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Sermon preached at Ebenezer, Clapham, by Mr. J. Delves
on Wednesday evening September 5th, 1951

Text: Isaiah 38, 16.

"O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit."

This remarkable chapter records an extraordinary and unique experience; such an experience as is not, probably, in the case of another, in exactly the same circumstances that prevailed in this one. It was real trouble, real affliction, real need, real prayer, real distress and a real deliverance that Hezekiah was, eventually, favoured to witness. All the Lord's people have trouble; trouble is common to all men; resulting from the fall of man; but it is only the Lord's people who know what spiritually sanctified trouble is. This is the great difference and is an evidence of being graciously exercised in our afflictions and distresses. "By these things men live." That is so when sorrows, afflictions and trials are graciously sanctified to the people of God and made eventually to work for their good. This gives rise to spiritual exercise, earnest prayer, waiting upon God, and His hand is seen in His good providence, working effective deliverances. Only grace it is, grace alone, that will wait upon God in trouble. It is true that natural unregenerate people may call upon God when they are in some heavy trouble or affliction, but it is grace alone that will, in a spiritual way, wait in faith at the Throne of Grace for God to deal with their matters and bring them to a comfortable issue, so that by these things they may live. It is grace alone that will seek spiritual profit in affliction and trouble. Has there ever been an occasion when we have been really more concerned to receive gracious teaching and soul profit by some trouble, than to be speedily brought out of it? Have you ever felt you could really say before the Lord, Lord I would be willing to remain in this furnace until it is Thy will to fulfil Thy purpose in it, to bless my soul in it, and then to bring me forth out of it? Job had something of this when he said "He knoweth the way that I take; when He hath tried me I shall come forth as gold." We are seldom nearer to heaven in our soul's exercise than when we can be truly passive in the furnace of affliction.

The victory of grace very principally consists in being able unreservedly to say, "Thy will be done;" because when, without reserve, we can say that, we have no quarrel with God in His dealings but a single eye to His glory and that alone. This is how it is - "By these things

men live"! So it is by the Lord's merciful appointment, that the soul is often more lively in the furnace of affliction because it is there the dross is purged and the gold is refined. I admit that my personal experience of these things is very, very slight, but I believe I have had times, and I believe some of you have had moments when you could say, "In all these things is the life of my spirit." It is rather noticeable that it is twice repeated here. "O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit." O who can tell what is involved in that, in your life, or my life, or the life of any child of God? "These things." "In all these things." These depths, these troubles these griefs, these sorrows, these afflictions, these hard things, these dark things, these bitter things, these bewildering things. But how far can we really affirm that we live by "these things"? In the case of the Lord's servant Hezekiah it was most blessedly true; he lived by these things and in all these things was the life of his spirit. The reading of the chapter before and this chapter will abundantly confirm the point. Moreover the reading of the following chapter will show which was the safer place, though not the pleasanter one for Hezekiah. He had need to be kept every moment, as every child of God has; every moment - for it appears immediately after this, after his recovery, the congratulations of the Babylonians were too much for him. In the pride of his heart he showed them all the treasures in his house, of the temple, and "there was nothing..... that he showed them not." O look at Hezekiah in chapter 38, and look at Hezekiah in chapter 39. What then? "Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not." "O Lord, by these things men live".

Let us take a review of the case of Hezekiah, in the trouble that came upon him, and its effect; how he walked in it, because this is where the 'living' comes in. "By these things men live." The trouble that came upon him was not a slight superficial trouble; it was an overwhelming affliction that came upon the Lord's servant. Truly, 'deep called unto deep at the noise of the Lord's waterspouts' here in the experience of Hezekiah, as in very different circumstances in the case of Job. The trouble and affliction that came upon Hezekiah was three-fold. There was first a threat to the city; a vast Assyrian army, the army of Sennacherib, had besieged the city, but there were other painful things attending that. Rabshakeh incited the Jews to revolt against Hezekiah, and though good men appealed to Rabshakeh "not to speak in the Jews' language, but in the Syrian language for we understand it" yet he blasphemed the Lord God of Israel saying, "Who is that God that can deliver you out of my hand?"

We have taken this city and that city; their gods could not deliver them. Who is your God that He can deliver you? What do you think He can do for you? You are in my hand. Now come over to us and we will do well with you. That was one thing which came upon Hezekiah, distressing enough in the nature of it, but that was not all; a painful affliction came upon him at the same time as it would appear. "In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death." The reading would indicate that the sickness came upon him when he was involved in this great national danger and the sickness was likely to be fatal. "In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death". He evidently got a dreadful boil, as it is said in the 21st verse of this chapter; a dreadful boil, blood poisoning or something of that kind, and was evidently in an exceedingly critical state.

But that was not all; there was a divine message. Isaiah came to him with a message from God, not 'Don't you be over anxious about this, you will get better'. No, "Thus saith the Lord" - mark the preface of it - "Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die and not live." Was not that enough to crush a poor man to pieces? It certainly was! But here, as in the case of other extreme conditions, there was one avenue of relief which grace only knows. As in the case of David when he looked upon burning Ziklag and all carried away captive and his company threatening to stone him - "David encouraged himself in the Lord his God." What about Hezekiah? This is my point, beloved hearers, "By these things men live." What about Hezekiah? Why, he "turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord." This is the secret! This is the secret! "By these things." Look at this series of troubles and heavy afflictions that came upon him, but what was the result? "He turned his face toward the wall and prayed unto the Lord." "By these things men live." Now you will know if that has ever been true in your case. Has heavy trouble ever compelled you to turn your face to the wall and pray? What a remarkable evidence of a gracious exercise! "By these things men live," not - by these things men die. I know we can become very hard in trouble and when we are overburdened and overwhelmed with things, if we are left, they can be an occasion of great bondage to us, but if they move us to a Throne of Grace as in the case of Hezekiah, if we have to turn our face toward the wall, then we live by them. "In all these things is the life of my spirit." It is actually a wonderful thought, that which in itself would bring desolation and death, acts by the touch of the Holy Ghost in a way to produce a deeper and more lively spiritual exercise. "O Lord, by these things men live."

Here is another point. He is speaking to the Lord about this. "O Lord!" The poor man seems to be making what might be termed a gracious confession. "O Lord!" "I would rather render praise to Thee that "these things", these things have not proved my downfall, but have been for Thy honour, for Thy glory, in my soul, in my body, and in deliverance for the nation. "By these things men live." Here you see all seemed to be faced with ruin and death. There was an army against them; they had very little power to stand. Here was an army which, though poor Hezekiah could not in himself with his army stand against them, could not stand against God. As to this army in the end they were struck by divine judgment and became "dead corpses."

"By these things men live." So Hezekiah prayed and wept, wept and prayed; it says so of him here. It says, "Remember now, O Lord, I beseech Thee, how I have walked before Thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight." But doesn't the prayer need understanding? He appears, superficially, to be commending himself to God, but what was in Hezekiah's heart was the honour of God in this, I believe. He had walked before God uprightly, and established the worship of God in the land and now it would appear as though he would be gravely dishonoured for doing it, by being overcome by this army. In all humility and earnestness, he would remind God of the grave danger they were in, that the land was in, that the city was in, and that His honour rested upon making bare His arm toward them; and what a wonderful answer it was too! He did not have long to wait and weep. "Then came the Word of the Lord to Isaiah, saying, Go and say to Hezekiah." It is an urgent case, do not keep him waiting. "Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears; and behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years." What a remarkable answer it was to receive from the same prophet who a short time before had said, "Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order." He comes with a "Thus saith the Lord" again, "I will add unto thy days fifteen years."

But that was not all; there was something else beside that. "I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city." I will, I will defend the city. O we never have need to fear the issue when God takes a matter in hand, never! I will defend the city, and the wisest course we can take is to commit the matter to Him. I will defend the city. Not - get all your soldiers and go and fight. No, I will defend the city; and God does not do things by halves when He takes them in hand. O what can be sweeter to faith

than to stand still and see the salvation of God?" Faith can do what nature will never do, and that is stand still and "look on while the angel of the Lord doeth wondrously."

"O Lord, by these things men live." This is a part of Hezekiah's song of thanksgiving recorded from verses 9 to 20. In this song of thanksgiving the good man tells us a little what he felt like when in that fiery furnace and what conclusions he came to whilst he was there. After he was recovered of his sickness he writes this. It is very different you know, to write about things afterwards, than to write about them at the very time we are in the depths. Yes, the pen often has to lie silent then; but after the deliverance one can take the pen and record the goodness and mercy of a covenant-performing God. He did not appear to have much hope, did he, when he had this terrible boil and when the enemy was threatening the city? He came to conclusions that were never fulfilled and perhaps you have done so too. It is not surprising is it? For the Lord's people come into such passes where

"Every door is shut but one
And that is mercy's door."

What did he say? "I shall go to the gate of the grave: my life is cut off: I am deprived of the residue of my years." No, he was not. "I shall not see the Lord in the land of the living" any more, "I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world." Yet he did. "Mine age is departed, and removed from me as a shepherd's tent:" It was not so really. "I have cut off like a weaver my life: He will cut me off with pining sickness". I should imagine he felt terribly ill, poor Hezekiah was as near to the grave as a man could be, feeling "like bones scattered at the grave's mouth," But it was not so actually; he was in the hand of God and we are always safe then. "I reckoned till morning, that, as a lion, so will He break all my bones:" but he did not break one. What a night it must have been! Have you ever had a night when it has appeared or seemed as though the Lord was fighting against you like a roaring lion? "As a lion, so will He break all my bones; from day even to night wilt Thou make an end of me." That is what the poor man felt like and it seemed as though it must come to that too. Yes, but how many, many times the Lord's dear children have come to premature conclusions about things; and that is no wonder either, because it is only the Lord who sees. "Declaring the end from the beginning." Only the Lord. Everything was as dark as dark at Ziklag, and as dark as dark could be with Job when he was sitting among the ashes for seven days and nights in dead silence. Yet the light shone again, and it will shine upon you if you are one of the Lord's children,

however dark it is now! "The darkness and the light are both alike to Him." They are opposite to us.

But now here is the secret of how Hezekiah lived "by these things". It comes to this. "Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter." He does not seem to have had a well-dressed, well-worded prayer all beautifully set out, O no, he cried and moaned and muttered. "I did mourn as a dove." A dove can get on your nerves. "Mine eyes fail with looking upward:" What a night he had! What a night! He was utterly weary, but "by these things men live!" How? "O Lord, I am oppressed, undertake for me." This is where it comes in, "By these things men live!" So he was favoured to see, not only the Lord's delivering hand, an army all "dead corpses"; there is not the least question whether the blasphemous Rabshakeh was one of them; no question about that; but he saw something else beside that. "Behold for peace I had great bitterness." Evidently Hezekiah had enjoyed peace and prosperity until this trouble suddenly overwhelmed him. "For peace I had great bitterness." But that is not all the verse is it? "But Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption." Just the very place where he felt sure he was going. "I shall go to the gate of the grave," he said. In other words you can almost hear him saying, 'This trouble will be the death of me', and perhaps some of you have said the very same thing. He said all that, "But Thou has in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back." Now it is evident Hezekiah was not righteous in his own eyes. In this same prayer where he says, "I have walked before Thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in Thy sight", he says, "Thou has cast all my sins behind Thy back." O what more blessed place could a man be in? A city delivered, health restored, sins forgiven, and as he says here, "The Lord was ready to save me." He did not talk like that a bit further back but now is the time to sing. "Therefore we will sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the Lord." "By these things men live." O my friends, "these things"! It covers so much, does it not? It may come into your business, your home, your family, your office, your school, anywhere, but more particularly into your heart. "These things" O "These things". You have them, your burdens, these heavy things, these hard things, these trying things, these crooked things, these afflictive things. "By these things men live."

This is peculiar then, to the Lord's children. By these things we live when we wait upon God in them. By these things we live when

we watch His dealings with us in them, when they bring us to the mercy seat with a "Lord, help me." "Have mercy upon me." Remember what I said in the first place. It is only grace that brings forth spiritual prayer and waiting upon God in times of affliction and distress. "By these things men live," when the bitter waters of Marah are made sweet, when the Lord walks with you in the furnace as in the case of the three Hebrews, when He shuts the lion's mouth so that your enemy, however strong he may be, dare not open his mouth but must be as still as a stone.

"In all these things is the life of my spirit." But we have to prove that there is no living by these things unless we have some such experience of them.

"Brethren, those who come to bliss
Come through sore temptations.
May we all, remembering this,
Pray for faith and patience."

"In all these things is the life of my spirit." That is we live by them when we are enabled to walk graciously, tenderly and carefully in them, when we derive spiritual profit from them and when the good hand of God is seen in delivering from them. So this chapter and those before show what a wonderful mercy it is to have God to go to and to feel that no circumstance or affliction, however heavy, need bar the way to Him, but can be an occasion of need in us, to bring us "between the cherubims". "In all these things is the life of my spirit." What does that mean? Why, it means that you come out of the furnace better than you went in! And has that ever been the case? O what some of us have had to lose in it! O what some may have gained in it! "By these things." Can you look at one thing among all "these things"? Can you look at one thing and say, O it was good for me. "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now I have kept Thy word."

Well may the Lord in His mercy so instruct us. Then how all things are made to work together for our good like so many links in the chain; every one of the links may be a very black one, but the Lord knows all things and it is a mercy when certain things instead of hardening us bring us eventually feelingly to say, "He hath done all things well."