

FAITH UNDER SIEGE

Part 7: Temptations After Victory (Isaiah 38-39)

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In some stories, heroes never do anything wrong, and villains never do anything right. So, we cheer for the good guys and despise the bad guys. Everyone is on one side or the other, and anyone who says anything negative about a hero cannot be a good guy. A lot of us try to view life that way. Everything is black or white. There are good guys and bad guys. So, when our “good guy” does something questionable, we find a way to excuse it. He must have a good reason. He’s a good guy! Don’t you dare criticize him!

That perspective may work for comic books, but it does not fit with what the Bible teaches us about human fallenness. Real life is messy. We all sin. The only sinless person to ever walk the earth was Jesus. So, even the greatest heroes of the faith sometimes fall into spectacular sins, and the Bible does not hesitate to expose those situations.

Think of King David, for instance, a man after God’s own heart who wrote profound psalms and was victorious in battle but who also committed adultery and orchestrated the death of the woman’s husband. David was a good guy, but the Bible does not excuse his actions. God does not give us plastic heroes.

Isaiah 28-39 draws our attention to another hero of faith, David’s descendant, Hezekiah. He led a revival of biblical worship in the kingdom of Judah. We learned in chapter 37 that when the Assyrian Empire laid siege to Jerusalem, he prayed an exemplary prayer for the Lord to demonstrate his power and glory. In response, God sent an angel that struck down 185,000 Assyrian troops. It was a great spiritual victory.

Chapters 38 and 39 conclude this section of Isaiah that I have called, “Faith Under Siege,” by describing two more crises that Hezekiah faced. Some commentators interpret his responses to them in a positive light. But as we work through the passage, we will see why that is difficult to do.

Others concede that Hezekiah responded poorly, but they say that these events happened before the Assyrian siege. Chapter 39 says that Hezekiah showed his treasure to envoys from Merodach-Baladan, the son of a Babylonian king. Historical records show that a king called Merodach-Baladan was ousted by the Assyrians before the siege. We also know from 2 Kings 19 that the Assyrians took Hezekiah’s treasure. So, these commentators say that Isaiah only records these crises afterward to lead into what he says in chapters 40-66 about Israel’s future. Hezekiah grew in his faith to stand firm against the Assyrians, and his heroic trajectory is preserved.

There are good reasons, however, to see these events as happening after the siege. The most obvious argument is that other biblical accounts of these events in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, both record these crises after the siege as Isaiah does. Furthermore, 2 Chronicles 32:22-23 tells us,

So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all his enemies, and he provided for them on every side. And many brought gifts to the LORD to Jerusalem and precious things to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from that time onward.

So, Hezekiah's treasure was quickly replenished, and this entourage from Babylon may have come seeking help from exalted King Hezekiah in reclaiming their city. Second Chronicles also goes on to describe the period of Hezekiah's rule after the siege in a negative light. Verses 24-26 tell us,

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. But Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah.

So, even though Hezekiah experienced victory over the physical siege, his faith was still under attack. Victory brings its own set of temptations, and I think that is Isaiah's point in Isaiah 38 and 39. These chapters make a powerful conclusion for this part of the book, showing that the attacks on our faith will not relent this side of eternity. Pay attention to how often Hezekiah says I, me, and my. We will see that he struggles with four temptations related to pride, temptations that we all face.

These temptations can be triggered by any small victory, spiritual or not. You get a promotion at work. You accomplish a special project. You achieve a goal related to finances, fitness, or family. You resist your besetting sin or share your faith. It could even be as simple as showing up to church, praying, or reading your Bible. We must prepare ourselves to resist the temptations that come after victory.

Temptation 1: Why Me

In our moments of victory, we tend to think that we have climbed to new heights and have risen above the struggles of normal people. We are living at a new level, and we presume that there should be perks to go along with it. We feel entitled to VIP treatment from people and even from God himself. If that doesn't happen, we get offended. We become bitter. We are tempted to ask, "Why me? Don't I deserve something better?"

King Hezekiah was probably 39 years old at the siege of Jerusalem. It should have been the physical prime of his life. But Isaiah 38:1-3 says,

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.

We are not told what Hezekiah's sickness was, but verse 21 mentions that he had some sort of boil. From a medical perspective, it is not surprising at all that he would have health problems after such an intense crisis. He probably had many sleepless nights. He might have found it difficult to eat. In fact, there may have been a shortage of supplies. Even when you rely upon the Lord, circumstances like that take a heavy toll on your health physically and emotionally.

The Prophet Elijah, for instance, paid a steep cost after his victorious confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. First Kings 19 tells us that when evil Queen Jezebel threatened him, he fled into the wilderness, hid under a scraggly bush, and slept for days. The Lord had to send an angel to wake him and get him to eat.

When exhausted or sick, we are all tempted to focus on ourselves, and as we fixate on our problems, our hearts can become bitter. Until the Lord corrected him, Elijah claimed that he was the only faithful prophet left. He seems to imply that it was unfair that Jezebel is pursuing him. I suspect that Hezekiah is using a similar logic here as he asks the Lord to remember his faithful walk and his good deeds: "How is it fair for someone like me to die from illness at an early age?"

The Lord is gracious in his response, but he also tries to redirect Hezekiah's focus. Verses 4-6 tell us,

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.

Second Kings 18:2 tells us that Hezekiah reigned for 29 years, and the siege occurred in his fourteenth year. So, this sickness happens during the same year as the siege. Some say that the mention of deliverance from the Assyrians places this before or during the siege. But that is not necessarily the case. Even after they departed, the Assyrians were still a threat for many years. They could have regrouped and attacked.

So, the Lord promises here to protect and defend Jerusalem, even though that was not Hezekiah's prayer at that moment. The Lord knows the struggle taking place in his heart, and he wants him to look beyond himself to the welfare of the city. To assure him of his sovereign control, he gives him a miraculous sign. Verses 7-8 tell us that he said,

"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.

Signs are not normally given to people whose faith is strong. They do not need them. A sign is God's gracious way of helping someone who doubts. In this case, there seems to be a sundial that Hezekiah's father had built. Second Kings 20:8-11 tells us that God gave Hezekiah the choice of whether the shadow should go forward or back. He decides that it is better to turn back time than to fast forward. I suspect that most of us would wish for the same. But this miracle was probably a bending of light rather than actually backing up a few hours in time.

Did Hezekiah overcome his "why me" attitude of self-entitlement? I am not sure. We will see that his selfish focus continues in slightly different ways. But what about you? Are you willing to accept that the Lord has numbered your days? James 4:13-15 puts it this way:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"-- yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

Sickness and death are not outside the Lord's control. In this fallen world, he allows them to come upon the righteous and the unrighteous. In this case, the Lord chose to extend Hezekiah's life. But we should not presume that God will always do that. We can certainly pray for healing, but if it does not happen, then we should look upon our condition as an opportunity to trust him and live for his glory.

Temptation 2: Woe is Me

Sometimes in your journey through life, there is no other option but to go through the deep sticky mud of personal suffering. You do not have to like it! It would be weird if you did. It is toilsome and messy. So, there is nothing wrong with acknowledging how awful it is and asking God for help to get through it. But that does not mean you should stop, sit down, and sulk in the middle of it.

Believers struggle to find this balance. On one hand, people hear the instruction from James 1:2 to count it all joy when you encounter trials, and they try to pretend that a bad experience is somehow inherently good. That is not James's point! The good part of a trial is that God uses the experience to help us grow. So, we can acknowledge the awfulness of suffering and pray for help while being confident in God's good purpose. Several psalms model a pattern of biblical lament. But selfishness tempts us to respond by giving ourselves completely over to self-pity, a "woe is me" attitude.

We do not know how long King Hezekiah was sick before Isaiah came to interact with him. It may have been weeks or even a few months. But he wrote his own lament about his experience. It is not recorded in Kings, Chronicles, or the Psalms. It is only found here in Isaiah 38:9-20.

So, is Hezekiah's lament presented as a positive example to follow? Or does it show that he was wallowing in his own grief? Isaiah does not declare his reason for including it, but keep these questions in mind as we walk through it. Verses 9-11 introduce the lament by saying,

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.

The Hebrew word Sheol seems to be a generic term for the place of the dead. Old Testament believers did not have explicit teaching about eternity. So, we cannot fault them for clinging to life, but some passages in the Psalms do speak of something more. Hezekiah's concern about not seeing the Lord anymore may contradict Psalm 139:7-8, where David says, "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!"

Hezekiah speaks as if his life is simply over, and he lays the blame upon the Lord in terms that seem to question how much God values his people. Isaiah 38:12-15 tells us that he wrote,

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.

Do these statements reflect a "woe is me" attitude? My life is just a tent to be plucked up, a bunch of fabric cut off a loom. God's breaking all my bones like a lion while I'm just a poor little bird. I can't even look up to God anymore. All my life is drudgery, nothing but bitterness. Was Hezekiah overdoing it?

He transitions to thanksgiving for his recovery in verses 16-20, but he seems to suggest that God is the one who will benefit from it.

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! 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.

So, Hezekiah acknowledges that his suffering was for his own personal welfare. But he does not speak in the broad sweeping terms of someone like Joseph in Genesis 50:20 who said that God used his suffering for the good

of many people. He recognizes God's love and forgiveness. But he says that only the living give thanks, teach their children, and sing songs at the house of the Lord. David expressed some similar thoughts in Psalm 6, but he also spoke of his own unworthiness and of God's grace in hearing his prayer. That humility seems to be lacking here.

Verses 21 and 22 make for an odd conclusion, because they seem to be out of order with what has already been said. They tell us,

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?"

Some liberal theologians who deny that Isaiah wrote the entire book, say that the passage presented as Hezekiah's writing was awkwardly inserted by an editor much later. It should have come after these verses. But it does not make sense that an editor would be so careless. Perhaps Isaiah wanted to reinforce these points. The Lord gave Hezekiah a simple treatment for one of his ailments, but that was not enough. He wanted a sign for extra confirmation. As we saw a moment ago, the Lord was gracious to allow this, but here it seems to highlight the weakness of Hezekiah's faith in this situation.

Perhaps I am being unfair toward Hezekiah. I have never experienced such dire situations, and we as New Testament believers have a much clearer understanding of eternal life. But we find a very different attitude from the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1. He was imprisoned for his ministry, but he rejoiced that the gospel was still being proclaimed. As he considered the possibility of his own death, in verses 21-24, he said,

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Is that your perspective of life and death? Do you look forward to being with Jesus for eternity? Do you live to serve here and now? If that is your outlook, there is no room for the self-pity of a "woe is me" attitude. Live for the Lord and trust him to direct your path even through the valley of the shadow of death.

Temptation 3: Look at Me

People are always chasing the spotlight. Actors do it on a stage, but the rest of us do it in other ways. We want to be recognized and appreciated, and that's not wrong. But some crave that attention so much that they'll do anything for it, even foolish and reckless things. They show off and say, "Look at me."

Of course, this temptation is the most enticing after our greatest victories. King Hezekiah engages in this sort of self-exalting behavior. Isaiah 39:1-2 tells us,

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.

Flaunting your wealth is always risky, particularly before the wrong people. It tempts them to covet it and even steal it, but Hezekiah wanted to impress his guests. So, the prophet Isaiah comes to investigate the situation. Verses 3-4 tell us,

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."

How do you show off? It could be through your house, your car, or your clothes. It could be through talking about your accomplishments, your knowledge, or your kids. It could even be through your spirituality. Matthew 6 tells us that Jesus confronted this behavior in his Sermon on the Mount. He warned his followers about doing righteous deeds, giving, praying, and fasting to be seen by others. He called them to be secretive instead. For example, Matthew 6:3-4 tells us that he said,

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Of course, Hezekiah did not know these verses. But there is clear teaching in the Old Testament about living to please the Lord. He knows all things and looks upon the heart. But when we focus on performing for others, it's as if we are saying that God's approval is not enough. In Galatians 1:10, Paul wrote, "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."

He was talking about how he preached the gospel, but the principle applies to everything we do. Whom are you serving? Live for the Lord!

Temptation 4: Good for Me

In Psalm 127:4, Solomon likens children to arrows in the hand of a warrior. The next generation can go farther than we can reach. They can carry on our values and commitments to accomplish things that we cannot. But parenting requires a lot of effort. In Proverbs 22:6, Solomon also spoke of training up a child in the way he should go.

Yet all sorts of obstacles can interfere with that process. Every child has their own personality, strengths, weaknesses, and temptations. The strong wind of cultural influence can blow them off course. Of course, parents face all sorts of temptations too, and our sins can make a lasting impression on our children.

After his victory over the Assyrians, King Hezekiah was tempted to become self-satisfied and complacent. The end of chapter 39 shows us that as long as things were good for him personally, he was not too worried. After he showed off his treasure to the Babylonians, Isaiah delivers a prophecy of what the consequences will be. Isaiah 39:5-7 tell us,

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."

His kingdom would be decimated by the Babylonians. One day they would return to seize the riches of Jerusalem. God's people would be scattered. The temple that Hezekiah restored would be destroyed. His own descendants would be led away to serve a foreign king, even being castrated to prevent them from bearing any future heirs.

How does the ruler of God's chosen people, the man who led a revival, faced down the Assyrians, and then wept so bitterly over his own sickness respond? Verse 8 tells us,

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."

Some say that Hezekiah is demonstrating a mature acceptance of this revelation from the Lord. But prophecies like this one are not set in stone. He could have wept. He could have pleaded with the Lord to relent. He could have focused on training the next generation. But there is no indication that Hezekiah did any of that. As long as there was peace and security in his lifetime, it was good for him.

In fact, Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, turns out to be Judah's worst king. He brings back all the high places and idols in the land and even sacrifices his own child by fire to a false god. Now Manasseh made his own choices, but I cannot help but wonder if Hezekiah did anything to train up his son in righteousness. It just does not seem to have mattered to him.

How do you think about the future? Are you praying for the next generation and investing in them? The Apostle Paul had no children, but even at the end of his life, he kept the future in mind. He had trained many men to serve the Lord. In 2 Timothy 2:1-2 he wrote to his younger co-worker, saying,

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

We cannot look back to some great victory in the past and coast. We must stay committed to serving the Lord and his mission for the good of generations to come.

Don't misunderstand! Hezekiah was a good king. Second Kings 18:5 says, "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." But powerful temptations come after great victories, and even the strongest believers can sometimes fall prey to attitudes like: Why me? Woe is me! Look at me! Good for me! Our faith is under siege, so we must keep encouraging one another to repent and do what is right, humbly walking by faith.

When some people witness a leader behaving like Hezekiah did, they respond like his son, Manasseh, did. They believe anything but the word of God. But you cannot blame your rejection of the Lord on someone else. There are no perfect parents or church leaders, we are all fallen sinners saved by grace. You are not called to put your faith in them, but in the Lord. If you have never done so, I encourage you to repent and believe in him. If you would like to learn more about humble faith in the Lord, you might want to read the first two chapters of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

If you are walking with the Lord, have you succumbed to one of these temptations? Has some expression of selfishness sprouted up in your heart? It happens to us all. Repent. Confess it to the Lord and ask him to uproot it. If others in your life have been affected by it, ask them to forgive you. If you fall again, repent and confess again. God is gracious! Don't let your struggles hinder you from investing in the lives of others, particularly the next generation. May the Lord help us grow in faith!

Reflect

Which of these temptations have you faced? How did you respond?

What other temptations could we face after times of spiritual victory?

What can we learn about a healthy Christian view of self from Philippians 1:12-2:18?