

“BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU PRAY FOR!”
(You Might Get It!)

“Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD...”

It’s hard to believe now, but when the movie, “*It’s A Wonderful Life*” came out in 1946, it wasn’t considered the classic we regard it as today.

In fact, it was thought to be somewhat of a “flop” – barely making back its production costs and being shut out at the Academy Awards.

You know the story, of course...

George Bailey, a small-town banker considers his life a failure.

Giving up his dreams to travel the world, he stays home in Bedford Falls to manage his family’s small Savings & Loan – which is about to go under and be absorbed by the town’s villain – the miserly old Mr. Potter.

Well, the mounting pressures get so bad for George Bailey – played by Jimmy Stewart, of course – that he stands atop a bridge contemplating suicide – figuring that everyone he loves would be better off without him.

But, it’s at that point that an angel named “Clarence” comes and shows him what life would have been like in Bedford Falls had he never been born.

And, George is shocked by what he sees in this alternate reality.

His beloved wife, Mary, is a lonely spinster...

His brother Harry – whom he saved from drowning as a child – is now dead...

His bumbling uncle Billy, in an insane asylum...

And, miserable old Mr. Potter owns the whole town!

Everything is changed! And, definitely not for the better!

And, this peek into what life would have been like without him turns out to be a wake-up call for Bailey and he realizes that despite his business failures...

Despite his unrealized ambitions and dreams...

That he has made a difference and that it is, in fact, “a wonderful life!”

Well, like I said, when the movie first came out in `46, it didn't make nearly the splash we might have assumed it did.

But, as it's been replayed over and over again through the years, it's become something of a classic.

And, the reason for that – I believe – is because there's something about the message in that film that resonates with so many people...

Something we can relate with!

That despite how ordinary and unexciting and even mundane our lives may appear...

That our lives do matter!

They are meaningful!

And, often what's needed is just a different perspective to help us understand how meaningful they really are!

Perspective's a wonderful thing!

Of course, we usually aren't privy to angels showing up like “Clarence” did.

But, occasionally the “blindness” come off and we're able to see things in a whole new way.

And, that way changes us and makes us think!

I like the story Thomas Wheeler, former CEO of the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company tells.

Wheeler and his wife were driving along the Interstate one day when he noticed they were getting low on gas.

So, Wheeler pulled off the highway at the next exit and found a rundown gas station with just one pump.

He asked the attendant to fill the tank and check the oil – while he went for a walk around the station to stretch his legs.

Well, when he got back to the car, he noticed his wife and the attendant were having an animated conversation.

He paid the bill and left. But, as he was getting into the car, he saw the attendant wave at his wife and heard him say, *“It was great talking to you.”*

As they drove off, Wheeler asked his wife if she knew the man.

She admitted she did.

In fact, they had gone to high school together and had dated steadily for about a year.

***“Boy, were you lucky that I came along,”* bragged Wheeler.**

“If you had married him, you’d be the wife of a gas station attendant instead of the wife of a chief executive officer.”

***“My dear,”* replied Wheeler’s wife...**

“If I had married him, he’d be the chief executive officer and you’d be the gas station attendant.”

Boy! Talk about perspective!

But, the fact is, having the right perspective is crucial to our lives and our health and even our relationship with God.

And, one of the keys to understanding our Scripture lesson today is being able to admit and humbly accept that only God truly sees the Big Picture of our lives...

Because God has a perspective on it all that we simply don't have!

Now, this was certainly true for Hezekiah!

Although we can understand what a bitter pill it must have been for him to swallow when the prophet Isaiah shows up and tells him he's gonna die!

After all, Hezekiah was only 39 at the time!

He was a young man! Still in the prime of life and still – in his own mind – with a lot of living left to do!

Hezekiah's situation reminds me of my grandmother who died when she was only 39 herself.

And, even though I never met her, I can only imagine what it must have been like for her and what she must have felt when the doctors uttered that dreaded word – “cancer!”

And, how it was as the disease progressed and she began to realize she was losing the battle and would be leaving a husband and six children behind.

It “had” to be a bitter pill to swallow!

But, making it all the worse for Hezekiah was that he might have “expected” something better.

Something different!

That a lifetime of “faithful” service to the LORD – even extraordinary service – would have netted him at least a few points.

I mean – it was Hezekiah who single-handily ushered in a period of great spiritual reform in Judah!

He took it upon himself to restore the Temple which had been shuttered by his father. The Scripture says:

“In the first month of the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the Temple of the LORD and repaired them” (2 Chron. 29:3).

Hezekiah didn’t waste any time! Getting people back on track with God was his number one priority!

He ordered that the priests consecrate themselves again for worship...

He reestablished the Passover – which hadn’t been celebrated in years...

He reinstated the “tithes” so there’d be funds to support the Temple...

He prayed for the people – asking God to forgive them...

And, he tore down every pagan altar and idol that had been polluting the land!

Hezekiah did it all!

The Scripture says:

“In everything that he undertook in the service of God’s Temple and in obedience to the Law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly” (2 Chron. 31:21).

And...

“There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him” (2 Kings 18:5).

Hezekiah was one of a kind!

That’s why he wasn’t just “blowing smoke” when he prays and passionately lays out his case before God!

He’s lived a good life and he’d like to live more of it.

It’s understandable! He doesn’t want to die!

Why him?

Why now?

Any of us would feel the same way!

But, there’s a perspective to it all that Hezekiah doesn’t see!

Because no sooner than he’s done praying, God sends Isaiah back with the message that He’s heard Hezekiah’s prayers and given him “15” added years.

And, while that’d normally be good news – and Hezekiah’s certainly relieved – the fact is these turn out to be “not” the best years of Hezekiah’s life.

Think of it this way...

Did you ever pray for something or want something so badly, but when you finally got it, it wasn’t all it was cracked up to be?

I remember my senior year in college a friend of mine told me of a great new job he was offered at a local newspaper.

The job was covering sports and local news and paid the whopping sum of \$250 dollars a week plus a free apartment.

Well, I was glad for my friend, of course. But, part of me was jealous too!

“Why don’t I ever get breaks like that?” I wondered.

But, I thought my break had come when my friend decided not to take the job and I applied for it myself.

So, the editor sent me out to cover some stories – you know – just to see how I’d do.

And, when he was satisfied that I could write, he offered me this great new job – which turned out to be not so great after all!

You see, it didn’t pay \$250 a week.

It paid \$150. That’s \$600 a month – BEFORE TAXES!

And, that free apartment?

Oh, it was free all right! But, that’s because nobody in their right mind would have wanted to live in it! It was a dump! A complete dive! And, the guy wanted me to fix it up, to boot!

So, I learned a lesson that day. Things aren’t always as they seem! And, everything we want – or “think” we want isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be.

You see...

I wonder if Hezekiah would have prayed so passionately if he’d known – or understood – or could foresee all the “not-so-good” things that’d go down during these “Bonus Years.”

He’s led a good life!

He’s served God with all his heart!

But, after his healing and the miraculous sign God provides, Hezekiah's heart becomes proud – and his focus gradually shifts off God and onto himself!

So, when the envoys from Babylon come to see him and hear about his healing and this wondrous thing God's done in his life, Hezekiah doesn't use it to point to God...

He uses it to show off instead!

The Scripture says:

“Hezekiah received the messengers and showed them all that was in his storehouses – the silver, the gold, the spices and the fine oil – his armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them” (2 Kings 20:13).

Now, you may be wondering, “What's wrong with that?”

“It doesn't sound so bad!”

Hezekiah was just extending a little hospitality – giving these guys a little tour – showing them a good time.

Right?

But, the parallel passage of this story found in the book of 2 Chronicles spells it out more clearly, and says:

“Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him...” (2 Chronicles 31:25).

In other words...

Rather than use the opportunity to honor and glorify God – Hezekiah used it to honor and glorify himself instead.

Rather than being grateful -- these things made Hezekiah proud! And, for a time, Hezekiah lost his moorings – the humility and daily dependence that kept him close to God.

And, it hurt him! It also hurt the people around him!

In fact, it lays the seeds for a coming judgment nobody can yet imagine!

You see, the point of it all is that God has a plan and a purpose for Hezekiah's life.

Hezekiah begs God to change it. And, for whatever reason (and we don't know that reason) – but for whatever reason God does – giving him another 15 years.

But, it's what Hezekiah does next...

Or, precisely what he “doesn't” do that makes all the difference.

The Rev. Dr. Michael Halcomb puts it like this...

How did Hezekiah use those fifteen precious years of life?

We see that he was greatly concerned with accumulating material possessions. With pride he displayed “the silver, the gold, the spices and the fine oil – his armory and everything found among his treasures (2 Kings 20:13). When Isaiah came and told him that all of these material things would someday fall into the hands of foreign kings, surely Hezekiah realized how foolish he had been.

Hezekiah would have been better advised to have spent the last years of his life with his son who was born during those fifteen extra years. Apparently, Hezekiah was so occupied with his treasures that he neglected the spiritual development of his son Manasseh.

Then Halcomb reminds us of something very important, when he adds:

Manasseh, as you may read in chapter 21 of 2 Kings, grew up to be the most evil and sinister king in the history of Judah.

Golfers, of course, have their “holes-in one.”

Bowlers are always aiming for that perfect game.

“My” equivalent came last Monday night in my adult soccer league when I pulled a move I’ve always dreamed about, but never had the courage to try before.

It’s called a “Rainbow.”

And, what it involves is basically flicking the ball up with your back-heel so that it arcs up from behind over your head and comes down right in front of you.

It’s very tricky!

It takes just the right touch!

And, not only hadn’t I ever done it before – or even tried...

I’ve never even seen anyone attempt it in a game before!

But, we were playing. We were way ahead and the game was winding down. And, I thought, “Why not?”

“If I get the ball, I’m gonna try it.”

So, with about a minute left I got the ball near the goal...

Flicked it up behind me...

And, wouldn’t you know, that ball perfectly arced up over my head and came down straight in front of me...

And, before it hit the ground I headed it in for a goal!

Like I said – I’d never done it before and I don’t think I could ever do it again!

But, the reason I’m telling you this is not to impress you with my increasingly diminishing soccer skills...

But, because of what Johnny said to me after I scored that goal.

He said, “*Dad, just walk off the field and don’t come back because you’ll never top that!*”

And, in some ways, he’s right!

If I were smart, I’d go out on top! The lasting imagery of scoring an impossible goal.

Well, you see, Hezekiah had the chance to go out on top! With a firm grip on his faith – totally in the will of God!

Instead, he begs God to change the plan...

For whatever reason God does...

And, Hezekiah’s life plays out in ways – and a lot of unfortunate ways – he never expected.

So, what does it all mean for us today?

Well, some years ago I knew a man who was laid off from his job and spent several months hunting a new one.

Now, this fella’s educated and bright and dedicated and a hard worker. But, for some reason he kept applying for jobs...

Kept getting interviews...

Kept making it to the final rounds of the process...

But, never landed the job!

And, it was frustrating for him! He didn't know why it always turned out like this. But, it did!

Despite all his qualifications he never landed any of those jobs he interviewed for.

But, then after many, many months, another job came up.

A job paying more money – with better benefits – a shorter commute – doing exactly what he was trained to do...

And, he nailed it!

He got the job and he loves it.

But, as we talked about all this – all the frustrations along the way -- it occurred to me that perhaps the reason none of those other job interviews panned out was because “this” is where God had really wanted him all along!

Of course, during the whole frustrating process of being turned down so many times before he didn't know that because he didn't have God's perspective.

All he could do was believe that there was a purpose behind it all!

You see, the thing about God is that He sees what we can't see.

He has a perspective that we don't have.

And, He asks us to trust Him even when we don't understand His timing or how the seemingly random events of our lives are adding up.

It's like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

If you know the story, you know Jesus really didn't want to die!

He didn't relish going to the cross. He did it because He loves us and wanted to save us from our sins!

But -- before they came to arrest Him and crucify Him -- Jesus knelt down and prayed to His Father in Heaven and asked if there were some other way...

Any other way -- that this cup might pass from Him.

That He wouldn't have to go through with it.

But, if you remember, the most poignant part of His prayer is when He says, "*Yet not My will, but Thy will be done.*"

You see, even though Jesus didn't want to be beaten and battered and nailed to a cross -- any more than you or I would -- He trusted His Father's will for His life.

And, He humbly submitted even when it wasn't easy!

You know what that takes?

It takes a lot of things -- for sure!

But, most of all, it takes "humility" to trust and believe that God's perspective is bigger and better than ours!

In his book, "*How Life Imitates The World Series*", author Dave Bosewell tells a story about Hall-of-Fame manager Earl Weaver and baseball star Reggie Jackson.

Apparently Weaver had a rule that no one could steal a base unless given the steal sign.

Well, this bothered Jackson because he felt he knew the pitchers and catchers well enough to run on them. And so, one game he decided to steal second without being given the sign.

Reggie got a good jump on the pitcher and easily beat the throw to second. And, as he stood, shaking the dirt off his uniform, Jackson let off a little smile, feeling he had vindicated his judgment to his manager.

Later, however, Weaver pulled Jackson aside and explained why he hadn't given the steal sign.

First – as Weaver pointed out – the next batter was a fella named Lee May – who, other than Jackson was his best power hitter.

But, when Jackson stole second -- first base was left open – so the other team walked May intentionally – taking the bat out of his hands.

Then, along with that, Weaver explained that the next batter hadn't been particularly strong against this certain pitcher, so Weaver felt he had to send up a pinch hitter to drive in the men on base.

That, of course, let Weaver without bench strength later in the game when he needed it.

The problem, Bosewell explains, is that Jackson saw only his relationship to the pitcher and the catcher.

He only saw a small part.

But, Weaver was watching the whole game!

He had a perspective on it that Jackson didn't.

Well, it's kinda the same way for us.

We can only see so far.

But, God sees the Bigger Picture of our lives!

He sees it all!

And, “faith” means trusting that God’s perspective is better than ours...

Even when we don’t understand everything...

And, even during those times we’d rather have things some other way.

We can trust that God’s plan for our lives is good!

Perhaps it’s best summed up in a prayer penned by an otherwise unknown Confederate soldier sometime during the Civil War.

You might have heard it before. But, it really captures the spirit of how God alone sees the Big Picture of our lives – and how we can always trust Him in that.

The prayer says:

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve,
I was made weak, that I might learn to humbly obey...*

*I asked for health, that I might do greater things,
I was given infirmity that I might do better things...*

*I asked for riches, that I might be happy,
I was given poverty that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men,
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God...*

*I asked for all things that I might enjoy life,
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things...*

*I got nothing I asked for – but everything I hoped for,
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.*

I am among all men, most richly blessed.

Amen.