

Project Runway

Designer Clothes For Disciples

Hezekiah: Part 12

Written By
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Hanging high on the wall directly behind the pulpit of the church I attended during seminary was this saying engraved in wood:

Prayer changes things

Believe me, I had many opportunities during worship services to ponder that pithy little statement. “Does prayer really change things?” I mused during more than one sermon (Yes, my mind did drift occasionally while Pastor Spikes preached. Guess someone should have been praying for me.) This theological query obviously daisy-chained in others:

- “Since God is absolutely perfect in His being in every way, otherwise He wouldn’t be God, then in what way can, or could, my prayer ever change anything?”
- Since God has complete knowledge about the past, present, and future, not to mention all possible outcomes, then why should I pray since it won’t really matter?
- If my prayers somehow caused God to change His mind, or motivated Him to do something He hadn’t intended on doing, then surely He is not God because this means, by definition, He was caught off guard (which is impossible for a perfectly omniscient

being), or that His knowledge is limited because I proposed an idea He hadn't anticipated.

As you can see, that small sign led to some really big questions about God and the utility or futility of prayer.

For the layperson, you've probably never given these types of questions any thought. You know the Scriptures call you to pray, so you pray. You'll leave the thorny, paradoxical theological questions for the highly skilled, seminary trained theologians. For you, prayer is just what you do because it is what God calls you do to.

For the thinker types, you get so caught up with the complexities of the questions and counter-questions, you become almost immobile in your prayer life. I know, I've been there and done that.

After pondering this question for more years than I'd care to recall, I must be honest with you: I firmly believe that prayer does, in fact, change things. How, I don't fully understand with my finite mind. How my prayer is received and acted upon by God, who is infinite and whose ways are past finding out, is beyond my ability to fully comprehend, regardless of how much thought I give to the subject. Prayer's power is, indeed, somewhat of a profound mystery when it comes to the perfection of God Almighty. Furthermore, regardless of what I understand or am unable to understand about prayer, and how it interfaces with God and His foreknowledge, I, as a man of flesh and blood, a man of limitations, am summoned by my Creator to approach Him with my requests. It is up to God, then, to work out the details of my prayers in light of His predestined plans and purposes.

Prayer, therefore, does change things. Scripture says so. That is what I know. That is all I know. Passages like 2 Kings 20 teach us this much.

“In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. 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 and not live.’² Then he turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying, ³ ‘Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart and have done what is good in Your sight.’ And Hezekiah wept bitterly. ⁴ Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁵ ‘Return and say to Hezekiah the leader of My people, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. ⁶ I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.’⁷ Then Isaiah said, ‘Take a cake of figs.’ And they took and laid *it* on the boil, and he recovered. ⁸ Now Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘What will be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD the third day?’⁹ Isaiah said, ‘This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that He has spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten steps or go back ten steps?’¹⁰ So Hezekiah answered, ‘It is easy for the shadow to decline ten steps; no, but let the shadow turn backward ten steps.’”¹¹ Isaiah the prophet cried to the LORD, and He brought the shadow on the stairway back ten steps by which it had gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.”

If you ever doubted prayer is important, then, perhaps this passage has removed that faithless fog from your mind. One cannot read this passage and fail to walk away with that all-too familiar message burned in your brain: Prayer changes things. The question which needs asking is this:

What Does Prayer Change? (2 Kings 20)

From my reading and study of this theological complex passage, I believe it changes two things.

It Can Change One's View Of The Badness (2 Kings 20:1-3)

Consider King Hezekiah's stressful situation. According to verse 6, it is clear he became terminally ill right before Assyria attacked him. Second Kings 18:13 states:

¹³ Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them."

Given the fact God eventually granted Hezekiah a divine healing and added fifteen years to his life, and coupled with the fact he reigned twenty-nine years (2 Kings 18:2), this tells us his illness most likely coincided with his sin of giving the Assyrians tribute, or protection, money. Again, 2 Kings recounts the faithless, prideful (in-so-far as he obviously thought he didn't need God's assistance) mis-step of the king:

⁴ Then Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, 'I have done wrong. Withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear.' So the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. ¹⁵ Hezekiah gave *him* all the silver which was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasuries of the king's house. ¹⁶ At that time Hezekiah cut off *the gold from* the doors of the temple of the LORD, and *from* the doorposts which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria" (2 Kings 18).

As we discovered in our last study, Sennacherib was in the attack, divide and conquer mode anyway. In today's dollars, 300 talents of silver would equal \$10,800,000 and 30 talents of gold would add up to \$80,856,000. Since Hezekiah, therefore, caved so quickly on his "wrong" association with allied nations and paid this exorbitant price, Sennacherib obviously decided, and greedily so, that the best course of action was to attack Jerusalem and seize anything and everything. He made this attempt, but the prayer of Hezekiah to the living God moved God to step in and supernaturally re-route this ruthless, blood-thirsty foe. To get Sennacherib moving, one angel went from God and slew 186,000 Assyrian soldiers in one evening. He, then, went back to Nineveh where he was murdered by his sons (2 Kings 19:35-37).

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. As I said above, Hezekiah appears to have contracted a deadly sickness right before the Assyrian encounter in Jerusalem.

¹ In those days, when Hezekiah was mortally ill, the prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, came and said to him: "Thus says the LORD: 'Put your house in order, for you are about to die; you shall not recover.'" ² He turned his face to the wall

and prayed to the LORD: ³ "O LORD, remember how faithfully and wholeheartedly I conducted myself in your presence, doing what was pleasing to you!" And Hezekiah wept bitterly (2 Kings 20).

His reaction and prayer would be your reaction, most likely, if you found out the same divinely appointed news.

The question is, why was he sick in the first place? He had faithlessly and arrogantly stripped the holy temple of its precious metals to placate a worldly potentate. Had he forgotten the words of God in Isaiah?

Behold, the nations count as a drop in the bucket, as dust on the scales; the coastlands weigh no more than powder ... Before him all the nations are as naught, as nothing and void he accounts them (Isaiah 40:15, 16).

Before you quickly point your boney finger at Hezekiah, ask yourself: When is the last time I forgot the Word of God and stepped out in total carnal, selfish unbelief in order to make a way for myself in a tough, trying situation? When is the last time I relied on myself, my connections, my expertise, my financial standing first and God, well, second, or third, or maybe not even at all?

We should not be surprised that God would judge a sinning saint with sickness, especially since this motif is easily substantiated in the Old Testament (Nadab and Abihu, Leviticus 10; Miriam, Numbers 12:1-15; the infant son of David, 2 Samuel 12:1-23; Gehazi, 2 Kings 5:20-27; Uzziah, 2 Chronicles 26:16-21). And since God killed Uzzah for merely touching the holy Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6:6-8), what *would* happen to a king who dared to give the silver of the holy Temple, along with the gold from the Temple doors to an idolatrous, blood-thirsty king? Giving the king a deadly boil would be expected for such an egregious infringement upon the holiness of God. Giving the king a sickness unto death for such lack of trust in the living God would be in order in Old Testament terms. In New Testament terms we encounter words like this in Hebrews:

⁶ For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives. ⁷ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? ⁸ But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Furthermore, we had ¹earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, that we may share His holiness.

When the Lord see unholiness in our lives it moves Him to take quick, definitive action in order to move us toward holiness. Such may, at time, involve a sickness should it serve His lofty purposes.

Now, if we are correct in placing Hezekiah's illness directly after his irksome actions with the Assyrians, we can posit that God intended to judge, discipline, and educate the errant king. More precisely, God sought to judge him for his flagrant sin, and He sought, from what we

ascertain in the historical account of 2 Kings 20, to teach him a spiritual lesson about humility as he laid on his back, growing weaker every day.

What lesson is there in the badness of a boil? One lesson, in particular, stands out in my mind. *In adversity we are given ample time to evaluate our spiritual performance, or lack thereof. In adversity we are given ample time to reflect on whether we've lived humbly or pridefully.* Ever been in this situation? Do you know what I'm talking about? Lying there on his royal bed, writhing in pain, Hezekiah receives the prophet Isaiah. This is no ordinary visit, and his words are far from comforting: "Put your affairs in order; you're about to die—you haven't long to live" (*The Message* paraphrase). That was some kind of "pastoral" visit, wouldn't you say? But it was the truth in light of what King Hezekiah, a man known for godliness, had willfully done to dishonor God and to diminish his walk with God.

King Hezekiah's response to this bad news is predictable, as well as insightful:

"³ Remember now, O LORD, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart and have done what is good in Your sight.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly."

What just happened? King Hezekiah has been given time to think about his situation, and most likely what caused it. Neither he, nor Isaiah, needed to talk about the cause of the sickness. Both of them would have known its causation. The King knew he had blown it, yet in his pain and suffering he saw clearly that this one departure from God wasn't the total story of his walk of faith. Far from it. He knew he had been a godly man, a man sold out to God for the majority of his life. That is what the adversity caused him to see clearly. This sin represented but one small blemish on an otherwise stellar life of devotion to God. This is what he wrapped his mind and heart around, and this is what He asked God to remember as well.

Adversity and affliction. They are tools God uses to teach Hezekiah types, that's you and me. Moses spent forty years being sand-blasted in the wilderness of Midian after he murdered an Israelite and fled the wrath of Pharaoh (Exodus 2-3). Paul's thorn in the flesh was divinely ordained to keep him, who had been given amazing intellectual and spiritual gifts, humble (2 Corinthians 12). We can expect no less. As Robert Leighton so correctly concludes: "Adversity is the diamond dust heaven polishes its jewels with" (*Encyclopedia Of Christian Quotations*: 19). Another has wisely surmised after studying the life of faith: "It is the crushed grape that yields the wine" (*Ibid.*, 19). Hezekiah was crushed, and his crushing caused him to take stock of who he really was before God. He was a godly man who had sinned and needed to throw himself on the mercy and grace of God by means of prayer.

While he sinned by looting the Temple, he had forgotten who he was and how he was supposed to be living. The divinely ordained boil got his attention and brought him back to spiritual center. The sickness showed him his pride and his utter need for humility (2 Chronicles 32:24-26). His illness also brought him to a place of weeping prayer, and in that prayer he became a changed man, a man who understood who he was, and who he had been, spiritually speaking.

In light of this, I must ask you, has your affliction, your adversity ever brought you to a point of tears and weeping in prayer before God? I've been there many times in my life. Sometimes you sit dumbfounded as to what God is doing, you are stunned by what is going on, and you just don't have any real answers, so you pour your soul out to God. And then something wonderful changes. God gives you a viewpoint you didn't have or see before. You get new wind in your sails. You are reduced to the most important common spiritual denominator in your life.

Again, I've been there, done that. I've experienced adversity, for whatever reason (sometimes it is known, sometimes unknown), and God keeps up the heat up until I let go of what I'm grasping and then a fresh spiritual insight comes during prayer. Who can place a value on such change?

Does prayer change things? You bet. As you work through and wrestle emotionally in prayer, you'll find that sometimes the biggest change concerns the way you view the fire you are currently in and can't seem to get out of. A flash of insight comes. A beam of heavenly light fills your soul. You see a sin you've committed, a prideful way you have embraced, and you desire to come clean and become humble, once again. A tear is dried by the hand of God who is happy you are learning in His school of discipline.

I don't know what your boil is right now, but I know you do. You need to ask God to show you if, in this instance, there is sin which needs confessing. Such is not always the case, as we readily see in the life of Job, a godly man who experienced personal pain unrelated to spiritual mis-steps. In fact, his physical and familial attacks came from the Adversary primarily because of the stellar nature of his faith (Job 1). All of this, however, doesn't free us from positing in prayer if our current condition is directly related to a prideful stripping of the temple, as it were.

In addition to possibly changing your view of your bad situation, be what it may, prayer also has the potential of creating a second change in your life.

It Can Change One's View Of Their Belief (2 Kings 20:5-10)

I'll be the first to admit it. These are heavy, white-capped theological seas. Anyone who says otherwise isn't paying attention to the theological problems this portion of Scripture poses. On the one hand, we have God saying that King Hezekiah is going to die, and on the other hand, it appears that God changes His mind. In light of the fact that God is changeless ("I the Lord do not change," Malachi 3:6), and He appears to change here, we are presented with a tough theological problem, of which all answers I've ever read or studied fall woefully short of bringing resolution, meaning, and comfort.

Without completely sidestepping the issue just mentioned, but with one pastoral eye on the practical message here, I would offer this humble appraisal of what is going on here.

First, King Hezekiah never asked God to heal him. That was God's choice. All the King did was ask for God to remember how spiritually faithful he had been overall. So it's not as if God changed His intention on a man's tearful request. By no means.

Second, since God is omniscient, He knew how Hezekiah would respond to his death sentence, and how He would respond to that tearful prayer which simply recalled his absolute devotion to God. He also would have known beforehand that He'd graciously move to do something He wasn't asked to do specifically, that being direct healing. In light of this, God didn't change a thing. Since all was known, nothing was changed, but went as He sovereignly planned in the King's life.

Now you know why I said these were heavy, white-capped theological seas. Got any water crashing over your deck right now? Don't worry. It won't sink you.

From a pastoral perspective I'd say this. If you get all caught up in the debate of whether prayer actually changes God, you will miss the intended import and message of the rest of the story. Remember. The King had a sin problem of a colossal scale. He pridefully thought he knew best how to keep the Assyrians at bay without consulting God first. God struck him and death knocked on his door. He, then, reappraised of his life, learned a fundamental truth about

himself as he turned to God in prayer. God's next move considered the tears of His servant with a view of bringing about a miraculous healing.

“⁵ Return and say to Hezekiah the leader of My people, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. ⁶ I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.’ ⁷ Then Isaiah said, ‘Take a cake of figs.’ And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.”

Absolutely amazing. God heard King Hezekiah's prayer, as He always does, He saw his tears, and He told Isaiah how to bring healing to him. Do you think the figs really had anything to do with the healing? Not really. The ancients typically used them to soften an ulcerous nature of a boil; however, this isn't what brought the King back to health. That came via faith in the God who could use figs to do the job.

Now please keep your eyes on the closing verses of this story:

“⁸ Now Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘What will be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD the third day?’ ⁹ Isaiah said, ‘This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that He has spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten steps or go back ten steps?’ ¹⁰ So Hezekiah answered, ‘It is easy for the shadow to decline ten steps; no, but let the shadow turn backward ten steps.’ ¹¹ Isaiah the prophet cried to the LORD, and He brought the shadow on the stairway back ten steps by which it had gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.”

All of this transpired *before* King Hezekiah was healed. He, like a good Jew (Gideon, Judges 11:36ff; the Scribes and Pharisees, Matthew 12:38; 16:1), wanted a sign this healing and the additional fifteen years of life was no prophetic joke. Wow! Would you call this faith? I wouldn't. This is a man who needed his faith fine-tuned. His earlier prayer might have been a good reminder he was a man of faith; however, from his statement here, we can safely conclude he was having another one of those carnal moments. What audacity. He asked for a sign this divine deal with for real. I wonder if he heard a rumbling of thunder outside the window of his royal palace. Can you say weak faith? Despite all his great spiritual actions for God, from opening the Temple his father had closed to the priests and people to the reinstatement of Passover (2 Chronicles 29:20-31:21), Hezekiah discovered in his response to the sickness the real depth and breadth of his faith. And it all came to a head with the request for a sign from God.

Isaiah gave the waffling, wavering king a choice. “Do you want the shadow to advance ten degrees on the sundial or go back ten degrees? You choose” (The Message).

Showing a great deal of chutzpah, Hezekiah says, “It would be easy to make the sun's shadow advance ten degrees. Make it go back ten degrees.” Gulp. What? Is he crazy? Doesn't he know he's really challenging God?

God obliged, as only He can do. How did He make the shadow on the Babylonian sundial go backwards?¹ He's God. He can do anything. He could have reversed the earth's

¹ Keil & Delitzsch: *Commentary On The Old Testament*, Vol. 3:464.

rotation ever-so-slightly, He could have just miraculously moved the shadow and nothing else, or some other means we aren't privy to. Point is ... God acted mercifully toward the King. Why? He had seen his heart. The tears showed this King's heart was still supple and teachable before God, and whatever unbelief still clouded his thinking, the man was salvageable.

A short, teary-eyed prayer had set up this train of action. Within that prayer the King had come to terms with who he really was before God, and God went beyond that prayer to show the King through a cosmic miracle that he still had a ways to go. He was a man of faith, true, but unbelief still lurked in his heart.

What had prayed changed? It changed King Hezekiah's understanding of his life of faith. By and large, his prayer was true. He had been a godly man, but how he responded to God and the prophet, Isaiah, revealed he still had the sinful impurity in his life called unbelief, whose root, in turn, is pride. And just in case you doubt my point is valid, don't overlook the priestly/spiritual view of this healing as recorded in 2 Chronicles 32:

“²⁴ In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill; and he prayed to the LORD, and the LORD spoke to him and gave him a sign. ²⁵ But Hezekiah gave no return for the benefit he received, because his heart was proud; therefore wrath came on him and on Judah and Jerusalem.”

Enlightening, wouldn't you say? God healed the King and gave him a jaw-dropping sign; however, neither of these divine acts moved him from pride to humility. Pride was starting to be worked out in his opening prayer, yet the Chronicler is clear that the King did, indeed, still have a long way to go in getting to God's destination for him.

Too often we look at prayer as giving God our petitions and waiting for Him to answer. This is part of prayer, but sometimes, as we see here, the nature of our prayers are designed to change us, to mold us, and to mature us in our walks with Jesus Christ. In light of this, I would be remiss of my pastoral calling if I didn't ask you, “What is your prayer changing in your life?” “What are you learning about yourself?” “Is your time before and with God showing you an area which needs improving you might not have seen before?”

The old sign is so true: Prayer changes things. Yeah, sometimes it changes you. I watched this principle fulfilled one time in the life of an aged woman I'll call Loren.

Even in her late 70s, she was a tall, pencil thin, striking blond. Throughout her life she had used her beauty to strategically move from man to man in order to obtain the finer things of life. When her two children cramped her style, she placed them in boarding schools for their entire upbringing. They grew up not knowing or having a relationship with their mother. They also grew up with a truck load of resentment and anger for being deserted.

At one point she married a politician and enjoyed the money, power, and prestige which came with the job. When that relationship ended, she made sure her financial house was more than secure. With each husband, the same tactic proved quite lucrative for her. Her last husband, a WWII Marine war hero, with a wall full of medals, provided her a beautiful home in the Sierra mountain range, along with other profitable land holdings. When he died, she held tightly onto these materialistic items, going so far as to forbid his children from even entering the home to retrieve the medals the U.S. government had awarded to him.

One day, however, her life changed forever. While traveling down a country road, she saw a strawberry stand just up ahead. With her eyes fixed on the stand, she turned left across any oncoming traffic. She never saw the young man in the car headed in the other direction. He

died instantly, and her injuries caused her to eventually be moved miles from her cozy, comfortable home to a top end retirement facility located in her son's town.

Within time, this worldly woman with a sordid past, came to know Christ as her Savior. She also came to know the value of prayer. I eventually met her through my many contacts with the retirement home in question, and over the years she became a devoted parishioner and follower of Jesus.

I, also, watched her physically deteriorate and I lived to witness the powerful hand of God touch her. One evening I went over to her home with our Elder Chairman to pray for her. A large blood vessel had formed on her brain and her neuro-surgeon told her she had better make her peace with God because she would die instantly any moment. We took communion, anointed her with oil, and we prayed. The next day at her neuro-surgeon's appointment, he couldn't find the aneurism. God had, for whatever reason, answered our prayers and her prayers. She, then, went on to live seven or eight more years. But they weren't easy years, for adversity shaped, honed, and molded her spiritual soul.

Neuropathy negatively impacted her ability to walk securely. The moment an orderly forget to lock her wheelchair wheels as he turned to close the main doors of the facility on a walk, cost her dearly as she rolled downhill and off the curb, landing face first on the asphalt. After that tragic event, her broken ankle was never the same, and all of this took a toll on her spiritual walk.

During one visit, I rolled her out in the sunshine because depression had sunk its tentacles into the soil of her shattered life. We had prayed together for years; however, instead of God sending calm seas her way, massive waves just kept coming. Sitting next a fountain in the California sun, she desperately cried, "Pastor, why did God miraculously spare my life? I'm an old woman. Why did He do that?" That wasn't just a question she had for me. It was a question she had for the Lord in prayer.

Looking in her eyes, I said, "Loren, do you know if your room-mate is a believer in Jesus?"

"No, no she is not," she replied.

"How about the nurses who attend to your needs? Do they know Christ as their Savior?" I probed.

"No, I don't think are believers either," she stated.

I then asked, "Do you think that perhaps the Lord in His infinite wisdom and sovereignty has purposefully placed you here in order to win these particular people to the faith? I mean, think about it, Loren. You have access to people I don't have great access to. You have ample time to show them Christ in your tough situation. You have the responsibility to be a light of Jesus even in this place. Perhaps this is why the Lord spared you, don't you think?"

You could see her countenance change. You could see a smile forming on her formerly sad, expressionless face. You could see the light of purpose return to her eyes. We had all prayed for the waves which came against her little frail vessel, and we had lived to see God move in a miraculous fashion. We also lived to see God use other waves to deepen and broaden her belief in Him and His purposes for her life ... even in a rest home. Imagine that.

She, like Hezekiah, had made her share of sinful mistakes.

She, like Hezekiah, had lived to see the Lord miraculously and mysteriously heal.

She, like Hezekiah, lived to understand the badness in her life from a new, fresh perspective.

She, like Hezekiah, lived to see how sometimes prayer's greatest accomplishment is in the deepening in one's belief in the person and work of God.

She, like Hezekiah, lived out her final days with a deeper devotion to God.

She might just be a picture of you right now. You might be praying for deliverance from a storm to end all storms, and He might grant you this request ... and He may not. It all depends on His grander purposes for your spiritual life and maturation. While you pray, then, you should be looking for the greater answer to your prayer which might just be a change in you. Yes, it's true: Prayer changes things. Maybe we need to rephrase it with Hezekiah's life in mind: Prayer sometimes changes things, and quite often it changes you.