasting house (2 Sam 7:20), he can find no words adequate to express his gratitude and sense of amazement before the Lord.

he hath both spoken unto me, and himself hath done it:--He begins to speak of God's work in the third person. Note the contrast: "What shall I say? He has spoken and done." In contrast with his position in v. 3, he no longer claims any credit for the deliverance.

God sent Isaiah to "say" the word of deliverance (v. 5), and promised to "do the thing that he hath spoken" (v. 7). Now Hezekiah looks back from a point in time when the promise has been fulfilled, and starts his thanksgiving by acknowledging the truth of God's promise.

The pairing of these two verbs, "to speak" אָמַר and "to do" or "to make" עָשָׂה, is reminiscent of Gen 1:

Gen 1:6 And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters,

Gen 1:7 And God made the firmament,

Gen 1:14 And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven

Gen 1:16 And God made two great lights; ... *he made* the stars also.

The most fundamental truth about God is that he is the creator. Because he has created us, he can give us his law, expect us to obey it, and punish us if we do not. He can also deliver us. What he says, happens. His word is so true that if it disagrees with reality, reality changes to fit it.

I shall go softly all my years—The first person account appears only after he mentions what God has done. Clearly, he is much less focused on himself, and much more on the Lord.

The verb appears elsewhere only in Ps 42:4 (MT 5) ("went with them"), where it describes the solemn procession of the people of God to Zion. This citation is a clue to the meaning of the verse here.

in concerning of the bitterness of my soul.--As our version reads, Hezekiah anticipates a life of constant "bitterness of soul." But this is problematic, for two reasons.

First, the phrase "in the bitterness of my soul" בְּמַר נַפְשִׁי describes someone who is currently in deep anguish, like Job (7:11; 10:1). Hannah in 1 Sam 1:10 is also said to be "bitter of soul." But Hezekiah knows that God has delivered him from his time of suffering. In v. 17 he says that bitterness as past.

Second, the preposition עַל does not mean "in," but "on" or "concerning." He anticipates joining the procession of God's people to Zion as a conscious act of thanksgiving for the Lord's deliverance, remembering the bitterness from which the Lord delivered him.

The repetition of the verb from Ps 42:4 may point to a further parallel. That verse is usually translated as David's reminiscence, in exile, of earlier happy days:

Psa 42:3-4 My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me,
Where is thy God? 4 When I remember these *things*, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone
with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with
a multitude that kept holyday.

In the last stanza (Ps 43), David looks forward to his return to temple fellowship:

Psa 43:2-4 why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? 3 O send out thy light

and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles. 4 Then **will I go** unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy: yea, upon the harp **will I praise thee**, O God my God.

But the verbs in 42:4 are all imperfects, most naturally translated as futures.⁴ We should translate,

4 Let me remember these *things*, and let me pour out my soul in me: for **I will go** with the multitude, **I will go softly** with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that keeps holyday.

David, in his time of exile, looks forward to the time when he will return to the tabernacle, and promises not to forget the exile from which God delivered him. The principle is that enjoined on us in Ps 103:2, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” It lies at the heart of the thank offering, which the worshiper gives to God in conscious recognition of his past blessings.

Now Hezekiah, meditating on David's psalm, adopts a similar resolve. He too shall rejoin the solemn procession to the temple. And when he does, his praise will be all the greater because he remembers the bitterness from which the Lord delivered him.

Hezekiah draws on David to instruct him in his worship, and we should draw on both of their examples. We too have been delivered from great bitterness of soul. We should not forget what it was like to be alienated from God, shut up to our sins, but should recall that time, and God's deliverance, when we gather with the people of God to remember our Savior's great sacrifice for us.

The next two clauses summarize the impact of God's fulfilled word on people in general, and on Hezekiah in particular.

16 O Lord,--As in vv. 12b-13, he turns from speaking about God in the third person, to addressing him directly.

by לָעֵלְוֹת these things men live,--The idiom recalls Deut 8:3, and may be inspired by it:

man doth not live by לָעֵלְוֹת bread only, but by לָעֵלְוֹת every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.

The best candidate for the antecedent of “these things” is the word and deed of God, 15a. This is the only reliable foundation for a person's life.

and in all these things is the life of my spirit:--This clause both specializes and generalizes the previous one.

- It specializes it by moving from the impersonal “they shall live” to Hezekiah personally. What is true of all men, he owns to be true of himself.
- It generalizes it by emphasizing “all these things,” and by shifting the pronoun from masculine to feminine (in its collective sense⁵: “all things of this sort”).

so wilt thou recover me,--How can he look forward to recovery, when v. 9 says he had already recovered? The verb here is different, and emphasizes not just coming back from death's door, but a

4 With Alexander, but against virtually everybody else.

5 Joüon-Muraoka 134n,o

positive strengthening and vigor of life.

and make me to live.--This verb is actually an imperative, “the hope [of recovery] passing into prayer” (Delitzsch). “So wilt thou recover me—indeed, please make me to live.”

There are three important lessons in this verse.

1. If we would enjoy true life in our spirit, we should revel in the words and works of God, living “by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” Hezekiah resolves to focus his attention on the Lord, to draw all his strength and confidence from him. We shall see how successful he is in this regard, in the next chapter.
2. God's restorative work does not happen all at once. God recovered him from his illness, but he still looks forward to further restoration. God's deliverance often comes in stages, rather than all at once. Compare 2 Cor 1:9-10,

But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: 10 Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us;

3. Note the transition from personal resolve in the first half of the verse to petition in the second half. These support one another. He resolves to draw all his strength from the Lord, while praying that the Lord will restore him.

In v. 15, he promised to found his future worship upon the memory of the past bitterness from which God had delivered him. Now he gives us three views of this great reversal.

17 Behold, he changed for me bitterness to peace for peace I had great bitterness:--For the second time, Hezekiah shifts grammatical persons. The first person here has no independent verb at all. The focus is entirely on what the Lord has done for him.

The first instance of מר is best understood as the 3ms Qal perfect of the verb מור “to change” (Alexander), thus leading to the translation, “He changed for me bitterness to peace.” The third person sets us up for the shift to the second, as in vv. 12b-13 and 15-16.

~~but~~ **and thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption:**--As before, he shifts from third to second person. The Hebrew is much more vivid, “thou hast loved my soul out of the pit of corruption.” The first reversal focused on Hezekiah's feelings (“bitterness”). The second focuses on God's love for him.

This verse is a lovely statement of the nature of God's love. It is not a passive warm feeling toward all of humanity. It is active and selective. Not all receive it, but for those who do, it is the engine of their deliverance.

for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back.--The third reversal deals neither with Hezekiah's feelings nor with the Lord's, but with the root cause of his difficulties.

This is a striking expression. Four times in the OT we read of casting something behind one's back. The only one that precedes this one in time is 1 Kings 14:9,⁶ and the context suggests that Hezekiah may have it in mind. God gave the ten northern tribes to Jeroboam, who then set up false gods at Bethel and

⁶ The other two, like 1 Kings 15:9, speak of rejecting God (Ezek 23:35) or his law (Neh 9:26).

Dan. Jeroboam's son fell ill, and he sent his wife to Abijah the prophet to inquire of the outcome.

Abijah received her rudely, sending her husband news that the boy would die. More generally, he reminds Jeroboam of his sin against the Lord:

1Ki 14:9 [thou] hast done evil above all that were before thee: for thou hast gone and made thee other gods, and molten images, to provoke me to anger, and **hast cast me behind thy back**:

Hezekiah, after his recovery, may have given some thought to episodes in Israel's earlier history when sickness fell upon the royal family. In Jeroboam's day, the sin of the king led to death. In his earlier prayer (38:3), Hezekiah pled his righteousness. Now he recognizes that he himself is a sinner. When his court sought Egyptian aid against Assyria, they were casting the Lord behind their back. Yet, amazingly, God has not exacted the expected penalty of this sin, but has instead "cast all my sins behind [his] back."

18-20a, Hezekiah's Dealings with Men

Delivered from being cut off from human fellowship (vv.10-12a), he resolves to make use of the added years given to him to praise the Lord to others.

18 For the grave cannot praise thee, death can *not* celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth.--We saw in v. 11 that the OT saints had a much weaker understanding of the afterlife than is granted to us. Assertions like this are common throughout the OT:

Psa 6:5 For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?

Psa 30:9 What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall the dust praise thee? shall it declare thy truth?

Psa 88:11 Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction?

Psa 115:17 The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence.

Ecc 9:10 Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

It would be a mistake, with some cults, to take these verses as God's final word. Rev 5 shows us the redeemed praising God in heaven. But this vision is one of the latest even in the NT. The emphasis throughout the Bible is not on pie in the sky by and by, but on how we live our lives here and now.

19 The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I *do* this day: the father to the children shall make known thy truth.--Hezekiah is overwhelmed with his responsibility to praise the Lord, to make known to his contemporaries what the Lord has done for him. The composition of this psalm is his fulfillment of this purpose.

20 The LORD *was ready to save me*:--This is the testimony that he, the living, wants his contemporaries and his children to remember. .

20b, Formal Closing

therefore we will sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of

the LORD.--This dedicatory statement is parallel to the conclusion of Hab 3:19, and the frequent (though misplaced) conclusions to many of the Psalms, per Thirtle. “songs to the stringed instruments” is *neginoth*, a common musical designation in the Psalms (coming at the end of Pss. 3, 5, 53, 54, 60 singular, 66, and 75). Hezekiah, like David, resolves to share his experience with his people by recording it in a psalm that will be sung in the services at the temple.

21-22, The Answer (Summary)

Isaiah has displaced these from their position in 2 Kings to provide a frame for the Psalm, effectively extending its chiasmic structure and increasing the focus on its central element.

21 For Isaiah had said, Let them take a lump of figs, and lay *it* for a plaister upon the boil, and he shall recover.--matches 4-6

22 Hezekiah also had said, What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?--corresponds to 7-8

39:1-8, Visit from Babylon

1, The Setting

We must consider two elements of the setting of these events. One element is physical: the arrival of the Babylonian ambassadors. The second, recorded not here but in Chronicles, is spiritual.

Physical: The Babylonian Ambassadors

39:1 At that time—Again, the timing is uncertain. Some would place this before Sennacherib's invasion, on the grounds that Merodachbaladan would have been seeking an alliance against Assyria. Sennacherib claims to have driven him out of Babylon before the invasion of Judah. But Merodachbaladan's embassy was one of many that followed the Assyrian defeat:

2Ch 32:22-23 Thus the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib the king of Assyria, and from the hand of all other, and guided them on every side. 23 And many brought gifts unto the LORD to Jerusalem, and presents to Hezekiah king of Judah: so that he was magnified in the sight of all nations from thenceforth.

The former king of Babylon may have hoped to regain his dominion by alliance with someone who had successfully stood down Sennacherib.

Merodachbaladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah: for he had heard that he had been sick, and was recovered.--The Chronicler describes his motive this way:

2Ch 32:31 to enquire of the wonder that was done in the land

The term “wonder” is often associated with “sign,” the name given to the reversal of the shadow on the stairs. Recovery from an illness is not out of the normal course of experience, but the reversal of the

shadow was. Like the wise men at the birth of the Lord, these ambassadors are drawn by a celestial sign marking an earthly event.

Spiritual: The Lord abandons Hezekiah

As often, the Chronicler provides theological commentary where Kings gives a more sparse history.

2Ch 32:31 Howbeit in *the business of* the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to enquire of the wonder that was *done* in the land, **God left him, to try him, that he might know all *that was* in his heart.**

The Chronicler explains the Lord's actions in three steps:

1. The main action: "God left him"
2. The purpose of this action: "to try him"
3. The motivation of the trial: "that he might know"

Each of these has many parallels throughout Scripture, yet each presents challenging questions. Let's consider each in turn.

God Left Him

There are numerous cases throughout the OT when God is said to leave someone.

When the spies brought back an evil report of the land and the Lord condemned the nation to wander in the wilderness, the people had a change of heart and decide to go ahead with their invasion. Moses warned them (Num 14:42), "Go not up, **for the LORD is not among you.**" They disobeyed, and were defeated.

After repeated disobediences, when Samson allowed Delilah to cut his hair, he thought that he would defeat the Philistines as before, but "he wist not that **the LORD was departed from him**" (Judg 16:20).

The Spirit of the Lord came upon King Saul to deliver Israel (1 Sam 10:10; 11:16). But after he disobeyed the Lord and Samuel anointed David, "The Spirit of the Lord **departed from Saul**" (1 Sam 16:14), an action that is later described with the words, "**The Lord was departed from Saul**" (18:12).

Perhaps remembering this experience, David prayed, "**leave me not, neither forsake me**, O God of my salvation" (Psa 27:9); "Cast me not away from thy presence; and **take not thy holy spirit from me**" (Psa 51:11), and at the dedication of the temple, Solomon prayed (1 Ki 8:57), "The LORD our God be with us, as he was with our fathers: **let him not leave us, nor forsake us.**"

Isaiah himself wrote of the nation,

Isa 2:6 Therefore **thou hast forsaken** thy people the house of Jacob, because they be replenished from the east, and *are* soothsayers like the Philistines, and they please themselves in the children of strangers.

So OT saints were aware that God might abandon them. But there are two paradoxes.

Isaiah 38-39

The first is that the OT is also full of promises that God will *not* forsake his people. We naturally think of Heb 13:5,

he hath said, **I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.**

As the writer of Hebrews notes, this is a quotation from the OT. God promises Jacob at Bethel (Gen 28:15), “**I will not leave thee**, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.” The Lord makes similar promises to the nation as they wait in the plains of Moab to enter the land (Deut 31:6), to Joshua (Deut 31:8; Josh 1:5), and to Solomon (1 Chr 28:20).

God repeatedly promises never to leave or forsake his people, yet repeatedly he is said to leave or forsake them. In fact, there is no contradiction. God never forsakes anyone whom he has promised not to forsake. But those promises are not universal. They are directed to particular people in particular circumstances. There are two important lessons here.

1. We must be careful not to appropriate promises out of context. If God promises never to forsake Joshua, but does forsake Samson, we do well to seek out the difference.
2. A momentary experience of God's presence is not the same as persistent salvation. We are accustomed to distinguish pretense from true saving faith. The experience of Saul shows that there is an intermediate option, a transient true experience of God's Spirit that falls short of salvation.

Those who are truly saved will abide in Christ, and he will abide in them, and bear his fruit through them (John 15:4).

Heb 3:6 we are his house [now], if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

Heb 3:14 For we are made [perfect tense, finished work] partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end;

Col 1:21-23 And you ... hath he reconciled [aorist tense] 23 If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and *be* not moved away from the hope of the gospel.

1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.

The promise of the New Covenant is,

Eze 36:27 I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*.

Joh 14:16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you **for ever**;

1Jo 2:3 hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

As we saw in our study of sealing last April, the Holy Spirit is God's pledge of our future inheritance (Eph 1:14), and cannot be withdrawn without violating God's promise. Those who do not abide in him, show that their salvation was only superficial in the first place.

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There's another puzzle here. Hezekiah is a righteous king, one of the two exemplary monarchs⁷ in the Book of Kings:

2Ki 18:5-6 [Hezekiah] trusted in the LORD God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him. 6 For he clave to the LORD, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the LORD commanded Moses.

In all the other cases when the Lord forsakes someone, it is as a result of their sin: Israel at the time of the spies, or under Babylon; Samson; Saul. But Hezekiah is renowned for his righteousness. Yet the Lord leaves him. The Chronicler explains this with the words, “to try him.”

To Try Him

God often tries, or tests, his people. He tested Abraham with the offering of Isaac (Gen 22), Israel in the wilderness (Deut 8:2, 16), the nation with false prophets (Deut 13:3). David (1Ch 28:9; 29:17), Solomon (Pro 17:3), and Jeremiah (Jer 17:10) lay down the general principle that “the Lord trieth the heart.”

The Lord forsook Hezekiah in order to try him. Now, under the new covenant, he will never forsake his children, but he may still try them in other ways. The whole of Heb 12 is devoted to the principle of divine discipline. God does not test us in order to provoke us to sin (James 1:13). But, like any good teacher, he does include practical exercises and tests in our education, and sometimes they are very challenging.

That He Might Know

The motive of God's test of Hezekiah is “that he might know all that was in his heart.” This motive for testing, like the testing itself, is attested elsewhere in Scripture. Often, we read that God tests people in order to know something:

Deut 8:2 the Lord ... led thee ... in the wilderness .. **to prove thee, to know** what was in thine heart

Deut 13:3 the LORD your God **proveth you, to know** whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Psa 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart: **try me, and know my thoughts**

These phrases are puzzling. They suggest that God does not know our hearts and our thoughts without testing us. Yet other verses expressly state that he needs no such test to understand us.

1Sa 16:7 man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

2Sa 7:20 And what can David say more unto thee? for thou, Lord GOD, knowest thy servant.

1Ki 8:39 for thou, *even* thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men;

Psa 44:21 he knoweth the secrets of the heart.

⁷ The other is Josiah, 2 Kings 23:25.

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Pro 15:11 Hell and destruction *are* before the LORD: how much more then the hearts of the children of men?

Pro 21:2 the LORD pondereth the hearts.

Eze 11:5 Thus saith the LORD; Thus have ye said, O house of Israel: for I know the things that come into your mind, *every one of them*.

Amo 4:13 [he] declareth unto man what *is* his thought,

He could even tell Nebuchadnezzar a dream that the king himself had forgotten (Dan 2). So why does he need to try us in order to know our hearts?

I believe the purpose of trials is not simply so that God knows our hearts, but so that we know that he knows our hearts. Compare the full sentiment of Ps 139,

Psa 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: 24 And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, **and lead me in the way everlasting.**

God knows our every thought without any trial. But that knowledge is private to him. He wants us to live in the constant consciousness of his penetrating knowledge, a posture that the Scriptures describe as “walking before the Lord” (Gen 17:11; Ps 56:13; 116:9). When there is some detail of our life that needs correcting, he knows it before the test, but he brings the test to make his private knowledge public, so that we will know that he knows.

In Hezekiah's case, the test is particularly severe, far more intense than we will ever endure. “God left him, to try him, that he might know all *that was* in his heart.” Those who have received the pledge of the Holy Spirit will never experience this test. God wanted Hezekiah to know the limitations of a heart without the presence of the Lord. And by recording his history, he wants to convey that knowledge to us as well.

When God withdrew his presence, Hezekiah's heart could accomplish nothing. Nor, for that matter, could the heart of anyone else. This passage isn't about Hezekiah; it's about the human heart.

Jer 17:9 The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Rom 7:18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not.

Hezekiah's failure in ch. 39 is not the result of any fault that was peculiar to him alone. Any of us would fail in exactly the same way, if deprived of the Lord's presence. As the Lord told his disciples, after commanding them to abide in him, “without me ye can do nothing” (Joh 15:5).

God choose for this test the most righteous king of the Old Covenant, one who “clave to the LORD, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments” (1 Kings 18:6), in a way unlike any king of Judah before or since. This passage is thus a cornerstone for the teaching of the new covenant. It shows us the limits of the old covenant, and the tremendous power of the new, the linkage between the indwelling Holy Spirit and our ability to walk in God's statutes and keep his commandments.

2, Hezekiah's Pride

2 And Hezekiah was glad of them,--That is, he found pleasure in them. They were the object of his joy. It's not hard to understand why, since it would be very flattering to receive an embassy from such a far distance.

and shewed them the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah shewed them not.--The Chronicler offers an expanded description of the prosperity that Hezekiah enjoyed:

2Ch 32:27-29 And Hezekiah had exceeding much riches and honour: and he made himself treasuries for silver, and for gold, and for precious stones, and for spices, and for shields, and for all manner of pleasant jewels; 28 Storehouses also for the increase of corn, and wine, and oil; and stalls for all manner of beasts, and cotes for flocks. 29 Moreover he provided him cities, and possessions of flocks and herds in abundance: for God had given him substance very much.

The wealth he had available to show the Babylonians is taken by some as evidence that the illness and subsequent visit preceded the Assyrian invasion, since

2Ki 18:15-16 Hezekiah gave [Sennacherib] all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king's house. 16 At that time did Hezekiah cut off *the gold from* the doors of the temple of the LORD, and *from* the pillars which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria.

But note:

- The only item Hezekiah took from his personal treasury at that time was silver. The gold came from the temple, which he did not show to the Babylonians.
- Hezekiah would have been enriched by the spoil of the defeated Assyrian army, as promised in Isaiah ch. 33:

33:1 when thou shalt cease to spoil, **thou shalt be spoiled**;

33:4 And **your spoil shall be gathered** *like* the gathering of the caterpillar:

33:23 **then is the prey of a great spoil divided**; the lame take the prey.

- In addition, 2 Chr 32:23 describes the gifts brought by other nations after the defeat of Assyria
2Ch 32:22-23 Thus the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib the king of Assyria, and from the hand of all *other*, and guided them on every side. 23 **And many brought gifts unto the LORD to Jerusalem, and presents to Hezekiah king of Judah:** so that he was magnified in the sight of all nations from thenceforth.

In fact, if his riches included the spoil of the Assyrians and the tribute of other nations, he would naturally be motivated even more strongly to show it to the ambassadors. "This ring came from the hand of an Assyrian general; these golden bowls were a personal present from the Egyptian Pharaoh."

A godly person always seeks parallels between his life and episodes that the Holy Spirit has recorded in

Isaiah 38-39

Scripture. We have seen evidence in his prayers that Hezekiah was a student of Israel's prior history and literature. When he found himself hosting the representatives of a foreign king, he would naturally remember the example of Solomon on receiving the Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10. It's important to remember that this is the very pinnacle of his kingdom, before his wives in ch. 11 lead him into idolatry. Compare two points in these two episodes.

	Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, 1 Kings 10	Hezekiah and the Babylonian Ambassadors, Isa 39, 2 Chr 32
Why visitors came	1 And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning belonging to the name of the LORD , she came to prove him with hard questions.	2Ch 32:31 the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to enquire of the wonder that was <i>done</i> in the land, Isa 39:1 At that time Merodachbaladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah: for he had heard that he had been sick , and was recovered .
What the king showed	4-5 And when the queen of Sheba had seen all Solomon's wisdom, and the house that he had built, 5 And the meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cupbearers, and his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the LORD ; there was no more spirit in her.	Isa 39:2 And Hezekiah was glad of them, and shewed them the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah shewed them not.

Compare first **the motives for the visits**. In both cases, the visitor has heard of something remarkable: Solomon's wisdom, the wonder in Jerusalem of the reversed shadow in connection with Hezekiah's healing. The historian in 1 Kings 10 adds his own note that Solomon's fame actually belongs to the Lord, because Solomon's wisdom was due to the Lord (1 Kings 3:12). In both cases the visitors come with an open heart, impressed at the news they have heard and eager for an explanation.

Next, compare **what the king shows his visitor**. Solomon, like Hezekiah, shows his visitor all his glory. But the climax of the tour has no parallel in Hezekiah's history: "his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the LORD" (v. 5). Solomon crowned the entire exhibit by drawing her attention to the fact that he was a worshiper of the Lord. He gave the Lord the glory for his accomplishments.

How easy it would have been for Hezekiah to follow Solomon's example. Yet, without God's presence, the flesh takes over. He behaves as though God were completely out of the picture. The Chronicler says,

2 Ch 32:25b his heart was lifted up:

Hezekiah's focus on his wealth, and his neglect to glorify the Lord, is symptomatic of his moral failing. After recounting his healing, the Chronicler records,

2Ch 32:25a But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the ~~benefit done unto~~ recompense incumbent upon him;

The word rendered "benefit" (גמול) deserves further attention. In general, it means "recompense," and it comes from a verb that means "repay." Only twice in the OT⁸, here and Ps 103:3, is it translated "benefit," as though it described an unmotivated blessing from God. But in both cases it makes excellent sense to retain the more common meaning "recompense," referring to what we owe him in exchange for his blessings.

⁸ Supported by HALOT paragraph 3

- In Ps 103:2, the Psalmist is reminding himself to bless the Lord, and not to forget the repayment of thanks that he owes God, the one who has bestowed on him the blessings of vv. 3-5. The definite participles of 3-5 describe, not the “benefits,” but the benefactor one to whom “recompense” is due. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his recompenses [the recompenses that you owe to him], the one who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases,”
- In our passage, the sense “recompense” rather than “benefit” is confirmed by two details.
 - The preposition “unto” (עַל) is very commonly used to express an obligation or duty, in the sense of “incumbent upon.”⁹ So “the benefit unto him” is naturally read, “the recompense incumbent upon him,” “the recompense that he owed.”
 - This meaning is reinforced by the association of the noun with the verb “render” שׁוּב C. Everywhere else (Ps. 28:4; 94:2; Prov. 12:14; Lam. 3:64; Joel 4:4,7; Obad. 1:15), גָּמַל in this association means “repayment, recompense.”

We cannot earn God's blessings. There is no sense in which he owes them to us. They are never a recompense to us. However, they place us under a powerful obligation. Hezekiah owed God a debt for the healing he had experienced. He had an opportunity to repay that obligation by exalting the Lord before the ambassadors. Instead, he glorified only himself.

3-7, Isaiah's Rebuke

3 Then came Isaiah the prophet unto king Hezekiah, and said unto him, What said these men? and from whence came they unto thee?--Isaiah's first question has two parts. V. 1 says that MB “sent letters.” Were they proposing an alliance? Were they offering congratulations on the victory over Sennacherib, or on Hezekiah's recovery, or asking about the backwards sundial? Isaiah is curious about their motives.

We in fact know their motives—curiosity about the supernatural events that have just taken place in Judah. In the protocol of the ancient court, they would have begun their visit by reading their letters aloud to the king. This opening statement would be an excellent open door for Hezekiah to return praise to the Lord. We can imagine how the interchange might have gone:

Ambassadors: Great king Hezekiah, we have heard of the wonder done in your land. Our own wise men were terrified when their sundials ran backwards. We have come to learn more about what happened [2 Chr 32:31 “to enquire of the wonder”]

Hezekiah: You are welcome to our court. A great wonder was indeed done here. In fact, there have been many wonders here—not only the sundial, but my healing, and the defeat of the Assyrians. These wonders show the power of our God, the Lord who created heaven and earth. Come, see his people. See his temple. Listen to his law.

That's how the exchange might have gone—but it did not. A more likely reconstruction is:

Hezekiah: You are welcome to our court. A great wonder was indeed done here. In fact, my

9 HALOT paragraph 1d

Isaiah 38-39

kingdom is full of wonders—not only the sundial, but my healing, and the defeat of the Assyrians. Come, let me show you the great spoil that we have gathered from our defeated enemy, and the tribute that nations are now bringing unto me.

God shows his glory throughout the creation, but faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of the Lord. This is why Isaiah wants to know what the men said. What did the visitors say? How did Hezekiah respond?

And Hezekiah said, They are come from a far country unto me, even from Babylon.--Hezekiah's answer is defective in two ways.

First, he only answers the second part of the question. Far from taking advantage of their opening speech to glorify the Lord, he passes by it entirely. He is not looking for ways to exalt the Lord. Perhaps Hezekiah is ashamed of how he mishandled the visitors' greetings, and thus skips over Isaiah's first question.

Second, note in particular how he picks up Isaiah's "unto thee." He emphasizes, "They are come ... **unto me.**" He sees himself as the center of their interest, even though the "wonder" about which they came to inquire was done by the Lord. The wonder really "belonged to the Lord," as the writer of 1 Kings 10:1 says of the fame of Solomon. They would have been primed to hear an explanation in spiritual terms. Yet Hezekiah deflects their interest to himself.

This is the natural reaction of a person without the Lord's presence. The flesh naturally wants to claim all the credit. "His heart was lifted up" (2 Chr 32:25).

4 Then said he, What have they seen in thine house? And Hezekiah answered, All that is in mine house have they seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shewed them.--If our chronology is correct, these treasures are due largely to the divine defeat of Assyria and the gifts that other nations sent him to recognize that defeat. They, like his healing, are a divine blessing. Yet he focuses the attention of the ambassadors on the gifts and not on the giver.

5 Then said Isaiah to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: 6 Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house,--The very phrase Hezekiah used in v. 4, that of which he was so proud.

and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the LORD. 7 And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.--Note the two directions of the judgment: the fruit of his fathers' toil, and the continuance of his sons.

- Both were products of the Lord's grace: the wealth remained with him only because the Lord destroyed Assyria, and he had sons only because his life was extended 15 years (Manasseh took the throne at 12, 2 Ki 21:1, and therefore was born after the healing).
- Both are cut off.

The Chronicler comments,

2 Ch 32:25c his heart was lifted up; therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem.

8, Hezekiah's Response

8 Then said Hezekiah to Isaiah, Good is the word of the LORD which thou hast spoken. He said moreover, For there shall be peace and truth in my days.--These words can be understood in two ways.

Some think that Hezekiah is exhibiting callous indifference to the oracle of judgment that he has just heard, like Louis XV of France, whose financial mismanagement bankrupted France and led to the revolution 15 years after his death. When asked how the country could survive, he is reported to have proclaimed, "After me, the deluge."

But the Chronicler has a more positive view on what is going on.

2 Ch 32:26 Notwithstanding Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, *both* he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah.

Remember our conclusion from 2 Chr 32:31 that God is using Hezekiah as a case study of what happens to Israel's most righteous king when left with only the resources of the flesh. Once this demonstration is accomplished, the Lord tenderly grants him "the spirit of grace and of supplications" (cf. Zech 12:10). His statement, "Good is the word of the Lord," should be understood as an acknowledgment of his sin, and the recognition of the delay is thanksgiving for the measure of grace that the Lord has bestowed on him.

There is an important principle here for us. Though the Lord may chastise us and test us, in the end he will restore us to a better relationship with him than we had before.

Psa 103:9 He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever.

Mic 7:18 he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth *in* mercy.

Isa 54:7-8 For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. 8 In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer.

Isa 57:16 For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made.

Lam 3:31-32 For the Lord will not cast off for ever: 32 But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies.

Notes

These notes collect other OT parallels to understand the Chronicler's interpretation of Hezekiah's failing:

2Ch 32:31 Howbeit in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to enquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left עָזַר G εγκαταλειπω him, to try נִסָּה D πειραζω him, that he might know all that was in his heart.

God Leaves his People

Vocabulary for “leave” (2 Chr 32:31)

The Hebrew is עזב and the LXX εγκαταλειπω. Εγκαταλειπω is by far the dominant translation of עזב at 129x; next most frequent is καταλειπω at 45x; עזב appears 216x in all. It is also a devoted translation, reflecting no other verb more than בגד 6x.

In the references below, we will other terms used as well, notable נטש and סור.

References

Other examples of God leaving people:

God withdrew his presence from Israel's armies after they refused to enter the land:

Num 14:42 Go not up, **for the LORD is not among you**; that ye be not smitten before your enemies.

The failure at Ai was accompanied by the warning,

Jos 7:12 **neither will I be with you any more**, except ye destroy the accursed from among you.

The language of abandonment is also used to describe the disciplinary periods under the judges:

Jdg 6:13 but now **the LORD hath forsaken us** נטש, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.

Jdg 16:20 And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that **the LORD was departed** סור from him.

Psa 78:60 So that **he forsook** נטש the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent *which* he placed among men;

The departure of the Lord from Saul when David was anointed is a key milestone in the monarchy:

1Sa 16:13-14 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and **the Spirit of the LORD came upon David** from that day forward. So Samuel rose up, and went to Ramah. 14 **But the Spirit of the LORD departed** סור from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD troubled him.

1Sa 18:12 And Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him, **and was departed** סור from Saul.

Isaiah observed this in general:

Isa 2:6 Therefore **thou hast forsaken** נטש thy people the house of Jacob, because they be replenished from the east, and *are* soothsayers like the Philistines, and they please themselves in the children of strangers.

Isaiah 38-39

During the reign of Manasseh, the prophets warned of such an outcome:

2Ki 21:11, 14 Because Manasseh king of Judah hath done these abominations, ... 14 **I will forsake נטש** the remnant of mine inheritance,

And Jeremiah records its fulfillment in the Babylonian captivity:

Jer 7:29 Cut off thine hair, *O Jerusalem*, and cast *it* away, and take up a lamentation on high places; for **the LORD hath rejected נאס and forsaken נטש** the generation of his wrath.

Jer 12:7 **I have forsaken עזב mine house, I have left שטט mine heritage**; I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies.

Jer 23:33 And when this people, or the prophet, or a priest, shall ask thee, saying, What *is* the burden of the LORD? thou shalt then say unto them, What burden? **I will even forsake נטש you**, saith the LORD.

Jer 23:39 Therefore, behold, I, even I, will utterly forget you, and **I will forsake נטש you**, and the city that I gave you and your fathers, *and cast you* out of my presence:

David, perhaps looking back on earlier experiences, twice prays that the Lord would not leave him:

Psa 27:9 (unknown occasion) Hide not thy face far from me; put not thy servant away in anger: thou hast been my help; **leave נטש me not, neither forsake עזב me**, O God of my salvation.

Psa 51:11 (When Nathan rebuked him for his sin with Bathsheba) **Cast me not away from thy presence**; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

Solomon blesses the people during the dedication of the temple:

1Ki 8:57 The LORD our God be with us, as he was with our fathers: **let him not leave עזב us, nor forsake נטש us**:

During the reign of the good king Asa, Azariah the son of Oded exhorts him and the nation as they return from victory over Ethiopian invaders,

2Ch 15:2 And he went out to meet Asa, and said unto him, Hear ye me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin; The LORD is with you, while ye be with him; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but **if ye forsake him, he will forsake עזב you**.

In these cases, as in 2 Chr 32:31, God's presence is essential to success, and his absence brings disaster. But there is an important contrast between these cases and Hezekiah. In all these cases, God's withdrawal is the **result** of some sin. By contrast, in 32:31, the forsaking is a test that leads to a failing, rather than a consequence of a previous sin.

Can or will God leave his people now?

Red font in negatives indicates οὐ μὴ plus subjunctive, a very strong negative (Wallace p. 468)

We naturally think of the promise in Heb 13:5-6,

Heb 13:5-6 *Let your conversation be* without covetousness; *and be* content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, **I will never leave ἀνημι thee, nor forsake εγκαταλείπω thee**. 6 So

that we may boldly say, The Lord *is* my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.

Importantly, this is a quotation from the OT, thus not a difference of covenant. Here's the data:

Gen 28:15 (Jacob) And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for **I will not leave** עזב εγκαταλειπω thee, **until** I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.

Deut 4:30-31 (Israel) When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, *even* in the latter days, **if** thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice; (For the LORD thy God *is* a merciful God;) **he will not forsake** רפה εγκαταλειπω thee, neither [ουδε μη + indicative] destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he sware unto them.

Deut 31:6 (Israel) Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he *it is* that doth go with thee; **he will not fail** רפה ανημι thee, **nor forsake** עזב εγκαταλειπω thee.

Deut 31:8 (Joshua) And the LORD, he *it is* that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, **he will not fail** רפה ανημι thee, **neither forsake** עזב εγκαταλειπω thee: fear not, neither be dismayed.

Josh 1:5 (Joshua) There shall not any man be able to stand before thee **all the days of thy life**: as I was with Moses, *so* I will be with thee: **I will not fail** רפה εγκαταλειπω thee, **nor** [ουδε μη + indicative] **forsake** εζβ υπεροραω thee.

1 Chr 28:20 (Solomon) And David said to Solomon his son, Be strong and of good courage, and do *it*: fear not, nor be dismayed: for the LORD God, *even* my God, *will be* with thee; **he will not fail** רפה ανημι thee, **nor forsake** εζβ εγκαταλειπω thee, **until** thou hast finished all the work for the service of the house of the LORD.

There are other such OT promises as well:

1Sa 12:22 (Samuel's valedictory) For the LORD will not **forsake** נטש his people for his great name's sake: because it hath pleased the LORD to make you his people.

Psa 94:14 For the LORD will not cast off his people, **neither will he forsake** נטש his inheritance.

Observations:

- The Hebrews quotation is conflate. The first person is from Gen 28:15, while the paired verbs are from numerous others (and the use of ου μη plus the subjunctive of ανημι rather than ου plus the future points to Moses' exhortation to Israel, Deut 31:6). Exactly the same conflation appears in Philo's quotation of the passage in *De confusione linguarum* 1:166.
- Note the “until” of Gen 28:15 and 1 Chr 28:20, and the conditional in Deut 4:30-31. This promise could be temporary in the OT. But the promise to Joshua (1:5) is “all the days of thy life.”
- All the OT passages are with respect to specific people or groups in specific settings. The statements that God could and did leave individuals shows that the promise is not universal, and

the Lord is never said to leave someone to whom he promised that he would not leave them.

- Relation of this concept to the Holy Spirit as the pledge of the New Covenant (Ezek 36:27; Eph 1:13, 14) (compare the role of the Spirit in the Lord's presence with Saul and David); John 15 (abide in me). Perseverance of the saints ...

God Tries his People

Other Examples

Gen 22:1 And it came to pass after these things, that **God did tempt** **נסב D πειραζω Abraham**, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

Deu 8:2 And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and **to prove** **נסב D εκπειραζω thee**, **to know what was in thine heart**, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

Deu 8:16 Who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and **that he might prove** **נסב D εκπειραζω thee**, **to do thee good** at thy latter end;

Deu 13:3 Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for **the LORD your God proveth** **נסב D πειραζω you**, **to know** whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Joh 6:5-6 When Jesus then lifted up *his* eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? 6 And this he said **to prove** **πειραζω him**: for he himself knew what he would do.

General Principles

Psa 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart: **try** **בהק G εταζω me**, and **know** my thoughts:

Pro 17:3 The fining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold: but **the LORD trieth** **בהק the hearts**.

1Ch 28:9 And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: **for the LORD searcheth** **שרר G εταζω all hearts**, and **understandeth** all the imaginations of the thoughts:

1Ch 29:17 I know also, my God, that **thou triest** **בהק G εταζω the heart**, and hast pleasure in uprightness.

Jer 17:10 I the LORD search the heart, **I try** **בהק G εταζω the reins**, even to give every man according to his ways, *and* according to the fruit of his doings.

1Pe 1:7 That the trial δοκιμου of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: