

# "By These Things Men Live"

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"O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit" (Isa 38:16).

"By these things men live." By what things? Was Hezekiah thinking of his royal estate or of the splendor of his reign? Did his mind dwell upon his achievements or his greatness, or upon the fact that in the early days of his career he had been successful in shaking off the yoke of the king of Assyria? Did he refer to all or any of these when he uttered the exclamation, "By these things men live"? No, it was none of these, nor was it to the pleasures and pastimes which are always available to one in his position.

To what, then, did he refer? He actually referred to that which men dread most and avoid, if they possibly can. As we read down from verse 9 to verse 14 of the above chapter, we find a condition described which, above all others, we should think undesirable. His life had been in the balance; in fact, the sentence had gone forth, "Thou shalt die, and not live." And his misery had been great at the thought of being "deprived of the residue of his years." Nor was it merely "pining sickness," that which affected the body; there had been a distress of soul of the most intense description. It was as though God would make an end of him. "Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter," he says. "I did mourn as a dove." Could there be much deeper anguish of spirit than is portrayed in such words? Yet it is to these very things he refers when he says, "By these things men live"; "in all these things is the life of my spirit."

The relation of his experience begins with this pregnant utterance: "The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness." "The writing!" Apart from ordinary correspondence, do we ever write unless we have been deeply moved, or, at least, do we ever write to very much purpose? Perhaps the strongest evidence as to the real nature of the exercise Hezekiah had passed through is the fact that when it was over he takes up his pen to write. It is "the *writing*" we do well to note, not "the *message* of Hezekiah." The king, amid all the affairs of state, turns author and gives to the world for all time this fragment of autobiography. Another thing to be noted is that the writing was after he had recovered. It is only as we look back upon God's discipline and survey it as a whole that we can understand and discern its purpose and the need for it.

All this is convincing proof as to the impression made, but it also reveals the character of the man and establishes the fact that heavy affliction, all this commotion of spirit, had left behind a peculiar and ineffaceable blessing. So definite, so real, so abiding was it, that he could tabulate the results — he could record the gain. Had he been another kind of man, he would have said when the sickness was over and the trouble had passed, "Let me forget it; let me have my fill of pleasure, until these bitter memories are wiped out and the sadness and sickness are scarcely remembered." Instead of that, he realizes that the pain had not been without a purpose. He is assured of the recompense. The bitterness of soul he speaks of has left behind it a sweetness and a psalm — song has replaced sighing — and it is a new song, one which he had never sung in the days of his brightest prosperity. "*By these things men live*" — this is his refrain — "*and in all these things is the life of my spirit.*" For the first time he knew what it meant really to live.

Do you know anything of this experience? Have the clouds been dark with you? Has wasting sickness been yours? Have riches taken to themselves wings? Has anxiety, about one thing

or another, pressed heavily upon you? Have you had to face want or woe? Has it been wave upon wave, tumult upon tumult? Above all, has God been dealing with you, until you have to say, *"Day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me, my moisture is turned into the drought of summer."* Is life a disappointment? Do friends fail? Are you ready to cry out, "O Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me"? These things are not in vain; they are not chance occurrences. They are designed, and they have a purpose. The lesson has to be learned that life is not found in externals, nor in earthly good, nor does it consist in temporal prosperity of any kind. The things by which we live are the very things we are troubled about and anxious to escape. A life of pleasure is not life at all, for "she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth."

There seems to have been a reason for Hezekiah's sickness, in addition to that already suggested. If we turn to the history of his reign, we find that he had grievously failed. His heart had lost its trust in God. In 2. Kings 18:7 we read, "[Hezekiah] rebelled against the king of Assyria, and served him not." Ahaz, his predecessor, we learn from chapter 16:79, had placed himself under tribute to the king of Assyria and confessed, "I am thy servant." Hezekiah rebels and serves him not. But what happens in the fourteenth year? Sennacherib, king of Assyria, comes up against Judah and takes the fenced cities, and Hezekiah, instead of trusting in God, sends the following message:

"I have offended; return from me: that which thou putttest on me will I bear. ... And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king's house."

Did this look like faith? If God had delivered him once from this foreign yoke — a yoke that was dishonoring alike to God and to His people — was He not equal to a second deliverance? Instead of expecting God to manifest His power on behalf of His people, Hezekiah seeks to buy off the king of Assyria and actually robs God of the silver found in His house and cuts off the gold from the doors of the temple in order to do so. Does it not remind us how the energy of faith may wane? and how ready we are, when such is the case, to resort to mere human expedients and to lose sight of those divine resources which are available, if only we put our trust in God?

Now this happened in the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign. What is remarkable is that this is precisely the year in which Hezekiah was sick unto death. A simple calculation makes this perfectly clear. He reigned altogether twenty-nine years. From the time of his sickness until his death, we know, was fifteen years. Deduct fifteen from twenty-nine and it leaves us with fourteen. These two events, then, happened in the same year: the invasion of Sennacherib and the illness of Hezekiah.

It seems evident that Sennacherib made two invasions, and that between the two, the events and experiences of Isaiah 38 occurred, and the deliverance recorded in chapter 37 did not happen until afterward. In any case, there was an interval of some kind, and it is evident that Hezekiah's expedient failed. The silver and the gold taken from the temple of the Lord did not suffice. God allowed Hezekiah to be stricken, and He permitted Sennacherib to press home his attack. Everything must surely have seemed very hopeless at that time. Yet, as always, our extremity is God's opportunity. Hezekiah learns his lesson, though through very bitter experience, and, on the other hand, 185,000 of the enemy are eventually slain by the angel of

the Lord. Thus God's double promise to Hezekiah was fulfilled — the promise that He would add unto his days fifteen years, and also that contained in the words which follow: "I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city." These gracious interventions on God's part, along with the discipline that accompanied them, led Hezekiah to say, "*By these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit.*"

Recently, we received a letter from a bedridden child of God, who for thirty-three years has been a cripple from rheumatism and who for many years has been quite helpless. He writes of his increasing weariness and suffering, and he adds that his mother, who, for years has watched over and tended him, is now dying of cancer in the adjoining room. Such cases under various forms could be multiplied indefinitely. "By these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit."

And why? How can this be? The writing of Hezekiah will explain it, for this writing, though 2,500 years old, might have been penned yesterday, so closely does it touch many of us. Suffering has not ceased with the passing of the years; rather, in some respects, it has increased. Nor, if we are truly to live, has God's discipline become unnecessary.

As Hezekiah concludes the account of his painful experience — an experience so painful that at last he exclaims, just as if he could bear it no longer, "O Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me" — he puts this question to himself: "What shall I say?" Yes, what shall we say in the face of some of God's dealings? Sometimes we are strongly tempted to break out into rebellion and, with an accusing voice, charge God with hardness or indifference. We are ready to argue our case with the Almighty as Job did and prove that the seeming penalty is undeserved or unjustly severe. "What shall I say?" The kind of answer we make to this question is of all importance. There comes an echo of this question in that great outpouring of the Apostle's heart, as recorded in Romans 8, when he exclaims, "*What shall we then say to these things?*" He has been saying, "We know that all things work together for good." And his answer to his question is: God is for us; God loves us. He falls back upon one stupendous fact: "He that spared not His own Son." What do we say? Are we assured that the end of all is love; the aim in all, that we should have a better knowledge of it? Hezekiah reaches this conclusion, for he answers the same question in almost identical language — "*Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption.*" This is what he comes to see.

But before he tells us this, he has another answer to give, one of intense sweetness and reality. "*He hath both spoken unto me, and Himself hath done it.*" We may hear God's voice amid the storm, or we may catch its whispers in the chamber of sickness. Does God in very deed speak to men? He does. Hezekiah knew it. Thousands and tens of thousands, both before and since his day, have had this experience likewise. It is one of the most precious experiences of the soul: awful, yet sweet. It is not only that sorrow, sickness, bereavement, blighted prospects and disappointed hopes are in themselves His voice, but it is also true, "He hath spoken unto me." Nor can it be mistaken for another, when once that voice is recognized. At first, like young Samuel, we may fail to discern it as the Lord's voice, but our hearts soon know it from every other. The form it may take is sometimes the words of Scripture or the lines of some spiritual song, or it may be neither of these. But whatever the form, the effect is the same. And how near it brings God. We realize that He knows our case, that He is dealing with us, and that He is at hand to help and to bless. We learn above all, as Hezekiah expresses it,

that "*Himself hath done it.*"

Yes, it is when God enters the scene — He who has been behind all the scenes and events that, it may be, have so disturbed us — and we discover that what has happened has not been without His knowledge and that He is master of the situation and can make all work together for good — it is then, in that presence which we cannot fail to recognize, we take our shoes from off our feet and bow the head and worship.

*"Midst the worlds that lean on Thee  
Thou hast loving thoughts of me."*

"He hath both spoken unto me, and Himself hath done it." And when He speaks, the heart finds rest. Resistance to the divine will ceases, the conflict is over, the restless passions of the soul subside, the storm becomes a calm and the waves thereof are still. "Himself hath done it," and we wait for Him to explain — which the "afterward" always will explain when it yields "the peaceable fruit of righteousness."

And Hezekiah describes this result in these words: "*I shall go softly all my years in the bitterness of my soul.*" The present effect is that we are humbled. Henceforth we go more softly. What an apt figure of speech this is, and how well we understand it! Does it not indicate a more lowly, dependent, trustful walk with God, with less confidence in the flesh? "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise." Bitterness of soul, produced by the recollection of all that has befallen us, *and the need of it*, alone can produce this.

But Hezekiah can lead us still further and instruct us as to what it means "to live." "O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit: so wilt Thou recover me, and make me to live." He is going to unfold to us what it really means to live. And surely never did we need this lesson more than in this twentieth century, when the one almost universal cry is for material prosperity — less hours of work with higher wages, more pleasure and greater comfort — these are the things men are seeking on every hand today, and seeking them with both hands, as though life began and ended in the things which are tasted, seen and handled. And where all this is leading some, who once professed to know better, is told by one in the following incident:

"The whole story (of materialism) has been set in the melancholy career of Frederick Naumaun. He was once the devoted and impassioned evangelist, the preacher of the gospel of redeeming love, the teacher of the greatness of the consolations of God. His own life, enriched by his noble self-denial, was manifest in its joyous liberties. Thousands found the path by the clear flame of his holiness. But he was caught, as so many of the preachers of today are caught, by the materialism which insists on a secular well-being as the instant purpose of the preacher's message. He slipped back into an almost prayerless worldling's life, and at the end he was found among those who supported, by his advocacy, the most carnal and most pitiless of worldly ambitions. Like Balaam, the light of his seeing was quenched as he turned his back on the spiritual values."

No, it is still true that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he

possesseth." Hezekiah, through sickness and suffering and through bitterness of soul, had found that men live by other things than this world can offer. He learned "that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God." We find that life consists in knowing God and that we only live as we live in the sense of His love. In these things is the "life of my spirit," the only true life, for it is through the spirit we enjoy communion with God.

The writing of Hezekiah leads us to this rich and satisfying portion, for only in the love of God is true life to be found. God had, in love to his soul, delivered him from the pit of corruption. As the beams of that unmerited love — unsought for and unbought, unmeasured and unimagined — begin to enlighten and shed their warmth around us, life for the first time awakes. The heart finds its home, all the hunger of the soul is met, and every desire is satisfied. Only as we know love do we live, and the more we know of it, the more we live. "Love brings the glorious fullness in." It puts us in touch with the very fullness of God. It is remarkable that our being filled with this fullness is linked in Ephesians 3 with the knowledge of the love of Christ.

Just what the sun is to this earth, so is the love of God to the soul. All earth's productiveness, every harvest with its fruitfulness, all the forms and features of life it breeds and feeds are the result of the sun's warmth. Without it this earth of ours would soon be one vast ice field, a scene of desolation and of death. Again we repeat, what the sun is to this earth, the love of God is to the soul. And surely there is no metaphor in the whole of the Scriptures more full of meaning than this: "The Lord God is a *sun*" (Ps 84:11).

## How Does This Love Become Known?

A process is indicated by which this consummation is reached. The secret is revealed in a very few words: "*Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back.*" Hezekiah speaks of this as something which God had done, and he refers to it with the utmost assurance. Here is the first step. We can only be assured of the love as we are assured of the forgiveness. The sense of the need of that forgiveness and of that divine compassion, which, at infinite cost to itself, has met the need, can alone impart to us a sense of the love. Only when God has given us His forgiveness can we be quite sure He has given us His love along with it.

And may I be sure of His forgiveness? Yes, His willingness to forgive is stamped on the very forefront of the gospel of His grace and on page after page of the inspired Word. In Luke 5 we have the account of the palsied man being brought to Jesus, and we read (vs. 20), "When He saw their faith, He said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee." And then Christ, as it were, makes this same message of forgiveness applicable to all, by declaring, "But that ye may *know* that the Son of Man hath power upon earth to forgive sins." "When He saw their faith." "Faith"! This is all that is necessary—a faith which springs from a sense of sin, and true repentance toward God. Christ's sacrifice is the alone reason, not our works or merits. Hear what Peter says: "*To Him [Christ] give all the prophets witness, that through His name, whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins*" (Acts 10:43). Hear what Paul says: "*Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man [Christ Jesus] is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him all that believe are justified from all things [all sins and misdoings and omissions].*" Hear what John says: "*I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake.*"

When such statements are accepted in simple, unquestioning, childlike faith, then we can say with Hezekiah, and with the same confidence and certainty with which he said it, "Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back." God will never look upon them again. "Their sins and iniquities," He says, "will I remember no more." The ground and the reason for this Hezekiah does not tell us. This is the revelation of the New Testament, set forth in such words as these "Who [Christ] was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification." "Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God."

In learning His forgiveness and the way of it, we learn two things: God's righteousness and God's love. The sacrifice of Christ reveals both. Where can I see His hatred of sin more than in the fact that the death of His own Son was necessary to my forgiveness, or where is His love more fully displayed than in such a sacrifice?

But let it never be forgotten that the actual knowledge of this love came to Hezekiah through the things he suffered. His language and his thoughts — his whole estimate of things — are entirely different after his discipline from what they were before. In his misery he became aware that God was dealing with him, and he learned that it was all for his highest good. It is when He has brought us to a knowledge of ourselves that we learn how utterly He loves us — loves us because He is love, and not because of anything in us — loves us because it pleases Him to do so — and loves us enough to smite us and almost make an end of us, that He may rebuild us and fashion us according to His own liking. Ah, that is love which, fathoming all the depths and exploring all the windings of the human heart, takes the sin to itself, and making it its own, bears it and puts it all away, and leaves us convicted both of sin and weakness, yet in possession of a love which becomes the source of a new life, as well as its strength and joy forever. Have you been brought there — alone, perhaps, in your sorrow, just you and God, yet knowing that He loves you? "By these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit."

Someone tells of the factory girl who said, "I think if this should be the end of all — and if all I have been born for is just to work my heart and life away in this dull place, with those millstones grinding in my ears forever, until I could scream out for them to stop and let me have a little quiet, with my mother gone and I never able to tell again how I loved her, and of all my troubles — I think if this life is the end and there is no God to wipe away all tears from all eyes, I could go mad."

Ah, but it is not the end, and it is not all. Hezekiah's experience may be ours. He had known what it was to mourn, for eyes to fail and heart to falter, but he can praise in the end: "*The living, the living, he shall praise Thee, as I do this day.*" "The Lord was ready to save me." He knew God's salvation, and salvation always leads to singing. "Therefore we will sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the Lord." It is on this high note he ends. The climax is reached — from the pit to the house of the Lord, from distress of soul to the assurance that God loved him, and praise instead of pining sickness. Well might he say, "By these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit: so wilt Thou recover me, and *make me to live.*"