



Preaching Through The Bible, Michael Eaton Isaiah

Part 52 Turning From Assyria to Babylon (38:1–39:8)

• Babylon is the new threat

• Judah would not be rescued from Babylon

• God demonstrates His power both by using pagan empires to chastise His people and also delivering them from harm

Hezekiah prays to be rescued from God's judgement

• God had mercy on Hezekiah

• Hezekiah was troubled by the threat of premature death

• He thought he was about to die under the judgement of God

• He promises not to be so unbelieving in the future

We are reaching a turning point in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah chapters 1–37 have been about the threat of Assyria. But the remaining chapters¹ will have little to say about Assyria and much to say about Babylon. Isaiah 36–37 showed us that God kept his promise to keep Judah safe from Assyria. But Isaiah 38–39 tells us how it was that although Judah would be rescued from Assyria, they would **not** be rescued from Babylon. It leads into Isaiah 40–66. The events of Isaiah 38–39 actually took place **before** the events of Isaiah 36–37. They are placed in **logical** sequence. Isaiah 36–37 winds up the story of Judah and Assyria. Isaiah 38–39 opens up the story of Judah and Babylon.

God was doing two things at the same time. He was demonstrating he had power to deliver from mighty pagan empires. He was also insisting he can use mighty, powerful empires to chastise his people and prepare for salvation. He shows his power to rescue by rescuing Judah from Assyria. He shows his power to chastise by using Babylon as the agent of discipline in the story of Judah.

Hezekiah prays to be rescued from God's judgement. The king became ill. He is about to die prematurely as a judgement on his lapse into unbelief¹. His life will be a failure. Hezekiah asks for more time to live and do his work². He points to his good works!³ Perhaps he was being foolishly immature, for our prayers depend more on God's mercy than upon our good works. But perhaps he meant: 'I have done so much. Please let me survive so that I finish what I started.' Either way God had mercy on him and heard his prayer. He was given fifteen more years⁴. Deliverance from the Assyrians will come⁵ (historically it is earlier than Isaiah 36–37). He is given a sign that the promise will be fulfilled⁶.^a

Isaiah 38:9–20 shares with us the psalm that Hezekiah used at this time. He was troubled with the threat of premature death.

*¹⁰I said, 'In the middle of my life must I go through the gates of Sheol and be punished by losing the rest of my years?'
¹¹I said, 'I will not again see Yahweh, Yahweh, in the land of the living; no longer will I look on mankind, or be with those who now dwell in this world.'*

We must not think this is the general Old Testament view of life after death. It is rather the story of a man who thought he was about to die under the judgement of God! He uses various pictures to make vivid his feelings at this time.

*¹²Like a shepherd's tent my place for camping has moved on and is taken from me. Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom; before the day ends in night you will make an end of me.
¹³I calmed myself during the night until dawn, but like a lion he broke all my bones; day and night you are making an end of me.
¹⁴I was crying out like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. How I am troubled! O Sovereign Lord, be my security!*

He promises that he will not be so unbelieving in the future.

1 ch. 40–66

1 38:1
2 38:2
3 38:3

4 38:4-5
5 38:6
6 38:7-8

¹⁵*What can I say and what can anyone say to me?
He himself has done this.
I will walk carefully all my years
because of this anguish of my soul.*

• He has learnt a lesson

He has learned a lesson.

¹⁶*Sovereign Lord, by such things people should live;
and everything contained in these events will guide
my spiritual life.*

• He knows his sin has been forgiven

He reaches an assurance that his prayer has been answered. He knows his sin has been forgiven.

*You restored me to health
and let me live.
¹⁷Surely it was for my benefit
that I suffered such anguish.
You showed your love to me,
taking me from the pit of destruction.
For you have thrown all my sins
behind your back.*

• If he died his life's work would be cut short

Although he would not be lost if he died, yet his work in this life would be cut short. Nothing in this world can be done for God after we have died.

¹⁸*For Sheol offers you no thanksgiving;
death cannot sing your praise;
those who go down to the pit
do not wait in hope for your faithfulness.
¹⁹The living, the living – they give thanks to you,
as I am doing today;
fathers tell their children
about your faithfulness.
²⁰Yahweh was committed to saving me,
and we will sing with stringed instruments
all the days of our lives
in the house of Yahweh.*

• A poultice of figs was made to heal him

• God would rescue Judah from the Assyrians but He would use the Babylonians to chastise them later

Isaiah 38:21–22 tells how provision was made for Hezekiah's healing.

²¹*Isaiah had said,
'Prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover.'
²²Hezekiah had asked,
'What will be the sign that I will go up to the temple of Yahweh?'*

Hezekiah makes the same mistake again

Israel's continued pride still left them open to the judgement of God. God would show his power by rescuing Judah from the Assyrians but in due course the Babylonians would be the chastisers of God's people. Isaiah 39:1–8 tells us of the origin of the Babylonian invasion which would come in later years.

Hezekiah makes the same mistake again. Baladan, king of Babylon, pretended to be congratulating Hezekiah on his recovery¹. It is obvious that he really wants some kind of alliance with Judah that would protect him against Assyria. Once again Hezekiah is being tempted to make a worldly alliance, this time not with Egypt but with Babylon (at this time quite a small nation). Hezekiah makes the mistake for which he is famous – making alliances instead of trusting God. He receives them gladly and gives them a conducted tour of all of his treasures and armaments². Isaiah soon comes and is told what had happened³. The prophet recognizes it as a part of Hezekiah's foolish tendency to unbelief and compromise and announces God's judgement. The Babylonians will be the people who will take Judah off to exile⁴. Hezekiah's answer shows his self-centred weakness.

• Another worldly alliance

• God's judgement

• Hezekiah's response shows his weakness

1 39:1

2 39:2

3 39:3-4

4 38:5-8

⁸*‘The word of Yahweh you have spoken is good’. . . For he thought, ‘There will be peace and security in my lifetime.’*

Assyrians are defeated; Babylonians are coming!

• **Isaiah 40-66 is predictive prophecy**

• **God alone can predict the future**

• **God can rescue, chastise and bring redemption**

Assyrians are defeated; Babylonians are coming! This is a very crucial turning point of the book. God has shown he can rescue (Assyria!). Now he will show he can compel his people to abandon their idolatry and their unbelief. They will be exiled – not to Assyria in Hezekiah’s reign but to Babylon a century later!

Isaiah is a highly unified book. Some have thought that since Isaiah 40–66 deals predictively with events after Isaiah’s life it cannot have been written by him. But there are objections to this. The whole point of the book of Isaiah is that God and God alone can predict the future. What the idols cannot do, God can do. The argument of Isaiah 40–66 is pointless if it is not predictive prophecy. Isaiah 36–39 is the bridge between the past and the future. Isaiah has said Assyria will be defeated, and they were defeated in his own lifetime. He has said that Judah will be taken to exile. Surely he must have asked the question: what will happen in that exile and after it? He was given an answer and he gave the answer to us – in Isaiah 40–66!

Two lessons are outstanding. God can rescue (Assyria!). God can chastise (Babylon) – and then he can rescue us from the chastisement (Cyrus!) and bring us redemption (Jesus!). That is the overall message of the book of Isaiah.

Note

a. See my comments on this incident in Eaton, 2 Kings (Sovereign World, 1998) and see Motyer for the textual difficulties of this verse.

Dr Michael Eaton (1942-2017) was highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. Born in the UK, he lived for many years in Kenya where he became a citizen. He was one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship in Nairobi. His Preaching through the Bible books are highly popular worldwide, written in a clear and down-to-earth style but underpinned by rigorous scholarship. Some of these books have been reformatted as individual sheets for personal and group study and preaching. The New Testament volumes have been re-edited and combined in the Branch Commentary. The Old Testament, including previously unpublished material will follow. More details: www.slices.org.uk.