

Faith and Foolishness

Isaiah 38-39

In his book Reaching for the Invisible God, Philip Yancey tells how moving from inner city Chicago to Colorado was like moving to paradise. Instead of looking out of his basement office at concrete sidewalks and people's knees as they walked by, he was looking at brilliant wildflowers, Ponderosa piles coated with 5 inches of fresh snow with majestic mountains in the background. Instead of pigeons, squirrels, and neighborhood dogs, he would see deer, red fox, exotic birds, and herds of elk. It was like living in paradise. But soon after moving to Colorado, Yancey returned from a trip to Wyoming to find that there were fifteen holes in the side of his house - some big enough to put your fist through. He could stand inside his house, look out through the drywall, insulation, and wood siding and see the sky. It turns out that there were woodpeckers in paradise. The next spring a herd of elk feasted on the small aspen trees they had so carefully planted. Squirrels, raccoons, chipmunks, and moles destroyed vegetation and personal property on a regular basis. Yancey's comment: "Our corner of paradise turned out to be just like the rest of the world" (pp. 249-251). Life in this world is always a mixture of satisfactions and disappointments.

This is not only true of life in general. This is also true of ***our lives***. One way to say it is to say that ***In this world, our lives are a mixture of faith and foolishness***. This principle is illustrated in a very poignant way in the life of Hezekiah in Isaiah 38 and 39. In the book of Isaiah, Hezekiah is the very best of earthly kings. But even though he demonstrated great faith, and even though God answered his prayers in dramatic fashion, Hezekiah was careless (and even foolish) at times. Of course Hezekiah is not the rare exception among the people of God. Hezekiah is a concrete, specific example of the universal reality that *in this world every believer's life is a mixture of faith and foolishness*. Let's first look at Hezekiah's example in chapters 38 and 39; then we'll discuss the implications for our lives.

In this world, our lives are a mixture of faith . . . (38:1-8)

38:1 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.'"

Isaiah's pronouncement of Hezekiah's death is unequivocal. He wasn't giving his own opinion; he spoke a word from the Lord: "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live." Such a pronouncement didn't exactly encourage Hezekiah to seek God's healing. But because he understood the character of God - his mercy and compassion - Hezekiah prayed to God anyway:

2 Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, 3 and said, "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.

Hezekiah pours out his heart to God in prayer. He reminded God of his integrity and his obedience and he "wept bitterly."

4 Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah, saying, 5 "Go and say to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of your father David, "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. 6 "I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city."

Not only does God "add fifteen years" to Hezekiah's life; he also promises deliverance from the Assyrians. Just as God had given Ahaz a "sign" (the child born of the virgin), so too He would give Hezekiah a sign to confirm the prophecy.

7 "This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that He has spoken: 8 "Behold, I will cause the shadow on the stairway, which has gone down with the sun on the stairway of Ahaz, to go back ten steps." So the sun's *shadow* went back ten steps on the stairway on which it had gone down.

We've all observed that the sun moves across the sky, shadows fall a certain way. In this case, as the sun went across the sky, the shadows always proceeded down the stairway of Hezekiah's palace. The shadows never went back up the steps. But that day God wanted to confirm to Hezekiah with a supernatural sign that he would indeed be healed and that Jerusalem would be delivered from the Assyrians, so He caused the shadow to go backwards ten steps. (2 Kings 20 gives a fuller account of this event.) This was a very tangible victory for Hezekiah. Hezekiah was shown once again to be a man of faith.

The rest of chapter 38 records a psalm of lament written by Hezekiah during and after his illness. But when we come to chapter 39 we see that Hezekiah was just as capable of foolishness as he was of faith.

. . . and foolishness. (39:1-8)

39:1 At that time Merodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.

This king of Babylon wasn't merely being polite when he sent "letters" and a present to Hezekiah. There is always a motive on the part of kings who send presents and letters to other kings. We aren't told the contents of the letter that was sent, but apparently it offered or suggested some type of alliance or friendship between Babylon and Judah. At this time in history, the Babylonians and the Medes were the up-and-coming powers on the eastern borders of the Assyrian Empire. Since Judah was resisting Assyria in the west, it was a strategic move for the Babylonians to seek an alliance with Judah.

Whatever the present and whatever the contents of the letter, Hezekiah was obviously flattered by the interest of Babylon. He tried to impress the Babylonians with his wealth and resources.

2 Hezekiah was pleased, and showed them *all* his treasure house, the silver and the gold and the spices and the precious oil and his whole armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them.

Hezekiah was going down the same road with the Babylonians that he had with the Egyptians and the Assyrians earlier: he was beginning to trust in a nation instead of trusting in God.

We see in verses 3 and 4 that Isaiah then comes to Hezekiah and begins interrogating him, exposing the foolishness of what he had done:

3 Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah and said to him, "What did these men say, and from where have they come to you?" And Hezekiah said, "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon." 4 He said, "What have they seen in your house?" So Hezekiah answered, "They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasuries that I have not shown them."

Hezekiah was truthful if nothing else. But beginning in verse 5 we learn just why Hezekiah's actions were so foolish. Just as the Babylonians had *seen* "all that is in [Hezekiah's] house," they would one day *own* "all that is in [Hezekiah's] house."

5 Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD of hosts, 6 'Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the LORD. 7 'And *some* of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.'"

This would not happen until over a century later when King Nebuchadnezzar would besiege and conquer Jerusalem. But Hezekiah was just as foolish to align himself with the Babylonians as he was with the Assyrians. Trusting in anything or anyone but God will eventually be a person's downfall. We see in verse 8 that Hezekiah seems to accept what Isaiah had said, and even to find a ray of hope (for himself at least).

8 Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." For he thought, "For there will be peace and truth in my days."

The deportation to Babylon would take place, but in Hezekiah's days there would be "peace and truth."

When we come to the end of chapter 39, we have to conclude that even though Hezekiah was among the best of Judah's kings, his life was a mixture of faith and foolishness. Hezekiah clearly was not the long-anticipated Messiah, the king who would sit on the throne of David forever (9:7). Even though Assyria would not take Judah into exile, Babylon would. The salvation of Judah would not be found in any human king. No, the solution would involve One who would "bear the iniquity" of God's people. But at the end of chapter 39 we are left with the reality that ***in this world our lives are a mixture of faith and foolishness.***

Let's think for a few minutes about how this truth affects both how we view/treat ourselves and how we view/treat each other.

The implications of this truth for how we view/treat ourselves.

Avoiding pride after our "victories."

What we've seen in the life of Hezekiah is duplicated in the lives of many people in Scripture: spectacular faith followed up by spectacular foolishness. We shouldn't be too impressed with ourselves when we have some great spiritual success because there's a good chance that foolishness is just around the corner. The story is told of the woman who said to the preacher after church on Sunday, "That was a good sermon pastor." He replied, "It was all the Lord," to which she replied, "It wasn't *that* good!" God has a way of humbling us when pride creeps into our lives.

Do you remember a time when God has used you in some significant way or when you've experienced some answer to prayer or when you've had some "mountain top experience" and only a short time later you found yourself discouraged because of your own foolishness/sin? The point is that we shouldn't break our arms patting ourselves on the back. We should remember that our lives are a mixture of faith and foolishness. Instead of becoming prideful about who we are and what we're doing, we should be humbled by God's grace, trusting Him for that same grace in the future. 1 Corinthians 10:12 reads: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall."

Avoiding despair after our failures.

The fact that each of us *will* sin should never be an excuse *to* sin. But I am impressed by Hezekiah's response to Isaiah's prophecy that the Babylonians would one day own everything that he had shown them. His failure didn't mean the end of his walk with God. We have every reason to believe that he repented and continued walking with God. There aren't too many failures more spectacular than King David's. He committed adultery with Bathsheeba and then schemed to have her husband murdered. But even David didn't despair. Psalm 51 records his fervent, intense prayer of repentance. He learned from his sin and continued walking with God.

Bennan Manning asks a series of questions in his book [The Ragamuffin Gospel](#) that drive the point home for us:

Do you live each day in the blessed assurance that you have been saved by the unique grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? After falling flat on your face, are you still firmly

convinced that the fundamental structure of reality is not works but grace? Are you moody and melancholy because you are still striving for the perfection that comes from your own efforts and not from faith in Jesus Christ? Are you shocked and horrified when you fail? Are you really aware that you don't have to change, grow, or be good to be loved? (p. 195)

Sometimes it is our pride that won't let us accept the fact that *our lives* are a mixture of both faith and foolishness. Since sin is a reality in this world, we should respond to our sin, not with despair, but with repentance and renewed zeal to seek God.

The fact that *in this world our lives are a mixture of faith and foolishness* also has significant implications for how we view each other in the body of Christ. This truth gives us a better grid for relating to other believers.

The implications of this truth for how we view/treat each other.

Avoiding the tendency to idolize others.

Think of the Christians that you respect the very most (a teacher, an author, a Bible study leader, an elder, a friend, etc.; I don't want to rule out the possibility that it would be your spouse). The Christians you respect the very most are still flawed human beings. Their lives in this world are a mixture of faith and foolishness. Perhaps all you see is the faith, but rest assured that there is plenty of foolishness mixed in.

There are certain Christian authors and speakers for whom I have incredible respect. It just so happened that a few years ago a friend of mine ended up attending the same church (in another part of the country) with one of these men whom I respect. I was a bit disillusioned to discover that this man comes across as very aloof and even arrogant in that local church. Instead of talking with people and encouraging people (like all of us do), this man was often seen walking around the church with his face buried in a book he was reading. That was disillusioning because my thought is that a guy who can preach and write with such power should be a great asset to the life and fellowship of a local church; but apparently he's not. What should my reaction be? Should I throw away all of his books that sit on my shelves? Say bad things about him every chance I get? Well, obviously a person can cross the line where s/he is no longer a respected spiritual leader. But in this case, I think that the mind of Christ is to simply realize that even this man's life is *a mixture of faith and foolishness*. This realization should make me take him down off of the pedestal I had put him on and make me realize that he needs the prayers of God's people just as much as I do.

I'm not suggesting we quit respecting and looking up to people as examples and mentors; but I am warning us against idolizing such people - they are no substitute for God. By the end of Isaiah 39, it was clear that the people of God living in Jerusalem needed to look past Hezekiah to God. Hezekiah was a great spiritual leader with great faith and a great prayer life. But he was no substitute for God. They still needed a Messiah and a deliverance that only God can bring. And we too have our great spiritual heroes, but they are never a substitute for God.

The fact that *in this world our lives are a mixture of faith and foolishness* should also remind us to avoid the tendency to condemn others (when we see this mixture).

Avoiding the tendency to condemn others.

Even though on one level we understand that "nobody's perfect," it is often difficult to be gracious to people when we see their "foolishness" - especially when it affect us personally. And we can be so very selective in our graciousness. I find that I am able to show one person who sins a tremendous amount of grace and understanding; I instinctively want to help that person come back to a place of obedience and wisdom. But I find that another person's sin only makes me mad; I have very little patience or understanding - only condemnation. Can you relate to that? The fact that *every believer's life* is a mixture of faith and foolishness should make us more consistently gracious because our goal is that *every* person should come to maturity and fullness in Christ.

In Rebuilding Your Broken World, Gordon MacDonald recounts a story that illustrates the power of what he calls "restorative grace." Jane McAdams' mother had lived an extremely frugal lifestyle, having grown during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Her only extravagance was "a frilly nightgown kept in a bottom drawer, 'In case I should ever have to go into the hospital.'" At age sixty-nine McAdams' mother was diagnosed a serious cancer that would require hospitalization. Since her birthday was approaching, McAdams decided to buy her mother a new nightgown to replace the old nightgown in the bottom drawer. When her mother opened the present and studied the new nightgown, she looked at it for a while and then said, "Would you mind returning it to the store? I don't really want it." Then she picked up an advertisement, pointed to a picture of "expensive designer summer purses" and said, "This is what I really want, if you could get that."

My reaction was one of disbelief. Why would my mother, so careful about extravagances, want an expensive summer purse in January, one that she could not possibly use until June? She would not even live until spring, let alone summer. Almost immediately I was ashamed and appalled at my clumsiness, ignorance, insensitively, call it what you will. With a shock, I realized she was finally asking me what I thought about her illness. She was asking me how long she would live. She was, in fact, asking me if I thought she would live even six months. And she was telling me that if I showed I believed she would live until then, then she would do it. She would not let that expensive purse go unused. That day I returned the gown and robe and bought the summer purse.

That was many years ago. The purse is worn out and long gone, as are at least a half dozen others. And next week my mother flies to California to celebrate her 83rd birthday. My gift to her? The most expensive designer purse I could find. She'll use it well. (pp. 192-193)

Restorative grace believes in people, grace that invites people who've sinned to turn back to God and walk with Him again. What do you communicate when you encounter foolishness in the lives of other believers? Do you send a message of condemnation and rejection? Or do you send

a message that says, "God's grace is greater than your sin. Your foolishness is not the last word. Your life can be different because there is forgiveness and restoration in Jesus Christ." As the people of God, we should treat one another the way Jesus Christ treats us.

In this world our lives are a mixture of faith and foolishness. For believers in Jesus Christ, that will not always be the case. One day we will see Jesus Christ face to face. At that time, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, we will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Then there will be no more foolishness and no more sin. Actually, there will be no more faith either; our faith will become sight. Until that day, the only way the only way to negotiate this life is to walk humbly with one another and to walk humbly with our God.