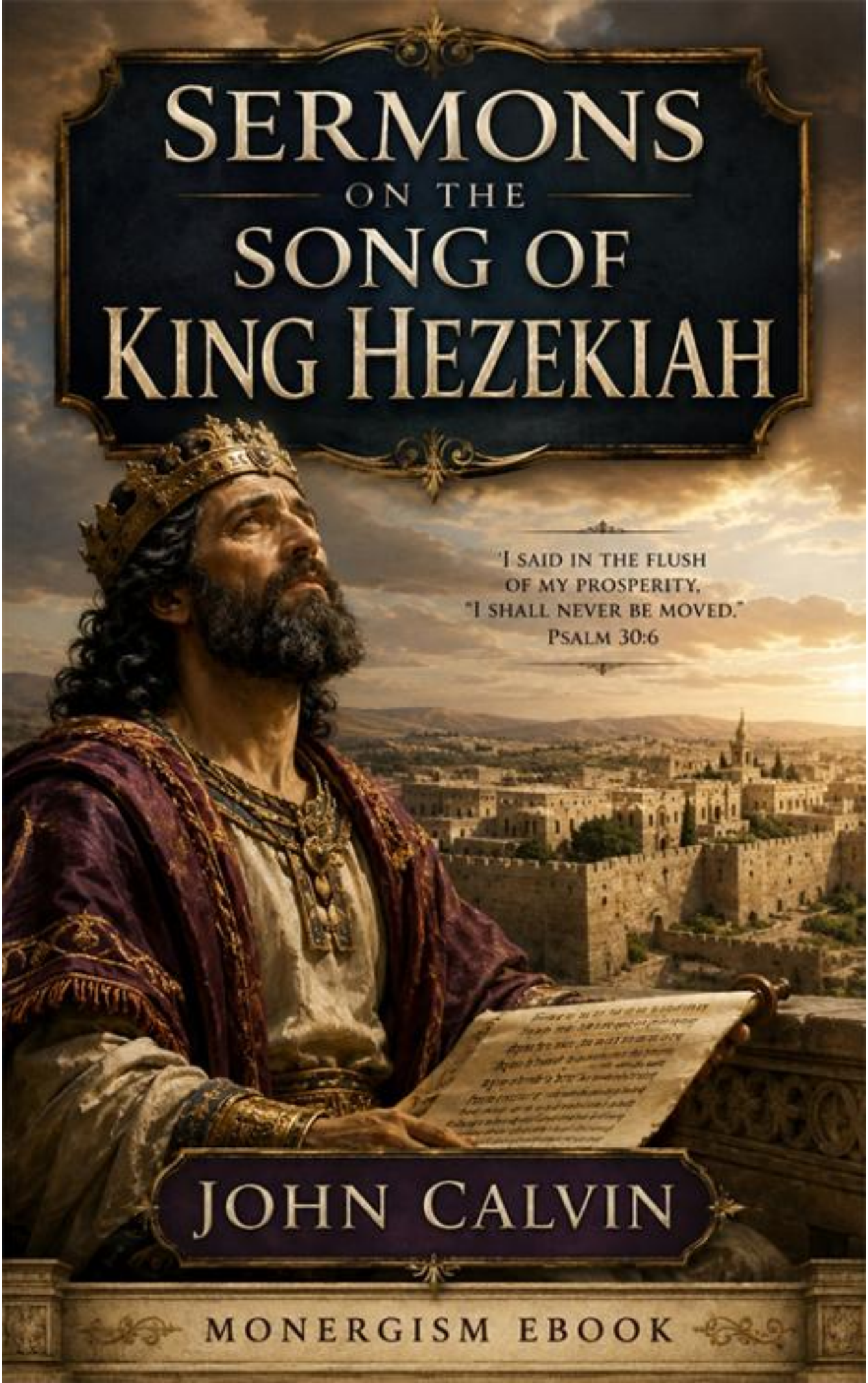
SERMONS ON THE SONG OF KING HEZEKIAH



JOHN CALVIN

MONERGISM EBOOK

SERMONS ON THE SONG OF KING HEZEKIAH

John Calvin

Monergism Books

The following work was fully translated by Claude. It was then thoroughly checked during the editing process to ensure accurate transcription throughout. Even so, please notify us if anything is found to be amiss, and we will work to remedy it as soon as possible.

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Contents

Editor’s Note

1. CALVINI OPERA EDITORIAL NOTICE

2. FIRST SERMON

3. SECOND SERMON

4. THIRD SERMON

5. FOURTH SERMON

Editor's Note

We used Claude to generate a translation of John Calvin's *Sermons sur le Cantique d'Ezechias* as found in volume 35 of *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*. These sermons were originally published in Geneva in 1562. We have not included an original title page in this edition since the *Calvini Opera's* Editorial Notice contains this information.

CALVINI OPERA
EDITORIAL NOTICE

We know from Colladon (*Life of Calvin*, Volume XI, p. 81) that Calvin, for his regular weekly sermons, took up the prophet Isaiah, which he had preached some years earlier in the Church (we assume, at the Friday congregations) and had since lectured on in the school. These sermons had been collected by stenographers, and six volumes of them existed in the Geneva library, of which we have only been able to recover the second (chapters 13 to 29), containing 66 sermons preached from February 22 to July 31, 1557 (628 leaves), and the fourth (chapters 42 to 51), of 503 leaves, containing 56 sermons preached from December 31, 1557 to June 4, 1558. The third volume has been recovered at the Tronchin library in Bresinge [Bessinge], comprising 67 sermons on chapters 30 to 42, preached from August 4 to December 30, 1557. The series had further included: Volume I, 66 sermons begun July 16, 1557; Volume V, 44 sermons begun June 14, 1558; and Volume VI, 43 sermons begun September 22 of that same year — 343 sermons in total.

Of all these sermons, only four have ever been printed, on verses 9 to 22 of the thirty-eighth chapter, along with seven on chapter 53. Here we are speaking only of the former. Of the pamphlet containing them, only two copies remain, both in Paris — one at the Bibliothèque Nationale, the other at the Bibliothèque Mazarine, this latter bound together with other small volumes under the number 23607, which we have already had occasion to mention in connection with the sermons on Psalms 115 and 124.

It is a small octavo of 98 numbered pages; the gatherings are signed a–g; the first five and the last are regularly of 8 leaves, but the sixth (f) has only two leaves, without any of the text being missing. The very last leaf is blank. Here is the title:

Sermons of Jean Calvin on the Song that good King Hezekiah composed after he had been sick and afflicted by the hand of God, as it is contained in Isaiah, chapter 38. (The Estienne olive-tree device.) At Geneva, by François Estienne, for Emeran le Melais. 1562.

The text is preceded by the following notice:

JACQUES ROUX: TO THE FAITHFUL READER, GREETING

Although in all the afflictions by which God tests his faithful, Satan takes the occasion and the material to shake them and turn them from the faith — as though such afflictions were the clearest and most evident testimony of their reprobation — his rage nonetheless shows itself far more inflamed when God, closely examining and summoning the conscience of his own, presents himself for a time as their adversary and stern judge, and makes them feel in earnest the dread of his judgments. Now such trials are very dangerous, for it seems, even to those who have made moderate progress in the word of God, in no way fitting that the faithful should be subject to such a trial — seeing that in their Head, our Lord Jesus Christ, the wrath of God

has been appeased once for all, and that through him they are set free and delivered from the tyranny of the prince of this world. For this reason, following the counsel of the Holy Spirit, we must diligently gather from the holy Scriptures the examples of those who, though having good testimony of having been pleasing to God, nevertheless passed through such a furnace — so that, being thereby strengthened in patience, we may resist every such violent assault of Satan, and carry off the victory against his pernicious efforts.

Now among those of whom Scripture makes mention, the example of good King Hezekiah is excellent, as he himself sufficiently declares, in few words, in his Song, as the prophet Isaiah recorded it in writing. This Song, dear reader, so that you may profit from it all the better, I present to you together with its true exposition, faithfully gathered from the sermons of Jean Calvin, faithful minister of Jesus Christ, just as he preached it publicly, without anything having since been added to it or taken from it. I must confess, however, that I did not obtain his consent to have it brought to light without great difficulty — as all those who know him privately will readily believe, since they know well that he has wished only to serve the flock God has entrusted to him, teaching them in a familiar way, and not to compose Homilies at his leisure to be set before the eyes of the whole world. But I think it would be superfluous for me to dwell on making you understand with what skill and vehemence he has shown the true and natural sense of this Song, nor how profitable the reading of these sermons will be to you — being assured that the experience and certainty you will gain from reading them will teach you more than I could ever tell you. For my part, I know how I was carried away, hearing the living voice of this good servant of God, led and guided by the Holy Spirit, without deceit or

any display of human eloquence, but pure and simple — and yet lively and penetrating, as God by his grace made me feel it in earnest, with an indescribable consolation, according to the great need I had of it, being at that time in a like struggle of spirit, and stirred by the goad of a similar trial, just as much as God saw fit for me.

Now although God examines his own so keenly, this is not to say that the inestimable benefit of our Lord Jesus Christ is in any way diminished or obscured by it, or that they should come to doubt their free adoption and the fatherly love of God — for on the contrary, by this very means his excellence and power are declared all the better, seeing that through it all the afflictions they endure are but so many steps leading them to the inheritance of heaven, which he has acquired for them at so dear a price. This, dear reader, is what I thought good to tell you, having procured for you so great a good as the enjoyment of these fine sermons, which would otherwise have remained within the enclosure of the sheepfold where they were delivered — asking you to take this good intention of mine in good part, and to pray with me to our good God and Father that he would soon confound Satan, and further advance and maintain the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ, which today is so outrageously persecuted by the sons of this age, enemies of the truth. So be it.

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We have not been able to bring ourselves to copy out the 164 sermons that still survive only in manuscript. Since Calvin's commentaries are practical rather than scholarly in character, publishing the sermons alongside the other work would have been redundant — not to mention that we know well enough, from the two different versions of the commentary on Isaiah,

how inexact these stenographic transcriptions tend to be. We therefore confine ourselves here, as everywhere else, to re-editing what has already been published before, and that generally under the very eyes of the author himself.

FIRST SERMON

Isaiah 38

9. The writing of Hezekiah, king of Judah, when he had been sick and was healed of his sickness. 10. I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I sought the remnant of my years. 11. And I said, I shall not see the Lord in the land of the living; I shall no more see man, nor the inhabitants of the world. 12. My life has departed, and has been changed like a shepherd's tent.

As the name of God is immortal, so too you must take pains that those who come after us should call upon it, and that it be adored and glorified at all times. Thus, it is not enough that during our life we strive to honour God; rather, as I have already said, our concern must extend into the future, so that we may leave some seed of religion, in such a way that God's truth is never abolished. And above all, those whom God has appointed to some position of leading others ought to devote themselves to this all the more. So too we see that Saint Peter, declaring that his end was near and that he must depart from the world, adds that as far as it is in his power, he will see to it that the doctrine he had preached should remain always in force and in

memory, and that people should profit from it after his death. This is why Hezekiah was not content merely to speak this declaration that we read here, but wished to write it down, so that until the end of the world people might know how greatly he had been afflicted in his suffering, and that this might serve as instruction to everyone—just as today we can well profit from it. It is particularly noted that this writing was composed after he had returned to health. For often, when we are pressed either by sickness or by some other rod of God, we make plenty of protestations, but we merely, as they say, shake our ear once we have escaped, and soon forget everything we made a show of having recognised. But here it is shown to us that King Hezekiah, having returned to health, did not forget the chastisement he had received from the hand of God, nor the anguish in which he had found himself, but wished instead to make a record of it all, so that those who came after him might be instructed by it.

Now it might seem at first sight that this writing would give no instruction to those who read it, but rather cause scandal—for we see the excessive passions of a man almost undone, who holds death in such horror that it seems to him everything is lost when God withdraws him from the world. And in this we seem to see nothing but signs of unbelief: he torments himself and rages, so it appears, with a rebellion unworthy of a servant of God. In short, it might seem that we can gather nothing from this Song except that whatever faith Hezekiah had existed only in his prosperity and his ease, and that he let go the reins of his sadness so far as to complain of God—as we shall see him compare God to a lion. But when everything is carefully considered, we shall find there is no better or more useful instruction for us than this one; for when we have thoroughly examined all that is in us, we shall recognise that this concerns us directly.

But note first of all that the good King Hezekiah has not here preached his own virtues in order to be esteemed by the world—for he could have set aside what he tells of his troubles, and instead spoken only of the request he made to God and of the constancy of his faith. Yet he does not say that he was magnanimous, or that he overcame every temptation without struggle or resistance—none of that. Instead, we see a poor man tormented to the very end, and so cast down that he does not know what to do. We see a man terrified by the wrath of God, seeing nothing but his own affliction. When Hezekiah thus exposes himself, and makes no difficulty about confessing his weaknesses, we perceive that he was not moved by ambition or worldly glory, to be esteemed by men or to gain reputation, but rather that he was willing to be nearly overwhelmed with shame, so that God might be glorified.

What, then, is his intention? On the one hand, that we should know how he was afflicted while he believed God to be against him; and then, that in this we should recognise all the more clearly the goodness of God, when God received him back into mercy and did not wish to abandon him in his need. We have here, then, to contemplate as in a mirror our own weaknesses, so that each of us may prepare himself for when his faith is tested as Hezekiah's was, and God gives us some sign of his wrath—so that if we are then as if lost, we do not cease to hope that God will grant us a way out of our anguish, as he did for this good king. And further, that we may learn to attribute all praise for our salvation to the mercy of God, knowing that as soon as we are deprived of it, we are undone, and more than miserable.

Now, meanwhile, let us see how and why King Hezekiah was so tormented: it was because he saw death drawing near to him. It might well

seem at first sight that this does not suit a faithful man. It is true that by nature death will be dreadful to all of us, for there is no one who does not desire to exist, as they say, and it seems that in death we perish and are as though annihilated. Thus, by nature we shall flee it and hold it in horror. That is why Saint Paul also says, in the fifth chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians, verse 4, that we do not desire to be stripped of this body—for it is impossible for man to desire to change his condition, I mean regarding this present life. And those who do away with themselves have no natural affection in them at all but are so carried away by the devil that they are utterly blinded—such people must be counted as monsters, in whom the whole order of nature has been overturned. In short, it is certain that death will always be terrible to us, not only because we are inclined to desire to live, but also because God has left some mark such that even pagans and unbelievers are compelled to sense that death is a curse of God, pronounced upon Adam and upon all his lineage.

Since, then, death came into the world through sin, and is a testimony of God's wrath, by which we are as it were rejected by him and removed from his kingdom—which is the kingdom of life—it follows that even if we had no clear light of faith, nor had ever heard a single word of doctrine, it would still be impressed upon our minds that death is our enemy. Thus, we are led to flee death and draw back from it as much as we can: first, because we desire to exist; second, because we apprehend in it some sign of God's wrath. And I add further that even without any certain instruction, God nonetheless gives us some impression of this that is hidden within our hearts.

Yet meanwhile the faithful overcome these two fears, and prepare themselves to die whenever it pleases God—not, as we noted earlier from

Saint Paul, simply and without further thought desiring death, for that would belong to desperate people, but they prepare themselves because they know that they will be reclothed after being stripped, that this body is a frail tent, nothing but decay, and that they will be restored in the kingdom of God. Because we contemplate this hope given to us, we thereby overcome the terrors of death. And further, we know that our Lord Jesus Christ has repaired this desolation and ruin that came upon us through the sin of our father Adam. Thus, because we apprehend life in the midst of death, we are no longer so terrified that we cannot withdraw ourselves when God calls us to himself—for we know that death is nothing but a passage to life. On the other hand, we know what our true being is: it is not to dwell in this world, for this world is but a passage, and we must always remember what is said, that God places men here to handle them and lead them through certain turns, as they say, and then bring them back. When, then, we are taught that our life is nothing but a race, and that the world is nothing but a passing figure that vanishes, we then know that our true being and our permanent state is in heaven, and not here below. Thus, we shall no longer flee death; indeed, we shall have occasion to desire it, because on one hand we are frail, held in bondage to sin—we see so much corruption in ourselves that it is pitiful. Even when we desire to serve God, we drag our feet, and when we lift one foot thinking to take a step forward, we fall back, or else we stumble and trip.

So, then, we have good reason to regret our life—not in despair, but because we ought to hate sin and hold it in detestation. We must also desire that God deliver us from this miserable captivity in which we are held, as Saint Paul shows us by his example. He confesses himself wretched, dwelling in his body as in a prison, and asks how he shall be delivered from

it. And on the other hand, we know that death becomes more desirable to us the nearer we come to our God. For, as it is said in the passage we cited, while we live by faith, we are as though absent from God. Now where is our happiness and our perfect joy, if not in adhering perfectly to our God? Since, then, we draw nearer to him through death, this is a happy thing for us, and one that ought to gladden us. That is why Paul says, in the first chapter of Philippians, verse 23, that for himself it would be greater gain to die than to live, and though his life was profitable to the Church, yet if he considered only himself, he would wish to be taken from here. Such, then, ought to be the disposition of the faithful.

Now let us come to King Hezekiah. It seems that he has lost all taste for the goodness of God, that he knows nothing of the resurrection, that he does not recognise he will be restored through the Redeemer—he apprehends nothing but the wrath and curse of God. Where is his faith? Where is his obedience? Where is that consolation of the Holy Spirit, and that inestimable joy we ought to receive when God assures us of the love he bears us? Even if he had this persuasion well rooted in him, that he is among the children of God, does not adoption carry with it the inheritance? Why has God chosen us as his children, if not so that we may share in the heavenly life to which he invites us?

Now we see none of this in Hezekiah. It seems, then, that he has been entirely alienated from sense and reason, that he has put God out of mind, that everything good he had heard before is erased and no longer occupies his thoughts. These things would indeed seem strange at first. It is true that in that time there was not such heavenly revelation as we have today through the Gospel; yet Hezekiah, and all the other holy kings and prophets, and all the rest of the faithful, well apprehended that God had not chosen

them in vain. For although this saying had not yet been pronounced by our Lord Jesus Christ, still it was engraved in the hearts of all the faithful, that God is not the God of the dead. All those, then, who are counted among his people have been assured of a permanent life that shall endure forever. And elsewhere it is said that God calls himself the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, long after their deaths. They must, then, have continued to live. Thus the faithful have indeed had this assurance, that God did not nourish them in this world like brute beasts, but gave them some taste of his goodness until they should have full enjoyment of it after death.

Even Balaam, who never knew anything of the Law, nonetheless says: "Let my soul die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like theirs!" He desires to be joined to the race of Abraham, and yet he was a wicked and reprobate man. And what makes him speak thus? It is that he is there as though on the rack, and God wrings this confession from him. Now if Balaam, possessed by the devil to hire out his tongue to curse the people of God, was compelled to speak so, what shall we think of those who had truly profited in the Law of God? But be that as it may, the ancient fathers did not have so clear and plain a knowledge of the heavenly life as we have today in the Gospel. This too was reserved until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that was fitting, for we have a sure pledge of our life in our Lord Jesus Christ, in that he is risen—not for himself alone, but for his whole body. Here, then, is a full certainty that God gives in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we pass through this world in order to arrive at everlasting life. The ancient fathers had not come to such a degree; they were not so far advanced; but nevertheless the taste they had of the heavenly life sufficed for them, so that they yielded themselves peaceably to God. And indeed we do not read that they were greatly tormented in

death. When Abraham dies, for instance, there are no lamentations, regrets, or complaints as with King Hezekiah, but Scripture says he was full of life and satisfied. The same is true of Isaac and Jacob. “I will hope in your salvation, my God,” he says, breathing his last. Though Jesus Christ had not yet appeared in the world, he had a firm and unshakable hope, and was as assured of his salvation as if he held it in his hand. Thus, we see that the holy fathers were not in doubt or in suspense, but always aspired to the heavenly life, and it was their supreme desire to attain it.

Now let us come to King Hezekiah. We must conclude that there is some particular reason in him why he complained so of death—which we shall better see in the person of David. David is sometimes in such anguish that he cries out: “Alas, my God, who shall confess you in death? And when I am a poor rotting carcass, what profit will you have of me? When you have reduced me to ashes, what will you have gained?” He makes his complaints there; nevertheless, in the end he dies peacefully, for we do not see that he was so troubled in his final passing, but he yields himself quietly into God's hands. How, then, does he come to cry out so? It is that he apprehends the wrath of God, whether in sickness or some other affliction—it is as if hell itself presented itself before him. Such, then, is the feeling he conceives, not of death simply, but of the sense that God gives him some sign of punishing him for his sins.

Since, then, we see this same struggle in the person of David, it will be easy for us to conclude concerning King Hezekiah that he too was greatly troubled in the face of death—but not because it grieved him to leave this world, nor because he was attached to it as poor unbelievers are, who do not aspire to a better life, who are as it were plunged in their pleasures and so lulled asleep that the heavenly life means nothing to them. We see that

Hezekiah was not so cast down; rather, he recognised that God was against him, as we shall see more fully. And indeed it was not without cause that the prophet Isaiah was sent to him, for he was like a herald of arms sent to challenge him, declaring: “Here is God who is your enemy; you must bear his utmost rigour, for you have offended him.” When Hezekiah hears this, he does not look merely at the simple death through which he must pass, but has another concern: that he is cut off from this world as an accursed creature, unworthy that the earth should sustain him. And when God persecutes him, this bears witness that the land shall be laid waste, for he knows what the condition of this people will be—that all will be scattered after his death, unless God provides a remedy by miracle. And he thinks thus: “My death will not merely send me to the pit of hell, but will bring a deluge everywhere, so that in all the land there will be nothing but desolation. Must the service of God be overthrown, and must all this fall back upon me, because I have offended my God? Alas, what will become of it?” Let us not find it strange, then, that Hezekiah speaks as we hear him speak—but let us always remember that it is not death alone that has so terrified him. What is it, then? It is the wrath of God, when he looks upon his sins, and God takes from him all savour of his goodness, and even turns his back on him, as though he saw God armed against him, his arm outstretched as if to annihilate him. When Hezekiah sees this, he is so confounded that his mouth is closed—and not without cause.

Now this is well worth noting: there are many stupid people, indeed most people, who fear death, but not because they sense that God's curse appears in it. It is true, as we have already said, that God always leaves this sting in the conscience of men; but they do not have a similar consideration. Why, then, is death feared by them? Because, as everyone will say, one desires to

exist. Indeed, when they speak so, it is as though they said: “I would wish to be a calf, or a donkey, or a dog”—for the existence of brute beasts is confined to this world. And where is the existence of men, if not in being joined to their God? Now we are presently as if in prison; for whereas this world ought to be for us like an earthly paradise, had we persevered in obedience to God, we are instead as in a foreign land, where we are as exiles and captives. It is true that we still see there some traces of God's goodness, and many of them; but nevertheless, we languish here—yet there are few who recognise this. All the more, then, must we note this doctrine I have already touched upon: that in death, as in all other afflictions, we ought to be more troubled and anguished by the wrath of God than by whatever suffering we may feel. If one is afflicted by poverty, hungry and thirsty; another cast down by sickness and suffering great torments; another persecuted by men without any relief; and finally death presents itself before our eyes—let us recognise that there is nothing so much to be feared as the wrath and vengeance of God. Yet everything is done to the contrary.

And that is why I said we must all the more note this doctrine. For we shall see that poor sick people, and those afflicted in whatever way, will cry out, alas—one crying over his arm, another his legs, another this, another that—and yet they never come to the true source of the trouble. This comes from the hypocrisy that is in us, for we are as it were numbed in our senses, so that we cannot come to recognise the judgment of God. All the more must we learn, when we are struck with such rods, as I have said, to look to the cause from which the evil proceeds—namely, that God wants to make us feel our sins, that he summons us to appear as it were before our Judge, and that we should come there not with concealment or subterfuge, but with a free and open confession; and that this should not be merely with the lips

or as a formality, but that we should be pierced to the depths of our hearts, feeling what it is to have transgressed the will of our God, to have provoked him against us, and to have fought against his justice.

This, then, is what we must retain when we see that King Hezekiah was in such extreme anguish because God was afflicting him for his sins. Indeed, this is worth remembering all the more because, though he had earlier declared that he had walked in integrity and uprightness, that he had striven all his life to obey and please God, nevertheless he does not dwell upon his virtues or his merits, nor does he enter into dispute with God—for he sees well that none of that could profit him or bring him any relief. He does not put forward what his life had been, but recognises that he is justly afflicted. Let us learn, then, when it pleases God to chastise us with his rods, not to enter into murmuring, as though he were wronging us, as though he had no regard for our merits, or dealt with us more harshly than we deserved. Let all such blasphemies be cast down, and let us confess that he has just cause to punish us—not only to the point of removing us from this world, but even of plunging us into the depths of hell.

This, then, is how we deserve to be treated, when we have considered our whole life. And meanwhile let us not find it strange that God sends us afflictions that seem harsh and painful to us, since we see Hezekiah going before us to show us the way. Many are astonished when they have had some good desire and affection to serve God, if he punishes them more than many wicked people, and it seems to them they have wasted their effort. This temptation is all too common, as we see David too was tormented by it, when he says: “What is this? For I see the despisers of God prosper and make merry and celebrate their triumphs, while I do nothing but drink the cup of anguish from evening to morning, having no rest.” It would seem,

then, that it is wasted time to serve God. So, I say, he was cast down to the extreme, had God not sustained him by his admirable power. And since the same thing may happen to us, let us make a shield of the example set before us in King Hezekiah. For we have already seen how he had conformed his whole life to the Law of God: he had a zeal rarely found in anyone, to purge his whole country of every superstition and idolatry. Many alarms were raised against him, and there might even have been some revolt; but this did not turn him from restoring true and pure religion, and in his private life he sought nothing other than that God should be glorified in all things and through all things. And yet here is God coming to assail him, indeed in a strange manner, for he is like a lion breaking his bones. Thus, when we see Hezekiah treated in this way, must we not learn to bear patiently the corrections God sends us? This, then, is what we must retain from this passage.

Now, whatever passions Hezekiah endures, and however much he here seems to go beyond bounds, nevertheless amid all this he declares the love he bore toward God, and that he did not desire this present life in the manner of those who are brutish in it, who seek only to eat and drink and do not know why they were created, except to amuse themselves here for a while. Hezekiah, then, shows well that he was moved by another spirit. He says, then: “I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go down to the gates of the grave, I shall no more see the Lord”—yes, the Lord. Here he speaks indeed of his life, that it will be cut off in the middle of its course; but nevertheless, he shows that he does not desire to live merely to be at ease here. He was king and could have kept a fine table; he could have had many pleasures and delights in this world; in short, he could have drowned himself in every luxury. He regrets none of that; but he says he shall no

more see the Lord—and not content to have said this once, he repeats it for greater emphasis. “The Lord, yes, the Lord,” he says. By this he shows that his life was not so desirable to him, except insofar as he exercised himself here below in knowing that God was his Father, and in confirming himself ever more in that faith.

Let us note well, then, what our life should relate to: that we should perceive that God already, in part, shows himself as Father to us. It is true, as I have already said, that we are absent from him, for our salvation lies in faith and hope. He is, then, hidden, and we do not see him with our natural senses; but nevertheless God does not fail to send us certain rays here below to enlighten us, so that we are led to the hope of eternal life, and perceive that God is not so far removed from us that his hand does not extend here below to care for us, showing us by experience that he holds us in his keeping. For when the sun rises in the morning, do we not see the fatherly care God has for us? And when it sets in the evening, do we not see that God has regard for our weakness, so that we may have rest and be somewhat relieved? God, then, in thus hiding his sun at night, does he not show himself our Father? And further, when we see the earth producing its fruits for our nourishment, when we see the rains and all the changes and shifts that occur in nature, do we not perceive in all this how God stretches out his hand to draw us continually to himself, and shows himself already our liberal Father toward us, so that we, enjoying the temporal benefits he grants us, may be drawn thereby to something higher—namely, to know that he has adopted us, so that we may attain the fullness of joy and complete happiness when we are fully united with him?

This, then, is what our whole life must relate to, if we do not want it to be cursed—so that however many years, months, days, hours, and minutes we

shall have lived here below, all of it should not simply add up to increase and inflame God's vengeance against us. Let us know, then, that we must contemplate here the works of God, for that too is why we are placed in this world. And that is why, in the fifth chapter, when the prophet wished to rebuke the Jews for their vile brutishness, he says: “They have not considered the works of God.” He speaks of their drunkenness, their gluttony, and their dissoluteness, but the height of their evil is that they have not considered the works of God. Thus now the good King Hezekiah shows us that it would be better for us all to have been stillborn, and for the earth to have opened when we came from our mother's womb to swallow us up, than to live here below—except insofar as we already see our God there. Not that we have a perfect vision of him, but first he shows himself to us through his Word (that is the true mirror), and then we have, both high and low, so many signs of his presence and of the fatherly care he has for us, that unless we are excessively dull and utterly devoid of intelligence and reason, we must indeed see it. For the whole world is like a living image in which God displays his power and his majesty; and further, that we are governed under his hand is for us yet another and more intimate testimony of his justice, his grace, and his mercy. Let us learn, then, to live on these terms: to exercise ourselves in worshipping God as the one who created and formed us, and to give him honour and reverence as our Father, and, in tasting the good things he now bestows on us, to be confirmed in the faith of the heavenly life. And further, that he deigns to extend his providence even here below, to govern us in this transitory and frail life, so that we should not doubt that when we come to him, we shall then contemplate face to face what we now see only obscurely and in small measure.

And thus, King Hezekiah commits everything to God, as if he said: “Alas, it is true that I am here as though to contemplate clearly the graces of God, but meanwhile I see that all this is as though snatched from me, for it seems God wished to strip me of what he had given me before, and that nothing remains for me but utter despair, since he has left me and cast me off. He has sent me his prophet with this message, that it is finished for me. Alas, and when I no longer perceive any sign of my God's goodness, nor that he displays his power to relieve me in my afflictions, even while I am in the anguish of death—is it not, then, great pity that my Lord has abandoned me there, and that I am cut off from him?”

Now from this we must gather that whether in life or in death, this grace alone must always suffice us—namely, that God gives us a sense of his goodness; and when he shows us that he is favourable to us, let us walk boldly, and if we must languish in this life, let us bear it patiently. It is true that we may well groan and sigh at being captives in this prison of sin. And we may well also groan, on the other hand, seeing the afflictions God sends us here; but nonetheless we shall not cease always to bless the name of God, and to rejoice in him amid all our troubles, when we feel that he will be our Father, and that he will also acknowledge us as his children. In death we shall contemplate eternal life, which will make us forget all regrets, so that we shall no longer say, “Alas, what shall I do? How shall I manage? Where shall I go?” We shall cut off all such thoughts. Nor shall we say any longer, “Shall I drink no more, shall I eat no more?”—that belongs to brute beasts—but rather: “Now I see my God drawing near to me; I will go and prostrate myself before him; I will go and give myself into his hands, and yield myself to him as to my Father.” When I say, we are thus disposed, we shall be able to say with David: “Lord, I commend my spirit to you.” David

said this during his life, but our Lord Jesus Christ shows us that we must say it too when God takes us from this world.

And further, when we consider all the benefits of God, let us also learn to glorify him, for these things are inseparable. According to the measure in which God makes us partakers of his graces, and already in part shows us that our whole happiness lies in belonging to the company of his children, so too each of us must strive to honour him as our Father. That is why Jonah too, once drawn out of the depths, says: "I will bless my God"—he does not say, "I will live to eat and drink," but "I will come to the Temple, to the sanctuary of my God, and there I will give him praise for this redemption"—namely, that he has drawn me back from death. This, then, is what we must do.

Now, as for what Hezekiah says about the cutting off of his days, he looks to the natural course of human life, of which mention is made in the Song of Moses, for he began to reign at the age of twenty-five. In the fourteenth year the city of Jerusalem was besieged, and it was then also that he fell into this sickness, as we see. He was thus thirty-nine years old. Now he says his life is cut off, since he had not attained old age. It is true that Moses there speaks of the frailty of men, saying: "What are men? After God has led them about here for three days, then they return." Indeed, when a man reaches sixty years, he is already broken, and if ten more are added, there is nothing but trouble and grief; he becomes a burden and nearly useless, and his life itself becomes wearisome to him. Moses shows us there that this life, being so brief and frail, ought not to hold us back. But be that as it may, King Hezekiah was, so to speak, still in the flower of his age; he had not reached forty years. From this perspective he says that God cuts off his days —not that we have a fixed appointed time, for do not children sometimes

die even before coming into this world? And once they have arrived, has not death already laid siege to them? But still, he had not reached that old age which belongs to the ordinary course of human life.

Hezekiah, then, contemplates this, and above all he keeps his eyes fixed on the message of the prophet Isaiah—namely, that God afflicts him because of his sins. It is as if he said to himself: "I see well that God does not wish to leave you in this world, since there is here a violent breach. And from where does it come? From your faults and sins," as we shall see him add shortly. It is true that he attributes everything to God as to his judge, but he takes the fault upon himself and confesses himself alone guilty. This, then, is how he understands that his days have been cut off. When he says he will come to the gates of the grave, that he will no longer see the living —this is because he will no longer converse with men in order to exercise himself in the service of God. Now it is not without cause that even in this he still apprehends the wrath of God, even though he was subject to dwelling there pell-mell with much rabble—for there were many hypocrites in Judea, wicked and dissolute people, mockers of God and his Law; and among the pagans there was nothing but impiety and rebellion.

Now while Hezekiah sees this, he says: "I now know that I am not worthy to dwell on the earth, for these people remain still in the world, and God cuts me off from it—indeed with a strong hand, as though he came armed to make open war against me as his enemy." When, then, Hezekiah has such apprehensions, we should not be astonished that he makes these complaints; but whatever the case, all of it relates to his seeing that God persecutes him. This is so heavy a burden to him that he is as though crushed beneath it. All the more, then, must we note this doctrine, so that if God sometimes afflicts us more harshly than we would wish, we do not cease to recognise that he

loves us, and that this persuasion of his goodness may enable us to overcome all temptations, which would otherwise be enough to overwhelm us. And further, if he rebukes us and makes us feel our sins, let us have recourse to him to plead guilty—for we would gain nothing by any subterfuge; if we wished to argue our case, he would still always have the winning cause. When, then, we see that God is just in punishing us for our sins, let us come with heads bowed, so as to be relieved by his mercy, having no other trust or hope of salvation except that it may please him, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to receive us into favour, since there is in us nothing but utter condemnation.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our faults, praying that he may more and more make us feel them, and so cleanse us of all our pollutions that we may be truly awakened from our stupor, so as to groan and sigh—not only for the miseries we see in the world because of our sins, but because we do not cease to increase them ever more, as much as lies in us. And meanwhile, let us always have recourse to our God, and even though it seems he persecutes us, and his hand is harsh and dreadful toward us, let us not cease to draw near to him and magnify his goodness, being assured that it will overcome all our faults and offences. And even though we feel some harshness in him, let us nevertheless recognise that it is far better for us to withdraw into his house, and under his guidance, than to distance ourselves from him, like poor desperate people. May it please him to grant this grace not only to us, but to all peoples, etc.

SECOND SERMON

Isaiah 38

12. My life has departed; it has been changed like a shepherd's tent. I have cut off my days like a weaver: he has oppressed me with sickness. From morning to night you will consume me. 13. I reckoned to go until morning; he has broken my bones like a lion. From morning to night you will destroy me, and undo me. 14. I chattered like the crane and the swallow; I moaned like a dove; my eyes were lifted up and failed. Trouble presses me; Lord, relieve me. 15. What shall I say? He who spoke it has also done it.

Continuing the discourse begun yesterday, Hezekiah says here that his life has been changed like a shepherd's tent. By this comparison he shows that there is no fixed permanence in the life of men, and that he experienced it himself—for he was as if at rest, and in a moment, God withdrew him from this world. When we compare our bodies to the houses in which we are lodged, it might seem that the body of man, being more than the house, ought to have some permanence—for what is a house but an accessory to the body? Houses are built for the use of men, so the one who dwells in a

building ought to be valued above the house, just as the body is valued above clothing and all adornments. Now here Hezekiah says that he has been lodged in this world like a shepherd who has his little tent, which he drags and carries here and there. He speaks according to the custom of his country, where flocks are penned, and a shepherd carries his tent as easily as one would carry something quite light here. He shows, in sum, that his life has been nothing but a wandering, and that God suddenly changed it. He speaks according to the opinion he had conceived, for he was as it were at the edge of his grave. And indeed he had good reason to prepare himself to die, since God had sent him such a message, as we said. In short, he speaks as if the thing had already happened.

He then returns to the cause of his affliction and confesses himself guilty of it. He says that he himself has cut off his days, as if a weaver, having cloth on his loom, cut it all off. “I must not,” says Hezekiah, “accuse anyone else, for this evil must be imputed to me alone, for I have provoked the wrath of God, I have deprived myself of his blessing—I must therefore now attribute it all to myself.” Now although this is spoken of a single man, we nevertheless have here a good admonition about the brevity of our life. It is true that this is a well-known thing, but we think of it very poorly—for after confessing that present life is but a shadow, we become so entangled in it that each of us thinks only of how he will provide for himself up to a hundred years. In short, it seems we never intend to leave here, so occupied are we with what belongs to the world. All the more, then, must we call to mind what Scripture shows us about the fragility of our life—as Saint Paul also says that we are now lodged under a mere hut. The body of man is not a house that deserves to be called a building or an edifice, for there is nothing in it but frailty. Let us groan, then, waiting to be fully restored, and

let us not be so held back in this world that we fail to press forward. For unbelievers, whatever happens, will come to their end—but meanwhile they draw no nearer to God; rather they are stuck fast in this world, and instead of advancing they sink ever deeper. Let us learn, then, to walk forward—that is, to be so disposed to follow when God calls us that death never comes before its time.

As for Hezekiah saying that he was the cause of his own affliction, let us likewise practice this doctrine whenever it pleases God to afflict us. We see that we are prone to murmuring, and even when convicted of our faults, we do not cease to be aggrieved, as if God had gone too far. Let us then confess with true humility that God justly punishes us in all the afflictions he sends, speaking as Hezekiah did: "It is I who have caused all this evil." It is true that presently he attributes it to God, but the two agree very well—namely, that man is the author of all the miseries he endures, while God works as Judge. For when a wrongdoer is punished, he must not complain of his judge; rather, seeing that he himself has offended against the laws, he condemns himself. And then he recognises that God, too, by the authority of justice, brings him to just chastisement. So must we do likewise: first, recognising that if God afflicts us, it is not that he takes pleasure in tormenting us, but that he must repay us according to what we have deserved—though even then he does not deal with us according to the full measure of our offences, for what would become of us? We would be a hundred thousand times overwhelmed if he wished to deal with us in strict rigour; but he chastises us according to what he knows is good for us. Meanwhile let our mouths be closed, let no murmur escape us. And further, when we recognise that we have provoked his wrath, let us know that we

must not look outside ourselves to say who caused it, but simply accuse ourselves. This, in sum, is what we must retain from this passage.

There follows: “From morning to night you will undo me.” By this Hezekiah shows how terrible the fury of God is—for he signifies that God need not scheme this or that when he wishes to avenge himself on men; if he but speaks the word, the thing is done at once. In short, he shows here both the power of God and, on the other hand, the frailty of men. This is meant to strip us of all the foolish notions we conceive, making ourselves believe we might escape. We see how men always draw back, and even when God presses them, it seems to them they will find some way to flee. In short, we push time back with our shoulder, as they say, and give ourselves extensions; and even when the rope is drawn tight, we still conceive some vain hope. And what causes this? We do not consider our own frailty—for there is not a minute in which death does not threaten us, and though we stand now, it takes but the turn of a hand for us to fall. On the other hand, we do not recognise the infinite power of God—for if he once lays his hand upon us, he need not strike twice; it suffices that he merely breathe, and we are entirely annihilated. It is not, then, without cause that Hezekiah says here that from morning to night he will be undone. For we understand also that we are sustained only insofar as God gives us strength—but if he withdraws his spirit, we shall at once fail and be thrown into confusion. And if he shows himself against us and persecutes us, we shall be all the more cast down. Following, then, Hezekiah's admonition, let us often consider how weak we are, recognising what we are made of—namely, that from minute to minute God sustains us, but that meanwhile death besieges us, and it takes no great assault to ruin us; a single breath suffices, and we are withered like grass, as we shall see in the fortieth

chapter. And let us know what the wrath of God is when it is armed against us. For God is not like creatures who need to arm themselves and make great preparations; as soon as he speaks the word, we are immediately abolished by his word alone. Since this is so, let us learn to walk in watchfulness, let us commit our lives into his hands, let us recognise that we are nothing at all except insofar as we subsist in him; and whatever measure of respite he grants us, let us attribute it wholly to his grace when he thus prolongs our life—for we would be as good as failing if he displayed even a single drop of his power against us. This, then, is what we must observe in this passage, where it speaks of "from morning to night."

Now he adds that he chattered like a crane or a swallow and moaned like a dove. By this he signifies that anguish held him so tightly bound that he did not even have free speech to express his feelings. If a man cries out and laments, voices his complaints and declares his trouble, one must already say he is greatly pressed—but when a man is so cast down that he cannot even declare what he needs, that he mutters to himself, unable to force out a single word to show how vehement his passion is, that he sighs, saying half a word while the rest is held back as if his throat were gripped shut—this is indeed a great extremity. Hezekiah, then, says this was his condition. There is no doubt he looks chiefly to God: as if he said that men had well perceived the sadness in which he was held, but that when he wished to form some request to God, he was as if mute—pressed on one side by the affliction itself, and yet unable to properly express what he needed, so that he was caught between two extremities: on the one hand so constricted within that scarcely a complaint could be drawn from him; and on the other hand so pressed by such vehement passions that he did not know where to begin his prayer.

Now one might find it strange that Hezekiah, who had previously shown such great virtue in himself, should now be so undone, indeed almost entirely annihilated—but this is because he was engaged in a spiritual struggle, feeling his sins and knowing that God was his Judge. For, as we touched on yesterday, this affliction surpasses all others. It is likely that Hezekiah suffered an extremely severe pain, by which he was greatly cast down—one may even conjecture it was something like a burning plague. This, then, was his affliction, great in itself; but it was nothing compared to this apprehension of God's wrath, when he looked upon his faults and recognised that God was armed to be his adversary, and that it was God himself pursuing him—and this too is what so terrifies him. And indeed, when one comes to that point, all courage and all magnanimity must fail—for what constancy could a man have to resist the wrath of God? It would take more than madness and rage for a man even to think he could. It is true that a man may show constancy in bearing afflictions God sends him—but how? Only insofar as he is fortified by God. And then, if men trouble and molest him, he considers that he deals only with creatures; if he suffers some evil at their hands, well, he grits his teeth. But when God summons us, and makes us feel that we are guilty before him, that the time has now come to render account, that our sins threaten us, and that meanwhile we perceive eternal death prepared for us—there, as I have said, could we have any strength to hold firm? We would have to be more than raving mad.

Let us not find it strange, then, if Hezekiah is so cast down—for it is not a question of resisting pain, or repelling wrongs done to him by men, or shrugging off some affliction, but of doing battle against God himself. And how could he possibly manage that? He must, then, be entirely as if dissolving into water. This is why he could form no complaint to express his

suffering, and yet he could not stay silent. This is also why David says that sometimes he kept silent, and shortly after began to cry out and groan, finding no relief. We see that David's passions were like those of good King Hezekiah—indeed he adds that his sins troubled him, and that he was terrified by the wrath of God. He kept no rule or measure, but sometimes burst out, rose up, and then afterwards was so cast down that he could not catch his breath, while the affliction continued always. And in another passage he says he had kept silent as if he had bridled himself, resolving within himself to say not a word. "No," he says, "I will be there like a mute creature, I will not speak, I will not utter a syllable"—but meanwhile, he says, he felt the pain increasing, even kindling, like a fire that, if well caught and enclosed, exerts itself all the more and shows greater force, bursting out. So David declares that in his anguish, when he had resolved to keep quiet and say nothing, it was then that he was compelled to show what was hidden in his heart, even if not in well-ordered words. In short, those who truly know what the wrath of God is will speak and cry out plenty; yet they do not know where to begin—and then when they fall silent, they do not know why; but still they are always in anguish.

We see a notable example of all this in good King Hezekiah. It is true that God will not bring us all equally to such a trial—for if he tests us, it will be according to our weakness; he considers that we would not be able to endure such blows and assaults, so he spares us. But when it pleases him to prove us in such a way (as we read here in the example of King Hezekiah), we must already be equipped with this doctrine. This, in sum, is what we must retain.

And further, let us learn what all the constancy of men amounts to. They may well show some sign of virtue when God does not display his power

against them—but as soon as he calls us to account, all the strength we thought we had must dissolve and vanish. This is what we must practice for our instruction in true humility—for we know that men always remain in their presumption and trust in themselves. And what causes this, if not that each of us measures himself against his neighbour? This is how we come to think ourselves quite capable—but we ought instead to raise our minds to God, for there we shall find that as soon as he turns toward us, we are nothing at all. Let us recognise, then, that we could be plunged into ruin in a single minute, as soon as God makes us feel his wrath; let us recognise, too, that until we are stripped of all confidence in ourselves, we cannot be brought to true humility. For as long as men have some good opinion of themselves, thinking they are capable of this or that, they certainly rob God of what belongs to him. And when they thus exalt themselves without any foundation, it is only to break their own necks.

This, then, is what we must retain: that all human self-confidence, when men trust in their own virtues, is nothing but a dream, since they do not look to God, nor stop there to be stripped of all vain presumption. And further, when we hear here of such chattering, and Hezekiah confesses he could not utter a single word but only muttered, scarcely knowing what he ought to say, let us recognise that when our Lord presses us so hard that we cannot form a request or offer a well-ordered prayer, the door is nevertheless not closed to us in coming to him. I say this because this particular temptation is dangerous. It is true that if we do not perceive in ourselves a zeal to pray to God, and a disposition to meditate on the promises he gives us, and boldness to approach him, this ought to displease us—we ought to feel that we are indeed far from where we should be. But nevertheless, we must still overcome this temptation.

When then, a man finds himself in such distress that he cannot draw out a single word in praying to God, so overwhelmed that he does not know where to begin, he must still pray regardless. And in what way? That we at least chatter—that is, that we utter sighs and groans that show some excessive passion, as if we were on the rack. And God hears these groans—as we see Saint Paul say, that the Holy Spirit stirs us to groanings that cannot be uttered, that is, which cannot be put into words.

If, then, one wished to turn the prayers of the faithful into an art of rhetoric, this would be an abuse—for our Lord humbles us in this very point, so that we should not think to obtain anything from him by fine display. He wants us rather to be so confounded that we have not a single skilful word in our prayers, but that we pour out our groans and gasps, and then remain there utterly speechless: "Alas, my God! Alas, what shall I do?"—and when we thus groan, that we be so tangled up that there is neither beginning nor end to it. When we come to that point, our Lord understands this language, even though we ourselves do not understand it, and though our perplexities prevent us from setting out a coherent thought, and though men too cannot tell what we mean to say—still God, as we have already said, will indeed hear us. This, then, is what we must retain from this passage: that if anguish presses us, however much Satan tries by this means to shut us out entirely so that we do not pray to God at all, but wander lost from him, let us not fail to bring these groanings to God, confused though they may be.

Now Hezekiah goes on to say that he reckoned until evening, and that God broke all his bones, as if he were in the jaws and between the paws of a lion. In saying he reckoned— "well, I will see what happens until night"—but, he says, the affliction overcame him, for he had not yet fully known the

terrible and dreadful power of God when he rises up against a poor creature. Now here we must remember that although we have been taught by the word of God what his power is, and have even felt it by experience, we grasp only the smallest portion of it. For God will rise up in such a way that we shall see all we had thought of him before was but a faint shadow. Let us learn, then, to consider what the power of God is, and to apply all our thoughts and study to it, and to be so moved by it that we walk in fear of him and dread his majesty, knowing that even now he lets us feel only the smallest taste of his power—for if he wished to press us in earnest, we would find that what we had thought before was but distant, almost as if we had only dreamed it. This, then, is what good King Hezekiah wished to express, so that by his example we might learn not to reckon without our host, but to know that the judgments of God, and the corrections he sends to punish the sins of men, are a marvellous thing. Let us not think, then, that we have grasped it all, for our capacity is far too small—rather let us always be led further, so that when God corrects and chastises us, though we are already seized with fear, and even though we are dull of understanding, he still makes us feel something of his majesty and power; let us understand that it is a hundred thousand times greater than our minds can conceive, and that under this we should be all the more moved to fear him.

Now as for this comparison to a lion, it might indeed seem that Hezekiah does God some wrong here—for it is not speaking of him with the reverence he deserves, to compare him to a cruel beast that devours, breaks, crushes, tears, and destroys everything. Now we know that Scripture preaches to us the very opposite of this—namely, that God is kind, compassionate, patient, full of mercy, full of equity and gentleness; in short, that he bears such love for men that he asks only to hold them tenderly as

his own children. Since, then, God declares himself to be such, it might seem that Hezekiah blasphemes in comparing him to a lion. But here the good king did not intend to contend against God; he only declared his own feelings, and did not do so to preach his own praises (as we saw earlier), but preferred to bear this shame until the end of the world, so that his frailty might be known, and that we might draw profitable instruction from it. This, then, is how Hezekiah did not spare himself, but set himself before us as an example, so that we might see how he was seized with terror, and thereby be taught to fear God, and to arm ourselves also with his promises when we come into such troubles, so that we persist in calling upon him. And even if we utterly fail and are confounded, let us nonetheless retain this: to offer ourselves to God and direct our sighs and groans to him. This, then, is what we must retain.

Now it is not without cause that Hezekiah compares God to a lion—for, as we have already seen, all the pains we feel in our bodies, and all the troubles we can conceive, are nothing compared to this apprehension of the wrath of God. That is why we say that spiritual struggles are far more difficult than any temptations we may have. We call spiritual struggles those in which God compels us to look at our sins, and, on the other hand, awakens us in such a way that he makes us think what his wrath is, so that we conceive of him there as our Judge, summoned before him to render account. This, then, is what we call a spiritual struggle, far heavier and more dreadful than all the troubles, anguish, fears, torments, doubts, and perplexities we might have regarding the world. Now when we have come to that point, we should not be astonished that God seems to us like a lion—at least as far as we are able to perceive him—for it is not here a question of this word as applied to the nature of God itself. And when he thus

tormented King Hezekiah, it was not that he had forgotten his goodness and mercy, which he shows him elsewhere—but it was necessary that Hezekiah know himself to be in the hands of God as between the paws and in the jaws of a lion. And we too must come to this point, as I have already said, for otherwise God cannot win us over. There is such arrogance in us that we always think ourselves strong and robust, and can never be brought low except by a great thunderclap, indeed by lightning itself. And we cannot magnify the power of God as we ought—we will speak of it enough, and think something of it too, but not so as to attribute to him an infinite greatness, to be as it were carried away when we think of it, occupying all our senses as it should. Our Lord must, so to speak, transfigure himself—that is, render himself more terrifying than all the lions in the world, and reveal himself to us with such power that we are utterly terrified, as if we saw a hundred deaths before us. For the wrath of God is not merely to make us die, but we see the pits of hell opened when God shows himself as our Judge. It is no wonder, then, if we are seized with such terror, as if a lion were tearing us between its paws and breaking our bones with its teeth, and if we conceive such horror when God is against us.

And this too is the source of all the complaints we see in the Psalms. Those who are not tried in these struggles, these troubles and perplexities, think that David wished to make his suffering seem much greater than it was, or else it seems to them he was too delicate. But when we come to the test ourselves, we feel that there is not a single superfluous word—for the terrors that the faithful feel, when God truly probes them to the quick, surpass anything that can be expressed by the mouth. Let us not think, then, that this comparison used here by King Hezekiah is excessive—for we shall find the majesty of God far more terrifying than all the evils contained here

can express, when it pleases him to call us to account and make us feel that he is our Judge. For if the mountains tremble before him and melt away, how shall we, who are nothing, be able to stand?

Let us note well, then, that whenever God takes from us the taste of his goodness, and we imagine ourselves cut off from his kingdom, and we perceive nothing but our sins—like great piles of wood to kindle the fire of his wrath—let us consider that, being almighty, he must also strike us down and overwhelm us. When we feel these things, we must indeed be utterly overwhelmed, until he raises us up again. And indeed, in a single moment we would be plunged to the very depths of hell, were it not that he holds us firmly by the hand, and that in some secret way we are held back by him, even though we do not see how. Here, then, is a doctrine that should serve us on the one hand to humble us, so that we forget whatever virtue men think they have in themselves, and submit to the majesty of God, being utterly cast down beneath it; and, on the other hand, that we recognise the need and necessity we have of his holding us—indeed in a way beyond our comprehension. And when we think ourselves entirely abandoned by him, forgotten by him, let us be assured that he still holds us by the hand—we may not perceive it, but he does it, nonetheless. And indeed, we could never come out of such a labyrinth except that by his infinite mercy he draws us out of it—just as it is certain that Hezekiah would never have been raised up had God not sustained him inwardly by his Holy Spirit and given him light, while he was in such great troubles.

Now after speaking thus, he adds: “Lord, trouble presses me; relieve me. But what shall I say? He has done it, just as he said.” Here Hezekiah confesses, in sum, that he is defeated as far as he himself is concerned, and that there is no remedy left except that God intervene and stand as his

surety. The word he uses sometimes means “to answer,” which we here call “to stand surety.” One might express it: “Lord, be my surety in this extremity, for I can do no more. You see there is no longer any capacity left in me; you must therefore answer in my place.” This word appears also among the complaints of Job—but it also means “to relieve,” and it all comes to the same thing: as we have already noted, Hezekiah recognises that he has no strength left, and that he must fail as far as he himself is concerned—as if a man declared he had nothing with which to pay what he owes, and so has recourse to God.

Now here we have again a good admonition: that we cannot call upon God as we ought, except when we are brought to the point of utterly emptying ourselves. For as long as men retain some residue of self-reliance, they will certainly call upon God only half-heartedly. We must, then, be so subdued that, being entirely stripped bare, our destitution compels us to seek in God what is lacking in ourselves. This, then, for one point.

Meanwhile, we are warned not to lose heart when God has thus stripped us bare and emptied us of all strength—for we can still address our words to him, following Hezekiah's path: “Lord, I can do no more; I pray you, relieve me.” This, then, is what we must retain from this passage. It is true we are not always pressed in the same way as Hezekiah was—but whatever the case, even if the constraint is not so violent, we must still be stripped and emptied of all false confidence in our own strength, so that God may be glorified as he deserves. And meanwhile, as I have said, let us continue our prayers and petitions; and after being convinced that we have no strength left in ourselves, let us still have recourse to our God, and he will give us what we lack, since in him lies the fullness of all good things.

Now he adds further: “And what shall I say? For he who has spoken, he has also done it.” Here some have thought that Hezekiah wished now to rejoice, sensing the deliverance God had sent him, and that he breaks off all the complaints he had made, now opening his mouth to confess the goodness of God. But the thread of the text does not support this—rather, Hezekiah breaks off his speech to show the anguish that prevents him from continuing as he would have wished. We see many such examples throughout the Psalms, where there is some account of the chastisements God sent to David or his other servants. When God has harshly afflicted his people, there have been such petitions in which the faithful always weave in something, as it were, as if they were at a loss. So it is now with Hezekiah. And there is an entirely similar example in Psalm 39, which we have already cited, for there David likewise recognises that he deals with God. It already meant a great deal to know that men were persecuting him—but when he sees that the hand of God is against him: “I must not,” he says, “come here to plead or bring a case; there is nothing better than to be utterly silent and accept my condemnation.” And in Job too we see many such complaints.

Now let us come to Hezekiah's intent. “What shall I say? It is he who spoke it, and he has also done it.” Earlier he lamented—yet not like those who find no hope at all, for such people will cry out “alas” enough, but all their sighs vanish into the air. In contrast, Hezekiah shows us here that if we want God to hear us, we must lay out all our passions and sorrows before him, so that we may be relieved of them, as is said in the Psalm. Now up to this point Hezekiah has followed this order—laying out the perplexities and anxieties he endured, as if placing them in God's lap. Now he catches himself. “Alas,” he says, “what am I to do? For it is God himself who has

spoken it and done it. He has sent me this message by his prophet, that there is no more hope of life—so it is in vain that I pray to him. What good will all my prayers do? What shall I do? I do not know if he will have pity on me." We see now how Hezekiah is vexed with himself.

Now it is true that such an inner dispute proceeds from unbelief—but it is also necessary that there be some unbelief in us, so that our faith may be all the better tested. And this is not to say, properly speaking, that we are unbelievers when we are thus troubled with anxiety, but rather that our faith is weak, and that our Lord exercises us in such a way that we come to know, meanwhile, who we are, and that without him we would be defeated a hundred thousand times every hour. This, in sum, is what Hezekiah meant to express here. "What shall I say? For I do not feel that the prayer I might offer would be of any use. And why? God presses me hard, and I feel no relief; I am afraid to present myself before him." Yet nevertheless he still hopes his request will not be rejected by God—although he truly knows that when God spoke through the mouth of his prophet, he displayed his hand at the same time; and he experiences that this message is not like some childish threat, but that God has declared and announced war against him, waged as if by fire and sword, so that it seems there is no remedy left.

Now here we have again a good passage showing us that we must defy Satan and all unbelief when it comes to praying to God—so that even if we had a hundred thousand doubts, we should not fail to conclude: "Still I will overcome every obstacle by the power of my God; I will still seek him, even if he repels me, and even if it seems there are a hundred armies to cast me far away, still I will come to him." This, I say, is how we must be armed when it comes to praying to God—for just as we need, in every extremity, to have recourse to our God, so too we must recognise that Satan makes

every effort to prevent us from having access to God, and there is not one of the faithful who does not feel this more than he would wish—but nevertheless, knowing the sickness, let us take the remedy given to us here by God. So, when the devil suggests to us, “What good would it do you to pray to God? Do you think that, in all the poverty you feel in yourself, he would want to help you? And what do you think, miserable creature? To whom are you addressing yourself? Is it not God himself who persecutes you?”—let us press on nonetheless, and strive to break through all such hindrances, trampling underfoot all such extravagant arguments.

Further, it will happen that even when we are somewhat at rest, if we lift our thoughts to God, this immediately comes to mind: “Alas, who are we? Would we dare now address ourselves to God? How many times have we offended him?” And on this basis, we sometimes resolve to hold back. Yet such inner disputes are quite harmful—for they amount to so many blasphemies, were God to hold them against us; just as when we enter into question or doubt whether we shall be heard or not, this is certainly a mortal offence, and if God did not bear with us in our weaknesses, we could be overwhelmed by it. But whatever the case, after condemning ourselves, after feeling that our spirit is entangled in many doubts—in short, that it is a labyrinth—let us nevertheless take courage, and after saying, “Alas, what shall I do?” let us break off that thought to say instead: “Still I must pray and seek my God—and why? For he has said that he will hear those who call upon him, even from the depths of the abyss. Now here I am; this, then, is the fitting time to address myself to him.” This, then, is what we must retain from this teaching of Hezekiah: when we see these broken-off statements, this chattering, when we see his passions so excessive that they trouble him, let us recognise that God wished here to show us a mirror in

which we might contemplate our own weaknesses and the temptations to which we are subject, so as to fight against them, and to persevere always until we feel the relief he promises us—as indeed we shall feel it, provided there is true perseverance, and that we do not fail through our own laziness and sloth in the middle of the way.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our faults, praying that he may more and more make us feel them, until we are truly stripped of them. And though there is always much to be found wanting in us, let us nevertheless not cease to hope in his mercy; and may he grant that we taste it so fully, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that it may give us true patience in all our afflictions, and that we may be so held in his obedience that we ask nothing other than to offer ourselves to him and be wholly sanctified in him. May it please him to grant this grace not only to us, but to all peoples and nations, etc.

THIRD SERMON

Isaiah 38

15. What shall I say? He who spoke it has also done it. I shall walk quietly all the days of my life in the bitterness of my soul. 16. Lord, to all who will live on, the life of my spirit will be made known in them, in that you have made me sleep, and have brought me to life. 17. Behold, in my prosperity bitterness was bitter to me; and you have loved my soul so as to draw it back from the grave, since you have cast my sins behind your back.

We have already shown earlier that good King Hezekiah, complaining that it is God who persecutes him, is more confounded on that account than he would be if he had all the men of the world as enemies, and they had conspired to torment him—for it is a far harder thing, one that ought to astonish us beyond comparison more, if God rises up against us than if all creatures made war on us. This is why Hezekiah remains confounded and troubled, feeling that what God had declared to him through his prophet Isaiah is now accomplished in him. For this too touches us more keenly when we compare the word of God with what we feel of his judgments. If God simply struck us, we might be stunned by it—but when he adds his

word to rebuke us, so that we know it is he who chastises us, indeed because of our sins, this causes all the greater confusion.

So Hezekiah says specifically that as God spoke, so he has also done. And on this he concludes that he has no reply to make. For when dealing with mortal men, we might well voice our complaints—but when it comes to accusing God, he will always win his case. We may plead for a time, but he will always be justified after condemning us. It is, then, wasted time to imagine we can improve our situation if we do not accept condemnation before God, but instead try to resist and resort to murmuring and complaints. All that will do is aggravate our trouble, until we are utterly overwhelmed. Let our mouths, then, be closed, as it is said in Job—for this is what good King Hezekiah understood in this passage.

He then adds that all the time of his life he will walk with a trembling gait, moving gently like a man cast down, dragging his legs, indeed in the bitterness of his soul. Here Hezekiah declares that God has so engraved the feeling of this correction, and imprinted it so deeply in his heart, that the memory of it will never be erased. It may often happen (and we experience it more than we should) that when God presses us, we are utterly astonished, we groan; further, when it comes to confessing our faults with humility, it is a marvel to hear us. In short, we are not sparing with words, whether to show the greatness of our suffering, or to declare our faults, or to bless the name of God. But we merely shake our ear, as they say, shortly after, and from one day to the next, once God has given us some relief or rest, we think no more of it.

This, then, is how men are: they seek God (as is said in the prophet) while he draws them as if by force—then they call upon him and confess their debt, as we have said—but as soon as God spares them, there they are as

before; they lift their heads like stags, they do nothing but play, whereas before they were so utterly cast down, with such a terrified face; in short, there was nothing but anguish, and immediately afterward it is all feasting; they return to their pleasures, and what is more, it seems they wish openly to defy God. We see, then, this inconstancy, this fickleness and lightness, in almost all men. In contrast, Hezekiah says here that it is not only for the present time that he knows God chastises him, but that as long as he lives in the world he will always remember the chastisement he has received, and will walk, as it were, with a trembling gait. For the word he uses sometimes means "to go gently," and sometimes means "to be shaken." In sum, he means that he will never again have a firm, steady step, but will be so weakened that it will be as if a man had been pulled from the grave—like one who has been sick a long time and can scarcely drag his limbs; even if he shows himself in the streets, one can see clearly that he is spent; and even when he stands, he will nearly always have a tottering way about him.

We see now, in sum, what King Hezekiah meant to say. By this we are admonished not to find it strange if God sometimes afflicts us far more harshly than we would wish—for we have not yet profited enough from his rods until we are truly humbled for the whole of our life. Who among us will find this true of himself? Let each of us now examine whether, a month after God has shown him mercy, he has still recognised his faults and still trembles at them. On the contrary, as I have already said, we ask for nothing but to erase all memory of it, for it seems to us a matter for melancholy. Since, then, we so easily forget the rods of God, it should not astonish us if, having chastised us once, he returns to do so a second time, showing himself so harsh that we do not know what to do. What we must do, then, is this: during corrections, and when we are in anguish, let us bear the rigor of

God patiently, knowing that it is not without cause that he deals with us with such excessive harshness, but because he knows we need it. This for one point.

And for the second: let us strive to rouse ourselves on account of the laziness that is in us, for we are so slack and so cold that it is a pity. Let us, then, think carefully during affliction about all our offenses, so as to have a feeling and an apprehension of them engraved deep in our hearts. And when God has delivered us, let us still think of this, so that the sense of our wrongdoing is not merely for a day or a short while—but, as we desire that God bear with us and grant us some leisure to bless his Name and rejoice in him, let us so conduct ourselves that he is not compelled always to strike us as if we were donkeys, seeing our indifference and our slowness. Let us, then, get ahead of the rods of God, unless we wish them to remain forever fixed on our backs.

Meanwhile, note that Hezekiah, though he trembled so, did not fail to be sustained by the hand of God, and to seek relief in God, knowing well that God was favourable to him. But these two things agree well together: that on the one hand the faithful are always anxious, fearing to stumble a second and third time when there has already been a fatal fall; and yet, on the other hand, that they take courage, and trust in God to walk forward boldly, knowing that he will never fail them.

This, then, is what we must practice: on the one hand, thinking of our sins and offenses, being moved with horror at seeing that we have deserved to have God rise up against us, so that this makes us bow down, gives us a trembling gait, so that we can scarcely walk. This is how we ought to be cast down and humbled under the hand of God. For it is not a matter here of being too stubborn—rather, we must recognise that the chief virtue of the

faithful, when God afflicts and punishes them, is to be as if annihilated, and yet, while dragging our limbs, to still keep moving forward, since it pleases God to show us mercy, and knowing that even though we have offended him, he nevertheless wishes to continue his goodness toward us, wanting to give us courage—and that on the other hand we should therefore be cheerful. This, in sum, is what we must retain here from Hezekiah.

Afterward he adds that bitterness came bitterly to him in his prosperity. Here he aggravates the suffering he felt, since he had been seized by it suddenly, thinking himself at rest and free from affliction—whereas, on the contrary, we know that what is foreseen from afar will be borne more patiently. For what is it that discourages us in affliction, if not that each of us, during prosperity, persuades himself that all will go well? If a man thought of the death of his father, or his wife, or his children, if he thought his whole life subject to so many calamities, he would certainly be armed against every temptation and would not be so terrified when they came—but because each of us deceives himself with vain hope, this is what troubles us beyond measure when our Lord sends us some adversity. Now Hezekiah confesses that this is what happened to him, and that is why he says his bitterness was all the more bitter because it came to him in his prosperity. For we have already seen how God had afflicted him to the utmost—when he was stripped of his kingdom, and the whole country was plundered by his enemies. He was besieged in the city of Jerusalem, harassed there, mocked, subjected to every insult and reproach possible—even the name of God was vilely blasphemed. Hezekiah, then, was utterly confounded. Then God delivered him miraculously, as if descending from heaven to his aid. Seeing this great defeat wrought by the hand of the Angel, he rejoiced, and not without reason—for God gave him cause,

having shown such a sign of favour toward him, as if he had reformed the whole world at his word. But there was a fault nonetheless: he no longer thought of his past affliction, and rested too much—that is, he grew careless. That is why he now says that his bitterness came upon him in the midst of his peace and prosperity.

Now here we have a very useful admonition: that when we recognise the graces of God, we ought indeed to rejoice, but without forgetting the past, and keeping our true condition always before our eyes for the future—namely, that it takes but the turn of a hand for our life to become death, and our light darkness, as we see the various changes in this frail life. In short, let us magnify the goodness of God so greatly, when he assures us that he will maintain us in peace and ease, that we still always consider our own frailty, and are not so dazzled when God blesses us and sends us everything to our liking that it lulls us too much to sleep—but let each of us be prepared, whenever it pleases him to send us some change, to receive whatever he wishes to send in fear, humility, and full patience. If we do this, we shall not find the hand of God as grievous or heavy as we are accustomed to think. But when we grow too drowsy, even while recognizing the grace of God we presently enjoy, he will have to wake us, indeed pull our ear quite roughly, or even strike us hard blows. We have the example of this here in King Hezekiah, as also in David. For in Psalm thirty, David confesses that he had become so intoxicated that his prosperity had made him forget his condition: “I said in my abundance, I shall never be shaken.” And how could that be? David had had so many goads to prick him, had been so thoroughly trained always to think about what human life is, and had made such good use of it—for he had been for a long time as if in the shadow of death, persecuted by the whole people, held captive among

his enemies, scarcely having a moment's rest. Yet when God set him upon the royal seat, he concluded that he would never be moved, and would dwell there in peace forever.

If David—having the Spirit of God in such excellence as we know, having had so many trials to be entirely devoted to God—could nevertheless so forget himself, what will become of us? He then adds: “It was upon your free goodness that I leaned, Lord; you had established me as upon a mountain, but you turned away your face, and here I am troubled.” Thus he shows his own ingratitude in this—for although he had not entirely forgotten the blessings he had received from the hand of God, he still did not think: “God has delivered me once, so that I should always have recourse to him,” recognizing that his life hangs as if by a thread, unless its foundation rests in God's goodness, which works from minute to minute—and confessing that it would soon be over for him if God did not continue to help him. David did not think of this—and so he recognises that he had failed, and then adds: “Lord, you have hidden your face, and here I am troubled.” So it is with Hezekiah. He is at peace, and suddenly God wounds him, so that the wound is mortal, and he can conceive nothing but such terror, as if God had struck him with lightning from heaven. He must, then, receive a terrible bitterness.

Now let us apply this doctrine for our profit and not wait for God to make us recognise our weakness by force of blows—but even while he spares us, and has pity on our frailty, let us not fail to think of him, and to fear him, keeping ourselves hidden as under his wings, knowing that we could not survive a single minute except by his help. And further, if we are sometimes caught by surprise, let us recognise that it is because we had grown far too drowsy.

He then adds that God has delivered his soul. But he uses an expression that carries even more force. He says: “You have loved my soul,” or “you took your good pleasure in it,” so as to draw it back from the grave. By this circumstance he magnifies the goodness of God all the more, because God came seeking him even into the grave. For if God merely sustains us, it is true we recognise that we are indebted to him, but rather coldly—but if he delivers us from death, then we perceive far better how good he is, in that in such extremity he descended, as it were, even to us. For it seems to us there is hardly any great obligation if God merely preserves us in this life, because we take that as a natural order of things. It is true we ought all the more, when he spares us, to feel his fatherly goodness—but we do not; and so, because of our dullness, God must work in a different way.

So then, as I have already said, if God draws us back as if from the grave, if we have been as it were abandoned for a time, and it seemed we were cut off from all hope, even that men would not deign to look at us, as though we were poor rotting carcasses—if, in that state, God has pity on us, in this he gives all the greater lustre to his mercy, and we have all the more occasion to recognise what infinite goodness and justice it is that God has thus drawn us back from death. This is what Hezekiah meant to say. “Lord,” he says, “you have loved my soul.” And how could that be? Was there anything in it that could incite God to love it? Alas, no—for it was nothing but a shadow, a dead thing. “I was,” he says, “in the grave, and it was then that you declared your love toward me.” When, then, we are utterly disfigured, and God nevertheless deigns to cast his eye upon us and care for us, we ought all the more to be inflamed to bless his name, and to render him such praise as good King Hezekiah renders here. This, then, in sum, is what we must retain from this passage: since God sees that we are not

sufficiently moved by the good he does us and by his graces, it is necessary that we be so cast down, and in such extremity, that there is no more hope of life—and even when we are as if rejected by him and by men, that then he receive us into mercy. This is how we are truly moved to give him thanks, knowing that he found in us nothing but our miseries when he displayed his mercy.

Now he says further, on another point: "Lord, those who live on will know that the life of my spirit has been prolonged." It is true that this passage, being very brief, is obscure—for it is not a sentence laid out fully, but consists almost of broken words. In sum, he says: "Lord, they will live among themselves, and in them all, the life of my spirit; you have made me sleep, and you have brought me to life." Because he does not speak here of years at the start of the verse, and does not specify who will live on, this causes the brevity—but when we look closely, it is certain that Hezekiah meant that the miracle worked in his own person would be known not only for a day, but even after his death. Some interpret this as meaning that God will likewise prolong the life of others—but that would not fit the sense at all. For Hezekiah did not mean to say this was some common or ordinary blessing; rather, he sensed that God had worked toward him in an extraordinary way. This, then, is the drift of his statement: that this miracle of God will never be trampled underfoot, but that even after he is dead, people will still speak of it. Earlier he had said, "I shall remember all the days of my life that I was chastised, and shall feel the blows, for I shall go about as one trembling." Now he extends what he had said more broadly and fully—namely, that not only will he be humbled before God, but that the whole world will have occasion to say, "Here is an act worthy of everlasting memory that God has done for a man." For we too ought to

desire that all the good things God bestows upon us be made known to others, so that they may take example from them and be edified by them.

And we see that when God wishes to be moved to answer our requests, he almost always adds this reasoning: that everyone will consider it, that the good will be edified by it, and the wicked confounded. “Lord,” one says, “when it is seen that you thus assist your own, all who call upon you will rejoice, and be all the more confirmed, awaiting the same for themselves—and then the wicked will be confounded; and though they now mock the trust I place in you, seeing that you have afflicted me, if they see that I was not disappointed in having recourse to you, they will be astonished.” Hezekiah likewise says as much now—namely, that this miracle of God will profit not only himself but everyone else, as indeed it has become known and notorious everywhere. And he further amplifies that this will not be for a short time only, but that even after his death, since his life was thus prolonged, it will be spoken of forever—“for,” he says, “you have made me sleep.” This word “made to sleep” implies that he was as if in the grave, and then that he was brought to life—just as, indeed, this miracle is still celebrated today in the Church of God and will be until the end of the world.

Thus we see how this did not benefit one person alone, but was a confirmation in general to all the faithful, so that they might expect God to have pity on them in their need and come to their aid—and that even if he does not prolong their life in the same manner, he will nevertheless keep them until the end, and if he sees them cast down, he will raise them up; he will give them some sign of his compassion, so that in life and in death they will always feel him to be their Savior, and will know that they have not

been forsaken or abandoned by him. This, too, is the purpose this Song has served, and the intention with which it was composed.

Now we too ought to have a disposition like Hezekiah's—namely, that as far as it lies in us, we strive to make the graces of God known to the whole world, even when they concern us personally. For when God does good to each one of us, we must not merely thank him in secret, feeling ourselves indebted to him, but strive to make this known publicly, so that others may be confirmed and hope in God, seeing such approval of his goodness toward those who call upon him—and also so that praise for it may be rendered to him in common, as Saint Paul says that when the faithful everywhere praise God for someone's deliverance, and this thanksgiving resounds, this will be a reason for God to deliver that person all the more, so that praise may likewise be rendered to him by many. It is true that we will often preach the graces of God as we have felt them ourselves, but many will do so as much out of ambition as hypocrisy—for while pretending to magnify the name of God, they draw a portion of the praise to themselves. Let us guard against this, and have a right and pure disposition, so that each may learn to look to God and place his hope entirely in him—and further, that we may have such zeal and ardour that all creatures keep us company when it comes to blessing the name of God. And further, when God has as it were put us to death, and then brought us back to life again by his grace, let this move us all the more to praise him. It is true there is no good so small that it does not merit thanksgiving; and even if we devoted all our senses to thanking God merely for nourishing us, we still could not discharge even the hundredth part of our duty. But if God uses a more remarkable way to declare his favour toward us, and the good things he does for us are almost wondrous and incomprehensible to men, our

obligation grows all the greater, and we have all the less excuse unless we are then inflamed to praise him with full voice, and to proclaim everywhere the goodness he has made us feel.

After this, Hezekiah adds that God has cast his sins behind his back. Here he brings us back to what we saw earlier—namely, that what he endured was the payment owed for his faults, and that now, God being favourable to him, this was because God had hidden and buried his offenses, which had brought him all this suffering. Now this statement well deserves to be noted—for, as we explained earlier, even though we know well that adversities do not come upon us by chance, but that it is the hand of God that strikes us, we still cannot come to the cause of it as we should. This is partly because each of us flatters himself in his vices, and partly because we do not enter into judgment or examination of our life to know whether it is well ordered—for it displeases us to be tormented of our own accord. And yet we must come to this, for it is the true sign of repentance when men, of themselves, search out their sins, not waiting for God to force them to it, but presenting themselves before him and summoning themselves, needing neither sergeant nor officer, but examining themselves to say: "Alas! How have I lived? How do I stand with God?" When, then, men of their own accord come to such self-knowledge, they thereby show that God has touched them by his Holy Spirit—but this, as I have said, is a rare thing. For on the one hand, hypocrisy prevents us from examining our vices and having them uncovered—we always want to flee that shame, and we even hide our wrongdoing; indeed, we call evil good, and persuade ourselves we have not offended God, or else we minimize our faults as if they were nothing, as if it were enough merely to wipe our mouths. This is how we are

carried away by the pride and ambition rooted in our nature, when we do not come straightforwardly to God, recognizing what we are.

And on the other hand, we wish to flee all sadness, as this is naturally an unpleasant thing. Now there is no sadness so great as when we think that God is our Judge, and that we are wrongdoers before him—for there we feel what was said earlier, that he breaks our bones like a lion; the wrath of God is so terrible a thing that it is no wonder we flee from it. And yet this is a vice nonetheless, for we must not resemble those who are so dulled that they refuse entirely to think about what they have deserved from God—that is, the chastisements they merit. For this reason, all the more must we note this teaching, where Hezekiah, by his example, leads us back to recognise our sins whenever our Lord deals harshly with us—that we should know not only that it is his hand that afflicts us, but also that he is then bringing his case against us, rebuking us for the offenses we have committed; and since we were unwilling of our own accord to come and accept condemnation before him and ask his pardon, he must draw us to it by force. This is the first thing we must retain from this passage.

Now the second is that when God withdraws his hand, which we had seen weighing heavily upon us, this is a sign showing us that he is favourable to us, and no longer wishes to hold our sins against us. It is true that sometimes God, after having afflicted the wicked and the reprobate, will simply leave them there, and they will make merry more than before, as we have already said—but here Hezekiah shows us how we ought to feel the goodness of God when he grants us some relief, when he raises us up from some illness, delivers us from some danger, relieves us in poverty, and when, having had some trouble or vexation, he draws us out of it. If, then, we are distressed and grieved, it is not enough merely to feel the trouble—

we must look to the main point, and come, as it were, to the source. A small child, when it cries, is appeased as soon as it is given the breast. And why? It suckles, and there it is content—for it has no thought beyond its hunger, does not even know where the milk comes from, and feels no gratitude toward the one who gives it sustenance, for it has neither sense nor reason. But a man who has already come to the age of discretion, when he sees his father angry with him, saying, "Go, wretch, get out of my house," certainly feels this regret pierce him more to the quick—being thus rejected by his father—than enduring hunger and thirst and every poverty imaginable. Now if the father afterward forgives him, at the request of some friends, or is moved to it seeing his son displeased at having offended him, and says to him, "Come back, have dinner"—if the child has any sense, he will care less about dining than about being restored to his father's grace and love, so that he would rather fast and endure hunger and thirst than ever give his father occasion to reject him again; and he is far more pleased that his father has forgiven him than he would be by eating and drinking his fill.

Let us now apply this to our own use. Most people are like small children: if God is quickly appeased toward them, and withdraws his hand so that they no longer have outward cause for grief, then they rejoice, and say, "Praised be God, who has delivered me from this illness"—but in saying "praised be God," they do not think of him at all; they do not come to any recognition of their sins, and do not consider the reason why God had afflicted them; nor do they recognise, when they are relieved, that it is because he loves them and is favourable to them. And yet this is where all their joy ought to be directed, rather than simply saying, "Here I am, feeling better." One who has been in some danger, if he sees himself delivered from it, is glad no longer to be in that torment he was in—but does he consider

that the chief good and the sovereign happiness of men is to be reconciled to God? No—that never comes to mind. All the more, then, must we hold on to this teaching, where Hezekiah does not merely say, "I am now standing again, and God has raised me up, my life has been prolonged," as he had said earlier—but he stops there entirely to say, in effect: "God has forgiven my faults, he has received me into mercy, he does not hold against me the offenses I have committed; he has granted me such remission that now I am pleasing to him. He no longer wishes to bring a case against me as my Judge, for he has forgotten all my sins, and has cast them behind his back."

This, then, is where Hezekiah leads us by his example. And so, whenever we are afflicted by the hand of God, let us learn always to examine our sins—and when we ask God to deliver us, let us not put the cart before the horse, but pray that he receive us into mercy. And though we may have deserved a thousand times more affliction than he makes us endure, let us know that he does not fail to be favourable to us nonetheless—and when he has restored us, let us render him praise, not only for the good he does us in body, but for what is far more precious: that he has forgotten all our offenses, and has so fully returned to grace with us that he accepts us as his own children, because he turns his face away from our sins. For as long as God looks upon our sins, he can regard us only with disdain, and there is nothing but horror in it. It is necessary, then, that in order to look upon us with a favourable and gracious face, God must first have forgotten our sins, and think of them no more. It is true that when we speak of God in this way, it is in the manner of human speech—for we know that everything is present before God. But when we say that he must forget our sins, that he

no longer looks upon them, this is to express that he no longer wishes to call us to account for them, but loves us as if we had never offended him.

Further, by this manner of speaking that Hezekiah uses, we see what the remission of our sins truly is—namely, that God casts them behind his back, and casts them there in such a way that he no longer punishes us for them and demands no vengeance for them; and this is well worth noting. For the devil has always striven to obscure this doctrine, because it is the chief point of our salvation, and (as Scripture shows us) there is no other righteousness or holiness than this free remission of sins. "Blessed is the man," says David, "whose sins are forgiven." Saint Paul says that by this we see what our righteousness is, and that David made a brief summary of it. For this reason, the devil has always tried, by subtle means, to divert men from this, so that they would not recognise how much they need this remission of sins. As in the Papacy, we see on the one hand that they say when God forgives our sins, it is only along with repentance and confession, and beyond that, we must still bring some recompense—and that if God forgives the guilt, he reserves the punishment as Judge; and that it would derogate from his majesty if we said he forgave purely and fully, and that he must always show some rigor along with his mercy, or else it would strip him of his nature. This is how the Papists have argued about the remission of sins, such that if one tells them God forgives our faults out of his pure goodness, this seems to them a blasphemy. For, they say, we must bring our own satisfactions. And what are these? Works beyond measure, which we do over and above what God commands in his Law. These are truly detestable notions—but be that as it may, the poor world has been thus intoxicated by such sorceries. All the more, then, must we carefully note the passages where it is said that God, in receiving us into mercy, no longer

wishes to enter into any account with us, as Hezekiah says here: “You have put my sins behind your back.” It is true that God has neither a back nor a stomach, for we know his essence is infinite and spiritual—but he uses this figure of speech to signify that he forgives our sins; just as when it is said that he casts them into the depths of the sea, it is as if he no longer wished to remember them, nor have them spoken of, nor make any mention of them at all.

We see, then, in sum, that when God receives us, being reconciled with us, it is not only to forgive us the guilt (as the Papists have imagined, and as they babble without reason), but it is so as to make us feel his favour in every way, and to pursue us no more—and instead of our being afflicted by his hand, which gave testimony of his wrath, he now makes us know, on the contrary, that he holds us as his children, and wishes to treat us tenderly, showing the love he bears us. This, in sum, is what Hezekiah meant, using this manner of speaking, that God had put all his sins behind his back.

Now it is true that often, even though God has forgiven our faults, he will not fail to chastise us, as happened to David—but he does this only for our good and profit, so that we may walk all the more carefully in the future. I have already said that God sends his punishments in such a way that some mark always remains, to make us remember. God, then, will indeed afflict us even while being favourable to us—but these two things are not incompatible: that he puts our sins behind his back, receives us into mercy at the same time, and makes us prosper by his blessing, while nevertheless not wishing to nourish us in our laziness, but rather to awaken us and make us feel some sign of his displeasure, so as to forestall worse. And yet, if he wishes to declare to us fully the remission of our sins, he will indeed sometimes give us outward signs of it—that is, he will give us such a taste

of his goodness that we shall perceive he has truly shown us mercy, and that it would be impossible for him to treat us with such grace and kindness unless he no longer wished to examine our faults, but released us fully and completely, asking only that we walk with him in agreement, truly reconciled to his majesty.

This, then, is how God declares to us the remission of our sins—not only by his word, and inwardly by his Holy Spirit, but also by the fruits, that is, when by his blessing he makes us prosper, and treats us so gently that we are convinced he deals with us in fatherly goodness. When, then, we have these signs, let us boldly conclude that God has forgiven our sins, and has put them behind his back, never to examine them again, nor ever remember them. Thus, then, whenever we are afflicted by the hand of God, let us remember that he has shown himself good not only toward those he has drawn back from this world, who at other times endured harsh and painful afflictions, but that he has also forgiven them their sins—and let us know that he will show the same goodness toward us. In doing so, we shall learn to humble ourselves for the future, and the grace of God will shine all the brighter, in that he will not only have treated us with all gentleness in body, but will also not have held our faults against us, showing us that although we had provoked his wrath, and given him occasion to leave us forever in our miseries, he nevertheless does not wish to treat us with rigor, but wishes to draw us to himself by his infinite goodness and mercy.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our faults, praying that he may more and more make us feel them, and that this may humble us in such a way that, coming to him, we bring nothing but a pure and simple confession of our sins; and that meanwhile he may give us such a taste of his goodness that we do not cease

to have recourse to him, even when our consciences accuse and condemn us, so that we embrace the grace he has promised us in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and whenever he makes us feel it by experience, that we know how to profit from it, and be so armed against every temptation that we never fail beneath the burden, however grievous and heavy it may be. May it please him to grant this grace not only to us, but to all peoples, etc.

FOURTH SERMON

Isaiah 38

18. For the grave will not sing to you, and the dead will not praise you, and those who are brought down into the pit will not look for your truth. 19. The living, the living shall sing of you, as I do today: the father shall make known your truth to his children. 20. The Lord is here to save me: and we shall sing, all the days of our life, a song in the Temple of the Lord. 21. Isaiah said, Let them take a mass of figs, and make a plaster of it upon the wound, and he shall be healed. 22. Now Hezekiah had said, What sign shall I have that I am to go up to the house of the Lord?

It is quite certain that if our life were ordered as it should be, we would always have this as our chief aim, while we are in the world, to honour God. And indeed, it is only right to devote all our study to this, since without end and without ceasing we experience so many graces from him. For this reason, Hezekiah, having now recognised that God had prolonged his life, and had shown him such singular love, says that with all the greater courage he will magnify the name of God, to render thanks for such a benefit. And he adds specifically that it will not be only while he himself is

in the world that he will strive to have God blessed, but that for his successors too he will make sure it is always known how God has dealt with him. And finally, in conclusion, he says that God alone is our Saviour, and that if we rest in him, our salvation will be certain and infallible. But meanwhile one might find it strange that he says the dead will not praise God in the grave—for it seems he values and recognises no other goodness of God except when God sustains men in this frail life.

Now if we look only to what is here below, our faith will indeed be weak, and we know that we live under no other condition than to taste, in part, the goodness of God, so as to be drawn higher, and even to be wholly caught up into the heavenly life. It might seem, then, that Hezekiah is too attached to the world, and has no apprehension at all of the spiritual kingdom of God. For in saying that the grave cannot praise God, nor those who have died, it seems he has regard for nothing but this present life. And we know it is said, first, that God wishes to be glorified in our death just as much as in our life. And Saint Paul, for this reason, says that it matters not to him whether he lives or dies, provided the glory of God is always advanced by it. It might seem there is great difference between Saint Paul and Hezekiah —for the one flees death and holds it in horror, arguing that the dead will not praise God, while the other says, “It is all one to me whether I live or die, for God will always be glorified in me.” And if we consider the state of the dead, as they are withdrawn from the world and drawn near to God, it might seem they are even better disposed and more eager to bless his Name. For while we are here weighed down in this prison of our body, we can scarcely open our mouths, so to speak, to praise God; we do not go about it with such free courage or such vehement zeal as would be required. Now the dead are not so hindered; they are not, as we are, absent from God (as

Saint Paul speaks of it in Second Corinthians)—they can therefore all the better join in this melody with the choirs of paradise. And we know what is said of the Angels (as we also saw in the sixth chapter) that ceaselessly they cry, “Blessed be the Lord of hosts, Holy, Holy, Holy.” So, as far as we can judge, those whom God has withdrawn from this frail life ought to be better prepared to praise his Name.

But let us note first of all that Hezekiah here considered why God has placed us in the world, and why he sustains us in it. God asks no recompense from us: he is not like a man who places servants in his household in order to work his lands and profit from them. Nor is he like a great prince who wants many subjects, so as to be maintained by them and have their help when needed. But God expects no advantage from us, just as he has no need of us; he asks only that we render him homage for the many benefits he bestows on us. For our whole life ought to relate, as we have already touched on, to this end: that we bless God, and bear witness that his benefits have not been wasted on us, as they would be if we were, as it were, mute.

This, then, is what we must observe: that Hezekiah, in saying that the living will praise God, meant to note that men pervert the order of nature when they do not apply themselves to praising God, and that their ingratitude is in no way excusable when they bury God's graces and forget them. Since, then, our Lord seeks nothing from us except that his Name be glorified in this world, it should not astonish us that Hezekiah says, “The living, the living shall praise God.” And we must also note the difference between the condition of the living and of the dead. Even if the dead do praise God, we cannot judge or imagine that they are gathered together in our manner, to show forth an outward accord of their faith. Each of them

may well praise God individually, but this is not to say they are gathered into one body as we are now, for Scripture says nothing of that. We must not forge fantasies in our own heads as seems good to us. For we know that God reserves for the last day this perfection—that we shall all be united, so joined to our God that his glory shines fully in us. Since, then, the dead do not have such a way of exercising themselves in praising God as we do, that is why it is said that this properly belongs to us the living.

But there is more still, for Hezekiah does not here speak simply of death in general, as we have already noted, but he qualifies it—as if he had been cut off from the Church of God and from all hope of salvation, had that judgment come to be carried out; or as if he had stood before his Judge. Hezekiah, then, was not merely preparing to die, as by nature none of us can escape that necessity, but he had this testimony of God's wrath, by which he was as terrified as if all were lost for him. Now we know that no one can sing the praises of God unless he has occasion and matter for it—for when our Lord shows us a terrible countenance, our mouths are closed, we are seized with such anguish that it is impossible for us to bless him; rather, on the contrary, there will be nothing but gnashing of teeth when the wrath of God has so astonished us. Such, then, was Hezekiah's state.

By contrast, when God shows himself favourable toward us, and gives us some sign of his favour, he opens our mouths, as is said in Psalm fifty-one: “Lord, you have opened my mouth, and so I will sing your praises”; and in other passages, “Lord, you have put a new song in my mouth.” By this the prophets signify that when God has gladdened them by delivering them from some evil, he has by that very means exhorted them to sing his praises and bless his Name, and to remember his graces. Thus, then, when we apprehend nothing but sheer terror in God, we are as if stunned, and the

door is shut, so that we cannot praise God at all. So, Hezekiah, in this passage, saying that the dead will not praise God, does not mean in general all those who depart this transitory life, but those who are as it were cut off from God, overwhelmed by his wrath, no longer tasting anything of his goodness, and stripped and estranged from all hope of salvation. It is impossible, then, for such people to praise God.

There is yet another point to note. For when the faithful are held and oppressed by some distress, they can scarcely see anything except their own suffering, and each of us experiences this all too well in ourselves. When some affliction has utterly cast us down, we cannot apply our minds to anything else, for we are held there as in a narrow prison. So it was with Hezekiah. As also when it is said in Psalm eighty-eight, that the state of the dead is a land of forgetting, where nothing is known of God—it might well seem a blasphemy. But such ways of speaking arise from the roughness and weakness of men, in that they cannot compose themselves to judge with a settled mind, and to have a clear and well-considered understanding; rather, their suffering presses and carries them away so that they speak, as it were, at random and in confusion. So Job says that men, once withdrawn from this world, have no more care, that each is at rest as if there were a confused mingling, that servant and master are all one, and that tyrants no longer cause fear. He speaks of the state of the dead as if death abolished everything. Yet this was not truly his considered judgment—rather, his sorrow did not allow him to speak like a man at peace, for he had been so agitated by distress that his words wandered.

We may think the same of Hezekiah. He does not speak of the state and condition of the dead as Scripture teaches us. And why? His sorrow and the horror he felt so dominated him that he did not know where he stood. It is

true this is not to be excused—and that is also why our Lord gives us mirrors of our own frailty, when we see even the holiest and most perfect men speak this way. But meanwhile God bore with Hezekiah, because the main thing remained true in him—as we have already seen, his aim was directed to this: to glorify the name of God. For he would rather have died a hundred times than live a single minute in this world profaning, through ingratitude, the good things God did for him. Here, then, is Hezekiah holding to this rule: that men ought not to desire even a single day of life except so that God may be glorified by it. But meanwhile, the fact that he was so agitated by such great troubles that he could not speak distinctly as he ought—this comes from his weakness, which God excuses and bears with; for it is not disobedience, since there are many extravagant things in our prayers. It is true we must always conform to the rule given us, so that no one prays to God however he pleases, according to his own whim. But be that as it may, we will have regrets and complaints in us that exceed proper measure, and God must have pity on us in this regard.

This, then, in sum, is what we must retain: that above all, in living, we should always aim at this end, that God be honoured. For this is also why he has placed us in this world, this is why he has chosen us to be of his flock—namely, so that we might be gathered together to sing his praises in one accord. We see this even more clearly in Psalm one hundred fifteen, where there is a similar statement. And indeed it is not just one man speaking there, but the whole body of the Church of the faithful, who say that God will not be praised in death—but that we the living, they say, until the end, will confess that God has preserved us. There it is signified to us that God will always preserve his Church until the end of the world, and that there will always be some remnant of a people. Why? Because he wishes to be

known as Father and Savior among men, and though it be not the greatest multitude, he still wishes to have some company to bless him.

Let us learn, then, to exercise ourselves in blessing the name of God, while he keeps us here below, and while we are nourished by his generosity, and—what is more—since he has called us to himself, always tending toward the hope of the eternal inheritance. Since this is so, let us devote all our effort to this, indeed for the whole of our life. For if we do otherwise, it would be better that our mothers had miscarried us, or that the earth had opened to swallow us up, than to be here gorging ourselves like brute beasts, remaining ungrateful for so many benefits God bestows on us, and letting his praise be buried by our silence. This for one point.

And further, let us always be ready, following the example of Saint Paul, to glorify God whether by life or by death. If we are sometimes troubled, as good King Hezekiah was, let us recognise that all our regrets, complaints, and groanings ought to be suspect to us, because we cannot keep proper measure in them, on account of the frailty in us. Thus, what is said here—that the dead will not praise God—must not be drawn by us into a general principle, so as to argue our case when it pleases God to call us to himself; let us not make this excuse under the pretext of Hezekiah, or of David who spoke similarly in Psalm six, or of the whole people, as we have just cited. For there was excess in it—since both David and Hezekiah, and in general the whole Church, at a time of horrible devastation, were tempted to think that God wished to reject them, disown them, and have no more dealings with them. Since they had thus, in their own minds, withdrawn from God, they were confounded, and this is not to be wondered at. But let us not draw a rule from this, as if we could do the same, but let it rather teach us to recognise our own weakness. And further, even though God bears with us,

let us not indulge ourselves in such a fault. This, then, is what we must retain.

Now, meanwhile, we are admonished that, insofar as God makes us feel his graces, our hearts should be enlarged and our mouths opened to bless his Name. And conversely, that we shall never be able to utter a single word to his praise proceeding from good and free affection unless we are persuaded that God is favourable to us, and that we make good use of the good things we receive from his hand. As to the first point, let each of us learn to stir himself up according to the tally he makes of God's graces, for their number is infinite. There is not one of us who, if he thought duly of himself, would not be overwhelmed—as it is said in Psalm forty, that if we wished to number the testimonies God gives us of his fatherly care and mercy, there are more of them than hairs on our head, and we would be left utterly astonished. But whatever the measure in which God displays the riches of his goodness toward each of us, let us be moved all the more to bless his Name, and let each of us strive and be diligent in this. This, in sum, is what we must observe on this passage.

Now, on the other hand, let us recognise that our life is cursed if we gorge ourselves on the good things God gives us without contemplating his goodness in them. For we profane everything that was dedicated to our use and to our salvation, unless we are brought to this conclusion—namely, to recognise that God truly shows himself a Father toward us, drawing us to himself by every gentleness, so that we do not doubt that he holds us as his children. And in this we also see how miserable the condition of the Papists is—for they will not even allow themselves assurance of God's goodness, but say that we must always remain in doubt. And thus, all their prayers, and all the thanksgiving they render to God, is nothing but hypocrisy and

pretence. For we cannot call upon God except in confidence, nor can we praise his Name except by knowing him to be favourable toward us. Now they are entirely excluded from this. Let us learn, then, that we shall never be able to offer God a sacrifice of praise that he esteems and values, nor ever aim at the true purpose of our life, unless we are persuaded of his goodness. And so, whenever we think of all the graces and benefits of God, let this come to mind: that God confirms and ratifies our adoption, so that we do not doubt that he holds us as his children, and so that we may freely call upon him as our Father. This, in sum, is what we must retain from this passage.

Now we must also note what Hezekiah says: "The living, the living shall confess you; indeed, the father shall declare your truth to his children." He had said above that the dead will no longer look for the truth of God—that is, they will have no more hope in it. And in this we see what I have already touched on: that Hezekiah does not speak indifferently of all those God has withdrawn from this world—for it is certain that the faithful do look for the truth of God. When Jacob, breathing his last, said, "I will wait for the salvation of the Lord," he did not say this for a mere moment, but declared and affirmed that he had this certainty imprinted in his heart, one that would never be extinguished, such that though he pass through a hundred deaths, this treasure would always be kept for him. So, then, the saints and the faithful, even when God has called them out of the world, do not cease to nourish the hope of the resurrection and of that happiness promised to them. But Hezekiah speaks of the dead as those who are as it were banished and entirely estranged from the Kingdom of God, whom he renounces. Now he himself was in that state, according to his own apprehension, until God consoled him through his prophet. For the message sent to him was to show

that God was against him, and coming as his adversary, armed against him. Hezekiah, then, had to remain confounded in that state. Thus, it is not without cause that he says the dead do not look for the truth of God—that is, they are entirely shut out from his promises, no longer numbered among his children. But now he says that the living, who taste the goodness of God, will make his truth known to their children.

Now here again we see how God is duly praised and esteemed among us—namely, when it is known that he is faithful to all his own, that he never abandons them, but that his help is ready for them in their need, and that they will never be disappointed in leaning upon him. This, then, is the true substance of the praises of God. Thus, in sum, we see that there is nothing but falsehood and lies when men pray to God, or pretend to give him thanks, while at the same time not being taught the love he bears them, not being assured of their salvation, and knowing no promise. When this is lacking, it is certain that all the praises of God that may resound in men's mouths are nothing but wind and smoke. Do we, then, wish to praise God as we ought, so that he approves the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving we offer him? Let us profit from his Word, let us know what it means to trust in him—which we cannot do until he has declared his good will to us, assured us that he receives us, that we have access to him, and that we shall never be abandoned so long as we have recourse to him. If we lack such instruction, we shall never be able to utter a single word of praise to God as is required. This, then, is what Hezekiah's statement here relates to—that the father will make known to his children the truth of God. And further, just as he said the dead cannot look for it or find their support in it, let us recognise that when God declares himself gracious and generous toward us, it is so as always to confirm our hope the better, so that we may take all the

greater courage to have recourse to him, never doubting that his hand is always ready to help us in our need.

How, then, shall we make right use of the graces of God? It is when we are always more and more confirmed in faith, when we can defy every temptation, when we can resolve that in calling upon God, we need never fear to waste our effort, because our hope will never be put to shame. When, then, we are well resolved in this, so that we can do battle against Satan and repel every temptation, then we shall know how to wisely apply the benefits of God to our own use, and how to make them profitable. This, in sum, is what we must retain here.

Further, when it is spoken of how fathers ought to conduct themselves toward their children, we must gather in general (as has already been treated above) that it is not enough if we ensure that God is glorified during our own lifetime—we ought also to desire that, as his name is immortal, so from age to age it be celebrated, that those who come after us keep the pure religion, that the service of God never falls into decline but continues and advances always, and that the goodness of God be magnified everywhere. Let those who have children recognise that God has entrusted them into their care, and that they will have to render account of them, unless they take every pain to teach them to serve God. For when it is said that the father will proclaim God's truth to his children, we must always come back to this end: that the children may trust in him, call upon him, attribute to him the praise for every good thing, and dedicate and consecrate themselves entirely to him and to his obedience. If, then, fathers wish to discharge their duty, let them recognise that this is the chief inheritance they owe to leave their children. For if they amass goods for them, but meanwhile give them free rein once they see them becoming dissolute, wicked, profane, and

contemptuous of God—woe upon all the effort they put into advancing them in worldly terms, for they only raise them up high in order to make them break their necks all the harder. Their fall will be all the more fatal when they have great wealth, and yet despise God in his doctrine—their confusion will be all the more horrible, because their ingratitude will be all the less excusable. Let fathers, then, think more carefully about this than they are accustomed to: that when God gives them children, he obliges them to this duty, that they strive all the more to have them instructed in his truth for the whole of their lives—just as we see the example given us in Abraham, who is the father of the faithful. For when God wishes to show that he will govern his household as he ought, "Shall I hide from my servant Abraham," he says, "what I am about to do? No"—here God makes himself familiar with him. "For," he says, "he will teach his children in my statutes, my laws, and my ordinances." This is the mark by which the faithful are distinguished from those who despise God. If, then, we wish to be counted among the Church, let us follow this zeal and this affection of Abraham—namely, that each of us, according to the household he has, should take pains that God be honoured in it, and that his truth always be known there until the end.

Now, in conclusion, Hezekiah says: "The Lord is here to save me." This phrase implies that he rejects and casts aside every other salvation, as if he said, "There is only God." He could have said, "The Lord has saved me"; he could have said, "I hold my life from him and from his pure grace"—but he goes further, as if he wished here to uphold the honour of God, and cast down all the confidences men conceive in their own imaginations. For we are accustomed, when we want to secure ourselves and seek assurance, to say, "I will take this means, or that means." But Hezekiah renounces all of

that, and declares that there is only God, and that it is to him alone we must come. It is true that God does permit us to make use of all the means he offers us, and which he has ordained for such use—but even so, he does not want his glory obscured by it, and rightly so. Yet men are so wicked and perverse that they always take occasion to diminish the glory of God, under the pretext that he helps them through his creatures. If God is not content merely to make us feel his power, but applies all his creatures to our use, we ought to be all the more moved to praise him. But instead, we do just the opposite: we strip him of his rightful due, we forsake him, and attach our trust here and there, imagining that our salvation comes from this source or that. This is how God is defrauded of what is rightly his.

All the more, then, must we carefully observe what Hezekiah says here: "The Lord is here to save us"—that is, that although God stretches out his hand to us, and gives us the means to sustain ourselves, we should nevertheless confess that he is the fountain, and that the stream which flows down to us does not prevent us from knowing where the water comes from. Let us always look, then, to this source—namely, that God be glorified, and that he remains undiminished in what is properly his. And when we are stripped of every means, let us say, "The Lord alone will suffice." And this is also why David says, "The mercy of God is better than lives." Not that the life of men is not itself part of God's mercy—but he shows that men ought not to be attached to the things of this world, and that they act like brutes when they imagine they can preserve, sustain, and protect themselves by this means or that; rather, they ought to prefer, above all else, the sole goodness of God, and rest content in it. This, then, is a saying of great teaching, provided we know how to profit from it.

Let us, then, follow the example of Hezekiah, and when God has helped us in our need, let us attribute to him the praise for our life, confessing that he alone can save.

He then adds further: “And we shall sing our songs all the days of our life in the house of the Lord.” Here he repeats what he had said before—namely, that he would spend whatever remained of the life God had given him in giving God thanks for it, so as not to be ungrateful. For, as I have already said, it would be better that we had never been born than to enjoy the good things God does for us while keeping our mouths shut and never thinking of him. Let us note well, then, that this repetition is not superfluous, when Hezekiah says so many times that, since his life has been prolonged, he will be all the more moved to praise God. This for one point. He shows further that this will not be for a mere passing moment—for many can praise God with quite vehement feeling when they have first experienced his goodness, but this soon fades, the memory of it is lost, and it seems to them enough to have testified once that they hold their well-being from God. But Hezekiah shows us that we must continue in this with true perseverance—for we do not hold from God one day of our life any more than another. Our whole life, then, must be fully devoted and dedicated to him. Thus, seeing the laziness and coldness that is in us, let us learn to stir ourselves up whenever we feel our zeal growing cold, lest it be extinguished altogether. Let us wake ourselves up. How so? If I have recognised the grace of God once or twice, what then—must it now be forgotten? And if for a month I blessed the name of God, and then a year, and two, and three, and now I no longer think of it at all—what will all that have gained me, except to leave me all the more convicted of hypocrisy, showing that there was nothing but a fire of straw, with no constancy or

firmness at all? If, then, we look carefully at the example of this good king, each of us will be all the more spurred to stop nourishing this laziness, which is natural in us, and to which we are all too prone.

When he says, “in the house of the Lord,” this does not mean that the praises of God were confined to the Temple (for anyone may, and indeed should, praise God in his own house)—rather, Hezekiah shows that it is not enough to praise God privately; he will also stir up others, to have many companions in it. He speaks, then, here of a solemn sacrifice of praise that he will render to God in a great assembly. And that is also why our Lord wished his own people to gather together—for he could well have instructed us individually, if he had wished, saying, “Let each of you praise me in his own chamber.” But he wants there to be this order: that we be united as one body, that we call upon him with one voice, and that we make confession of our faith together in agreement. And why? It is true that, first, we see that all our faculties must be applied to glorifying him—but there is also a second reason: that we spur one another on, as we all need. For there is not one of us so disposed to praise God that he does not need some further prompting when he sees the company of the faithful and is shown an example. Since, then, this spurs us on, God wants us to sing his praises publicly and in common. And that is why Hezekiah specifically says here that he will come to the temple of the Lord to praise and bless his Name—as we also see Jonah say the same. He speaks of the house of the Lord. And why? Not, as I have said, because the praises of God were shut up and hidden there, but because the people gathered there, and he knew this would bring greater benefit, since some would be spurred on by his example. This, then, in sum, is Hezekiah's song.

Now, finally, it is here recorded that the prophet Isaiah orders that a plaster of figs be made for him upon his wound. From this it seems likely that what he had was a plague sore. It is then added, further, that Hezekiah also asked for a sign, which was granted to him, as we have seen when the sun was made to go backward on the sundial of Ahaz. One might raise a question here, whether this plaster was a medicine, or some sign the prophet gave him. And it might seem that if it were a medicine, this would diminish the glory of God, since Hezekiah's life was meant to be miraculous. Why, then, did God not heal him without any means at all? But when everything is well considered, the sign or miracle given to Hezekiah—when the sun halted its course, and the shadow on the sundial went back by so many degrees—suffices well enough and removes all doubt. Furthermore, even though Hezekiah made use of this plaster, this does not mean the healing was merely natural. For since God had changed the order of the heavens and had shown so evident a testimony that this came from his hand, and that it was an extraordinary benefit, we ought to be content with that; and we see that God has sometimes made use of his creatures in this way, while still declaring plainly that it was by his power alone. Those who think Hezekiah had this plaster rather as a kind of sacrament, to confirm him, suppose that figs would have done more harm than good to such a wound—but one can make a preparation from them that is fit to bring a wound to a head, and this is well known.

It is true that God will sometimes give signs that seem entirely contrary to what is promised—and this is to draw us all the more to himself, so that we renounce all our own notions, and are content that he has spoken. How so? God promises that the earth will never again perish by flood. Well then—what sign does he give of this? A sign that naturally threatens us with rain.

When one sees the rainbow in the sky, what sort of sign is that? It is an appearance such that it seems we ought to be overwhelmed, and that the earth will perish. And yet how is it? This sign is given us by God precisely so that we may know the earth will never again perish by flood—yes, but it is so that we may learn to rest upon his truth, and to close our eyes to everything else, to everything we conceive in ourselves, and let the truth of God be so authoritative to us that we receive it without contradiction. God, then, may indeed work in such a manner—but as for this passage, we may rather judge that the prophet, in order to ease Hezekiah's suffering, wished also to provide this remedy—for there is scarcely any wound as painful as the plague; it is like a fire that burns the sufferer. And so, when God had prolonged the life of this good king, he wished, over and above that, to add this further kindness, that the pain be eased. The prophet, then, gives him this as a bonus, so that not only does God lengthen his life, but he does not wish him to suffer so much, or endure the torments he had felt before.

Thus, we see how, in every way and in all things, God showed himself compassionate toward this good king, and wished to show himself appeased in every respect, after having used such harshness against him, having stretched out his arm as if to utterly destroy him. Yet this is not to say that God acts exactly the same way toward each of his own—so let us not demand that in a single moment God, after drawing us back from the grave, should make us rejoice and give us in every way everything to satisfy us. But if it pleases him to relieve our sufferings little by little, let us be content with that. And indeed, we may gather that God still worked by degrees even with Hezekiah—for already this miracle had been performed, that the shadow of the sun had gone back, and the message of the prolonging of his life had been given him by the prophet. It might seem, then, that Hezekiah

was entirely delivered—and yet this plaster was still needed. Thus, when our Lord, after having given us some relief in some affliction, still leaves some remainder of it, let this not trouble us, and let us not be vexed at bearing his corrections, until he has fully secured us.

Meanwhile, we have explained why Hezekiah had asked for a sign—for although this came from weakness, God nevertheless granted him this request too. And in this we see how humane God is toward us, in that not only does he grant the requests we make of him with pure and upright affection, but even when there is some weakness mixed in, and we bring him passions that are somewhat excessive, God still has pity on us in this regard. It is certain that had Hezekiah had a perfect faith, he would have been content simply to have heard the word from the prophet's mouth. So, when he says, “Alas, shall I not have some sign?” he shows by this that he does not give full and entire faith to the word of God. But here he confesses his fault, and in confessing it, he asks for the remedy—and from whom? From God himself. When, then, we find ourselves so hindered, let us first recognise our own poverty, and not come to excuse the fault that is in us, but willingly accept condemnation for it. If, on that basis, we ask God to remedy it by his goodness, he will bear with us and hear our requests. It is true that it is not for us to demand a sign or a miracle whenever it pleases us —for (as was explained where the prophet had already mentioned this sign) Hezekiah had a special prompting to this, as did Gideon also. But let us submit ourselves to the good will of God when we recognise our own frailty, and pray that he bear with us, and then confirm us, so that we may be well settled in his Word.

This, then, is the manner in which we must proceed; and in doing so we shall feel that this was not written only for the person of King Hezekiah, but

that God wished to give a teaching common to his whole Church—so that in our troubles, even when we have come to the very extremity, even to the depths of hell, we may nevertheless know that we ought to take refuge in the one who calls and invites us so gently, hoping that he will show forth his power, even though for a time it seems far removed from us and we see no sign of it, and that he will thus give us cause to glorify him. And so too we are taught to devote our whole life to blessing the name of God and singing his praises, according to the goodness we have experienced from him.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our faults, praying that he may more and more make us feel them, so that we may be wholly cast down and humbled before him, and that we may do battle against the vices that war against us, knowing that our Lord has ordained us to this struggle until we are fully renewed and clothed with his righteousness, and that there be no contradiction hindering us from obeying his good will. May it please him to grant this grace not only to us, but to all peoples and nations, etc.