

SCARED TO GO TO HEAVEN?

Today's Text: Isaiah Chaps 38-39

Extracts:

In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.'" Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the Lord, and ... the word of the Lord came to Isaiah, saying, "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will add to your days fifteen years'" [Is. 38: 1-2, 4-5]

*Dr. S.A. Adegoke was a member of the Nigerian delegation to the 33rd [2005] Session of the General Conference of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in Paris, France. He was the Director of the National Agency for Science and Engineering Infrastructure (NASEN). He used the opportunity of his visit to Paris to attend a parish of his church on Sunday, 9 October 2005. There, he gave a testimony to the congregation how God had saved his life five days before he came to France. In his residence at Abuja, Nigeria's capital, he was almost killed by a stray bullet that was so close that he momentarily lost the use of one of his ears. In concluding his testimony, he told his listeners, "I counsel you to move closer to God and serve Him in truth because **the end could come at any time**." Adegoke returned to Lagos, Nigeria, on the morning of Saturday, 22 October 2005. He boarded a local flight in the evening of the same day to return home to Abuja. He never made it. He was one of the 117 passengers and crew of the Bellview airline that crashed near Lagos.¹*

That sad story underlines the uncertainty of death. Yes, we know that we shall surely die one day. But we do not know when, where or how. A stray bullet missed Adegoke but a plane crash took him, both events within a space of one month. His advice is that we should give our lives to God and be prepared to die anytime. In other words, we should not be scared to return home to heaven where Jesus has prepared a mansion for each of us [Jn 14: 2-3]. The truth is that, like king Hezekiah in today's lesson, we are all scared stiff! How come we all want to go to heaven but nobody wants to die? Why are we scared to go back home? How can we overcome our fears? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹"The Bellview Plane Crash," www.thisdayonline.com of 24/10/2005

1. Life on earth is unsafe at any speed!

My maternal grandfather lived up to a ripe old age of 120 years. During my first ten years of life, I had the privilege to be close to him because my mother was his favourite daughter. I remember quite vividly that in the last three years of his life, he seemed to know what the rest of us did not know. He assembled his sons and apportioned land to the first and second born of each of his surviving wives to build their homes. He gave each of them enough money for the purpose and personally supervised the work (he remained strong and sprightly to the very end!). Then, after they had moved into their homes, he scheduled them to take turns to feast him. At the end of each feast day, he would put hands upon their heads and murmur a blessing. The day before his death, he sent for the catechist of the local church and received Christ and water baptism. In the evening of his last day (in June 1955), with his grown-up children surrounding him, he lay on the bed, waved to them, and smiled. He was gone! The elders fired a cannon in celebration to announce his death but I cried because I had lost my mentor.

When I grew up and started to study the Bible, I was pleasantly surprised to read a similar story there. When Jacob had become old, he called his twelve sons and said, “Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days. Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel your father” [Gen. 49: 1-2]. Then, he started with the firstborn, Reuben, and went all the way to the youngest son, Benjamin. So, “when Jacob had finished commanding his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people” [v. 33]. Remarkably, it was Joseph, the firstborn of his favourite wife, Rachel, who wept [Gen. 50: 1] as I did when my grandpa died.

A death such as those reported above is what we would refer to as the ideal type. Most of us can live with it because it is more a celebration of achievement than anything else. It is in line with God’s promise that He will satisfy us with long life [Ps. 91: 16]. Over time, God has shortened human life span from almost one thousand years in the days of Adam [Gen. 5: 1-32], to 120 years when sin spread among men [Gen. 6: 3] to 70- 80 years in modern times [Ps. 90: 10]. According to the World Health Organization’s *1997 World Health Report*, life expectancy averages 64 years in the developing nations and is approaching 80 years in some industrial nations, depending on level of socio-economic development, among other factors.²

In spite of its inevitability, we all fear death somehow, largely because we have no control over when, where or how it will come. The fear is heightened when we hear of a new tragedy, such as an earthquake, a hurricane, a terrorist attack or a plane crash.

² http://death.monstrous.com/causes_of_death.htm

Let us do a quick run down of recent deaths that you may already be familiar with:

- ❑ On Monday, 24 October 2005, a 7-year old German child accidentally shot his 5-year old brother in the head and killed him while he was playing with a small-calibre weapon from their father's gun shop [CNN news report of 25/10/2005].
- ❑ Doreen, a 21-year old student at a Nigerian university got married to Emeka on 15 October 2005 and they both travelled to Accra, Ghana, for their honeymoon. On their way back home to Abuja, Nigeria, on Saturday, 22 October 2005, they both died in a plane crash [www.thisdayonline.com of 26/10/2005]
- ❑ Larry's 32-year old younger brother died on Wednesday, 19/10/2005. in a four-wheeler accident. Larry (44) did not make his brother's funeral because he himself died in a car wreck on Saturday, 22/10/2005) on his way there [CNN news report of 10/25/2005]
- ❑ BBC Newsflash of 27 October 2005 reported 18 miners killed in a gold mine explosion in The Philippines, 19 dead in a gun fight in Baghdad, Iraq, 55,000 in earthquake deaths in India and Pakistan, and 11 detainees dead in a 3-hour blaze in a detention centre for illegal immigrants at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport.
- ❑ Sidney Budri (75) was the Principal of the Chandernagore Presbyterian School in Trinidad. On 28/10/2005, at an event to mark the school's 125th anniversary, he received an award for meritorious service. A minute after receiving the award, he collapsed and died of a massive heart attack [Newsday Section A, Saturday, October 29, 2005; p.3]
- ❑ Rosa Parks, whose act of civil disobedience in 1955 inspired the modern civil rights movement in America, died in her sleep on 24/10/2005, at the age of 92 [CNN news report of 25/10/2005]

Those deaths cover a wide variety of ages, places and causes. Let us even examine more closely the dreaded air crashes. Between January 2004 and October 2005, there have been 24 air crashes [8 in the Americas, 8 in Asia and Australia, 6 in Europe and 2 in Africa]. The total number of deaths from all of them is 1,256. In fact, if you take the top 10 fatal air crashes in history, the total fatalities come to 6,256.³ The total number of deaths is insignificant, compared to the over 40 millions that died during the Second World War, or the 1.5 million deaths during the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-52.⁴

What conclusions can we draw from the forgoing analysis? Firstly, that *death is inevitable*. Secondly, that *death is randomly distributed*- it can be our turn at any time, in any place and in any manner! Thirdly, that *life on earth is unsafe at any speed*. Finally, that the best strategy is to set our houses in order and *prepare to*

³ <http://www.airsafe.com/events>

⁴ "The Global Deathtoll," http://death.monstrous.com/the_global_deathtoll.htm

return home to heaven any day now! Let us study the story of King Hezekiah to drive those points home.

2. The case of Hezekiah

King Hezekiah was the king of Judah when Isaiah's prophetic ministry began. The king was sick and at the point of death. God sent the prophet to tell him, "set your house in order, for you shall die and not live" [Is. 38: 1]. He was distressed to hear such news. He turned on his sick bed and prayed for life. He reminded God of his "righteousness" in the following words: "Remember me, O Lord, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what is good in Your sight" [vv. 2, 3].

In deed, his record of service to the Lord was by today's standards quite commendable. For example, he had reformed temple services. He had repaired the temple and brought in priests and Levites [2 Chron. 29: 3-30]. He had restored pure worship [2 Chron. 30: 3-15]. In summary, "Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and *he did what was good and right and true before the Lord his God. And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law and in the commandment, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart. So he prospered*" [2 Chron. 31: 20-21]. I would have thought that such a record would give him a big apartment in heaven should he die from his present illness. So, why was Hezekiah not ready to die?

From his writing [Is. 38: 9-20], we can infer a number of reasons:

a) *He was in the prime of his life*

Hezekiah wrote, "In the prime of my life, ... I am deprived of the remainder of my years" [v. 10]. Recall that he became king at the age of 25 and reigned for 29 years [2 Chron. 29: 1]. That gives a total of 54 years. If you subtract the extra 15 years that God gave him [Is. 38: 5], it means that he was only 39 years old at the time that he fell ill to the point of death. Secondly, his son, Manasseh, succeeded his father as king at the age of 12 [2 Chron. 33: 1]. That means that he was born *after* Hezekiah's illness. So, at the time that God told Hezekiah to get ready to die, he was only 39 years old and there was as yet no heir to succeed him. God's promise to David was that his throne would last forever [2 Sam. 7: 13]. Would God then allow Hezekiah to die without an heir to the throne of David? He seemed to have reminded God of that promise when he wrote, "As I do this day, the father shall make known Your truth to the children" [Is. 38: 19].

b) *He was desirous to live out his life span*

Hezekiah lamented, “My life span is gone, taken from me like a shepherd’s tent” [Is. 38: 12]. The average life span that God has promised those who worship Him truthfully is 70-80 years [Ps. 90: 10]. Hezekiah claimed this blessing so as to be able to see “the Lord in the land of the living” [Is. 38: 11]. Like the Psalmist, Hezekiah could be saying, “I shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord” [Ps. 118: 17]. He put it in his own words as follows: “The living, the living man, he shall praise You” [Is. 38: 19].

Every death threat that we face may not be in line with God’s plan for us because the enemy, Satan, is always looking for opportunities to truncate our earthly life, especially when we are effective labourers in the Lord’s vineyard. Happily, he cannot succeed unless God allows it!

c) *He had not yet made peace with God*

Hezekiah wrote, “It was for my own peace that I had great bitterness; but You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption; for You have cast all my sins behind Your back” [Is. 38: 17]. In spite of the king’s public record of great service to God, he knew that he could not obtain forgiveness by works but by His mercies. The king needed time to repent and be delivered from hell [“the pit of corruption”]. He had to be alive to enjoy that grace.

This is one dread that plagues every believer. No matter how excellent may be your relationship with God over a long stretch of life, it is your relationship with Him *at the point of death* that matters. God underlined this point when He told Ezekiel [Ezek. 3: 20]:

When a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die... he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered

If the death is sudden and unexpected, there may be no time for him to repent. That is what most of us dread!

God heard Hezekiah’s prayer and granted him a 15-year extension [Is. 38: 5]. We all enjoy that grace every day. When you sleep and wake up the next day, God has granted you an extension. When you are struck down with incurable diseases and you are miraculously healed, you are enjoying God’s extension. When you escape instant death in an accident, God has granted you a rare extension. The question then is what you do with that extension. What did Hezekiah do with his?

Three years after his recovery, the heir to his throne, Manasseh, was born. When he became king at the age of 12, “he 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.” He practised sorcery and witchcraft and consulted mediums and spiritists to provoke God to anger [2 Chron. 33: 2, 6]. Where did the youngster learn all these? Hezekiah’s heart had become lifted up after his recovery. When his staunch enemy, the king of Assyria, sent emissaries to congratulate him on his miraculous recovery, “God withdrew from him in order to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart” [2 Chron. 32: 31]. True to his pride, Hezekiah imprudently revealed all his defences to the enemy, to God’s anger. God sent Isaiah back to him to tell him, “behold the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon, nothing shall be left” [Is. 38: 1-6]. Hezekiah got 15 years’ extension to his life but he used the period to squander his inheritance and to curse his legacy. What a waste!

3. Lessons: Go home!

It is a rare privilege for God to let you know in advance that your death is around the corner. He does not have to do so in loud ways, such as through a prophet. When you are over 50 years of age, what other warning do you need? When you are living a reckless life of drugs, alcohol and promiscuity, you cannot refuse to hear God’s clarion call to “set your house in order!”

Death has nothing to do with sin or the lack of it [Lk 13: 1-5]. It has nothing to do with age or place because it can knock anybody anytime any place anywhere anyhow. You are a citizen of heaven [Phil. 3: 20], and the ambassador of Christ on earth [2 Cor. 5: 20]. In other words, you are either a diplomat from heaven or a resident alien on earth. Even if you trade in your “Green Card” and become a naturalized citizen, you can only lose your passport to heaven when you renounce Christ. In that case, you will certainly be scared to return home because God will not admit you back into His kingdom.

Be home sick, not home-scared!