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As Good as it Gets

Isaiah 39

Introduction

As a slightly older guy, I use Facebook as my social media app of choice. It's the way I keep in touch with friends and family. If I was younger I might use Instagram, or TikTok, but I'm set in my ways. It can be dangerous, though, the social media. It can paint a false picture of the sort of life everyone else is having. Because people just like to share all the good bits of their lives. It looks like all your friends are having endless holidays and birthday parties, and yet most of your days are a bit mundane.

I wondered a while back if I should just send out a message every day saying "working again", or "doing the hoovering", "watching the telly", just to counteract all the brilliant life messages from others. But that's human nature, isn't it? We want to show other people the best that we have. And that's what Hezekiah does in our passage today. He has a visitor and shows him all of his stuff.

Context

We've reached a kind of pivot point in the book of Isaiah. Much of the first 37 chapters have been warning Israel about their sin, seeing the Assyrians at the door and warning of the rise of the Babylonian empire.

Chapter 38 and 39 bring out some of the story from 2 Kings 20. We learn about Hezekiah's healing, as God grants him 15 more years to his life. We also heard about God's promise, that he would protect the city of Jerusalem from the Assyrians. But then we have chapter 39, where Hezekiah shows off all his treasures to the Babylonian emissary, and Isaiah warns him that the Babylonians would return and take away all his treasures.

When you return to Isaiah, from chapter 40 onwards, it's as if we've jumped forward in time, and the Babylonian exile has started.

The Best a Man Can Get

But let's get to this person Hezekiah. What sort of a king was he? We read about him in 2 Kings 18:

In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan). He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel,

so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses. And the Lord was with him; wherever he went out, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him. He struck down the Philistines as far as Gaza and its territory, from watchtower to fortified city.

[2 Kings 18 v 1-8]

What a biography! None like him before or after. Maybe not including David in the kings of Judah, because he was king over the united Israel, this was the best that they had. I wonder if the Israelites thought this king might be the one that was promised. He was from the line of David. He was defeating their enemies. He pointed the people back to the Lord.

And it looks like God approves of him, as he extends Hezekiah's life by 15 years after he gets ill. Could this be the promised anointed one? How does he use the extra life God has given him?

Show Off

Let's see with the first part of our passage:

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

[Isaiah 39 v 1-4]

Why was Hezekiah so welcoming? They brought him letters and a nice gift. That can often open doors. Even today when our leaders meet they often exchange gifts. It doesn't always work out well, though. When Gordon Brown visited president Obama he gave him a pen made from the wood of a ship that was the sister ship of the one used to make the Whitehouse desk. When Obama visited Gordon Brown he gave him a box set of DVDs, and was widely criticised for it.

Hezekiah's gift must have been a nice one, because he welcomed the envoys gladly. Perhaps he also saw them as a possible ally against the Assyrians who had been causing so many problems. Maybe he thought they were safe to cosy up to since they came from far away. That's what he said when Isaiah challenged him, wasn't it? "They have come to me from a far country".

And then he has his Facebook moment. "Look at the wonderful life I'm living". "Look at all the great treasures I have". Maybe he is hoping for an alliance with Babylon and so is showing them that he's capable of paying for their friendship. Or maybe it's just pride and he's showing off.

In either case there's something I wonder about in this very-friendly visit. Where was God? You'd think that this man, just miraculously saved from certain death by his illness, promised 15 more years of life, and having it confirmed by the shadow of the sun retreating, would be gushing about the God who saved him. And not just him, but the whole of Jerusalem, as the Assyrian army had been repelled, not by human means, but by the power of the almighty.

Surely he would be desperate to let these people know about the God of his people, in fact the God of the world. And yet all we hear about is his riches, his arms and his stores of food.

Maybe we shouldn't be so critical though. When we greet strangers or friends, how often do we tell them about the God who has saved us, who has given us new life, who has saved a whole people for himself? Or do we just show them our riches? The new car? The redecorated living room?

Doom

Anyway, when Isaiah heard what had happened, he wasn't happy at all:

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good." For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my days."

[Isaiah 39 v 5-8]

The accuracy of this prediction makes scholars disbelieve the age of this writing. Around 100 years later, the babylonians did come in and sack Jerusalem. They carried away the treasure they found there, in the palace and in the temple. They also took many of the Israelites away to Babylon, including some from the king's house. Remember Daniel and his three friends, taken away to serve in the Babylonian palace?

Why was this going to happen? Was it Hezekiah's stupidity that caused it all? Or was it part of God' plan for his people? He had told them they would be taken into exile, because of their sin, and that only a remnant would return. I don't think Hezekiah built the fire that was to come upon Jerusalem, but maybe he was the spark that set it going.

We read a summary of Hezekiah's life from the book of Kings, but the Chronicles also cover his reign. Here's what they had to say about the latter part of his life:

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death, and he prayed to the Lord, and he answered him and gave him a sign. But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem.

[2Chronicles 32 v 24-25]

What a gift those extra 15 years of life had been. But what did he do with them? Nothing! He "did not make return according to the benefit". Now I'm sure there was no way he could repay the Lord enough to pay for those extra 15 years, just as there is no way we can repay God for the salvation he has given to us, but he should at least have shown gratefulness. Instead it seemed he turned away from God.

Did you notice Hezekiah's reaction to Isaiah's prophecy? It's such a disappointing response from a king who has just been told their kingdom is going to be ruined. "There will be peace and security in my days" he said. All he cared about was himself. This really isn't the promised king is it? The Messiah would care for his people, not his own security and comfort.

Christ is Better

And that's the message I took away from this chapter. Here is the best that Judah has to offer, the greatest of their kings, and yet he falls short of the saviour they needed. It only confirms that what man can offer is useless and we need God to send us help. And God did, of course. He sent his son, who was better than any king who had come before.

- Hezekiah had his life extended - Jesus' life was cut short.
- Hezekiah showed off his treasures - Jesus had nothing on earth but pointed to treasure in heaven.
- Hezekiah coveted his life and didn't care for the people - Jesus gave up his life for his people.
- Hezekiah's pride heralded the end of the kings in Israel - Jesus brought in an eternal reign, as the king of kings.

If we had to rely on the best we can produce we would be doomed. So God sent his perfect servant king.

Facebook in Heaven

And so while our lives aren't always Facebook perfect here in this world, we have a promised home in heaven, where they will be perfect. And maybe we'll be posting on heavenly Facebook: "Another great day with Jesus". And it won't be a carefully edited version of our lives to make us look good. It'll be the everyday truth.

And meanwhile let us not be like Hezekiah. He cared nothing for God's people as long as his life was comfortable and peaceful. We can be that way too, comfortable that our destination is secure while all around us there are people who know nothing of the God who died to save them. So let us strive to make him known, by our words, our thoughts and our actions.