

Isaiah 38:9-20

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A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness: ¹⁰ I said, In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years.

¹¹ I said, I shall not see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world. ¹² My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end; ¹³ I calmed myself until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end. ¹⁴ Like a swallow or a crane I chirp; I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety! ¹⁵ What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul. ¹⁶ O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh restore me to health and make me live! ¹⁷ Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. ¹⁸ For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. ¹⁹ The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness. ²⁰ The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD.

If you are the type of person that hears a strange noise coming from under the hood of your car but puts off getting looked at and hopes it will go away, then I'm a lot like you. If you are the type of person who thinks, "I'll get life insurance later, because I probably won't need it for a while," then I'm a lot like you. And if you are the type of person who puts off going to the doctor for a routine physical because everything's fine right now, then, again, I'm a lot like you.

I envy those people who not only have the *foresight* to see problems before they happen, but who also actually take measures today to be prepared for when problems arise. I *know* I won't live forever; I *know* preventative maintenance on my car and on my body will help both run more smoothly for longer. *But*, I don't have time to take care of those things right now. "That's a problem for future Sam to worry about!" And that's a bad mindset to have, isn't it? Because if you don't prepare in *advance*, then you're just not going to be ready when the problems arise. Because there's never a *convenient* time for your car to break down or your house to get broken into or to get sick or for a death in the family. So, the only way to be ready for these things is to start preparing *right now*.

Now, if you've ever read through 1 & 2 Kings or 1 & 2 Chronicles, you know that there are a lot of kings mentioned, and they're all described in one of two ways. Their reigns are summed up either like this, "**And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord,**" or like this, "**And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.**" This morning, we hear the words of one of those Kings of Judah, specifically King Hezekiah. And he was described in those books as one who "**did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done.**" (2 Kings 18:3) His reign was God-pleasing. Here are some of the highlights: he cleansed the Temple of idols and re-dedicated it to the Lord; he re-established the observance of festivals that the Lord had commanded, such as the Passover; and he tore down the high places and altars to idols throughout the country.

All things considered, Hezekiah was a faithful king, yet even *he* was not prepared when he eventually

became sick and was lying on his deathbed. (You can read about those events in 2 Kings 20.) While he lay there dying, God sent the Prophet Isaiah to King Hezekiah to tell him that it was about time he put his kingdom in order, because he was about to die. But Hezekiah wasn't ready, and so he prayed fervently that he might not die. And amazingly, the Lord decided to allow Hezekiah to recover and even gave him fifteen more years to live. And Hezekiah learned a lesson on his deathbed that we would be wise to pay attention to as well. That lesson will serve as our theme this morning:

It's About Time

- I. That is—that we wake up and realize our own frailty
- II. That is—the time we have been given to live

The Prophet Isaiah records these words for us, but they were actually written by King Hezekiah *after* he'd recovered from his illness. And the text divides nicely into two parts; the first half (through verse 14) are written from the perspective Hezekiah had while he lay sick and dying, and the second half describes his mindset *post-recovery*. First, I'd like to look at a few of his deathbed descriptions:

V. 11 ***"I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world."*** He's resigned to the knowledge that this is it! He's never going to walk out of the room, never going to eat another meal in his own home, never to interact with the people again. V. 12 ***"My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent."*** Shepherds dwellings are very temporary, they follow the flocks so each day they have to pack everything up and move. And Hezekiah's point is that he now realizes just how fleeting his life was; it was only a temporary stay. V. 13 ***"I calmed myself until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end."*** He's in tremendous pain; it feels as if all of his bones are being broken. It sounds like he was up all night every night, his agony keeping him awake at all hours. V. 14 ***"I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward."*** More vivid descriptions of his agony. He's lying there in his bed, only able to just stare up at the ceiling, speaking only in moans of pain.

These words were written 2,700 years ago, but all his feelings could have been expressed by any number of people today. That's because sickness is still around and death still affects us all. Every feeling he had as he wrote those words is shared by so many people in hospitals all around us who are tired of laying in hospital beds all day, who are in pain, who recognize how fleeting life is. And another highly relatable thought is found in verse 10: ***"I said, 'In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years.'"*** And here's where the idea of not being ready comes into play. Hezekiah says that it's in the *middle* of his days that his life is taken from him. He's still in his prime, so to speak. He has so much life left to live, but those days will be spent in the grave. He's *not ready* to die. And again, I think that's very relatable to so many of us still today.

When I was growing up and attending the Christian Day School at our sister-congregation in Milwaukee, I remember our teacher teaching us about Judgment Day. And he reinforced the point that Jesus could come at *any* time; we could run out to recess after lunch that day and suddenly see Jesus descending on the clouds with the trumpets of heaven announcing His arrival. And I can *clearly* remember thinking, "Wow, that would be amazing, I'd love to see that! . . . but I hope Jesus waits until after our family vacation!" We were going to Disney World that year, and I didn't want to miss out on *that*. That was admittedly foolish of me, but maybe you've had similar thoughts: "I'm ready to

meet the Lord! . . . just not yet.” Well, King Hezekiah felt the same way.

If you think back a couple years to the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was all this talk about “avoidable deaths.” I heard so much handwringing about it being a shame, “Such and such a death could have been avoided.” Hey, last time I checked, death is *unavoidable*. Unless Judgment Day comes first, 100% of people alive today *will* die. And when that day comes for each of us is known only to God, as David writes, **“Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”** (Psalm 139:16) It is the *Lord* who determines when we’re at the end of our days. So, there’s no such thing as dying in the **“middle”** of your days, dying with so much life left to live. When God determines to take us out of this world, *that* is our end of days. And only *God knows* that particular day for each of us.

But we don’t treat it that way. Instead, we naturally think about death as something that’s a long way off, something that we don’t have to worry about right now. Or we envision our own deaths as coming at an entirely convenient time: in our old age, in the comfort of our own bed, surrounded by our loved ones. On the flip side, there are those who wonder, “Lord, why am I still here? Can’t you just take me home already?” Really, these two attitudes are no different—we’re just humans trying to play God. We are trying to tell God when the right time will be for us to go. We want our deaths to be on our terms. Dear friends in Christ, **It’s About Time that we wake up and realize our own frailty.** We could die at any moment! So, the best way to be ready for it is to start preparing right now. What are you going to do with the **time you have been given to live?**

Perhaps you’ve known someone who came very near to death but then recovered. Such a person will usually have a new lease on life, they’ll say things like, “Now I realize what’s really important.” And that’s a good lesson to learn, and it’s the same lesson that Hezekiah learned after God had given him fifteen more years to live. He describes what that extra time means to him in the second half of our text, and we’ll start by looking at verse 18: **“Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness. The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD.”** In short, he’s going to teach his children about the Lord’s mercy; he’s going to live a life of thanksgiving to the Lord; he’s going to make melody in his heart to the Lord all the rest of his days.

This is his *new* mindset, because he’s come to realize what’s most important. In verse 15, he says, **“What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul. O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh restore me to health and make me live!”** When he writes, **“By these things men live,”** it’s hard to tell in English what the **“these things”** are, but in Hebrew it’s clear. He’s referring back to his phrase, **“[God] has spoken to me, and he himself has done it.”** He’s confessing the truth that he does not have life left to live because a doctor healed him or because his immune system kicked into overdrive; he has life left to live because *God* spoke and because *God* made it happen. It’s by God’s Word that he has fifteen years of life left in him and so God’s Word will *be* his life moving forward.

Another important lesson he’s learned is found in verse 17: **“Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness.”** Literally, it was *for his good* that he lay on his deathbed. He’s come to know that

even in the agony of his illness, through all those pains that he described earlier, the LORD was working. God had a plan, and the LORD had worked even these hurtful things for his good.

You've experienced this before—you're trying to impress upon a young person some lesson you've learned in your life, and they just don't really seem to care. You realize they're just going to have to learn that lesson for themselves, and it's frustrating! You don't *want* them to go through the pain that you did for that hard-earned lesson, but that's often how it has to go. Well, let's try to take the lessons that Hezekiah learned and actually apply them to our lives. Remember, **It's About Time—that is the time we've been given to live.** What are you going to do with that time? If we are going to be well-prepared for our deaths, we *need* to lean on God's Word, just as Hezekiah was now doing.

Being in and about the Word of God is the *only way* we can be prepared for our death, whenever it comes, because through God's Word He arms us with hope. Through His Word, we know that death isn't something to be afraid of, not for a Christian, because we've been given the promise of eternal life. Hearing Christ's Words *now* prepares us for that day when we will be called to God's judgment throne to hear Christ speak again. On that day, the LORD won't look at your life to see what you've accomplished, or to see how nice you were, or how good a parent you were, or how many charities you supported. He will look for one thing—to see if Christ is living in your heart through faith. And it's by the Word of God that this may be made true for you.

Yes, if we spend time in God's Word, then we can have confidence in Christ and a certain hope of eternal life, without any doubt about what Christ is going to pronounce on Judgment Day. With that hope, we can admit with King Hezekiah, ***"It was for my welfare that I had great bitterness."*** You see, God *promises* that He works through all things for the good of those who love him. (Cf. Romans 8:28) Even if you receive a cancer diagnosis, or if you have a painful sickness—even if you die—those will be for your welfare. God will work through them either to bring you closer to Him here in time or to bring you to His throne room in heaven for all eternity.

Now, you can be as prepared as you want for something, but your preparations could always potentially fail. For instance, you could be investing for retirement your entire working life, but if the stock market crashes as you get ready to retire, your preparations could fail. Well, what assurance do we have that *our* preparations won't be for naught—that we won't spend all our life in God's Word and then find out it wasn't enough? Well, again, the assurance we have is *in* God's Word, as Hezekiah describes in verse 17: ***"In love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back."*** God has taken your sins, all that should condemn you, and has cast them behind Him as rubbish. Because of *that*, your preparations in God's Word will not fail.

So, Hezekiah had 15 years left to live; do you think he spent them wisely? ***"But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favor shown to him, for his heart was lifted up; therefore wrath was looming over him and over Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart."*** (2 Chronicles 32:25-26) He had to humble himself and repent all over again. And that's what our time left is going to look like too. But know this: being well-prepared for death doesn't mean you've successfully stopped sinning, that'll never happen. Being well-prepared for death means you have learned where to take your sins—to Jesus, who casts all your sins away. So may God grant that we use our time wisely, continually turning to His throne of grace for forgiveness all our days. Amen.