Isaiah – Chapters 38-39

Set Your House in Order

> Isaiah 38:1, 5, 39:6-7 – 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.'" … "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."'" … "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. "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."

Context

With 37:38, the Assyrian question that has run through the Book since Chapter 7 was closed. The promise of 37:7 was kept to the letter, the army that reproached the living God lay dead in its camp, and Sennacherib died by the sword in the house of his own god. Chapters 38 and 39 are the second half of the Hezekiah narrative and the last narrative in the first half of the book. They record two events: the king's mortal illness and recovery, and the embassy from Merodach-baladan, king of Babylon.

These two chapters are not later than Chapters 36-37 in time. They are earlier, and the Book places them last. "In those days" (38:1) ties the illness to the days of the Assyrian crisis, and four details fix it before the army reached Jerusalem. First, the LORD's answer still speaks of the deliverance as future: "I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria" (38:6). Second, Hezekiah reigned twenty-nine years (2 Kings 18:2); fifteen years were added at the illness, so the illness fell in his fourteenth year, the year of the invasion (36:1). Third, Merodach-baladan had twice seized Babylon in defiance of Assyria, the second time briefly about 703 BC, and Sennacherib drove him out; an embassy from him belongs to the years when he was gathering allies against Assyria, not after Assyria had been humbled. Fourth, Hezekiah shows the envoys a full treasury (39:2), the same treasury that was emptied to pay Sennacherib's tribute at Lachish (2 Kings 18:15-16). The illness and the embassy came shortly before the Assyrian arrival at Jerusalem. The order of the book is the order of its subject: chapters 36-37 finish the account of Assyria, and chapters 38-39 open the account of Babylon. The closing section of this lesson takes up why.

The parallel accounts stand in 2 Kings 20 and, in brief, 2 Chronicles 32:24-31. Each record includes something the others leave out.

Set Your House in Order

Event	Isaiah	2 Kings	2 Chronicles
The illness, the prayer, and the fifteen years	38:1-6	20:1-6	32:24
The sign on the stairway of Ahaz	38:7-8	20:8-11	32:24 (“a sign”)
The writing of Hezekiah	38:9-20	not recorded	not recorded
The cake of figs and Hezekiah’s question	38:21-22	20:7-8	not recorded
The envoys from Babylon	39:1-2	20:12-13	32:31
Isaiah’s word about Babylon and Hezekiah’s reply	39:3-8	20:14-19	not recorded
Hezekiah’s pride and humbling	not recorded	not recorded	32:25-26

One word binds the two chapters: “house” (*bayit*). The narrative opens with “Set your house in order” (38:1) and closes with “all that is in your house … will be carried to Babylon” (39:6). Between them Hezekiah asks for a sign that he will “go up to the house of the LORD” (38:22) and shows the envoys “all that is in my house” (39:4). By the end, Hezekiah’s own life has been spared, and the sentence has fallen on his royal house.

Structure of the Chapters

The two chapters move in six steps, and the word “house” marks the turns:

- 38:1-8: The sentence, the prayer, the fifteen years, and the sign. “Set your house in order.”
- 38:9-20: The writing of Hezekiah, in three greater sections: lament (10-14), turn (15-17), and praise (18-20). It ends at “the house of the LORD.”
- 38:21-22: The cake of figs and the question about going up to the house of the LORD.
- 39:1-2: The envoys from Babylon and the open treasure house.
- 39:3-7: Isaiah’s two questions and the sentence on the house.
- 39:8: Hezekiah’s reply.

Exposition

The Sentence and the Prayer (38:1-3)

The illness is "mortal," and the word of the LORD through Isaiah removes any hope from the physicians: "you shall die and not live." "Set your house in order" (*tsav leveitekha*) is the instruction to a man settling his affairs before death, the arranging of his household and the succession. The house in question was also David's house. The LORD's answer comes from "the God of your father David" (38:5), and with no son yet born to Hezekiah (39:7 speaks of sons "whom you will beget"), the succession to the throne of David was in question at this instruction.

Hezekiah turns his face to the wall and prays. His appeal is that he has "walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and [has] done what is good in Your sight" (38:3). This is not self-righteousness, and it is not a plea for right standing before God. It is a covenant appeal, made by a king under the Law, to the conduct the covenant required of him. Scripture gives the same verdict on his reign: "He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done," and "he clung to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments" (2 Kings 18:3, 6). His walk was behavioral righteousness, obedience to the LORD under the Law, and the LORD's answer confirms that the appeal was heard and not rebuked: "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears" (38:5). Hezekiah also weeps. The king who went into the house of the LORD in sackcloth (37:1) brings his own death before the LORD in the same way.

The Fifteen Years (38:4-6)

According to 2 Kings 20:4, the answer comes before Isaiah has left the middle court. The sentence "you shall die and not live" is followed within the hour by "I will add fifteen years to your life." The first word was a conditional announcement. The LORD stated the principle in Jeremiah: "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it" (Jeremiah 18:7-8). Nineveh heard "forty days" with no condition stated, repented, and was spared (Jonah 3:4, 10). The condition in such an announcement may be left unspoken; the sentence states what will happen if nothing changes. Hezekiah's prayer was the change, and the LORD's word did not fail.

Verse 6 joins the king's life to the city's: "I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city." The verb "defend" (*ganan*) is the verb of 31:5 and 37:35. The promise of fifteen years carried within it the promise of the deliverance recorded in chapter 37, given before the Rabshakeh ever stood at the conduit of the upper pool.

The Sign on the Stairway of Ahaz (38:7-8)

The LORD gives a sign that He will do what He has spoken: the shadow cast by the sun on "the stairway of Ahaz" goes back ten steps. The text records a literal miracle and does not state how it was done, and it is left there. The narrative in 2 Kings 20:8-10 adds that Hezekiah asked for the sign and chose the harder of the two offered, the shadow going back rather than forward.

The place matters. Ahaz had been told, "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven," and he answered, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" (7:11-12). The sign that Ahaz refused is given to his son, who asked for it, on the stairway that bore Ahaz's own name. The sign was also known beyond Judah. Chronicles records that the envoys of Babylon came "to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land" (2 Chronicles 32:31). The shadow on the stairway is what brought Babylon to Hezekiah's door.

The Writing of Hezekiah (38:9-20)

Only the book of Isaiah preserves Hezekiah's own account, written "after his illness and recovery" (38:9). It is poetry, and it is best read in its three greater sections.

The lament (10-14). Hezekiah records what he said when the sentence came. He was in the middle of his life and about to enter "the gates of Sheol" (38:10); he would not see the LORD "in the land of the living" (38:11). The images are of a life taken down before its time: a shepherd's tent pulled up and carried off, a weaver's finished cloth cut from the loom (38:12). The LORD Himself is the one doing it, breaking his bones like a lion, making an end of him "from day until night" (38:13). The king can only twitter like a swallow and moan like a dove (38:14). The section closes with a plea: "O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security." The verb is the language of a guarantor who stands pledge for a debtor; Hezekiah asks the LORD to stand surety for him against death.

The turn (15-17). "He has spoken to me, and He Himself has done it" (38:15). The One who pronounced the sentence is the One who lifted it, and Hezekiah has nothing to add but to walk humbly all his years. His bitterness, he says, was for his own welfare (*shalom*), because through it the LORD kept his soul from the pit (38:17). Then the healing is joined to forgiveness: "You have cast all my sins behind Your back," the same mercy praised in Micah: "You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19).

The praise (18-20). "For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness" (38:18). In this book, as in 14:9-11, Sheol is the grave, the realm of the human dead. Hezekiah speaks of it from the earthly side: the man in the grave no longer stands in the congregation to give thanks, and no longer waits on the LORD's faithfulness in this life. The verse does not deny the resurrection; the book has already said, "Your dead will live; their corpses will rise" (26:19). "It is the living who give

thanks to You, as I do today; a father tells his sons about Your faithfulness" (38:19). The writing ends where the king had longed to be: "The LORD will surely save me; so we will play my songs on stringed instruments all the days of our life at the house of the LORD" (38:20).

The Cake of Figs (38:21-22)

The last two verses are an appended note, and the verbs are pluperfect: Isaiah "had said" to apply a cake of figs to the boil, and Hezekiah "had said," "What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the LORD?" Kings places both of these inside the story (2 Kings 20:7-8). The means were used, the healing was the LORD's, and the king's question was about going up to the house of the LORD.

The Envoys and the Open House (39:1-2)

"At that time" Merodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present "for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered" (39:1). The stated reason is courtesy, and Chronicles adds the wonder of the sign (2 Chronicles 32:31). There was probably a political reason as well. Merodach-baladan was Assyria's most persistent enemy in the south, and an embassy to the king of Judah, who had himself rebelled against Assyria (2 Kings 18:7), looks like the courting of an ally. The text does not say so, and the point should be held at that level.

"Hezekiah was pleased" (39:2), and he showed the envoys everything: the treasure house, the silver and gold, the spices and precious oil, his whole armory, and all that was in his treasuries. "There was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them." To show a potential ally the armory and the treasury is to show what one can bring to an alliance. The book of Isaiah records the act and names no fault. Chronicles names it: "But Hezekiah gave no return for the benefit he received, because his heart was proud" (2 Chronicles 32:25). Chronicles also records why the LORD allowed it: "God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart" (2 Chronicles 32:31).

The fault is the one the book has pressed since Isaiah 28. Judah's counselors had gone down to Egypt "without consulting Me" (30:2) and had relied on horses and chariots "but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel" (31:1). The question of 36:4, "What is this confidence that you have?" applies here also. The king who trusted the LORD in the crisis was, before it, to look to Babylon as Judah's friend.

The Sentence on the House (39:3-7)

Isaiah comes uninvited and asks two questions: what the men said, and where they came from (39:3). Hezekiah answers only the second, and he answers it with some pride: "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon." The second question presses further: "What have they seen in your house?" Hezekiah hides nothing: "They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasuries that I have not shown them" (39:4).

The word that follows comes from "the LORD of hosts" (39:5), and it answers the king's words point for point. Everything in his house and everything his fathers had laid up will be carried to Babylon, and "nothing will be left" (39:6). The house he displayed is the house that will be taken. Babylon has been named in the book before, as the object of the LORD's judgment (13-14; 21:1-10). Here, for the first time, Babylon is named as Judah's captor. In Hezekiah's day Babylon was a subject kingdom under Assyrian rule, and the empire at the door was Assyria. The word named an empire that would not rise as a world power for some seventy-five years. The fulfillment came in stages. In 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar carried off some of the vessels of the house of God (Daniel 1:2); in 597 BC he carried out "all the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king's house … just as the LORD had said" (2 Kings 24:13); in 586 BC the bronze of the temple followed (2 Kings 25:13-17).

Verse 7 reaches the king's descendants: "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." Manasseh, who was twelve years old when he became king (2 Kings 21:1), was born within the fifteen added years, and his sins are the ones Kings names as the reason the LORD removed Judah from His sight (2 Kings 21:10-15; 24:3-4). Daniel 1 records the fulfillment directly. Nebuchadnezzar ordered "Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles" to serve in his court (Daniel 1:3), among them Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Daniel 1:6).

Hezekiah's Reply (39:8)

"The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." For he thought, "For there will be peace and truth in my days" (39:8). Both halves of the verse are to be given their weight. The first half is submission to the word. Like Eli, who heard the judgment on his house and said, "It is the LORD; let Him do what seems good to Him" (1 Samuel 3:18), Hezekiah accepts the sentence as right, and Chronicles records that he humbled the pride of his heart, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come "in the days of Hezekiah" (2 Chronicles 32:26). The second half is relief. The thought behind his words is that the blow will fall after his lifetime. The book records the thought without comment, and with it the narrative ends. The next word in the book is "Comfort" (40:1).

Why Is This Here?

Chapters 36-37 were placed in the book to prove that what the LORD said about Assyria came true. Chapters 38-39 do the same on a smaller scale, and every word spoken in them can be checked against what followed. They also do something chapters 36-37 do not. The last word of the narrative is not about Assyria at all. It is about Babylon.

Tying the Narrative to the Prophecy

What Was Said (Chapters 38-39)	What Happened
"I will add fifteen years to your life" (38:5).	Hezekiah reigns twenty-nine years in all (2 Kings 18:2), and Manasseh his son succeeds him (2 Kings 20:21).
"I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city" (38:6).	The Angel of the LORD strikes the Assyrian camp, and Sennacherib returns to Nineveh (37:36-37).
"I will cause the shadow on the stairway … to go back ten steps" (38:8).	"So the sun's shadow went back ten steps on the stairway on which it had gone down" (38:8).
"Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover" (38:21).	"They took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered" (2 Kings 20:7).
All that is in your house will be carried to Babylon; "nothing will be left" (39:6).	The treasures of the house of the LORD and of the king's house are carried off, "just as the LORD had said" (2 Kings 24:13, 25:13-17).
Some of your sons will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon (39:7).	Some of the royal family are brought into Nebuchadnezzar's service under the chief of his officials (Daniel 1:3-7).

The Narrative as a Whole

The four chapters of this narrative answer the question with which they began, why a book of prophecy stops to tell what happened. The first answer is that the prophet's word was proven. What Chapters 1-35 said about Assyria came to pass in the days of those who heard it, and by the test of Deuteronomy 18:22 the prophet whose near word came true is to be believed about the word still waiting. The second answer is a king who trusted. Ahaz stood at the conduit, would not believe, and refused a sign. Hezekiah, confronted at the same place, went to the house of the LORD; he asked for a sign, and was given one. The third answer is that Chapter 39 keeps him from being drawn as faultless: the same king was ready to show his treasury to Babylon. What the narrative records is where he turned when the crisis came. The last answer is the hinge, and it is the reason Chapters 38-39 stand last.

The Two Narratives

Chapters 7-8 and 36-39 are the two prose narratives in the first half of the book, and they stand at either end of its Assyrian section. Each records a son of David facing a threat to Jerusalem. Let's read them side by side at three points.

The first is the house of David. In Chapter 7, the threat was reported "to the house of David" (7:2), and Aram and Ephraim planned to "set up the son of Tabeel as king" in Jerusalem (7:6), ending David's line on the throne. The sign was given to the house of David (7:13), and the sign was a son (7:14). In Chapter 38, the threat to the line came from within: the king

was dying with no son yet born. The answer came from "the God of your father David" (38:5), and chapter 39 closes with the sons Hezekiah would beget (39:7). Both narratives turn on whether the house of David continues.

The second is the sign. Ahaz was told to ask a sign "deep as Sheol or high as heaven" (7:11), and he refused. Hezekiah, at "the gates of Sheol" (38:10), asked for a sign, and it was given in the heavens: the sun's shadow turned back on the stairway that bore Ahaz's name.

The third is the foreign power, and here the two narratives frame the section. Ahaz sent the silver and gold of the house of the LORD and of the king's house to buy Assyria's help (2 Kings 16:7-8), and the word to him was that the LORD would bring on Judah "the king of Assyria" (7:17). Hezekiah opened his treasuries to the envoys of Babylon, and the word to him was that all of it would be carried to Babylon (39:6). The Assyrian section of the book begins with a king of Judah turning to Assyria and ends with a king of Judah welcoming Babylon.

From Assyria to Babylon

The book places these chapters out of their order in time so that its first half closes on Babylon. The Assyrian half ends with the enemy at the door then the Lord intervenes. The Babylonian half begins with the enemy no one feared, welcomed into the treasury and named as the captor of the house of David. The same prophet who saw Assyria broken saw the Babylonian captivity, and the reader goes from Hezekiah's "peace and truth in my days" directly to the LORD's "Comfort, O comfort My people" (40:1). The word that was proven against Assyria in chapters 36-37 is the word that announces the exile in chapter 39, and it is the same word that speaks comfort in chapter 40.

From Prophecy to History: The Hezekiah Narrative (Isaiah 36–39)

The Purpose of Narrative in a Book of Prophecy







Historical Verification of Prophetic Words

A prophet's authority is tested by whether his near-term words come true in history (Deut 18:22, Isa 30:6).



The Structural Hinge from Assyria to Babylon

Isaiah 36–37 closes the Assyrian crisis (701 DC); Isaiah 36–38 turns to the future Babylonian captivity.



Triple Scriptural Witness

The narrative is recorded nearly word-for-word across those three biblical books.

Prophecy Fulfilled: The Assyrian Crisis (Isaiah 36–37)



701 BC: The Invasion and the Rabshakeh's Speech

Sannacharib veized 45 fortified Judann cities; Rabshekeh mocked Jerusalem's defenders in Hebrew.



Hazekiah Spreads the Biasphemous Letter

Hazekiah appealed for deliverence to God for His name's sake.



165,000 Assyrians Struck in a Single Night

The Angel of the LGRD executed judgment without Judah drawing a how (Isa 31:9).



681 BC: Sennacherib's Fate in Ninevah

Sannacharib assassinated by his own sens in the temple of Nisroch (Isa 37.7).

Prophetic Fulfillment in the Assyrian Campaign

What Was Prophesied	What Happened in History
Assyria will overflow Judeh... (8:7–8)	All furtified cities fell; only Jerusalem remained (38:1).
Shebna deposed, Ellakim promoted... (22:15–21)	Ellakim is over the household; Shebna is scribe (36:5).
Egypt's help is "vain and empty"... (30:1–7; 31:1–3)	Rabshakah mocks Egypt; Tirhakah accomplishes nothing (36:8; 37:9).
"Do not fear the Assyrian"... (10:24; 37:7)	God says "Do not be afraid"; Sonnecherib retreets after rumor (37:6; 37:8, 37).
Assyrian army falls by "a sword not of man"... (17:14; 31:8)	Angel of the LOBD strikes 185,000 troops (37:36).
King of Assyria will fall by the sword in his own lend" (37.7)	Sonnacherih killed by sons in Nisroch's house (37:38).

Tale of Two Kings: Ahaz vs. Hezekiah

Ahaz: Unbelief at the Same Conduit



Refused a divine sign, trusted silver paid to Assyria, brought judgment

Hezekiah: Faith Under Threat



Asked for a sign, humbled himself, and prayed for God's glory.

The Miracles on the Stairway



Ahas rejected God's sign "ovep as Shool"



Hezekiah received a sign where the sun's shadow moved back ten steps

The King's Illness and the Hinge to Babylon (Isaiah 38–39)



15 Years Added

Following prayer. God reversed mertal illness and added 13 years.



Pride Before the Babylonian Envoys

Hazekiah proudly displayed his treasury instead of giving glory to God.

100% Loss Prophesied to Babylon

Isalah declared every object and rovel descendants would be carried to Babylon.



Prophetic Fulfillment of Hezekiah's Illness & Babylonian Embassy

Prophetic Declaration / Event	Historical Dutcome & Fulfillment
"I will add fifteen years to your life" (38:5)	Hezeklah completes 28 years; son Manasseh bern (3 Kings 18:3; 20:31).
Sun's shadow moves back 10 steps on Anas's stairway (36:6)	Literal astronomical sign observed by Babylonian enveys (2 Chron 32:31).
"All that is in your house... shall be cerried to Babylon" (39:6)	Nobuchadnezzor strips temple and palace clean (2 hiugs 24:13; 25:13–17).
"Some of your sons... will become officials in the palace of Babylon" (39:7)	Daniel, Hananiah, Michael, and Aszelah brought inte royal Babylonian service (Daniel 1:3–7).