

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Is There Ever a Good Time to Die?
2 Kings 20

We are spending the summer talking about hidden gems in the Bible, trying to find places and people in the story of God that you may never have heard about, even at Sunday School if you went. They are tiny, hidden gems that could make a big difference in our lives if we could find them. This one, this particular gem from the Book of the Kings, I found when I was 19 years old, a sophomore in college and, frankly, then I lost it because it didn't seem to make much sense to me back then. I'm older now and can see its value.

I was a transfer student from a state school. I transferred into a small Christian liberal arts college to get an education. I knew that I was in trouble in this new school because there were so few football players and because when I went there, they had said that they had chapel three days a week, and two days a week you were required to go to chapel. In the fall when the president called the first one to order, I am sitting in my right spot but I knew I was in trouble because I could not understand the words coming out of his mouth. He said, "The tintinnabulation of the carillon is to facilitate the perambulation of your colleagues." I was like, "Ohhhh, I wonder if there is a spot back in Western Illinois." A senior next to me looked at me and said, "Dude, he's just saying 'Stand up when the bells ring so the kids who are late can come in.'"

The chapel was called Edman Chapel, named after the president prior to the one who was there when I was in school. He had retired about five years before I came and about four years before I came, he was invited back to speak at the chapel services. His name was V. Raymond Edman. In many ways, he was a behind-the-scenes leader. He was a friend to presidents and kings and leaders around the world in that post-war era, a mentor to Billy Graham. Dr. Edman was nearing the end of a great career and wanted to share with the students at chapel the journey he had just taken to Ethiopia and the privilege he had had to meet Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. He described going in to meet the emperor. He said they were really big on the formalities of the court and would give instructions, "Go here and stand there. Say that, don't do this and you will know that it is over when his majesty raises his scepter."

Then he shifted from that protocol to the idea that coming to chapel was a place where the students could learn lessons, not on how to meet the emperor of Ethiopia, but how to meet the King of Kings. He said, "Let me tell you how to meet the King of Kings" and he paused and then he collapsed. He fell to the ground and people rushed up. Dr. Amerding, who was the provost at the time, came up and asked the students to sit still and pray while they sorted it out. In five minutes, Dr. Amerding came back to the pulpit and said, "Dr. Edman is not here any longer; he has gone to keep his appointment in the court of the King." It just struck me when I heard that

story that there is a little bit more to this life than playing football.

Four years later in 1971, my first semester there, Dr. Amerding asked us to open our Bibles. He said, "Please take your Bibles and open them to 2nd Kings, the 20th chapter and verse the 1st." That's how they talked back then. He set the stage saying, "This is a story of the best king you have never heard of, the good King Hezekiah. It's found beginning in 2nd Kings, chapter 18. This is what it says about Hezekiah.

3 He did what was pleasing in the LORD's sight, just as his ancestor David had done. **4** He removed the pagan shrines, smashed the sacred pillars, and knocked down the Asherah poles. He broke up the bronze serpent that Moses had made, because the people of Israel had begun to worship it by burning incense to it. The bronze serpent was called Nehushtan. **5** Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was never another king like him in the land of Judah, either before or after his time. **6** He remained faithful to the LORD in everything, and he carefully obeyed all the commands the LORD had given Moses. **7** So the LORD was with him, and Hezekiah was successful in everything he did.

Amerding stopped and said, "So you've never heard of him but he was a very good guy. Let me suggest to you that he has the key for your life or an order for your death." He turned to chapter 20.

1 About that time Hezekiah became deathly ill, and the prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, went to visit him.

Isaiah is the prophet from the Book of Isaiah.

He gave the king this message: "This is what the LORD says: Set your affairs in order, for you are going to die.

He said, "This is what God has decreed."

You will not recover from this illness." **2** When Hezekiah heard this, he turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, **3** "Remember, O LORD, how I have always tried to be faithful to you and do what is pleasing in your sight." Then he broke down and wept bitterly. **4** But before Isaiah had left the middle courtyard, this message came to him from the LORD: **5** "Go back to Hezekiah, the leader of my people. Tell him, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your ancestor David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you, and three days from now you will get out of bed and go to the Temple of the LORD. **6** I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will rescue you and this city from the king of Assyria. I will do this to defend my honor and for the sake of my servant David.'" **7** Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah's servants, "Make an ointment from figs and spread it over the boil." They did this, and Hezekiah recovered! **8** Meanwhile, Hezekiah had said to Isaiah, "What sign will the LORD give to prove that he will heal me and that I will go to the Temple of the LORD three days from now?" **9** Isaiah replied, "This is the sign that the LORD will give you to prove he will do as he promised. Would you like the shadow on the sundial to go forward ten steps or backward ten steps?" **10** "The shadow always moves forward," Hezekiah replied. "Make it go backward instead." **11** So

Isaiah asked the LORD to do this, and he caused the shadow to move ten steps backward on the sundial of Ahaz!

Hezekiah recovered!

12 Soon after this, Merodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent Hezekiah his best wishes and a gift, for he had heard that Hezekiah had been very sick. **13** Hezekiah welcomed the Babylonian envoys and showed them everything in his treasure-houses -- the silver, the gold, the spices, and the aromatic oils. He also took them to see his armory and showed them all his other treasures -- everything! There was nothing in his palace or kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them. **14** Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah and asked him, "What did those men want? Where were they from?" Hezekiah replied, "They came from the distant land of Babylon."

Babylon seemed like it was where China is with no transportation.

15 "What did they see in your palace?" Isaiah asked. "They saw everything," Hezekiah replied. "I showed them everything I own -- all my treasures." **16** Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Listen to this message from the LORD: **17** The time is coming when everything you have -- all the treasures stored up by your ancestors -- will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. **18** Some of your own descendants will be taken away into exile. They will become eunuchs who will serve in the palace of Babylon's king." **19** Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "This message you have given me from the LORD is good." But the king was thinking, "At least there will be peace and security during my lifetime."

21 When Hezekiah died, his son Manasseh became the next king.

It's a story you probably never really heard or focused on, but it's sort of a neat story. It's about somebody who has that natural fear of death, but then there is the miracle of his healing, the miracle of the sun, and then the rest of his life. There is power in a story. There are a lot of lessons you learn from a story but they don't say, "So you do this." They just let different people look at the story from different angles and we learn our own lessons. That's why hearing stories is so important.

May I just jump into a rabbit hole for a second? That's why it's so important for you to read the Bible. I'm not saying, don't trust me. I'm saying God will show you what you need to hear. That's why it's so important for you to read for yourself.

As I recall, that morning so long ago, Dr. Amerding took the approach of Debbie Manning. Debbie is preaching tonight at The Table. They have the same theory. What could Hezekiah have done to redeem that extra time given to him by God? Dr. Amerding had a throwaway line that I couldn't get out of my head even at age 19. He said Hezekiah lived a great life but he was not prepared when God said it was time to die, time to set his affairs in order and come home. Are you? I was 19. I had no clue about death. This what Dr. Amerding said, "And nothing good happened after Hezekiah's life is spared." Look that up. In fact, it probably would have been better for the Kingdom of Israel if Hezekiah had died right then because after he recovers, instead of telling the Babylonian envoys about his miraculous healing and the God who saved them and kept Israel safe, Hezekiah says, "Let me show you what I've got." He showed the

Babylonians all of his stuff. It was like the Emir of tiny Kuwait, the ruler of Kuwait, showing all the treasures he has to Sadaam Hussein, and King Hussein just licks his chops and says, "Here I come." And Babylon came. Hezekiah sealed the fate of Israel.

The second reason Hezekiah should have died then is because when Hezekiah hears the prophet Isaiah say that his children will perish and the nation will be destroyed, his reaction is not, "Oh, no, what can we do?" It's, "Oooh, sucks to be them. That's terrible but I'm okay," and then he checked out. A king should throw his body in front of the enemy for his people, but Hezekiah has a life too precious to lose now.

The third reason it would have been better if Hezekiah had died then is that Hezekiah has one more child. In another part of the Bible, in Chronicles, it says one of the reasons Hezekiah was so upset about dying is that he did not have an heir. We know now that after this miraculous cure, Hezekiah had a child named Manasseh. The reason we know that is that it says in the next chapter, chapter 21,

1 Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king

So Manasseh was the product of Hezekiah's cure and that's the worst possible thing that could have happened in Israel. It says

2 He did what was evil in the LORD's sight, imitating the detestable practices of the pagan nations whom the LORD had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites. **3** He rebuilt the pagan shrines his father, Hezekiah, had destroyed. He constructed altars for Baal and set up an Asherah pole, just as King Ahab of Israel had done. He also bowed before all the forces of heaven and worshiped them. **4** He even built pagan altars in the Temple of the LORD, the place where the LORD had said his name should be honored. **5** He built these altars for all the forces of heaven in both courtyards of the LORD's Temple. **6** Manasseh even sacrificed his own son in the fire. He practiced sorcery and divination, and he consulted with mediums and psychics. He did much that was evil in the LORD's sight, arousing his anger.

9 . . . Manasseh led them to do even more evil than the pagan nations whom the LORD had destroyed when the Israelites entered the land.

16 Manasseh also murdered many innocent people until Jerusalem was filled from one end to the other with innocent blood.

Manasseh is the worst king that Israel ever has because his father, one of the best kings, didn't raise his son to fear the Lord. Dr. Amerding said, "Do you think that if Hezekiah knew what would happen because he lived that he'd still pray for more life?" Before I try to apply this to our lives, may I just speak personally for a second? Heather Hood and I did a memorial service last month. I was basically just the host because the family had a relative of theirs come and do the meditation. He was a wonderful, old, retired Scottish pastor. I always think that accent is worth another \$20,000 or \$30,000 a year. It makes you sound so much smarter. He comes up to me right before the service and he says in this wonderful brogue, "I decided to preach on the text,

27 And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment [Hebrews 9:27]."

At the service, he spent time talking about the finality of death, the sureness of judgment, and the need to prepare. Heather and I talked about it later and we agreed it was all true but that was not the right time for those truths. When you are preaching, the time to talk about life and death is not at the graveside; it's beforehand when you can still do something about it. We need to learn to talk about death and about dying now. I realize that's very hard. We up here have the privilege of watching death more than most. I had the privilege of sitting with the family when Bee Scofield, at 96, breathed her last. Yesterday I played golf with a young man whose son had died of leukemia at age five, four years ago, and on every other hole he is still talking about Grant. For many of you, this is not academic. You've lost somebody you love or you are sick yourself or someone near you is on that path. My prayer is that God will bring you comfort and hope and courage today just by learning to talk about faith and life and death. That may be the last thing we ever talk about because when we don't talk about it, we don't learn well.

Barry and Hannah, an old married couple, are sitting on the couch watching TV. On the show, they were speaking about how to prepare in case of death. "Honey," says Barry, turning to his wife with a serious expression, "I want you to promise me that if there ever comes a time that I am dependent on machines and bottled fluid that you will make sure to put an end to it." "No problem, hon," says Hannah and she promptly turned off the TV and got up and poured his beer down the drain. "What's next?"

We are never excited to die, but the reality is, the way we look at death ties into the way we live now, today, and tomorrow. There's a natural fear of death. Hezekiah was naturally afraid and you are, too, because death is a loss of control, isn't it? Would you like to die now or would you like to die in 20 years? Well, let me think about that. There is a loss of control. There is also a sense that death comes with pain and sickness and diminishment. I've got to tell you, this is it; this is the one for me. I like to think that I've been at this long enough. I believe that there is a God. I am not really that afraid of death. I am deathly afraid of dying. Every time I go into the hospital, I am sure I've got whatever they've got.

We are afraid of death in a good part because we are afraid of the loss of love. If we are young, we are afraid of the loss of experiences we will never have. Hezekiah, it is clear, is afraid of death because he is afraid of what comes next. We are afraid of what comes next. Isaiah knew this. Remember Isaiah knew Hezekiah. He tells us in chapter 38 of the Book of Isaiah that after Hezekiah was cured, he wrote,

17 Yes, it was good for me to suffer this anguish, for you have rescued me from death and have forgiven all my sins. **18** For the dead cannot praise you; they cannot raise their voices in praise. Those who go down to destruction can no longer hope in your faithfulness.

The reason that he was so afraid of death was because he thought that was the end of the world. I would like to talk about that, about death, with you. I would like to contrast the fear of death that Hezekiah has with the view of death that somebody else experiences, namely, the apostle Paul. Which would you like? It is an intermittent theme in the Old Testament. Sometimes yes, sometimes no, but many in the Old Testament believed as Hezekiah did. When you are down in the grave, there is no more hope. The early church became convinced that there was life after death because they saw a dead man come back to life, King Jesus. The resurrection changed everything. The apostle Paul is hit over the head, literally, by Jesus and it changes his

view of life and death. He starts to look forward to dying in order that he might be face to face with Jesus. He says in Philippians:

21 For to me, to live is Christ

I like that part.

and to die is gain.

I'm not so sure about that part.

22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me.

This means I have good work to do.

Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! **23** I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; **24** but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body [Philippians 1:21-24].

At the end of his life, Paul writes to his protégé Timothy and says,

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near.

That means "My ticket for the voyage has already been bought."

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. **8** Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness [2nd Timothy 4:6-8].

The crown of righteousness and hope. Given a choice, let's assume just for a second that nobody is getting out of here alive. Who would you like to live like? Who would you like to die like? Hezekiah or Paul? I want to be like Paul. I want to have a rich, full life now and I want to believe that better things are ahead and not be terrified so that they put me on machines to keep my body alive. I don't want that. I want to live until I die and when I die, I want things to get better.

I think there are two ways that this happens. The first is that I think you need to learn to live today. The second is that you need to learn to live so that you are ready to go. How do you learn to live today? Anybody see the movie, it's an old movie by now, *Dead Poets Society*? Robin Williams. Great movie! There's a place in there where he is trying to crack through to these students and he has them go out into the hallway. He has one of the students open his poetry book and he says, "Read what's on page 57." And the guy reads, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." The teacher says, "What does that mean?" He says, "Well, we're going to run out of roses." "No! Wrong again. In Latin it comes out another way. It's *carpe diem*." Anybody know what *carpe diem* means? Seize the day. He says, "Look at all of these dead presidents of this college. They were young boys just like you and in a blink of an eye, it's gone, so seize this day. Squeeze every drop. Make sure your life has lots going for it." I love that.

I have my own bucket list, but I do not think that is how I am supposed to make meaning out of life today. I have a friend who is dying, the president of Columbia Seminary. We were exchanging emails and he said this the other day. He said, "John, I am no longer able to seize the day, but I'm working on learning to greet the day. I can't make life work so now I work on greeting the day and feeling God in glimpses throughout the day. This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Come, Lord Jesus, into my day."

That is what it is like to live today. Not to conquer life, not to squeeze every last drop out but to live life in a way that I see God as I look around. A lot of times Christians get the idea that eternal life is a get-out-of-hell-free card. If we have eternal life, it has already begun because you are learning to live as a citizen in an eternal Kingdom with a new language and new allegiances and new roles. You are supposed to start to live in the way that you see God on the list today. The theologian Dallas Willard was a mentor to my generation. He said, "I think that when I die, it might be some time until I know it." I want to live in such a way that I feel as if I'm living in the presence of God now.

How are you living today? Do you have the sense that God is with you? And then how do you get ready to go? I believe that the difference between Hezekiah and Paul is that one has the reality of eternal life carved into his heart. It is still bitter to lose people. It is still the worst pain on earth to lose children, but for those who believe that we live forever, death is swallowed up in victory and we need to talk about that. We need to be able to say to one another, "Remember!" Dr. F. B. Meyer is an Old Testament scholar and he wrote to a friend of his, "I have just heard, to my great surprise, that I have but a few days to live. It may be that before this reaches you, I shall have entered the palace. Don't trouble to write. We shall meet in the morning." I want that!

Most of us live like Hezekiah. When word comes that it is our time to die, we turn our faces to the wall and we get bitter and we weep. When it's our spouses, we get bitter and we weep. When it's people we love, we get angry and say, "How unfair this is!" I guess that is why I wasn't ready to preach about this when I was 20. Who believes in death when they are 20? I remember that Amerding got up and he said, "Hezekiah was a young man. He was only 39." Thirty-nine felt like, you know, Methuselah to me. It does not anymore, but our ability to discuss eternal life, one with another, is huge. Bee Scofield used to sit there. Another of our dear friends in this church was Joan Cherne. Some of you will remember Joan. One of the first female elders here at the church. Long-time receptionist. Great philanthropist. Joan was a person of deep faith who taught me a lot. When her cancer spread to the brain, one of the things that happened was that in the last two or three weeks of her life, she started to have huge anxiety. Her deterioration led to a great fear of death and so all of us would go and visit her. I would visit her as often as I could. I remember stroking her brow and saying, "It will be okay." That didn't work. I held her hand and said, "We're here." That didn't work. Then I started to sing. We were just alone in the room.

Jesus loves me!
This I know,
For the Bible tells me so.

And she would calm down. Since that seemed to work, I sang to her,

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;

And she started to mouth the words. We need to be reminded, sisters, brothers,

Only one life 'twill soon be past.
Only what's done for Christ will last.

so that we believe it in our guts! I told you about my friend Steve dying. I sent him an email the other day with the words of John Wesley. Near his own death, John Wesley said, "Death is not extinguishing the light of the Christian; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come." Not romanticizing death, but praying that you would believe in the dawn. I want to close this up in a very practical, unemotional way and that is that I feel we need to prepare each other for these discussions. For the last several years, our church staff has used a document that we call *Five Wishes*.

We have put 300 copies out on the round table and we would urge you to take a copy with you because it will inform a discussion that you should have about what happens when it is your time to die. What kind of care would you like? What kind of conversations would you like to make sure that you have with people before it is too late? How would you like to be memorialized? These and other questions are good starter questions for some of the most important discussions in our lives that we so rarely have. The time to do that is now rather than then.

One of my friends said, "You ought to make sure that you tell them not to just talk about it with their spouse if they are married and their parents if they're not, but that they should look out for somebody outside of their family and discuss it with them. It's important to have an accountability partner because when you are talking with your spouse, it's hard. You talk about it differently. Talk about it with somebody who has the ability to hold your hand and give you good counsel. We will be delighted as a church, we will feel it a privilege, if you want to make a copy of the *Five Wishes* and bring it to the church. Our Congregational Care department will arrange it so that all of us know together how to have these conversations. Brothers and sisters, my prayer is that you will walk out of here and not be able to sleep a little bit until you have had the conversations that you need to have with one another and with the King of Heaven and Earth. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we have walked into the deep end of the pool this morning and talked about those things we have too often ignored. I am reminded this morning that there are people here who have lost babies. I ask You to bring them comfort. There are others here who have lost loved ones and I ask You to remind them that Your love and Your mercy extends so that their eyes can see. There are others here who are themselves believing their bodies are going to let them down sooner or later and I ask You to help them live and die like the apostle Paul, running the race, fighting the fight, keeping the faith, looking forward to a life ahead, believing that just as You died for us, King Jesus, You came back to give us life everlasting. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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