

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 429

Hezekiah's Deliverance (2)

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 21st February, 2021**

Text: *"O Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me" (Isaiah 38. 14).*

So here we have King Hezekiah once again, and once again he is in deep trouble. But there is a difference. What we were thinking of this morning, with the trouble from Sennacherib, was more state trouble, national trouble, though it was serious trouble. But this evening, this was personal trouble, and it was both bodily and also it was deeply spiritual, and also there was much of providence in it.

"In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death." We are told at the end of that chapter what it was. It is called a boil, but you would suspect it was more on the lines of what we would call a cancer. He was seriously ill and he was deeply concerned about it. But then you see, added sorrow was laid upon his sorrow. Almighty God sent Isaiah the prophet to him, saying, "Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live." It does not seem that poor Hezekiah received that word we were thinking of this morning as comfortably now as he did on the preceding occasion: "What confidence is this wherein thou trustest?"

And yet as a man of God, if poor Hezekiah was not feeling at all confident, and he was not, he knew where his trust was. He knew to whom he was cleaving. He knew where he was looking. He knew whom he was following after. It is a mercy, beloved friends, if you and I do. Sometimes in a concern we have, we feel confident, but there are other times when we do not feel confident, but we know in whom we confide, that we cannot look anywhere else. And what a mercy that when a sinner is confiding in the Lord his God, he is as safe, he is as secure, as when he is blessed with that feeling of confidence. A sinner on the Rock of Ages, though he may shake, as Hezekiah did here, tremble, as Hezekiah did here, yet the Rock does not shake.

"Is He a Rock? how firm He proves!
The Rock of Ages never moves."

And so we do rejoice in that blessed *nevertheless*, despite all these things, and whatever we feel or do not feel. "Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure."

Some people have thought that the language of poor Hezekiah in the latter half of this chapter is really excessive. He uses some very extreme expressions. But if you consider his case, I am sure you will think differently, and if you consider if you and I were in his case, I think we should think differently.

This word I have read this evening does seem suitable for us at this time. I think many people are oppressed. So many things really burden them and get them down, and even in the things of God and the things at chapel. But perhaps the word we use more today is *depressed*. The Scripture does not seem to use that word so much. I am sure many are feeling that there are these things which are resting upon them. I think in these days of the covid, this is a very suitable word, and we do want the Lord to undertake for us, to do everything for us, to be everything to us. I think for you young ones at chapel, or listening in your own homes, your difficulties with your education, your inability to do many things you usually do, you are not able to meet with friends, and these things do oppress you. It seems to me that the British nation at present is a nation that is oppressed. It is a mercy if like Hezekiah we know the answer: “To this dear Refuge will I fly.” It is sad that so many hardly know how to handle their own matters.

So I think it is a word for us each at present – some specially afflicted, some in Bethesda in old age and in weakness – but the many things we have, and the many things we have not that we would like to have, and the things we find difficult to handle, and then right in the depths of this chapter, the deep concerns of our sins and our never-dying souls and eternity. “Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.” I reckon that Hezekiah was thirty-nine years old at this time. Those listening and those here, those who are about thirty-nine or just a year older, or any of us, if tidings came to us, if we were feeling unwell and it was made known that very shortly we were going to die, I wonder how we would stand.

It seems Hezekiah did not really feel ready; he did not feel prepared. He was a godly man – he *was* prepared – but he did not feel it at that time. It would be an exceptionally-solemn thing for any of us if we had these clear tidings: “Thou shalt die, and not live.”

But there is another very close and very deep matter which concerned Hezekiah at this time: that he had not any children; he had not an heir. And if he died without an heir, the royal line, the scarlet line would have died out. What about the promise of the coming of Messiah, the Son of God? It would all have faltered; it would all have failed. It was like that time when Abraham

was told to go up to the top of a mountain and sacrifice his own son. But there would have been no heir to this royal line, and that must have cut very deeply, very closely, with this godly man in his sorrow.

“Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall.” Some of us have done that at times. Some of our trials at Bethel over the years, where I just could not see any way out, any way through, and hardly knew what to pray for, but just to turn my head to the wall, away from everyone, away from everything. As here, he “turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord.” He took the sinner’s sure and safe retreat.

Joseph Hart has a beautiful, long hymn that starts off, “King Hezekiah lay diseased.” He takes up this point. If the Lord has said, You are going to die, then how can you pray that you are not going to die? And if some of you are familiar with that hymn, which has been very well loved in our congregations, he says,

“Can prayer reverse the stern decree?...
It may – at least I’ll try.”

If you read some of those obituaries in the old magazines, how many people in the depths of distress have been helped to lay hold on Joseph Hart’s unusual couplet:

“Can prayer” – can it? – “reverse the stern decree” – God’s decree?

“It may – at least I’ll try.”

“Then came the word of the Lord to Isaiah, saying, Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years.” It was a remarkable answer, and also, within three days he was healed of this terrible disease, and also he was given an amazing sign, a miracle, that the sun dial went back ten degrees, the sun dial of King Ahaz.

I feel I should just pause here a moment, because this must be a point that troubles many tender hearts. God says something is going to happen, and then it does not. How do we explain it? How do we understand it? Perhaps the best-known case in Scripture is Jonah going to preach to Nineveh. “Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” Well, forty days and Nineveh was not overthrown. The simple point is this: that in the threatenings of the Lord against sin, or what He is going to do, it is always conditional, and if the sinner repents, or the nation repents, or if the sinners prays, or the nation turns to the Lord, then the Lord is merciful, the Lord is gracious. Because really we

have it in the gospel. “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” “The wicked shall be turned into hell.” That is, unless they repent, unless they turn to the Lord, unless they believe.

There have been occasions in English history when the Lord has actually lengthened a person’s life for fifteen years. There was a well-known case among those godly, early pastors, really the founders of our denomination, long before the days of Gadsby. They were wonderful men and they suffered so much persecution for the truth’s sake. Hanserd Knollys visited Benjamin Keach when to all intents he was dying, and his prayer was so powerful on that occasion that the Lord spoke this promise that He would add to the afflicted man another fifteen years. So it happened. He died to the year, fifteen years later.

Well, as the old hymn says,

“It is no secret what God can do;
What He’s done for others, He can do for you.”

There are a few miracles in Hezekiah’s life: the deliverance from Sennacherib, the curing of this disease, the shadow on the dial of Ahaz going back for ten degrees. There are some miracles, and we believe that with our God nothing shall be impossible.

Well, this second half of the chapter is “the writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness.” Really, it is *a psalm of thanksgiving*, and there is hardly a chapter in the whole Bible with two such terrible contrasts, because Hezekiah confesses just how he was feeling, the depths to which he was sinking, and then the second half, the wonderful deliverance in providence, his life being spared fifteen years, the disease being recovered, and then in grace that complete deliverance in a way of salvation.

But beloved friends, it seems as if this little clause I have read to you is just the bridge from one to the other, from sinking in despair to rejoicing, because did any godly man speak a stronger word than this: “The living, the living, he shall praise Thee, as I do this day”? You would think that mortal man dare not speak such language as that. I remember when I was a boy, asking Mr. F. L. Rowell if he had ever heard a minister preach from it, and he said, “Yes, my father on one occasion preached from it.” That sermon of dear, godly E. G. Rowell must have been a sermon among sermons! But O the contrast, and what is it? One word: *deliverance*.

“Thy love was great, Thy mercy free,
Which from the pit delivered me.”

“O Lord, I am oppressed.” He was oppressed in body; he was oppressed in his feelings; he was oppressed, thinking what might be; and really he was oppressed concerning his kingdom; and above all, with this solemn sentence of death, he was oppressed concerning the standing of his never-dying soul. It is one thing to sing these blessed truths in chapel, but what if that sentence comes – it will come to us one day, if not in word, in reality: “Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.” What about that verse:

“From the oppressive weight of sin,
Lord Jesus, set me free;
Blood and righteousness divine
Can rescue even me.”

“O Lord, I am oppressed.” And then we are solemnly reminded that on the cross our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was oppressed more than any other man, more even than godly Hezekiah here. “He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth” – the weight of sin, imputed sin, the sins of His people laid upon Him, bearing Him down, oppressing Him. “He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth.” O to go to Calvary and see the dear Saviour of sinners oppressed, willingly, in love to His poor, unworthy, sinful people, that their sins might be atoned for! But O the agonies He endured, till at last He cried, “It is finished,” and bowed His head. This is the ground, this is the answer to that great question: O where is our trust? O where does it lie?

There is another precious promise concerning oppression, and it concerns the putting away of the weight of sin, and it touches the various things which I am sure many of you have before you in your own homes this week, things too heavy for you, too hard, things you cannot manage, things that cast you down. “For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him.” It is a strange expression, “him that puffeth at him” – Satan tempting you, sneering at you, your own unbelief, the carnality of your heart, the devil. “Him that puffeth at him.” And what is the Lord going to do? He is going to set you in safety. And where do you think that is?

“Within the clefts of His dear side,
There all His saints in safety dwell.”

So there is providential oppression; there is spiritual oppression. O but what a word is this! It is one of the best gospel words in the Old Testament. It is Hezekiah's own personal testimony as a sinner after all these fears he had. Listen to it carefully: "Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back." That was almighty God's answer to Hezekiah's prayer here: "Undertake for me." It is a magnificent word. It is almost too great to be commented on. "*Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption.*" We sing,

"When Jesus undertook
To rescue ruined man."

"Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back." In another place, the Lord kindly says, "I will remember their sin no more." And all this in answer to this prayer: "Undertake for me." As we so often say, Do everything for me; be everything to me, Lord Jesus. "Undertake for me." Take me into Thine arms, take all my concerns into Thine arms. Deal with them in mercy for me. I cannot deal with them myself. I have so many things in providence, but more important things in grace.

"O Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me." And then you have all these wonderful things that follow: prayer answered, promises fulfilled. And do not forget the emphasis here: it is in love. "Thou hast *in love* to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption." The divine sentence: "Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom."

"Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back." Now just briefly, before coming to a close – my pulpit Bible does not have a margin, and I know margins are different, but my margin at home gives the rendering, "Be Thou Surety for me," instead of, "Undertake for me." Those who understand say that the prayer of David's in the one hundred and nineteenth Psalm, "Be Surety for Thy servant for good," is the same words – "*be Surety*" there, as we have, "*undertake*," here. Now you know what a surety is. He makes himself completely responsible for the concerns of another. If a person became surety for you, if you got into trouble, he would be responsible; if you had a debt, he would have to pay it.

You have that beautiful representation of it with Judah when he pleaded with old Jacob. Jacob said in no way would Benjamin be allowed to go down to Egypt. He said, "Joseph is not, and Simeon is not" – are you going to take Benjamin from me? In no way can he go. But the brethren

pleaded. They said that the man said unless we brought Benjamin, he would refuse to see our face. Then if you remember, Judah stood forth. He spoke lovingly to his father. “I will be surety for him; of my hand shalt thou require him: if I bring him not unto thee, and set him before thee, then let me bear the blame for ever.” And old Jacob was able to fall before that.

One of the great offices of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is to be His people’s Surety. He undertook from everlasting in the covenant to be a Surety for all His people, knowing that it would cost Him His life. You think of that word in the Proverbs: “He that is surety for a stranger shall smart for it.” O and our dear Lord Jesus did become Surety for strangers, and He did smart for it! He had to pay every debt that they owed, and on the cross at Calvary, in His sin-atonement sufferings as the Surety, He paid to the utmost farthing the debt that of His people owed.

“Payment God cannot twice demand,
First at my bleeding Surety’s hand,
And then again at mine.”

His undertaking as Surety was to do *everything* to bring His unworthy people to heaven at last, and there in the great day, before all worlds, He will say to His Father, “Father, behold Me and the children Thou hast given me; not one is lost.” O that blessed office: the sinner’s Surety! And if you and I in this sense can say, “Undertake for me” –

“To this dear Surety’s hand
Will I commit my cause.”

In my hand it might falter, it might fail; it can never falter, it can never fail there.

So what a subject, and what a prayer, and it is for oppressed sinners. “O Lord, I am oppressed” – be Thou Surety for me – “undertake for me.”

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King Hezekiah lay diseased,
With every dangerous symptom seized,
Beyond the cure of art,
With languid pulse and strength decayed,
With spirits sunk, and soul dismayed,
And ready to depart.

His friends despair, his servants droop;
The learned leech can give no hope;
All signs of life are fled:
When lo! the seer Isaiah came,
With words to damp the expiring flame.
And strike the dying dead.

Entering the royal patient's room,
He thus denounced the dreadful doom:
"Of flattering hopes beware,
God's messenger behold I stand.
Thus saith the Lord, thy death's at hand:
Prepare, O king, prepare."

Methinks I hear the hero say:
"And must my life be snatched away,
Before I'm fit to die?
Can prayer reverse the stern decree,
And save a wretch condemned like me?
It may – at least I'll try."

He said; and weeping poured a prayer,
That conquered pain, removed despair,
With all its heavy load;
Repelled the force of death's attack;
Brought the recanting prophet back,
And turned the mind of God.

J. Hart