

I AM DYING!

Some Reflections on My Own Mortality

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“Set your house in order, for you will die and not live!” (2 Kings 20:1).

One of my regular readers phoned me a few weeks ago. I had never met him face to face, though we had often conversed over the phone or via emails and facebook. Richard was obviously very committed to our Lord Jesus Christ and was a firm believer in the one God of the Bible and His coming Kingdom.

I could tell by Richard's voice that he was struggling to speak. His voice was soft, and he was speaking through pain and debilitation. He informed me that his prostate cancer had spread to his bones. I promised to go and visit him in the next couple of weeks once his schedule could allow for this. I promised to pray for him and his wife in the meantime. I also said, "Just call me if there's anything you need or I can do for you in the meantime."

Only two or three nights later I received a phone call from his wife saying Richard had died. I felt like somebody just punched me in the belly.

MY RECENT MEDICAL HISTORY

I open with this story because I too have had an aggressive prostate tumour (rated as the worst possible grading for how likely the cancer is to spread according to the International Gleason Score). On the 29th August last year (2023) I had a major life-changing prostatectomy. My Urologist was happy with the surgery (margins were clear), but has advised that he needs to keep a regular eye on things for quite some time yet, because the lymphatic system draining the prostate showed inflammation, meaning possible spread.

How did I react? Time for some honest reflections on my own mortality, but first, I won't tell you how I reacted until I share a few general thoughts on my own mortality, and yours too!

THE GOOD KING HEZEKIAH.

Hezekiah was one of the better kings of Israel. He was crowned at the age of 25 and **reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem ... and he did what was right in the sight of Yahweh, according to all that his father David had done (2 Kgs. 18:1-2).**

Hezekiah was king of the southern kingdom of Jerusalem over Judah when the Assyrians **carried Israel (the northern kingdom) away into exile to Assyria (I Kgs. 18: 11).**

Hezekiah began his reign well by smashing all the idols of wood and stone that were offensive to the LORD God, and even **broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it ... (v. 4).**

No wonder it was said of Hezekiah that **he trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any who were before him, for he**

held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses. Yahweh was with him; he prospered wherever he went. (vs. 5-7). Clearly a paragon of godly virtue and a man of outstanding faith in the God of Israel!

TROUBLE ON THE HORIZON ... ASSYRIA.

However, a huge national crisis began to confront the king and his people. The Assyrian empire was on the rampage and Hezekiah and southern Judah were now in their cross-hairs. I remember learning at high school in our Ancient History classes about the cruelty of the Assyrians. They were notorious for impaling their victims and even skinning them alive. So far, nothing had halted their merciless advances. As already noted, the Land of Israel had already been ripped in half by them.

Hezekiah, in spite of his previous faithfulness to Yahweh God, goes to water and begins to compromise. He's like the proverbial deer (or, in Oz, a 'roo) caught in the headlights. He tries to buy time from the King of Assyria by giving him **all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD**, even **stripping the gold from the doors of the temple of Yahweh ...and from the pillars ...** (vs.14-16).

"Turn away from me" he implored, **"and whatever you impose on me I will pay"**. He is prepared to be a vassal king. He sells the furniture to keep the creditor from possessing the lot!

In spite of his attempt to pay tribute to buy extra time and to avoid military defeat, it was not long until the King of Assyria laid siege against Jerusalem. **Sennacherib** sent his ambassador **Rabshshakeh** to warn Hezekiah not to resist but to lay down his arms.

Rabshshakeh crudely and defiantly yelled out to the sentries and people of Jerusalem who were on top of the walls of the city **"... the men who sit on the wall are doomed to eat their own dung and drink their own urine with you ... do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you from my hand ... do not listen to Hezekiah"** (v. 27f)!

Things were indeed most grim and all the peoples' hearts were paralysed with fear. However, Hezekiah seeks the LORD his God and prays a memorable prayer to Yahweh for deliverance. God sends the prophet Isaiah who reassures him that **the king of Assyria shall not come to this city or shoot an arrow there ...** (1 Kgs. 19: 32). God says He will save the city **for My own sake and for My servant David's sake** (v.34).

That very night **it happened that an angel of Yahweh went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when they rose early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead bodies** (v. 35). (¹) Truly a mighty supernatural miracle right before the good King Hezekiah's eyes!

HEZEKIAH RECEIVES STARTLING NEWS!

We are not exactly sure how long after this awe-inspiring miracle of national deliverance it was until Hezekiah became **sick and near death** (2 Kgs. 20:1). My guess is it wasn't too long

¹ Although our English translations say it was **the angel of the LORD**, both the Hebrew and Greek texts are anarthrous, meaning **an** angel of the LORD. This was not Jesus, the Son of God in his alleged pre-incarnate form as is often thought.!

until the prophet Isaiah was sent to his sick bed to announce, **Thus says Yahweh, “Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live” (v. 1).**

Like all of us who are sons and daughters of Adam, the day came when his own mortality smacked him in the face. How will this great man of God react when faced with his own impending death? How will this righteous man — albeit with a few wobbles in compromising his faith as we all have — respond to the word, **“You will die and not live”**?

If you heard the voice of the LORD God speak directly and clearly to you that way, how do you think you might react? The doctor has just looked into your eyes and with a lowered voice announced, **“I am sorry to say, you have terminal cancer. You may have, at best, 6 months to live.”**

Ah yes, until and unless we ourselves hear the word, **“Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live”**, none of us really knows how we will react. At about 44 years of age Hezekiah was still a young man, in the prime of life. How would you, how would I, react in the prime of life?

HEZEKIAH WEEPS BITTERLY ...

Are we disappointed to learn that his immediate reaction was that **he then turned his face towards the wall, and prayed to the LORD, and said, “Remember now, O Yahweh, 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** (Isaiah 38: 3).

Is this how a good man of faith should react? His prayer seems to come from a heart only concerned with self-preservation. We may paraphrase it this way: **“Woe is me. After all I have done for you O God, why is this happening to me? Remember O LORD what a faithful man I have been before You all these years!”** Facing the wall, **Hezekiah wept bitterly.**

No sooner had the king spiralled down into inconsolable grief than the LORD God immediately — within minutes — sent him an answer to his bitter tears and intense prayer;

Then it happened, before Isaiah had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of my people, ‘Thus says Yahweh, the God of David your father: ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you ... ’ ” (2 Kgs. 20: 4-5).

We are all familiar with the rest of the story. God gives Hezekiah a sign that he will live another fifteen years — the shadow of the sun goes **backward by ten degrees (vs. 9-11)**. The LORD God heals Hezekiah and graciously extends his life. The bitterness of his imminent death is lifted. Death is stayed — for now.

ONLY PROBLEM IS ...

After his miraculous healing (presaged with a sign!) the next fifteen years of his miraculously extended life produced pride, compromise, and inevitably, big trouble. The defeat of the Assyrians was barely yesterday when the next national crisis arose in the form of the super power **Babylon**. Relations initially appeared cordial, for the king of Babylon sent a **“Get well” letter** and a **present** because he had heard how sick Hezekiah was.

But like the Assyrians before them, the Babylonians didn't take long to make their intentions clear. Once again Hezekiah and Judah are under the shadow of a foreign power with hostile intent. Sadly, as before, Hezekiah tries to save his skin by showing the Babylonian envoys **all his treasure house — the silver and the gold, the spices and precious ointment, and all his armoury — all that was found among his treasures. There was nothing in his house or in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them (2 Kgs. 20: 13).**

God was not happy with this and sent Isaiah again to rebuke him. Had he again so soon boasted in his gold and not in the God of Israel? Had he not learned that **the rich in this present age are not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the Living God ... (I Tim. 6: 17)?**

Yes, even men and women who have experienced God's grace in their lives may lapse in their faith at critical times. **Abraham** lied to Pharaoh in Egypt about Sarah, his wife, because he feared for his own life. **Peter** denied his Lord with oaths of curses as he warmed himself by the fire the night Jesus was betrayed.

THE WICKED SON FROM HELL!

But worse was to come. During those extra fifteen years of his life, Hezekiah fathered a son who became the most evil of kings to sit on the throne in Jerusalem. **Manasseh** was just 12 years old when he took the throne after Hezekiah's death. We are told that **Manasseh did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel (2 Kgs. 21: 2).**

Manasseh re-introduced the abomination of idolatry. He re-introduced the detestable practice of child sacrifices to false deities. He **shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another (v. 16).** He practised witchcraft and consulted mediums and spiritists. He **did much evil in the sight of Yahweh to provoke Him to anger (v. 6).**

One wonders whether it would have been far better if, on the day of that fateful announcement of his impending death, Hezekiah had bowed his head and like the great man **Job** had humbled himself and **worshipped** saying, **"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed by the Name of Yahweh."** (Job 1: 20-21).

Manasseh undid all the good which his father Hezekiah had done. We ask again, would not Hezekiah have been wiser to have followed Job's spirit? There is absolutely nothing wrong in seeking healing from the LORD, but what is our motive for wanting to get well and live happier and longer? Be careful what you ask for! Be careful why you ask for it.

PSALM 90 ... AND MAX!

Psalm 90 has a lot to teach us about **The Eternity of God, and Man's Frailty** as it is titled, and then sub-titled, **A Prayer of Moses the man of God.** After extolling Yahweh's everlasting power and glory as displayed in His creation, Moses reminds himself that man's brevity upon earth is like the grass which flourishes in the morning, but withers in the afternoon;

We finish our years like a sigh. The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labour and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away ... So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom" (vs. 9-10).

Some years ago now, we were driving with a couple of visitors and showing them the sights of our country when the subject of how quickly we were ageing came up. **Max**, who was well into his seventies, quoted that verse about **the days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years. So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).** Without a moment's thought or any time to calculate, Max rattled off that seventy years have 25,568 days (depending on leap years of course!) and then he added that 80 years have 29,200 days!

As if that wasn't impressive enough he had calculated that at his age, should God be gracious to him to let him see his 80th birthday, he only had 2,638 days remaining! He had it down to 5 years, 2 months, 3 weeks and was even allowing for 2 leap years! Each day that passed, he reminded himself of the revised number downwards! Of course, he was not presuming anything, but it was his way of reminding himself to stay on course and to make the most of each day that God was pleased to give him breath for.

I can reliably say that Max was one of the wisest and noblest of Christian men I have known. **Teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom!** Numbering our days keeps us focused on the brevity of our lives.

MY OWN ENQUIRY

I have always wondered whether I might be one of the saints who is privileged to be alive when Jesus comes back. Or would I be one of those sleeping **in the dust of the earth** whose next waking conscious moment would be to the voice of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ — **"It's time to wake up all you people of God! Come up out of those graves to everlasting glory! Stand up and live forevermore! Reign with me as kings and priests in the Kingdom of God on earth!"**

Well, the other night just before I closed my eyes, I opened my Bible and these words leaped out at me with such inner force and assurance. **Ecclesiastes 9:10 ...**

Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.

I felt the powerfully gentle (!) voice of our God saying that he has still given me work to do, that my time has not yet come to die, and that whatever each day may bring, that I am to give it my best shot for Him. But I also believe my heavenly Father revealed to me that I would not be alive when He sends Jesus back, but that he will awaken me from sleep in the grave — where **there is no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom ... where I am going.**

Ah yes. Today is the oldest you have ever been — yet the youngest you'll ever be, so you have God's permission to enjoy this day as His gift while it lasts.

It's not wealth that matters but health, for your health is your wealth. Life is God's gift to you, but the way you live your life is your gift to God.

WORK SMARTER!

I don't know about you, but I have a big regret now that I have just turned 70. What more could I, should I, have done to prepare for the coming Kingdom of God? How much of my life will go up in smoke as worthless **wood, hay, straw**? Will there be some **gold, silver, precious stones** left once the pure light of God manifests what quality my life's work has been (**1 Cor. 2: 11-15**)? As the old hymn asks,

Will there be any stars in my crown,
When at evening the sun goeth down?

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord ... that they may rest from their labours, and their works follow them (Rev. 14: 13). May we leave an active legacy which works for the glory of God even when we are dead — it may be the investment you put into your children and your grandchildren, it may be the good deeds of charity you have done for the needy and the poor, it may be the encouragement that lives on in somebody by their renewed zeal for God, it may be the letter or email or visit you have done under the prompting of the Spirit of God. **Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might** because **your labour in the Lord is not in vain**.

In the midst of all my meditating on **that Day which will declare what sort of works** my life has bequeathed, a little reassurance came to my mind, for last night whilst I slept, somewhere, someone, may have read something of what I have written or spoken and been encouraged in the Lord. It dawned on me that ***I had been working while I was sleeping!***

I may not have many days left, but I want to live each one of them doing what God places in my hands to do with all my might. Above all, I ask Yahweh God every day to please grant me a heart to, **Love the LORD my God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength and to love my fellows as myself** for, as Jesus himself has said, on these two commandments the whole of God's requirements is fulfilled.

HIS HOUR HAD NOT YET COME

In the Scriptures we read often how the LORD cut short someone's life because of their wickedness and sinful disobedience. A whole generation perished in the wilderness because of their refusal to believe and obey the God Who had redeemed them.

But we also learn how He extended the lives of many folks because their work was not yet done. Think of **Moses** for example. The next huge chapter for him began when he was 80! The task of leading the Children of Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land should have taken Moses no more than, at most, a few months once they had crossed the Red Sea. But the peoples' grumbling, complaining, whining and whinging, meant it took 40 long years.

I wonder, do you think Moses was meant to walk in the Promised Land when he was 80 or thereabouts and that he would have perhaps then died not long after his mission was

accomplished? Is it just possible that Yahweh had to extend Moses' life for another 40 years until the job was done? (²)

Many times during his brief public ministry **Jesus'** life was in peril of being cut short, but we often read the plots of murder were thwarted **because his hour had not yet come**. It was impossible that Jesus should die outside of Jerusalem and in any other way that fell short of God's purpose for his life.

When my hour comes, I do not know. However, lately I have been asking Father God to please give me more work for His people and for His glory. Meantime, rest assured that **whatever my hands find to do**, that by God's grace and enabling, I will do my utmost to do it **with all my might!**

As has been said, **it's better to burn out than rust out**. **Paul the apostle** testified that he was **being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith (Phil. 2: 17)**. That's the spirit! I too want to be useful to my blessed Redeemer and King. The day will come when I must put the sword back into the scabbard, but in the meantime I want to wield it faithfully and strike some blows (metaphorically speaking) for the Kingdom that is surely coming!

Remember **Epaphroditus**? He was Paul's **brother and fellow worker, and fellow soldier** who **because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service towards me (Phil. 2: 25-30)**. I am not suggesting that over-work is a good thing or even right. But many a servant of God out of great compassion for the church of God on their appointed mission field has become ill and sometimes even died prematurely. Just because we are serving the Lord does not mean that we can break God's directions for healthy diet, regular sleep and exercise, harmonious relationships, etc. with impunity. Even Christians are subject to the law of gravity!

Doing whatever your hand finds to do does not necessarily mean running yourself into the ground. As I have just said, try to work smarter! Sometimes we have to say 'no' to the things others might like, if those things do not contribute to the overall goal of your life.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Many days when I look at all the posts on my social media sites I have to consciously make the decision not to engage, not to reply, not to spend endless hours on things which tomorrow nobody will care about — at least until everything else I am called to do is attended to. Initially I felt bad about 'letting people down'. But this decision has freed my life up to attend to those things which I know I have been called to do first. God's call on your life may be different, but as has been wisely said, ***we must not let the tyranny of the urgent rob us of the necessary.***

OH, I FORGOT SOMETHING YOU ASK?

Remember how I told you at the beginning of this little article that I would share with you how I reacted to the news of my aggressive tumour? A short time after the Urologist

² I am thankful to Pastor Rosablanka Suen who ministers with her husband Ray in a church in Hong Kong for this insight.

informed me that I have cancer, a certain person asked me, “How are you doing? The news must have shocked you terribly? You must be very worried.”

My answer was honest. It rose up immediately from deep within my heart. And I now tell you with a heart overjoyed at God’s grace and faithfulness: **“I have the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. And whether I live, or whether I will die, I am my Lord’s, for I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him until that Day (Phil. 4: 7; Rom. 14:8; 2 Tim. 1:12).**

We are often reminded that there are only two certainties in this life — taxes and death. So yes, I am dying. But so are you. But our Lord Jesus has promised, **“Because I live, you will live”**. That which is perishing and mortal dust is now joined to the eternal God in union with His Son! **To die in Christ is great gain! He who has the Son has life!**

What a fellowship, what a joy divine
Leaning on the everlasting arms
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

What have I to dread, what have I to fear
Leaning on the everlasting arms?
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Leaning, leaning
Safe and secure from all alarms
Leaning, leaning
Leaning on the everlasting arms!

Alternatively you can **face the wall and weep bitterly!**