

7. Grace from start to finish

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[0 : 0 0] Now, before we look at 2 Kings 20, which is on page 327, we'll have a moment of prayer. God our Father, we praise you for your living word.

The word of life that fires us, speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze. As we read this ancient text, help us to hear it not as the word you once spoke only, as is the living word speaking to us today, the word that comes to challenge us, to correct us, to inspire us, to rebuke us and to strengthen us.

May that be our experience this evening as we listen together to what the Lord has to say to us. And we ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. I think you'll agree that it's typical of human nature, and I'm just as guilty of this as anybody else, to find fault in famous people.

If somebody is very distinguished, if somebody is very prominent, we really like hearing that they've got faults, don't we? It's a characteristic of human nature.

It's not an admirable one, but it is one. I remember many years ago speaking about a great biblical scholar, a godly man, who is now with the Lord, and talking about him with great admiration to another person who said, Oh, but didn't you know he's got a dreadful temper?

[1 : 3 4] Of course I didn't know he had a dreadful temper. And I'm not sure that I made any difference to the value I gained from his works and to the blessing I received from what he had written.

But it is characteristic, isn't it? And I found, as I studied these chapters in 1 and 2 Kings, that biblical commentators are no slouches at finding, at doing the great ones down.

We saw this many months ago. We looked at Elijah. There is Elijah, stands up to Ahab and the prophets of Baal, and then runs away from a woman. And here is Hezekiah, standing up to the Assyrian bully, and now wobbling and succumbing to flattery.

In other words, we moralize the story. We start with the human being and work out from there. Let me remind you that this is not primarily the story of Hezekiah.

This is primarily the story of God. This is God telling God's story. Now, of course, it is the story of Hezekiah. And of course, Hezekiah is not perfect.

[2 : 4 0] But if we start from saying Hezekiah was not perfect, Hezekiah wobbled, Hezekiah was human like us, then we'll read all the wrong things into it and get all the wrong things out of it.

We must start with God. And this is a story of God's grace from start to finish. That's my title for this evening, Grace from Start to Finish.

This whole series I've called God's Grace in Human Weakness. And this story shows us that. But a word of introduction before we look at the story, or rather the two incidents here.

Verse 1 says, In those days. And then verse 12 says, At that time. These are common narrative devices to show us that these incidents happened at roughly the same time.

In other words, this is not chronologically after chapter 19. Indeed, look at verse 6. I will add 15 years to your life. I will deliver you in this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my own sake, and for my servant David's sake.

[3 : 53] But didn't we read about that last week? Hadn't this already happened? Now the point is, this had not already happened. Chronologically, chapter 20 comes before chapter 19.

We'll come back to that point in a moment as to why it comes that way. When you think of it, that's not an uncommon way to present stories in history. David's story, after all, the last few chapters of 2 Samuel 23, sorry, 2 Samuel from 22, 23 onwards, take earlier incidents in David's life, as the writer is summing up what David's life was about.

It's a common device. I've got various biographies of people, which often at the end will go back to earlier parts of their life, which throw light on the whole story.

And that's what's happening here. These events happen before the Assyrian invasion, and they happen to show us important lessons, and important lessons about grace.

Grace from start to finish. And there are two episodes which are separate but connected. So let's look at the first one. Verses 1 to 11. Here is grace which responds to faith.

[5 : 08] Grace which responds to faith. Now it does seem so unfair, isn't it? After a dreadful time in Judah, this godly, capable, and courageous king had come to the throne.

And it seems now he's about to be taken away. The Assyrian menace is threatening the kingdom is in extreme danger, and the leader is about to be removed. Notice verse 8.

He is indeed, he's called Hezekiah, the leader of my people. Surely if ever a leader was needed, it was now. But the prophet's words are grim. Verse 1.

Thus says the Lord, Set your house in order, for you shall die. You shall not recover. Now once again, some have criticized Hezekiah here, saying that he ought simply to have accepted this, and said, The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. To quote Job's famous words. The answer to that surely is that God answered his prayer. After all, David says in Psalm 66 verse 18, If I had cherished sin in my heart, God would not have listened.

[6 : 17] But God listened to this prayer, and God answered this prayer. Now one of the things I want to say about this incident. First of all, God's will and prayer.

Now that is an issue we think about often, and an issue which is not one which can easily be resolved. Why is it that we pray if God works everything out according to his purposes?

What difference do our prayers make? Now the point here, Hezekiah I think shows some light on this. The prophet's words are uncompromising.

There's no maybes. I mean, as we saw last week, Isaiah doesn't do perhaps and maybe. Isaiah is totally straightforward and uncompromising. You will die, and you will not live.

Now Hezekiah takes that word as a challenge to pray. Rather than to sink in despair, he takes this word as a challenge to prayer.

[7 : 16] And this is what he says, verse 3, Please remember, I walk before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart and have done what is good in your sight. Those who here last week may remember when I talked about his prayer back in chapter 19, I commended him for not bringing up to God his faithfulness and his godliness, for saying, Save us, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone.

Now that was true, but this situation is very different. Hezekiah is not claiming to be perfect. He is claiming the covenant promises of the Lord.

Just as David does. I mean, for example, in Psalm 7, David says, Judge me, O Lord, in your righteousness, for I have walked faithfully before you.

Later on, when you go home, read Isaiah chapter 38, where we have a much fuller account of this episode. And indeed, we have a Psalm of Hezekiah. Remember, Hezekiah is the true son of David in all kinds of ways.

And that's one way in which he is also a son of David. He is a writer of Psalms himself. And this is what he says. He says, I will walk humbly all my years before you.

[8 : 32] This is claiming the covenant promises of God. After all, had not the Lord promised through Moses, obeyed these commandments, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God will give you.

And the point is, it's obviously right for Hezekiah to say this because God underwrites it. God says, Yes, Hezekiah, I will give you your request, the leader of my people.

I will defend the city for my servant David's sake. And once again, the answer goes well beyond the request. He's going to give Hezekiah further years of life. He's also going to save the city.

As we saw last week, the request is always answered, but more than answered. The answer is far greater than the request. And we looked at these, we mentioned these words of Cooper, You are coming to a king.

Large petitions with you bring. Since his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much. I know the problem with my prayers is I ask too little. I don't know what you're like, but I sadly always ask too little.

[9 : 41] Hezekiah is throwing himself on the covenant mercies of God. God had declared His will, but that will is not a mechanical thing. It's not a juggernaut that simply rolls on and on, crushing everything in its way.

After all, the prayers of God's people are one of the means by which He carries out His will. That's the first thing about this episode. And the second thing about this episode is God heals, but uses means.

Now, all healing comes from God. But most of the time, it comes through means. Most of the time, God heals through nurses and doctors and surgeons.

That is the normal way. And if God provides that, then we give thanks to God for it. And surely one of the things we do give thanks to God in our day is of the huge advances in medical science, which is one of the great blessings God has given.

And that's the point of the cake of figs. Now, I know nothing about medicine. I do not know how cakes of figs cure boils. Possibly some of you do, but I certainly don't.

[10 : 46] But that's not the point. The point is that God heals, but God gives, but God uses means to heal. There is a mystery here, but it is a mystery of grace.

Instead of a funeral, there is a celebration. You will go up to the house of the Lord on the third day after this. Notice the preciseness of God's promise. This is actually going to happen, and on the third day, you'll go up to the house of the Lord.

Hezekiah is a king who is devoted to the house of the Lord. We noticed last week he took Sennacherib's letter into the house of the Lord. His early reforming activities, and we read about more of this in Chronicles, had been devoted to restoring the house of the Lord, which had fallen into a desperate state.

But surely this points as so often in the Old Testament to the day when death will be destroyed, God's kindness and generosity. So in this episode, we have, first of all, prayer, the prayer of faith and the will of God.

We have the healing of God through means. And then the third thing we have, looking at the last part, verses 8 to 11, which in some ways are somewhat puzzling, we've got God giving assurance.

[12 : 00] God gives a sign. Now, if you look through the stories in the Old Testament, you'll find that God sometimes does this. Gideon, the famous incident of Gideon laying out the fleece, for example, in the book of Judges is an example of this.

In the stories of Elijah and Elisha, sometimes God gives physical signs. Now, as I say, it's not altogether clear what's happening here. Some think this is the sun and its shadow on a sundial.

But it may simply be literal steps on which the sun is casting its rays at a particular time of day. And notice, Isaiah said, verse 9, 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 back ten steps? Imagine the sun's rays shining on the steps at a particular time of day. And at that particular time of day, presumably, they are lengthening towards darkness.

The sun is beginning to set, the shadows are lengthening, and of course, it is symbolic of Hezekiah's own impending death, is it not?

[13 : 09] It's a dramatic picture of that. And Hezekiah says, if the sun's rays, if the darkness recedes, then, that will be a sign that my darkness is receding as well.

What C.S. Lewis calls the tape winding backwards, which is one of the phrases he uses about the resurrection, the tape wound backwards, dissolution and disintegration reversed, and the resurrection body being created.

So, Hezekiah is given more time. As I say, the actual details are difficult to work out, but clearly, this is the Lord, the King of the universe, using this natural phenomenon of the lengthening of the shadows, and then causing them to go backwards, to symbolize the further life that is given to the King.

Grace, which responds to faith. Hezekiah is a man of faith. We know that. Remember back in chapter 18, it was in the Lord he trusted, and there was no one like him before or after, and it's particularly in that respect that there was no one like him before or after.

He was a man of faith, and God is good and gracious. That story, in some ways, is easy enough to handle, but it's the second story, the second story in verses 12 and following, which is a story about grace, which is not turned away by failure.

[14 : 39] The grace, which responds to faith, is not repelled by failure, and that's so important, I think. Let me say a quick word about Merodach Baladan, in case you haven't been thinking much about him in the last week.

Even his name actually sets warning bells ringing. Merodach is the Hebrew form of Marduk, who was the principal god of Babylon, and whose worship was celebrated in Babylon.

The point is, in the country we now call Iraq, which in the older days used to be called Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, for many centuries, Babylon in the south, with the capital near Baghdad, and Nineveh in the north, the Assyrian capital near Mosul, battled it out for supremacy.

And over the years, over the generations, sometimes Assyria was on top, and sometimes Babylon was on top. Now we're in one of the periods, of course, when Assyria is on the top.

Sennacherib, king of Assyria, has raised the power of the empire hugely. But, they have an opponent, and this opponent, Merodach Baladan, king of Babylon, was a powerful Babylonian chief who fought against them and caused them tremendous grief.

[16 : 00] And almost certainly, what's happening here is that Merodach Baladan is sending his messengers throughout the Middle East to try and cobble together an anti-Assyrian alliance.

This is the sort of thing he's trying to do. And of course, he had heard, because all of them had heard, of the able king of Judah, who many were looking to for political and military reasons.

This is a man who'll stand up to the Assyrians. This is a man we need to have on board. And so this embassy is sent to Hezekiah. And what do we have here, then?

What is this story telling us? And the first thing this story is telling us is of the danger of flattery. Hezekiah is not the first person, nor will he be the last person, who stood up to a bully with tremendous courage and tremendous faith, but was swept off his feet by flattery.

See what's happening here. Merodach Baladan is a big player. It's the kind of thing that our politicians love to do. Particularly, nowadays, it would be like being photographed shaking the hands of President Obama.

[17 : 12] You look significant, it takes away from the problems at home. You stand with the good and the great. And you can easily see how Hezekiah was enormously flattered.

My goodness, I'm being invited to the play in the... I'm invited to the Premier League now. I'm getting a seat at the top table. Merodach Baladan. Who did you say? Did you mean Merodach Baladan?

That Merodach Baladan? Yes, we did. And he's come here to see you, Hezekiah. And you are important. And you are, significant. It'd be good to say that only happened in politics, wouldn't it?

But it doesn't. Think about our evangelical circles. I was going to say even in our evangelical circles. Perhaps I should say especially in our evangelical circles.

Think of the name dropping. Think of the claiming as great friends. Somebody we once met for two minutes in a crowded room. I had breakfast with...

[18 : 11] I'm not going to mention names. I had breakfast with so-and-so forgetting to say there were ten other people at the table and that so-and-so never actually talked to me. That is human nature.

Flattery is so difficult to face up to, isn't it? Standing up to a bully often brings out the best in us, often brings out the steel within us. But flattery is so, so difficult to stand up to.

And we need to remember this. And I think we see now why this episode is here. In the prophecy, in the book of Isaiah, it's here as well and in the book of Chronicles.

Although chronologically it's out of place. The reason it's here is verse 16. Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord. Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and that which your fathers have stored up to this day shall be carried to Babylon.

Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. That's what's going to, that's the tragedy. Pointing forward to the exile to Babylon and the ominous name at the end of the chapter whom we'll look at next, Manasseh his son reigned in his place because it was in the reign of that king that the point of no return was passed and the exile became a certainty.

[19 : 33] Flattery is dangerous. Flattery is cruel. We need the grace of God, we need the spirit of God to stand up to flattery.

So there's danger of flattery. But there's also submission to the will of God. Now verse 19, let's look at verse 19. Then said Hezekiah to Isaiah, The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.

For he thought, Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days? Now once again, this is a place where we could be very superior and snifty about Hezekiah.

Is Hezekiah saying, Peace in my time, at least it's not going to happen in my day, so I don't need to bother too much about it. That is possible. But it is also possible to look at the verse in a different way.

The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good. The biblical word good, which means conforming to God's purpose. Remember the use of the word in Genesis.

[20 : 36] God saw what He had done and it was good. Hezekiah is saying, I know disaster will come, but if the Lord has pronounced it, then it is good.

Echoing surely Joseph's word, God meant it for good. And it seems to me the second part of the verse need not necessarily be read as a selfish, well at least it's not going to happen in my time, but rather as gratitude at the Lord's restraint.

The Lord is honoring and vindicating his servant. God's judgments are never excessive. After all, if God had taken Hezekiah away at this time, there would have been no Hezekiah when the Assyrians came.

Now of course we know it wasn't Hezekiah who rescued the city, was the Lord, but nevertheless Hezekiah's prayers as we've already said were such an important factor in this.

So submission to the will of God. And it's in that context I think we've got to see verses 20 and 21, which is the divine assessment of Hezekiah.

[21 : 47] It's as if the author is saying, now look, we've come to the end of the reign of this great king. What is the last words to be said on him? Now back in chapter 18 verses 1 to 8 that we looked at a few weeks ago, we are told he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord according to all that David had done.

He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. He removed the high places. He held fast to the Lord. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses.

If you take that, if you like, as one bookend of Hezekiah's story and then these verses, verses 20 and 21, as the other bookend, it is overwhelmingly positive, isn't it?

I mean, one of the encouraging things, surely, is that no fall can ultimately damage the child of God, provided we get up again. That is the point.

Hezekiah was not perfect. Hezekiah wobbled. Hezekiah got things wrong, but he stood up again, didn't he? He kept on going. And verses 20 and 21 are full of praise for his achievements.

[22 : 57] And in particular, I want to just look for a moment at this little detail, how he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city. Are they not written in the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Judah?

Now, unlike many of the books that are mentioned in the Old Testament, this book actually is in our Bible. This is our book of Chronicles, which is the Chronicles of the kings of Judah. And there we read that as the Assyrians were approaching, Hezekiah and his engineers divert the water from the Gihon Spring outside the walls of Jerusalem into the city so that when the Assyrians came, if there was a prolonged siege, there would be water for the siege citizens.

And if any of you have been in Jerusalem, you perhaps may have been in Hezekiah's tunnel, which is still there to this day. Very impressive piece of engineering, which is very like, of course, Cromwell's words, trust in God and keep your powder dry.

Hezekiah made sensible precautions. But you know there's a bit more to it than that. Psalm 46, which is almost certainly a psalm referring to this period, has the beautiful lines, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place of the Most High.

Now that, of course, refers to the river in Eden, first and foremost, to the river which flows through the heavenly city in the new creation. But I believe in context it also refers to Hezekiah's tunnel, which brought the life-giving water into the city and which showed to people that this God was their God, that this God was protecting them.

[24 : 41] Remember that Psalm also says God will rescue her at break of day. And that's exactly what we saw at the end of the last chapter. When they arose in the morning the Assyrian army was destroyed before their eyes.

And I think this little detail is put in here deliberately to say what kind of a man was Hezekiah? Was he really the kind of man that chapter 18 said he was?

It seems to me this chapter is saying look at what He did. Look at His concern for His people. After all, it's no accident that this is the chapter in verse 5, in verse...

Yes, well, I've lost the verse immediately, but where He's called the leader of my people. And He's showing Himself a genuine leader.

And I remember the words of a character in C.S. Lewis' science fiction stories. It is the courtesy of deep heaven that when we mean well He takes us to have meant better than we did.

[25 : 50] And that surely is the assessment of these good kings. So as we finish, two things to remember. One is that Hezekiah was a man of God, a man of faith, whose faith we do well to follow, whose example inspires us.

One of the great cloud of witnesses of Hebrews 12. But the second thing to remember is, even a good king only makes it by grace.

Only by grace can we enter. Only by grace can we stand. And just as Hezekiah's faith was sustained by grace, remains true today.

He was not the serpent crusher. He is still to come. The Messiah is not yet here in Hezekiah's time. But what a wonderful story. How encouraging it is to us as we struggle to live the life of faith in the darkness of this world, trusting in the same God and sustained by the same grace.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we praise you for the great cloud of witnesses which surround us. Many of them we read off in the pages of your word.

[27 : 06] Many of them we know and love dearly ourselves who are now in your nearer presence. And we pray, our God, that as we travel through the darkness of this world, through its dangers and difficulties and its seductions and flatteries, that you will indeed help us to be faithful and to look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

and we pray this in his name. Amen.