

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE10th July 2005

Isaiah 38-39 King of Promise

People who cheat death often have a different perspective on life than the rest of us, at least for a while.

We are already hearing stories of people who miraculously escaped from the London bombings, and many of us will someone who passed through the underground within a few minutes of the explosions. They would not have known what a lucky escape they had until sometime later when they heard of the blasts – no doubt sending goose-bumps down their spine as they realised just how close they had come to death.

Others actually confront the near-certainty of their own death. I'm thinking of people like the passengers on Air Transat Flight 236 from Toronto to Lisbon in August 2001. 38,000 feet above the middle of the Atlantic ocean, their plane ran out of fuel due to a burst pipe! As the plane took 20 minutes to glide down to sea level, the passengers had plenty of time to come to terms with their almost certain death. But amazingly, the pilot was able to land the plane safely at Lajes Airport in the Azores. More amazing still, had their route not been adjusted 60 miles south of the usual due to "heavy traffic", they would not have made the airport and would have crashed into the sea.

Those passengers had a brush with death, and survived to tell the tale. For many people in those circumstances, the next few weeks and months are special times – ordinary, daily things which we all take for granted carry new significance, whether it be seeing friends and family, appreciating the view, enjoying a meal – all these things are received with greater gratitude than before.

Some who go through this type of experience dedicate the rest of their lives to some worthy cause, often related to the manner in which they brushed with death. So the heart-transplant patient campaigns to raise money into heart research, the cancer-beater runs marathons in aid of cancer research, and the plane crash survivor lobbies for even better safety standards and equipment.

But as the weeks turn to months, and months turn to years, their perspective on life slowly returns to "normal". The wonder of each new day is lost, the sense of cheating death fades, and for most people their lives return to their previous course.

One of the tragedies of the human condition is that we can, in all earnestness, make sweeping promises in the wake of some extra-ordinary event; only to grow content in failing to keep them in later months and years. To the idealistic young, this is inexcusable; but as time goes by, you realise it is the way we are.

I remember clearly the day this dawned on me. It was in the summer of 1983, at the conference of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in Manchester. At the end of the week-long conference, we were asked to stand if we were prepared to promise to pray for world mission every day of our lives. I sat. Not because I wasn't super-spiritual, because in those days I had more piety points than you could shake a stick at. But because I knew I couldn't keep that promise throughout my life. And I was right.

Now Hezekiah also had his share of piety points. In fact, of all the Kings of Judah he is perhaps the most faithful to God, receiving that all too scarce accolade that "He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his (fore)father David had done." (2 Kings 18:3). His father was the infamous King Ahaz, who amongst other hideous acts sacrificed one of his own sons to a false god. But Hezekiah sought to reverse as much of the decline into idolatry as he could, and to many people he was an answer to prayer. To some, he may even have been the most obvious fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy of a coming Messiah.

His reign was not without its problems. Although he followed the Lord whole-heartedly, the people did not; and the judgement stored up from his Father's time was beginning to unfold during his own reign. Hence, as we saw earlier, the Assyrians came to besiege Judah and to assimilate it into their empire.

At around this time, when Sennacherib's army was approaching Jerusalem, Hezekiah was struck down with a deadly illness. He was only 39, and apparently had no son and heir by this time. While he lay on his death bed, no doubt wondering whether he would pull through the illness or not, Isaiah the prophet paid him a house-call. By modern wishy-washy standards, his bedside manner left a lot to be desired. His message was blunt: "Make sure your will is up-to-date and your estate is tidied up, because you are going to die".

Like those passengers on flight 236, Hezekiah knew he faced death. This was all the more certain for him, however, because while there was always the remote possibility of a safe landing for the plane, what hope was there for Hezekiah when God had proclaimed that he was about to die?

When your time is up, your time is up. There's nothing you can do to change it. So why worry?

Now there is a certain piety in this attitude, in so far as it acknowledges the sovereignty of God and the futility of resisting his will. But is it a Christian attitude?

I hope Debbie won't mind me using her as an example here. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer last year, she could have taken this fatalistic attitude. If she was going to die, she was going to die – so what was the point of going through gruelling chemotherapy and now radiotherapy? But instead, she chose to fight – and we are all amazed at just how much of a fight she is putting up!

Debbie is not fighting against God, but against the cancer and an untimely end. And we join her in that fight by praying for her.

The fatalistic attitude, far from being in line with God's sovereign will, leads to behaviour which is quite un-Christian. It is at the root of many of the third-world's problems, whether in Africa or in India. In India, the infamous caste system owes its continuing existence to the fatalistic acceptance of their lowly status by the oppressed Dalit people. While in Africa, the care-free attitude which comes from a mindset in which the gods control your fate and your actions are not significant, leads to the continuing spread of Aids and makes the task of eradicating poverty impossible.

Andrew Carter tells a story to illustrate this point, from one of his trips to Africa. There had been a bad bus accident a day or two before, where many dozens of people had been killed. Despite this, the driver of his bus was driving pretty recklessly, his judgement further impaired by the high he got from the tobacco he was chewing. When Andrew tackled him on this, the driver responded that whether his bus crashed or not had nothing to do with his own behaviour, but was down to the will of the gods. So why try to do anything to improve the situation?

It is not just their old animistic religions which encourage this viewpoint. The same ideas have been taken forward into both Islam – which arguably has a fatalistic outlook anyway – and also to Christianity, which in Africa as elsewhere is so often corrupted by the local culture.

No wonder Karl Marx called religion the opiate of the people – a drug which the few “haves” encourage the many “have nots” to take, to keep them in their place.

Our passage gives a strong clue that fatalism is not an attitude which God condones.

Throughout the Bible, we are constantly reminded that we are responsible not just for our own actions, but for their ongoing consequences. What we do, and say, and believe makes a profound difference to our lives. The fundamental choice is ours – will we choose to trust in God, or to trust in someone or something else? It is we who decide our destiny.

No matter how appealing it may sound, no matter what pressure there is from those around us who all flock to the same things, no matter what the object of attention and source of supposed happiness, fulfilment, security or whatever else we seek is – if it is not God, then it will let us down badly. We can choose to go down that route if we want, but we cannot choose the consequences – they follow more inevitably than night follows day.

So when Hezekiah is told by God that he is going to die, his immediate reaction is not to choose the music he wants at his funeral! Rather, he throws himself on God's mercy.

His prayer sounds very self-righteous to us – remember what a good person I have been and how I have followed you with all my heart! But it has to be read in the culture of his day, and nowhere does he claim to deserve to live because of the perfection of his life! Indeed, when you look in detail at his writing after the event, it is clear that he recognised his own sin. His lament was, in part, that his life would be cut short. In part, it was that he would leave no son and heir to the throne of Judah. But the essence of his appeal is that he would not be able to continue praising God.

How would you appeal for an extra few decades of life? What would you miss out on and want to achieve if you were spared? It is natural to want to see your children grow up and settle down, and understandable to want to see more of the world or fulfil an ambition to experience something special – like I did a couple of years ago when we went hot-air ballooning. But how many of us would really rate praising God high on the list of things we wanted to do with our lives? Until we can, there is much we need to learn about just how praise-worthy our God is!

Amazingly, God heard Hezekiah's prayer. In fact, 2 Kings 20 adds that Isaiah had not even left the palace before God had given his answer. Hezekiah would recover, and would live for another 15 years. Not only so, but they would be 15 years of peace – with the threat of assimilation by the Assyrians well and truly removed!

How can this be? How can the God who never lies, and who never changes his mind, tell Hezekiah he is going to die one moment, and the next tell him he is going to live another 15 years?

This is not a trivial question, but I think we get a glimpse of how the sovereignty of God and our own responsibility for our actions can co-exist, as they clearly do from what the whole of Scripture teaches us.

We often see God make a proclamation of his intended course of action. This is what he will do. But when someone petitions him, he changes that course. There seems to be an implicit condition in what God proclaims: I will do this, assuming that you continue to do that. His purposes are conditional on our response – which is one good reason why he bothers to reveal them to us beforehand.

The response God is looking for is, above all else, for people to trust in Him alone. If that response is not forthcoming, then the original intent still stands. But if we react in a way which shows that we understand the world revolves around Him and not us, then an alternative course of action comes into play.

Was it always God's intention to spare Hezekiah for another 15 years come what may? No – if his response had been different, then he would not have recovered. Was it God's desire to end Hezekiah's life that day? Absolutely not – apart from anything else, the lineage of Christ is through Hezekiah's as yet unconceived son, so it was his wish to spare him.

Somehow, and don't ask me to explain it any further, God's sovereignty makes room for our free will. And somehow, God works his sovereign purposes out however we choose to exercise that will of ours. I have no idea whether God would have chosen a different line from David to Christ had Hezekiah not survived. In the end it makes no practical difference: God uses the world the way it is, and us the way we are, to accomplish his purposes.

That Hezekiah should react the way he did suggests he had a deeper understanding of God than perhaps we do. A number of times in the Old Testament we see the same sort of thing – for instance, when Jacob wrestles with God, or when Moses argues against God's plan to destroy the Israelites and build a people through him. In all these cases, the people are prepared to argue with God, not because they are full of their own importance, but because they recognise God's importance and want to see Him glorified.

The conclusion has to be that God uses the circumstances around us to test us, to see how we react and what we are made of. For Moses, the test was to see whether he had really understood and emulated the heart of God, or whether he was more interested in his own glory. For Hezekiah, the test was to see how he really valued his life, whether in terms of his achievements as King, or as a creature of his creator.

I suspect this is something that the church today has lost sight of, certainly there is a danger that we get too pall-y with Him and forget that he really is the Boss. He will test us, not in order to punish us for our sins, but in order to see what we are made of – and to help us to see what we are made of too. Have we only paid lip service to our faith, or do we truly see God as central to our whole life? Is our devotion to God something which is tacked on to our lives after our devotion to family, career, and material prosperity, or is that devotion the mainstay of our lives to which all else is secondary?

Only when we are tested, will we find out for sure!

Hezekiah passed this test, but as he did so he made what was to prove to be a rash promise: "I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul." (38:15). No doubt at the time such a resolution was meant in earnest; but like so many promises made in these circumstances, it was not a promise that he could keep.

Read 2 Chronicles 32:24-31 (esp 24-25,30-31)

Pride is the greatest of dangers to our walk with God. It was in essence pride which caused Adam and Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden, as their pride persuaded them that they did not need to obey God but could do what they thought best.

You can see why Hezekiah could become proud. Not only did God grant him an extra 15 years of life, but he also gave him a most spectacular miraculous sign: a shadow went back the way it had come!

Most commentators think that this "stairway of Ahaz" was a kind of giant sundial, with each step corresponding to a degree of rotation. A shadow cast by some special marker would move along the staircase, at a rate of one step every 4 minutes. Such artefacts were relatively common in the middle east at that time.

Just how the shadow was made to go back 10 steps is a mystery. Some think it was simply the effect of a solar eclipse – though I fail to see how this would work. Others maintain that the earth really did rotate backwards 10 degrees before carrying on as normal again. For the God who created the universe, such a feat would be possible. Indeed, there is another reference in Joshua 10 to the sun standing still for 24 hours to give the Israelites more time to win a battle. The truth is that we don't know exactly what happened, and to be honest it matters little.

The point is that God did something very special for Hezekiah, and that went to his head. Some time later – probably only a few weeks – envoys from Babylon arrived to congratulate Hezekiah on his miraculous recovery. 2 Chronicles 32 adds that they also came to enquire about the sign he had been given – indicating that the effects of this 40-minute wonder were observed hundreds of miles away too.

This was another test for Hezekiah, and this time he did not fare well. He ought to have been astute enough to realise that the Babylonian's real intentions were not to pay homage to his greatness. Babylon had ambitions to replace Assyria as the region's super-power, and while that meant in the short term they could be allies with Israel, in the longer term they were not to be trusted. By showing the envoys everything he had, he made himself a sure target for their marauding army when eventually they were strong enough to rise to power.

And the root of all this was pride – Hezekiah liked the thought that he was important, and liked to show off just how much he had. God of course saw all this, and Isaiah was despatched to tell him off. Now the eventual fall of Jerusalem to Babylon was not caused by this event alone – it was a result of generations of rebellion against God by the Jews as a whole. But never-the-less, Hezekiah played a part in bringing it about.

His reaction to Isaiah's prophecy does not paint him in a very good light – he comes across as someone whose only concern is for his own welfare, with no regard for the future either of his nation or his family. This is quite a negative note for Isaiah to end the historical interlude in his book of prophecy – Kings and Chronicles both paint Hezekiah in a much more positive light, as one who followed in God's ways; as Chronicles comments,

All Judah and the people of Jerusalem honoured him when he died (2 Chron 32:33)

Did Isaiah really have a downer on Hezekiah? Had he a different perspective on the significance of his reign than the main historians? Perhaps. But it is more likely that he is making it clear that, for all his devotion to God, Hezekiah was *not* the fulfilment of his prophecy.

Moreso, no human king ever could be.

That too comes across time and again in the Old Testament – none of the great heroes were good enough to be spared God's judgement on themselves, let alone good enough to provide shelter from God's judgement for other people.

Isaiah's message to Hezekiah and the others was that they must trust in God alone – no one else could save them from the nations around them. Such trust was not to be an occasional reaction, like an attempt to manipulate God to do something for them. Rather, it must be an entire way of life, lived consistently every day and in every situation, whether big or small. Only God can be trusted; and he can always be trusted.

So it fits that the Messiah Isaiah promised would come would be no ordinary man, but would indeed be God himself in human form. It was important for his hearers and readers to understand that their eventual salvation would not be won by a great human King, but by God himself. So indeed their entire trust was to be in Him.

The significance of the promised salvation went beyond what Hezekiah could imagine. For him, death was the end; the only opportunity he had to praise God was while he was still alive. This was common for the people of his day, for God's revelation of eternal life was not as explicit then as it was now. Some think that, by playing down life-after-death in the Old Testament, God was countering the popular notion of the time that events on earth are shaped by events in the spirit-world. Think of all the Egyptian ideas on the after-life and you will see what Israel was up against.

But even in Isaiah, as we saw in Chapter 25, the message is given that death itself will be destroyed. Hezekiah's concern that he would not be able to praise God after his death was ultimately groundless. Of course, only the living can praise God; the wonder is that we will be able to enjoy life again, much more glorious than the life we have now, thanks to what our true King has done for us.

So however long we have left on earth, we can praise him for his goodness and look forward to the fulfilment of his great promise.