

High and Exalted (7): Our Finest Hour

(Isaiah 38)

I. Introduction

- A. Winton Churchill made a series of three great speeches in May/June of 1940
1. France had fallen and Britain made a furious retreat at Battle of Dunkirk
 - a. Churchill was trying his best to get FDR and United States into the fight
 - b. Without France or the US, Britain stood alone; it was their “darkest hour”
 - c. He was also trying to rally the morale and the resolve of Great Britain
 2. These speeches by Churchill were some of the most important ever given
We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender...
 - a. It is the last of those three speeches I want to spin-off of this morning
If we fail, then all that we have known and cared for will sink into the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister... by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour."
 - b. The Battle of Britain would be one of the fiercest air battles in history
 - c. It was their darkest hour, and it would become their finest hour
- B. Today we continue our study of the Book of Isaiah, “*High and Exalted*”
1. We come to what was the finest hour for both Hezekiah and Isaiah
 - a. The Assyrian empire under Sennacherib laid waste to much of Judah
 - b. He surrounded Jerusalem and refused the gold they offered in tribute
 - c. He told them He’d take the gold from them after he’d killed them all
 2. He sent a letter to be read by his general in Hebrew so all could understand
 - a. He mocked Hezekiah and he mocked Hezekiah’s dependence on God
 - b. Every city we’ve destroyed their gods, and you have a bigger problem--
 - 1) **First**, Hezekiah had destroyed all the idols and high places (**Isa 36:7**)
 - 2) **Second**, Hezekiah’s God told him to destroy Jerusalem (**Isa 36:10**)
 - c. Sennacherib was the wolf at the gate, and there seemed to be no hope
 3. This was Hezekiah’s darkest hour; it would also become his finest hour
 - a. He took the letter of Sennacherib and laid it before God at Temple
 - b. He asked priests/prophets to pray and so did he (**Read: Isaiah 37:15-20**)
 - 1) That night, the angel of God turned Sennacherib’s army into corpses
 - 2) Sennacherib fled back to Nineveh where he was assassinated by sons

- C. This victory was Hezekiah's finest hour, but how did he get to that point?
1. We mentioned in earlier lesson that Isaiah isn't in chronological order
 - a. That is very common in the poetic, prophetic sections of the book
 - b. It's also true in the prose, historical section in chapters 36-39
 2. What if a story begins, "*Once upon a time...*" That's a fairy tale, right?
 - a. What if the preacher begins, "*The story has been told...*" Same thing!
 - b. Both of the stories in **Isaiah 38-39** begin with, "*In those days...*"
 - c. The stories happened, but "*in those days*" means "*at some point*"
 3. What's the point? Both stories happen before Sennacherib's invasion
 - a. Sennacherib's invasion of Judah (**Isaiah 36-37**) took place in **701 BC**
 - b. In **Isaiah 38**, takes place before God delivered Jerusalem (**Isa 38:6**)
 - c. In **Isaiah 39**, the king of Babylon is Marodach-Baladan (**721-710**)
 4. The two stories recorded in **Isaiah 38-39** are flashbacks or prequels
 - a. They give us the background for Hezekiah's faith and his finest hour
 - b. As such, they relate a couple of times that weren't his finest hour
 - c. We'll look at these background stories; the one for today is in **Isaiah 38**

II. Our Finest Hour: Hezekiah

- A. Our text begins with Isaiah delivering the worst of bad news to Hezekiah (**38:1**)
1. Several times over the I was with people when their loved ones died
 - a. I've been there as a doctor checked one last time, "*They're gone*"
 - b. I've laid on the bed beside someone and held their hand as they died
 - 1) But I've never told someone that they were GOING to die
 - 2) That the job of a doctor; I'm glad it's not the job of the preacher
 2. It was Isaiah's job as prophet; he tells Hezekiah that he won't get well
 - a. The Chronicler fills in an important detail to this story (**2 Chron 32:25**)
 - b. It is extremely hard not to struggle with pride when you are the king
 - 1) Everyone tells you how wonderful and great you are all the time
 - 2) Your stories are always funny; people rush to meet your every whim
 - c. It's a lot like being the preacher! Hezekiah's was getting best of him
 - 1) The details are not spelled out, but God is dealing with kinds pride
 - 2) The point of story is how Hezekiah responds to crisis (**Isa 38:2-3**)

- B. Here is where it helps me to see this as a flashback or prequel story
1. When you get right down to it, this prayer is pretty weak and whiny
 - a. Hezekiah does cry out to God here, and that is good, right?
 - 1) He doesn't turn his face to the wall and pout like Ahab, right?
 - 2) He turns his face to the wall and prays. What he should do
 - b. His prayer here sounds a bit like some of my pity-party-prayers
 - c. It's not like the bold, dramatic prayer we read earlier in **Isaiah 37**
 2. Interesting part is not Hezekiah's prayer; it's God's response (**38:4-6**)
 - a. The writer of 2 Kings says that Isaiah doesn't get out of the palace
 - 1) Isaiah goes to King Hezekiah with a "*Thus sayeth the Lord...*"
 - 2) Five minutes later, "*Scratch that; here's a new sayeth the Lord...*"
 - b. God can change things, right? And prayer can change God, right?
 3. What was it about Hezekiah's prayer that made it so effective?
 - a. Not how fancy or flowery the language; his other prayer is better
 - b. Nor how sincere or serious he was; his other prayer was as much
 - c. Nor how long or lengthy the prayer; what did it last... 5 minutes?
- C. Here's what I think. God had things He wanted to do through Hezekiah
1. Did God want kings like Ahaz, who didn't believe enough to want a sign
 - a. No, God wanted to accomplish things through all of those kings
 - 1) God sent prophets to warn those kinds that they needed to change
 - 2) He worked thru circumstances and situations to get them to change
 - b. God wanted to do great things in Hezekiah, but his pride was problem
 - 1) God allowed Hezekiah to get sick; He would've allowed it to be fatal
 - 2) Hezekiah's faith and focus changed; now God can work with him
 - 3) God changed what was going to be because of Hezekiah's prayer
 - c. He even gave Hezekiah something to strengthen his faith (**Isa 38:7-8**)
 2. Hezekiah turned to God and he aligned himself with God's purposes
 - a. He was now ready to lead Judah through crisis with Sennacherib
 - b. He would not have been ready unless he had faced a crisis of his own
 - 1) In that health crisis, Hezekiah learned to truly trust in God
 - 2) That faith allowed him to serve God in mazing way over Assyria

III. Conclusion

- A. This story has always fascinated me because of the obvious question it raises
 - 1. If God is omniscient (all-knowing), why this sudden change of mind
 - a. Didn't God know that Hezekiah was going to pray and cry?
 - b. I could have predicted that! Why the sudden change of mind here?
 - c. It was "*Thus sayeth the Lord...*" and then "*No, now the Lord sayeth...*"
 - 2. Can All-knowing God change his mind? Yes! No! (**Exo 32:14; Num 23:19**)
 - a. God absolutely knows what he is going to do... that doesn't change
 - b. But He acts with us in real time as if He doesn't know what we'll do
 - 1) How can you be in a real relationship with someone who already knows every single thing that you will ever say or do or think
 - 2) If that were true with God, nothing we say, do or think matters
 - c. My wife thinks that she always knows what I will do or say
 - d. But once or twice I will surprise her with something unexpected
 - 1) OK, it was once! But that is why we keep talking and interacting
 - 2) I may surprise her again someday; that is why it's a relationship
 - 3. God knows everything, but He interacts with us in relationship in present
 - a. The God who cannot change is sometimes changed by our prayers
 - b. Should we be amazed by that? Yes! And that he wants to hear from us
- B. What God was telling Isaiah here was proscriptive, not just predictive
 - 1. If Hezekiah continued on his current track, things would not go well
 - a. Pride was the great killer of kings in Israel; just ask Saul and Uzziah
 - b. Unless Hezekiah changed his tune, he would come to a bad end too
 - c. His illness and near-death were a wake-up call... and he woke up
 - 2. God holds the future in His hands, but the future is filled with possibilities
 - a. We must not in our pride and self-importance face that future alone
 - b. We need to rely on God every day; we need to seek him in every way
 - c. He's our one defense and righteousness... and we need Him!