

Series: **HEADWINDS—March 5, 2006**

CATCHING YOUR BREATH Isaiah 38:10-19

I. INTRO

- A. Some people love running. Remember Eric Liddell's comment from *Chariots of Fire*. "God made me fast and when I run, I feel God's pleasure." I kind of have this love/hate relationship with running. At times I really love it—and at times I really don't. I guess what I'd have to say is that I like how I feel when I make running a part of my life.

-I'll tell you what I **don't** like when I'm running. Wind. Problem is, I haven't ever found a way to run with the wind constantly at your back. So, I always know that at some point in my run, I'll be running into the wind. Now, sometimes, if it's not blowing too strongly, it's refreshing—especially if it's hot. But when it's cold, I come home with my lips frozen to my teeth.

- B. It's interesting how often Paul talks about life in terms of a race. At one point, he says, "**Don't just plod—RUN TO WIN!**" And that's fine—I can accept that. When the weather's just right, there's a nice breeze and there's no snow--I can do that.
1. But what about when it feels like the wind is blowing you backwards. It's like your legs are moving—and you're breathing hard—but you're not barely moving!
 2. It's very easy, in times like that, to think, "Hmmm. Maybe I'm going in the wrong direction." And the question I want to deal with is this:
When things get really tough, does it mean that God's trying to tell you that He's displeased—that He wants you to go in an easier direction?

II. JOURNAL OF A MAN IN PAIN

- A. I find that when I'm in pain, I tend to do several things. First, I tend to be pre-occupied with it. Have you ever noticed that when you have a sore on the inside of your mouth, your tongue always probing it? Or, if you have a bruise, you're always feeling it—and then flinching. I do that with emotional pain—may you do to.

-And I do something else. I write about it. Sometimes I write in a journal. Sometimes I write letters. I don't mail them—but it helps me organize my thoughts—and move on. One other thing, I tend to surf the pain passages of the Bible.

-Several years ago, I was on one of those journeys—and I came across the pain journal of a Jewish king named Hezekiah. He was at a point in life when the Headwinds were more along the lines of **Katrina**. It was excruciating. What caught my eye in his journal is a phrase I will probably never forget. **Surely it was for MY benefit that I suffered such anguish...** I've thought about that phrase a lot.

1. Now, I want to read that phrase in it's context, but before I do, let me set it up for you. When it came to integrity and devotion to God—Hezekiah was the best king Judah had had since David. He brought God back to the center of a country that had drifted far, far away. He was generous, he had courage and vision—he was truly outstanding.
-But one day, Hezekiah got deathly ill. His close friend and confidant, the prophet Isaiah, visited him. Isaiah said, "I've talked to God about this—and His message is a tough one. Hezekiah—you're not going to make it. You need to get your affairs

in order.” Hezekiah was only 39—and Isaiah was *never* wrong. These words are right out of his pain journal:

I said, "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?" I said, "I will not again see the LORD, the LORD, in the land of the living; no longer will I look on mankind, or be with those who now dwell in this world. Like a shepherd's tent my house has been pulled down and taken from me. Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom; day and night you made an end of me. I waited patiently till dawn, but like a lion he broke all my bones; day and night you made an end of me. I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid (Isaiah 38:10-14)!"

2. I love Hezekiah’s honesty. He’s not doing the “*it’s-just-my-time* stiff upper lip” thing people sometimes do so they won’t get God ticked off. He lets God know exactly how he feels about being snatched away before he can complete what He believes to be God’s assignment for him. He cries. He mourns the fact that he’s leaving all his friends and family behind. He in essence says in vs. 12, “Wow! I never realized how fragile life is until now! Like most people, I thought I was immortal—I’d live forever—and now my life is down to weeks, days and hours. -And he’s honest about his frustration. He says, “I’ve been calling out to you—but I just feel like you keep knocking me around like a lion playing with his food. Why would you do that, God, when I’m so desperate?

-And he’s so weak all he can do is lie on his bed and moan. He’s given up all hope. And just when all hope is gone, Isaiah shows up and tells Hezekiah that God has given him a 15 year extension on life—and prescribes a very common medical procedure of putting a poultice of figs at the site of the tumor. And Hezekiah is completely healed.

3. I didn’t read the whole journal to you. It’s the last part of the journal the really gives you insight into what happens in Hezekiah’s heart.

15 But what can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this. I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul. 16 Lord, by such things men live; and my spirit finds life in them too. You restored me to health and let me live. 17 Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back. 18 For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. 19 The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; fathers tell their children about your faithfulness. 20 The Lord will save me, and we will sing with stringed instruments all the days of our lives in the temple of the Lord (Isaiah 38:15-20 NIV).

His first reaction is speechlessness. ***“But what can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this. I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul (Isaiah 38:15 NIV).***

That's exactly what you feel like when you've been in some dark, hopeless hole of a situation—and suddenly you're free. You feel more alive than you've ever felt before. When people experience a brush with death—it changes them. There's gratitude—and a humility—a sense that they've been spared for a purpose.

4. What you see next is something profound that you only experience when you've been reminded that God is God, and you aren't. **Perspective.** Perspective never comes when life is easy and painless—only at the end of the tunnel of chaos. And that's when Hezekiah says records these amazing words:

Lord, by such things men live; and my spirit finds life in them too. You restored me to health and let me live. Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish (Is. 38:16-17a NIV).

- a. In some sense, the key word here is **anguish**. It's not cold-sores, traffic tickets, minor surgery—in running terms, it's **hitting the wall**. And listen to what he says **about** the anguish. **By SUCH THINGS men live—and my spirit finds life in them too.** How can he say this stuff is life-giving; that his spirit finds life in them? Well, truth is—anguish is a part of life, isn't it? We'd like to think that following Jesus puts us in a bubble. A “safe zone” where, as soon as anguish appears on the horizon, we can say a quick prayer and—**BAM!** Trouble's gone!

-Ever talked to someone who's stared death in the face? Who's come through something where they weren't sure they would survive? Believe me, they're **alive!** They say things like, “Man, I'm not going to just punch a time card, play the lottery, accumulate stuff and try to look important any more! Life is a **gift**—and I'm going to use it wisely. **Perspective.**

-Perspective says that if you stop at any one point in any story—including yours—it's incomplete. What would happen if you stopped Jesus' story on the Saturday after Good Friday. We handed out puzzle pieces last Sunday. A puzzle piece, by definition, says, “I don't have the whole picture.”

- b. Know what the really tough truth is about tough times. We don't usually grow without them. In fact, if you see someone doing well—long-term-- in a career, marriage, sport—they've probably experienced some anguish. In fact, the truly great people in the world have almost **always** experienced significant pain.
- c. Paul Stoltz has written two books on Adversity, coining the phrase in the business world, **adversity quotient**. Besides giving some great pointers on leading **through** adversity, know what he says? *People who can't handle adversity become easily overwhelmed and exhausted. They pull back and stop trying; those who handle adversity well become the leaders of today and tomorrow.* The bottom line in what he says is that adversity has the potential to make you a better person! That's not new information, by the way. The Bible said it first! The problem is that you can't develop in this area in a Petri dish. You have to actually **face** adversity to learn how to handle it!

- B. And that's what we see in this story. I believe Hezekiah experienced the suffering he did to prepare him lead Israel through a terrifying experience that would require radical faith.

1. Hezekiah's brush with death comes in the middle of news that the world super-power of that day, Assyria, was heading for Jerusalem with an army of 185,000 troops to demand that Hezekiah and his people surrender. Hezekiah got deathly ill in the middle of all this.
-To understand the **adversity quotient** in this story, you have to understand who the Assyrians were. Sennacherib, the king, is well-documented in history. Their brutality was legendary. They would attack a city, decapitate everyone in it—and then stack their heads in a massive pile outside the city gates. Imagine **seeing** something like that on an afternoon stroll! They had systematically destroyed city after city—and Jerusalem was next on their list.
2. Remember Hezekiah's statement, **Lord, by such things men live; and my spirit finds life in them too... Surely it was for MY BENEFIT that I suffered such anguish?**
I think part of what he's saying here that his brush with death and healing helped him see the power of God so that he would have the strength and faith in God he needed to lead in his nation's darkest hour.

And his worst nightmare comes true. The Assyrian surrounds the city—and tells Hezekiah and his officials and everyone listening, "Surrender—or die. You choose." In fact, Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, sends him a personal letter saying, "Don't for a minute think your God is going to get you out of this one! No one else's God has!"

- a. Guess what Hezekiah does—very first thing? He takes this letter right to God in the temple, and spreads this letter out in His Presence. He says, "God, you see the arrogance of this guy! What are **You** going to do about this?" Then these words, **Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God (Is. 37:20 NIV).**
- b. Through Isaiah, God lets him know. Listen to what God says to this pagan king in response to all his bragging and trash-talk. It's pretty cool. **But I know where you stay and when you come and go and how you rage against me.**
-In our vernacular, we would say, "I **know where you live, pal!**"
3. And God makes it clear that no one mocks Him. A single angel of God came into the Assyrian military camp as they surrounded Jerusalem—and when Sennacherib awoke the next morning, his whole army was dead. 185,000 of them.
-Sennacherib beat it back to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and right while he was worshipping his god in his temple—his two sons came in and assassinated him.
-In this crisis, Hezekiah does some things **really** well. Let me list them.
 - a. The very first thing he does is reach out to God for help. Now, in a few minutes, I'm going to talk very specifically about accessing the power of God—but you really need to see this pattern. He gets sick and finds out he's going to die. He cries—and he's very honest with God. "What are you doing? You know what's at stake here!"

-How many of you think that God gets upset when we are brutally honest with him about how we feel? He isn't! God isn't waiting for us to say something profoundly spiritual; He's waiting for us to be real and authentic.

- b. The second thing you notice about Hezekiah is that he has really good friends who walk with him—like Isaiah. Again, I'm going to be talking very specifically about this next week, so I don't want to steal my own thunder. -Bottom line, ***you and I need to develop strong friendships with good, wise people BEFORE big chunks of our lives start to fall off!***
- c. Hezekiah does something else. He places a high value on true wisdom—i.e., on what God has to say. I need to ask you—where do you go for wisdom and insight when life isn't going well? Dr. Phil? Self-help books? A consensus of what all your friends think? These can be good—but what you need when you're up against the wall is not ***good***, but ***BEST! BEST!*** Get wisdom you can trust and act on.
- d. Let me mention just one more thing. Own your own stuff. Own up to your weaknesses and faults and frailty as a human. The easiest thing in life to do is blame everything on everyone else and become a ***victim***. Bitterness will cause you to do that. Blame your parents, blame your employer—and when all else fails, blame God. Know what victims are, by definition? Helpless. I remember hearing someone say once, "If I could kick the person in the backside who's most responsible for my pain, I wouldn't be able to sit for weeks!"
- e. There are times in life when we will have to be patient—that the struggle we're in is not like a ½ hour sitcom. It will take some time for things to turn in a different direction.

-And that's okay—we do what we can and embrace the rest—because we serve a God who can work ***all things*** for our good. He's in the process of helping us to look like Jesus—and He can use ***all kinds*** of unlikely—and unpopular ingredients!

III. BREATHE OUT...BREATHE IN

- A Someone once said something to me I never forgot; "You keep talking about the power of God—how He's able to handle ***any*** situation and give you the help you need.

How do you ACCESS His Power? My answer, in short, is that it's as easy as ***breathing***.

- When I was really little, I had a problem--as least my Mom tells me I did. When I got hurt, I would cry so hard, I couldn't catch my breath and I'd pass out. Scared my Mom half to death. So, my Mom asked the doctor what to do about it. His advice ***really*** reflects the 50s era. He told her to tell me to take a really deep breath when I got hurt--and then to ***spank*** me if I didn't--to reinforce the advice. So, being a good 50s era Mom, that's what she did. She felt horrible about doing that because I was such a wonderful child.

- 1. The problem is that I now live 300 miles from my mother. So now, when I cry really hard, Lori spanks me. A lack of oxygen does strange things to your mind, doesn't it?

-I experimented with this when I was a little older. I found that if you stood up quick and held your breath you got this cool dizzy sensation. Kind of a Christian form of smoking pot. One day I did this when we had a guest staying with us—and **wham!** The next thing I knew, I was laying on my back and our guest was asking, “Are you alright?” Being in grade 6 or 7 is hard enough on your self esteem--without doing something stupid like that!

2. The power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts would be what oxygen is to our brains. You can hold up for a while without him—but not long. Think about Who the Holy Spirit is for a minute. God Himself--greatest power in the universe, for whom healing blind eyes, raising dead people, creating universes, and transforming wicked hearts is no big deal.
 - a. When you look at the words the Bible uses for spirit, the concept of breathing makes even more sense. The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*--breath. In Greek, the word for **Spirit** is *pneuma*--breath. As God, the Holy Spirit is the **breath** of life. We breathe out—we confess our weakness, our need, our powerlessness—sometimes our sin—and then invite the Spirit of God to fill that vacancy with His Presence.
 - b. Now, **please** don't mistake me as comparing the Holy Spirit to a gas or a liquid. He is a **Person**--but the One who does His work at the core of our lives--living in this Temple, working in our bodies, our emotions, our soul, our mind, our spirit--wherever we'll let Him work.
 - c. One of the things that wrecks us most is inner turmoil—especially when life is way out of our control. Philippians 4 says, “So...pray, breath all that stuff, all that pain, all that anxiety out to God. But don't leave the space empty. Breathe **in** the Peace of God—which will blow **everyone's** mind.” Well, actually, it says, “which surpasses all understanding.”
 - d. Listen to what Jesus said about the Holy Spirit: **“He will honor me; he will take from me and deliver it to you (John 16:14 Msg.)”**

-The Spirit's role in our lives is to deliver all the power of God that we need in our circumstances. Our job is to exhale the junk to make room.

3. Now, let me just tell you the story of how God used the truth of this to really help me. One day, several years ago, I was running. Many times as I run, I pray. On this particular day, I was really struggling. The headwind wasn't outside—it was **inside**. I was struggling with feelings of personal inadequacy. Struggling with not knowing what to do in several circumstances I faced. Struggling with feeling overwhelmed with life in general. I can't remember all the issues--but I **do** remember the feelings of sadness and hurt and weakness and inadequacy.
 - a. One of the things I'm always very conscious of when I run is breathing. I mean, it's pretty hard to ignore it--sucking air, especially in the first 1-2 miles.
 - b. So, I'm feeling all this stuff, gasping for breath. And then I remembered an old song I'd heard of long ago called, ***Breathing Out and Breathing In***. I don't think the author was a runner—but he did share the single most common experience for every human that's alive. Breathing out and

breathing in—again, and again, and again. About 720 times an hour; about 17,000 times a day; about 6.3 million times a year.

4. That day I thought, "What if along with my CO₂ and bad breath I were to exhale this sadness and junk from my heart?" So consciously began to think of all the junk I wanted to breathe **out**. And I thought, "Maybe I can breathe **in** presence and power of God's Spirit to fill and transform that empty space. I tried to think of every space inside me that needed God.
I thought about what was filling that space—and what **needed** to fill it. This is pretty much what I said.
 - a. God, I feel so powerless, so small today--so I breathe out my weakness, and I breathe in the amazing power of your Spirit you've promised.
 - b. I breathe out my inadequacy, my inability to change myself or my circumstances, and I breathe in the **complete** adequacy of your Spirit, your presence to transform me.
 - c. I breathe out my secret desires for things that will contaminate my soul and destroy my life--and, Lord, I breathe in your purity.
 - d. Lord, I breathe out my hardness of heart, my tendency to choose not to look at the devastated people of this world, and I breathe in the compassion of your Spirit.
 - e. I breathe out my impatience, my tendency to snap and growl at my children--and I breathe in the gentleness and patience of Your Spirit.
 - f. God, I breathe out my confusion, my frustration, the turmoil I feel when because I don't know what to do, and I breathe in your wisdom. You know **everything**.
 - g. I breathe out my restlessness, anxiety and worry, and I breathe in the same peace Jesus promised to **anyone** who would come to Him.
 - h. Lord, I breathe out my selfishness—and I breathe in Your selflessness.
 - i. Oh Lord, I confess and own up to my greed, my preoccupation with managing my finances, and I breathe in the generosity of the Spirit.
 - j. God, I breathe out my critical spirit, my grudge-holding, any bitterness I retain in my heart over what others have done to me; and I breathe in the love, forgiveness and gentleness of the Spirit.
 - k. Lord, Healer--I breathe out my tiredness, my emotional and physical exhaustion and the jadedness and dullness it brings, and I breathe in the Spirit's restoring power and endless energy.
 - l. God of all truth, I breathe out my lies, the half-truths I tell myself, my temptation to shade the truth I tell to others to make them think I'm better

than I am, and I breathe in the freedom of the Spirit's courage and truth telling.

- m. I breathe out all my cowardly ways, all my worry about what others think, and I breathe in the courage of Jesus who sweat blood and willingly laid himself on the cross to be nailed to it.
- n. I breathe out my hurt, my pain, my wounded feelings, and I breathe in the Spirit's grace for me, His healing of my heart.
- o. I breathe out my pride and arrogance and determination to get my own way, and I breathe in the humility of Jesus.
- p. I breathe out my sadness and disappointment—and I breathe in the joy and hope YOU promised—and the thrill of being loved and cherished by the God of this universe.

-That day as I ran my course, panted, breathed out all that junk--and breathed in the power, grace, hope and life of the Spirit--my heart was transformed. That's what happens when you reach out to God—and invite Him into your pain!

- 5. I guess what I'm trying to say in all of this is that you need to **look up**. You have to keep your eyes focused, not on the passing of time and circumstances—but **up**. On God. On where you're going.

-I've never forgotten this poem; **Two men looked through prison bars; one saw mud, the other saw stars**. Perspective is huge! Perspective gives you wings. Perspective helps you see past the awful times, the hurt, the struggle—and see **God!** A God so huge the universe can't contain Him. A God who could take the hatred we showed in nailing his Son to a cross—and make a way for everyone to find eternal life. Where are you looking these days? And—are you **breathing?**

- B. You may be wondering--how did Hezekiah make out, after all he went through? In the rush of emotion he felt after being so near the edge and getting his life back, he made a bunch of promises to God. Ever done that? I have.

“Oh God, if you only get me out of this mess...” The prayers are usually very sincere...but we forget. You find out that Hezekiah, like, is very human. Listen to his promises:

*He promises that because of the anguish he's seen, he'll walk humbly all his days.

*He promises that his children will know of God's faithfulness.

*He promised that a lot of people would know about what had happened because of his praise.

- 1. Almost immediately after his recovery, the king of Babylon sent some ambassadors with a gift to celebrate his recovery. Hezekiah showed them everything in his palace—treasures, weapons—I mean, he walked around letting them know how great he really was. Another record of this in 2 Chron. 32 is very blunt: **But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him.**

-His friend, Isaiah, comes by and tells him that because of this stupid move, Babylon will come back and take everything he showed them. Not only that—some of his own flesh and blood descendants will be eunuchs in the palace in Babylon. Anyone know what a eunuch is? **Ouch!**

-So much for **walking humbly all my days!** Imagine the difference if Hezekiah had bragged about how great his God was—instead of how great he was. Think how things might have been different!

2. But that's not even the worst of it. Listen to what Hezekiah says when he gets this word: **"The word of the Lord you have spoken is good, Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There will be peace and security in MY lifetime (Isaiah 39:8 NIV)."**

-Doesn't that take the cake? That seems so incredibly calloused. "Well, at least **I'll** be okay! The BIG #1 is gonna make it!"

3. It would seem that Hezekiah went through a test and failed miserably. I've done that—and maybe you have too. The amazing news is that God doesn't leave us in the middle of our screw-ups and defeats.

-When you look at the **whole** picture of his life—you see a man who finished well. See, we're all a mixture—some good and noble qualities—and some stuff that's pretty smelly. But God promises to stay with us to the end. He's the God of the 2nd chance—and 3rd chance—and 4th.

-We get impatient with Him, but surprisingly, He never gets impatient with us—He stays right there. We unfairly accuse Him of tainted motives, unkept promises and wrongdoing—and it's not true. Meanwhile, who here has absolutely pure motives—all the time? Who never does wrong—like you wouldn't mind us putting this past month right up here on the old screen? And has anyone ever kept all their promises. Every last one? God has.

IV. CLOSING

- A. Some of you might remember my "little man" carving. I carved this about 30 years ago. In the process of making him—I remember that the cuts I made that defined him most were deep ones. If wood could talk, that little piece of black walnut would've said, **Ow! What in the world are you doing!**
I don't mind you making little cuts, using a little bit of sand paper—but Gee! You almost cut me in half!

-Of course, wood **can't** talk—and every carver knows that to make a piece of wood look like **anything**—you have to make deep, defining cuts

- B. And I think the same is true of us humans. God has to sometimes make deep cuts if we're ever going to look like anything. We don't understand—it hurts—but, He's the artist, the craftsman—not us. Right?
 1. I'll tell you what God's plans are for us—if we'll cooperate. He wants to use **whatever** we face in life—even anguish. He wants us to **finish well!** He wants us to run—not crawl across the finish line. And God can use **all** kinds of ingredients to make that happen.

-My temptation is to run from pain. Get as far away as possible. Avoid it, minimize it—I mean, for me it's "**God, give me drugs! Smoke the people who are hurting me!**" But God sees things I don't. And, like Hezekiah, I would have to reluctantly admit, **Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish.**

2. My encouragement to you this morning is—don't give up. Take time to catch your breath. Breathe deeply. Breathe out...Breathe in the power and grace of God. And let God finish whatever good thing He's doing in you. And we'll all stay close to each other and help each other, okay?