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November 25th: Isaiah 38 & Luke 6:39—7:10

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The healing of Hezekiah. The conclusion of the Sermon on the Plain and the faith of a centurion.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 38. In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, came to him and said to him, Thus says the Lord, Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.

Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, and said, Please, O Lord, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight. And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah, Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears.

Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city. This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do this thing that he has promised.

Behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps. So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined. A

writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness.

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. 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. 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. I calmed myself until morning.

Like a lion he breaks all my bones. From day to night you bring me to an end. 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. 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. O restore me to health and make me live. 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. For 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.

Now Isaiah had said, Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover. Hezekiah also had said, What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the Lord? As in the case of the preceding two chapters concerning the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, much of the material of Isaiah chapters 38 and 39 is also found in 2 Kings, these two chapters having extensive overlap with the material of 2 Kings chapter 20. If we believe, as most commentators do, that chapters 36 and 37 relate to the events of 701 BC rather than to an earlier attack upon Jerusalem, it would seem that both in 2 Kings and in Isaiah the narrative material is not in chronological order.

This is indicated by the text itself, which promises the deliverance of the city and Hezekiah from the king of Assyria, strongly implying that this is prior to 701 BC, at a time when the Assyrian threat was imminent. The visit of the envoys of Meredak Baladan, king of Babylon, also almost certainly did not occur after the events of 701 BC. Meredak

Baladan had taken the throne of Babylon in 722 BC and had secured Babylon's independence from Assyria until removed in 710 BC.

In 703 BC he returned from Elam, incited a rebellion against Assyria in Babylonia again, but was removed within the year. Although he had managed to flee to Elam again, it is highly unlikely that he was sending envoys to Hezekiah in Jerusalem any time after 701 BC. As chapter 39 seems to be connected to chapter 38, as the illness of Hezekiah seems to have occasioned the sending of the envoys, we also have to consider the fact that Hezekiah was told that he would have 15 more years to live.

This clearly presents a constraint for our dating, although as there are wildly varying dates given as the most likely year of Hezekiah's death, it might not help us as much as we might expect it to. A further detail is the introductory phrase, in those days, in this chapter, which, taken with the allusion to the imminence of the threat of the Assyrians to Jerusalem, weighs in favour of a date nearer to 701 BC. On balance, my inclination is to date Hezekiah's illness to around 704-703 BC.

We are still left with the question of why the chronology of the text is disrupted at this point, in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles and Isaiah. In the case of the book of Isaiah, it is helpful to consider the structure of the book more generally. The accounts of chapters 36-39 have several parallels to the earlier accounts concerning Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, in chapters 7 and following.

The two kings face similar crises, the first in the Syro-Ephraimite crisis of the 730s and the second in the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, but their responses to those crises are contrasted. In both cases they are given signs by the Lord, in Ahaz's case the signs are those of new birth, in Hezekiah's case the sign represents the turning back of time and his deliverance from illness and death. In both of these cases the signs to the kings also symbolise the fate of their kingdom.

In Isaiah, the events of chapter 39 also anticipate the latter part of the book, which focuses upon Babylon, making it a very natural seam at that point in the text. The city is under threat, but the king is also seriously ill, at the point of death. As if the severity of his illness were not enough, the Lord sends Isaiah to Hezekiah to confirm the fact of his forthcoming death.

He will not recover and his nation is on the brink of being overrun by the Assyrians. The king is expecting death at one of the most critical times in the nation's history. He would have to leave the reins of the nation in the hands of his son Manasseh, a man who proved wicked for much of his life, although some commentators question whether he yet had an heir.

The symbolic relationship between the physical body of the king and the body politic has been much explored by writers and poets and theorised by theologians and political

thinkers, perhaps most notably in the work of Ernst Kantorowicz, who wrote on the subject in *The King's Two Bodies*. The illness of King Hezekiah is a symbol of the ailing of the kingdom and its nearness to death. Can the kingdom be delivered from the exile that seemingly awaits it? Hezekiah's response to the Lord's announcement is to turn his face to the wall and to seek the Lord's reprieve.

He calls upon the Lord to consider the way that he has walked before him faithfully. Like his forefather David, he has walked before the Lord with a whole heart seeking to do what is good in the sight of the Lord. After the idolatry of the reign of Ahaz, he has sought to re-establish true worship in the land and to root out all the idolatry and false worship that had become entrenched there.

As the account of 2nd Kings informs us, even before Isaiah had left the courts of the palace, the word of the Lord came to him, sending him back to Hezekiah with the message that his prayer had been heard. The Lord addresses Hezekiah as the God of David his father. He will be healed and restored.

2nd Kings adds the detail that on the third day he will be raised up to go into the house of the Lord. This won't merely be a reprieve of short duration. The Lord will add 15 years to his life.

As the king symbolises the nation, this deliverance is not just for Hezekiah as a private individual. It is also for him as the representative of the nation and the city. The city will also be delivered.

Delivered from the hand of the king of Assyria. God's commitment to the city is for the sake of David his servant and also for his own namesake. He has placed his name in Zion's temple and he is jealous for its holiness.

2nd Kings chapter 20 verses 8 to 11 give a longer account of the sign given to Hezekiah, making clear that the sign was one concerning which Hezekiah was given a choice. And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord on the third day? And Isaiah said, This shall be the sign to you from the Lord that the Lord will do the thing that he has promised. Shall the shadow go forward ten steps or go back ten steps? And Hezekiah answered, It is an easy thing for the shadow to lengthen ten steps.

Rather let the shadow go back ten steps. And Isaiah the prophet called to the Lord and he brought the shadow back ten steps by which it had gone down on the steps of Ahaz. King Ahaz had rejected the sign when it was offered to him back in chapter 7 in a false show of piety.

His son Hezekiah gladly receives his. The nature of the steps in question are disputed. It is not said that the steps represent ours or that they are part of a sundial.

The steps may have been steps that led up to the altar or in some part of the palace. Their connection with Ahaz might also recall Hezekiah's father, heightening the comparisons and contrasts that are being drawn here. As Peter Lighthouse observes, the words for stairs here are connected with ascent and there are themes of ascent and descent throughout this chapter, descent to Sheol and then lifting up from illness.

For this reason, among others, the sign would seem to be a fitting one. Within both the sign and the healing of Hezekiah we can discern a deeper message. People's times, even those of kings and nations, are in the hands of the Lord.

He can bring a person or a nation back from the brink of death and no one can stay his hand. When facing the prospect of imminent national or personal death, he is the one to turn to, rather than resorting to lesser powers. The writing of Hezekiah in response to his healing, recorded for us in verses 9 to 20, is not found in either 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles.

Indeed 2 Chronicles presents Hezekiah in a rather less flattering light, in chapter 32 verses 24 to 26. Hezekiah's writing includes elements of lament and also of thanksgiving. He bemoans the fact that he has been cut off in the middle of his life.

The land of the living is the place where the praise of the Lord and all of the things that really matter are found and yet he is going to be consigned to Sheol, exiled from the special presence of the Lord and no longer having communion with other human beings. Human life is fragile and transient. Hezekiah compares his existence to a shepherd's tent that can be pulled up, or like a piece of fabric that is removed by a weaver from the loom when it is finished.

It seems that the Lord himself is against Hezekiah and yet it is to the Lord that he calls out in his despair. Recognising the Lord's hand in his distress and the way that the Lord is speaking to him through his suffering is the means by which Hezekiah is able to turn the corner. Life and health is ultimately found through the Lord's speech to people.

Men live by the words that proceed from the mouth of the Lord. As the Lord deals with Hezekiah through his illness and suffering, he restores Hezekiah to a greater health than he had previously. Through the word of his prophet Isaiah, the Lord had charged Hezekiah to set his house in order, to prepare himself for death and as Hezekiah did that, the Lord healed him and restored him.

In particular, his sins were forgiven. His physical restoration came with a spiritual one too. Hezekiah began this writing by speaking about the way that the dead are cut off from the praise of the Lord and he ends by returning to the same theme.

Having been delivered from death, he will devote himself to the praise of the Lord and the passing on of the goodness of the Lord to his children after him. As the redeemed king, he is going to lead the people in the assembly at the temple in praise of the Lord.

The chapter concludes with a couple of details that refer back to the earlier narrative of the sign and Hezekiah's healing.

Here we discover that Hezekiah had a boil, perhaps connected with the plague or something like that. The application of figs was a known form of treatment of certain ailments and we need not presume that it is some strange prophetic sign in itself. We should also consider that having such a skin condition might also have barred him from the worship of the Lord, even if he was healthy enough to attend otherwise.

Returning to the sign here has the effect of bracketing the entire account with the action of the Lord. It also recalls the structure of the preceding chapter. A question to consider, what should we make of the very pessimistic view of the afterlife in Hezekiah's writing as in many other parts of the Old Testament such as Job or the Psalms? Luke chapter 6 verse 39 to chapter 7 verse 10.

He also told them a parable. Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above his teacher. But everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye, when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit.

For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of the evil treasure produces evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like. He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock, and when a flood arose the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation.

When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great. After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him.

When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to

come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue. And Jesus went with them.

When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you, but say the word, and let my servant be healed. For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me.

And I say to one, Go, and he goes, and to another, Come, and he comes, and to my servant, Do this, and he does it. When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

The end of Luke chapter 6 continues Luke's version of the material that we find in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. There are a number of seemingly disparate sayings on the surface of things which don't obviously seem to fit with the opening description of a parable, as it isn't what we would usually associate with that term. However, that term can be used more broadly, and it can include under it proverbial sayings.

Part of our challenge will be to recognise the connection between these statements. In these verses Jesus seems to be concerned to distinguish between different kinds of people. In verses 39-40, Jesus highlights the importance of discerning the difference between teachers.

In Matthew chapter 15 verse 14, Jesus' saying here about the blind leading the blind is used in reference to the scribes and the Pharisees in the context of the controversy concerning ritual hand washing. People who follow blind guides will come to ruin. Also blindness in this sort of sense is contagious.

If you follow someone who is spiritually blind, that blindness will affect you. We must pay attention to the character of our teachers. Our teachers' characters will tend to be reproduced in us.

You can think about Jesus' teaching about the leaven of the scribes and the Pharisees. The way sourdough works is similar to the way that teaching works. Something of your teachers is placed within you and is a principle of growth and development for you.

And if you are not very careful in the teachers that you listen to, you will take on some very negative characteristics. From this Jesus moves to the subject of hypocrisy in teaching. People who seek to correct the faults of others have to be very sure that they have dealt with the problems in themselves.

If we do not deal with the log in our own eye, if we do not teach ourselves first, then we

have no business teaching others. We are in a position of hypocrisy where we have not internalised the lessons that we claim to apply to others. Jesus' teaching about teaching here as elsewhere is very shrewd.

He recognises the way in which teachers will often use their teaching as a way of getting power for themselves, as a way of actually avoiding addressing their own problems. Indeed, teaching others can be a means of deflecting attention from the issues within ourselves. We must put our own house in order first.

How do you know if someone is a good teacher? You test them by the fruit that they produce. This can be seen in their actions, it can be seen in their more general character, it can be seen in the sort of people that they create around them. If you want to know if the teaching of a church is good, pay attention to the people who have been there for several years.

See what character it has produced in them. In discerning whether someone is going to be a good leader of people, look at their relationships, look at their families, look at the people who have come under the realm of that influence. Are they thriving? Are they growing? Are they people who are maturing into good character? Or are they people who are stagnating, or perhaps growing in forms of wickedness? Are they marked by an unhealthy fear towards that teacher or authority figure, or are they marked by joy in relationship to them? Are they liberated by that teacher, or are they held in bondage by that teacher? When you're a student, you are not an expert.

But there are ways, even if you are not an expert, to discern whether someone is a good teacher. And this is the primary way. Pay attention to their fruit.

What do they produce around them? Do they have a track record of good judgement? Do they have a good reputation with their surrounding society? Are they at peace with people, or are they constantly causing conflict? Are they producing maturity in the people under their teaching? What about themselves? Are they living righteous lives? Are their families in good order? Do their actions testify to their righteous character? Where these things are lacking, we should be wary. We may not know exactly where they are going wrong, but we have a good indication that somewhere they are going wrong. Out of the abundance of the heart, his mouth speaks.

If you can discern the fruit of people, you have an indication of their character. And if you have an indication of their character, you have an indication of the source from which their teaching is coming. If that source is a good one, they are people to listen to.

If that source is a bad one, keep your distance. The importance of testing teachers is found throughout scripture. We can see this in the testing of false prophets in Deuteronomy.

You see false prophets by the failure of their prophecies, or by the fact that they lead people away from God. Deuteronomy chapter 13 describes this in detail. Also chapter 18 verses 21-22.

Having discussed the character of teachers, Jesus moves to the character of disciples. There are many who might give lip service to him, Lord, Lord. Now these are not words that we have really heard to this point in the gospel.

They seemingly express a great recognition of the authority of Christ and submission to his rule. But yet, many people who have these words in their tongue do not live according to them. They declare him to be Lord, but they do not live according to his word.

What foundation are we building upon? Our lives are like houses, and if we are not careful we will build them on something other than solid rock. To hear Christ's word and to obey it is to have an integrity of life that will hold us firm in times of testing. And it's in the time of testing that the difference between wisdom and folly is revealed.

The foolish person is revealed in that moment of testing. As the storm comes in their life or their world, they collapse. However, the person who has true integrity, the person who hears and obeys, the person who declares Lord, Lord and submits in their actions, that person will find security and strength.

As we see in the wisdom literature, time and crisis tend to be the things that divide between the wise and the foolish, between the righteous and the unrighteous, between those who have integrity of life and those who do not. In those moments of crisis, or in the longer term harvest that we reap over time, our character is seen. There are periods in our lives which will be mostly those of sowing, we'll be making decisions that have long term effects, but we won't be reaping those effects just yet.

There will be other periods in our life that are mostly times of reaping, times when we're experiencing the consequences of decisions that we have made long before. And for many people these are the times of crisis. Mid-life crisis for instance comes when people reflect upon their decisions in marriage, their decisions in their friendships, in the vocations that they chose, all these other things, and they experience the consequences and there's no easy way out of them.

They feel trapped in their folly and they don't know what to do. And for many people such times involve falling into new and greater folly. The wise however, those who follow Christ's words, will be prepared for such periods of crisis.

They will have sown good seed and they will reap a harvest of righteousness. Chapter 7 begins with a centurion sending messengers to Jesus asking for the healing of his servant. It is not unlikely that this centurion would have been the highest ranking

military officer in Jesus' base town of Capernaum.

Jesus doesn't actually meet the centurion. Others approach Jesus on the behalf of the centurion and they approach Jesus on the basis of an honour and patronage culture. They are beholden to this man, he's a good man, he has given them a great gift, he's helped to build their synagogue.

And so they can speak on his behalf to Jesus saying he's a worthy man, he merits your attention. However, a surprise soon arises. Jesus goes with the original delegation of the Jews that have gone on behalf of the centurion.

But while on the way, a new delegation comes, some of the friends of the centurion, and they directly contradict the earlier delegation. The earlier delegation said he is worthy to have you do this for him. But then the second delegation says I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.

The centurion here has an insight into the nature of the kingdom. The kingdom does not operate like an honour or patronage culture. He cannot have a claim or entitlement to the blessing of Christ.

Rather he must appeal to Christ as one who has no claim. Behind this story we can probably hear echoes of the story of 2 Kings chapter 5, the story of Naaman the Syrian. The story of Naaman the Syrian and his healing by Elisha has already been alluded to in Luke chapter 4 where Jesus talks about the healings and the actions of Elijah and Elisha and their relationships to Gentiles.

In both cases we have a Gentile military leader, we have a servant. Again it's a story of delegations being sent between parties and the prophet never actually meets the person who is healed. Recognising these parallels however also helps us to recognise the contrast.

For Naaman the lack of contact with the prophet and the smallness of the action that he is called to perform is a cause for protest. In 2 Kings chapter 5 verses 10-13, By contrast with Naaman the centurion believes in the power of Jesus' bare word from a distance, without any spectacle at all, so much that he is prepared to say don't come into my house. The power of Christ's word and the authority of Christ's word and his power to heal from a distance is also similar to Jesus' second sign in John's gospel.

It also serves as a sign of the future of the kingdom, of the bringing in of Gentiles. This is a Gentile who has faith that puts people in Israel to shame. Jesus has not encountered such faith among his own people and the way in which this story plays off the story of Naaman the Syrian and the way it recalls the sermon in Nazareth in chapter 4 helps to alert the hearer or reader of Luke's gospel that something is afoot, that the kingdom is going to be blessing Gentiles.

A question to consider. The centurion in his second delegation to Jesus discusses the nature of authority comparing his position as a leader of men with Jesus' own position. What can we learn about the nature of authority from what the centurion says?