

Lesson 18 Isaiah 36-37 Lord of History

Introduction

Sennacherib has invaded Judah, capturing 46 fortified towns, killing soldiers, destroying fields, seizing livestock, and taking captive Jews as slaves into exile. He has scoured the land. And he is coming to Jerusalem. Isaiah foretold devastation in the six woes that precede the narrative of invasion. Here is a sample from the first woe, Isaiah 28:14-18 and 22.

- ¹⁴ Therefore, hear the word of the LORD, O scoffers,
Who rule this people who are in Jerusalem,
¹⁵ Because you have said, "We have made a And with Sheol we have made a pact.
covenant with death,
The overwhelming scourge will not reach us For we have made falsehood our refuge and we
when it passes by, have concealed ourselves with deception."
¹⁶ Therefore thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a tested stone,
A costly cornerstone *for* the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes *in it* will not be disturbed.

A cornerstone for the foundation of Zion. That's an interesting image. God lays in Zion a stone for the foundation of Zion. A cornerstone is not something you lay in an already completed building. This is either a new temple or palace, or the start of a wholly new Zion. Isaiah has been preaching a new Zion. The present Zion only foreshadows the glorified Zion that is to come. This cornerstone is to be laid in advance. It is a faith test. Those who do not believe will stumble. Those who do believe will not be disturbed or harried. They will rest in the security of God.

For Hezekiah, faith in God to save requires accepting the truth that he is not the savior. He is not the cornerstone of a new society. In chapter 7, Isaiah prophesied to Hezekiah's father that a child of promise would be born. And before that child was old enough to know good from evil, Judah would be saved from the double threat of Syria and Israel. Was Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, that child?

In chapter 9, Isaiah prophesied the birth of a child who would sit "on the throne of David and over his kingdom. To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore." Hezekiah was the next king after Ahaz to sit on the throne of David. Then in chapter 11, "a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding of counsel and strength." When sole rule over Judah fell to Hezekiah, he immediately began to reform the nation. He cleansed the Temple. He tore down places of idol worship. He re-instituted Passover, even sending messengers into the Assyrian-held territory of the north to invite all the tribes of Israel to attend. He was led by the Spirit of God. He acted with wisdom, and counsel, and strength.

Is Hezekiah the son of David foretold who would restore Zion? Is he the cornerstone laid in Jerusalem? No. Not any more than Peter is the rock upon which the Church of God is built. Peter was the rock only in the sense that he proclaimed the essential Gospel message concerning Jesus. In another sense, the Gospel message is the rock on which the Church is built. But only because the Gospel message rightly establishes the truth about Jesus Christ, who is fundamentally the rock, the foundation.

There is a connection between messenger, message, and Messiah that allows us to consider all three as contributing to the laying of the foundation. At the same time, we clearly see which of those three is the foundation. Jesus Christ, Messiah, Divine Son of David, He is the rock. He is the cornerstone that must be laid in Zion.

Hezekiah is not the cornerstone. He foreshadows the cornerstone. He gives witness to the cornerstone. He is not the cornerstone. A message of salvation has come to Hezekiah through Isaiah. Jerusalem and the throne of David will be protected by God. Isaiah has given witness to the coming king on whose shoulders government will rest eternally. In the time of Hezekiah, the actual

cornerstone has not yet been laid in Jerusalem. The Messiah has not yet come. But the message of the cornerstone has been set down by God through Isaiah. It is a standard, a banner. That message now constitutes a faith test, or faith challenge for Hezekiah. Can he accept that he is not the salvation of Israel? He is son of David. He is king. But he is but a man. He can seek to reform Israel. He cannot save Israel. He cannot save himself. Will he accept his weakness, his mistaken trust in Egypt, his need for God? And will he turn in faith, believing in the salvation of God?

Isaiah's narrative in chapters 36-37 gives a historical example of God as the Lord of History. Hezekiah plays the same role as his father Ahaz played: he is the human leader who must make a choice. Will he place his faith in God as the Lord of History, or will he turn elsewhere for salvation?

The narrative has two main sections: two emissaries from Sennacherib, and then a brief summary conclusion that consists of only three verses. The two emissaries share a similar pattern of three parts each. First, Sennacherib communicates his word to Hezekiah. Second, Hezekiah responds. And third, God communicates His word to Hezekiah. Neither Sennacherib nor God communicate directly to Hezekiah. Sennacherib and God are engaged in a power encounter over the vassal Hezekiah. According to the pattern of Ancient Near Eastern Kings, they both use mediators. Sennacherib will speak through his field commander, the Rabshakeh; Yahweh will speak through his prophet Isaiah. Hezekiah will be caught in the middle, forced to choose between one or the other.

I. Sennacherib's Word to Hezekiah through a Mediator 36:1-37:7

A. The Rabshakeh's Message (36:1-21)

The first word to Hezekiah is delivered by the Rabshakeh. Bibles tend to follow the older view that Rabshakeh was a name. Scholars now believe Rabshakeh is a title meaning, "field commander." The Rabshakeh delivers his message in two parts: first to Hezekiah's officials in front of the walls of Jerusalem, and then to the soldiers and citizens on those walls. We will start with the message directed to Hezekiah's officials in Isaiah 36:1-10.

1. The Message to Hezekiah's Officials (1-10)

¹ Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them. ² And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem to King Hezekiah with a large army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller's field. ³ Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came out to him. ⁴ Then Rabshakeh said to them, "Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, "What is this confidence that you have? ⁵ "I say, 'Your counsel and strength for the war are only empty words.' Now on whom do you rely, that you have rebelled against me? ⁶ "Behold, you rely on the staff of this crushed reed, *even* on Egypt, on which if a man leans, it will go into his hand and pierce it. So is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him. ⁷ "But if you say to me, 'We trust in the LORD our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar'? ⁸ "Now therefore, come make a bargain with my master the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. ⁹ "How then can you repulse one official of the least of my master's servants and rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰ "Have I now come up without the LORD's approval against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.' "

This is the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah. Dating from the beginning of his sole rule in 715 BC, fourteen years later agrees with the Assyrian records that Sennacherib invaded Judah in 701 BC. The great wall relief in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh shows the siege of Lachish. Sennacherib paused his advance to deal with Lachish, the second largest city of Judah, before attacking Jerusalem. This would secure supply lines and the flank of his army. While besieging Lachish, Sennacherib sent his field commander, the Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem with a large army. For Assyria, that secondary army could have easily been 50,000 men. The Rabshakeh first sought to secure a surrender. We can

assume he is also there to guard the city, so that no help could come to Lachish from Jerusalem and no escape could be made by Hezekiah.

Hezekiah's officials Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah came out to parley with the Rabshakeh. We heard of Shebna first in Isaiah 22:15. He was a leader focused on his own interests, more concerned with his legacy than the condition of the nation. In Isaiah 22:20 it was prophesied that he would lose his position as steward to Eliakim. That prophecy has been fulfilled. Here, we see Eliakim come out as the steward and Shebna as the scribe.

There is this other detail that stands out because it seems so unimportant. Why mention the detail that Rabshakeh "stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller's field"? Why go into detail about that place, that one detail, when there is so much other detail that Isaiah does not tell us? Well, the place has historic significance and it did not go unnoticed by Isaiah.

We read back in 7:3-4,

Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller's field, and say to him, 'Take care and be calm, have no fear...'

The same place Ahaz had stood now the Rabshakeh stands. Ahaz did not seek out the Lord. He did not seek out Isaiah. Isaiah was sent to him. After that, Ahaz failed the faith test he was given. So the reference to the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller's field" takes us back to Ahaz and his story. And that narrative forces us to ask, "How about Ahaz's son? How about Hezekiah? Will he follow in the footsteps of his father, or will he trust God?"

Okay, we have got the context set up. The Rabshakeh with his army is standing outside the walls of Jerusalem. And then, he gives a message to Hezekiah's officials.

⁴ Then Rabshakeh said to them, "Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, "What is this confidence that you have? ⁵ I say, 'Your counsel and strength for the war are only empty words.'""

"Counsel and strength," that's interesting word choice. I just noted from chapter 11 that the root of Jesse, the Messiah, would come with a spirit of counsel and strength – same words. That counsel and strength is available to all the sons of David who rely on the Lord. Sennacherib derides any counsel Hezekiah may have received, whether from Egypt or from Yahweh. According to Sennacherib, any counsel to resist is empty. The Rabshakeh's message first mocks reliance on Egypt. Verse 6.

Behold, you rely on the staff of this crushed reed, *even* on Egypt, on which if a man leans, it will go into his hand and pierce it. So is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him.

That reference to a crushed reed, those are the reeds by the Nile. So Egypt is as flimsy as one of the reeds. In fact, if you rely on it, it's going to damage you. It will be like sticking your hand down on that reed, and yet it will pierce your hand. It's annoying, it's minor, it's no help. That's what the king of Egypt is like. That part of Sennacherib's message actually agrees with Isaiah. Egypt is false security. Egypt is going to lose to Sennacherib at battle of Eltekeh, which may have already taken place or may be referred to in the chapter 37. We are not exactly sure when that battle took place. Sennacherib is not worried about Egypt. That is all he has to say about Egypt. His main target is Yahweh. That is the trust he wants his message to undermine. Verse 7,

But if you say to me, 'We trust in the LORD our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar'?

That's clever. The Rabshakeh connects the idols and high places of Judah with Yahweh in a way that makes complete sense to anyone living in the Ancient Near East and would have made sense even to a lot of Jews who were not so firm in their own Biblical theology. In the Ancient Near East, every people had a main god who ruled over a pantheon of gods. And all of the gods were manifested on earth in the form of physical idols. The first of the ten commandments declares, "You will have no

gods before me.” Certainly, that means we believe God is the one and only God. But it also targets the idea of pantheon. The main God usually has a host of lesser gods arranged before him at his court. The phrase, “No gods before me,” rejects the idea that God sits as ruling god among a host of lesser gods. The destruction of all the high places of Judah, in the mind of the Ancient Near East, can easily be interpreted as the destruction of Yahweh’s pantheon, and thus an attack on Yahweh.

The second of the ten commandments “You shall not make yourselves an idol” rejects both the making of idols of other gods and the making of an idol that is supposed to be Yahweh. Some of the idols Hezekiah destroyed may very well have been idols of Yahweh, like the golden calf was. The Rabshakeh speaks quite craftily into a culturally confused vision of who Yahweh is. He is speaking according to the generally accepted worldview of the times. It makes no sense that there is only one altar: just the altar at the Temple, where we must worship. Why can’t we worship God everywhere? Aren’t these idols also Yahweh? He is not telling the people of Judah that Yahweh is no god at all. He acknowledges Yahweh as the ruling god of the nation. The way he attacks their sense of assurance is by telling them Hezekiah has insulted Yahweh by removing Yahweh’s high places and idols. He is telling them Hezekiah’s religious reforms are nothing to depend on. Don’t think you have made Yahweh happy. In your zeal you’ve misunderstood your own Scriptures. You have insulted Yahweh.

That’s a challenge we hear in our own day. Some people want to reject God and Jesus altogether, sure. Others want to undermine the Biblical vision of God and Jesus. They will say things like, “You have to grow with the times. The Bible is inspired by human beings in their own culture but it doesn’t hold the same weight for us today. We know God is not a God of wrath. He is a God of love. He would never send His own Son to the cross. That’s angry. And Jesus would never judge. Biblical morality is also outdated. That’s not what God wants for us. Your pursuit of an overly Biblical Christianity is backward, and you’re actually setting yourself up against Jesus.” That’s the kind of twisting the Rabshakeh is engaged in. And the people of Judah have not shown themselves to be solid or strong theologically. So his words have an inroad. He wants to undermine, not the existence of Yahweh, but their vision of Yahweh and their trust in His word. “I mean, who really is Yahweh?”

Having attempted to undermine trust in God, the Rabshakeh takes it a step further claiming that he, in fact, is the one doing the will of God. Verses 8-10.

⁸ “Now therefore, come make a bargain with my master the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. ⁹ How then can you repulse one official of the least of my master’s servants and rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰ Have I now come up without the LORD’s approval against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, ‘Go up against this land and destroy it.’”

That’s not completely wrong. God has sent Assyria to judge Judah for its faithlessness. But the Rabshakeh does not really believe that and he has in no way submitted himself to Yahweh. Centuries later, the Mongolian lord Genghis Khan made the same claim as he destroyed Muslim cities on his way to Europe. “You have sinned against Allah. How else could I have defeated you? Allah must desire your punishment. He has given you into my hands.” The Khan was using their own theology and turning it on top of them. He did not really believe it. But he knew it would work on the minds of the Muslims he had defeated. The Rabshakeh is using the theology of the day against the Jews. “How else could Sennacherib’s armies win? Yahweh must be against us and for them.” His words are very unsettling. You don’t know whether you have believed truthfully about Yahweh or not. And even if you have, maybe this is just the will of God? Maybe Isaiah is wrong? God doesn’t want to save us: we deserve this.

2. The Message to the Inhabitants of Jerusalem (11-21)

Hezekiah’s officials are rightly nervous about the effect these words might have on the soldiers and citizens defending this part of Jerusalem.

¹¹ Then Eliakim and Shebna and Joah said to Rabshakeh, “Speak now to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand *it*; and do not speak with us in Judean in the hearing of the people who are on the wall.”

The Rabshakeh apparently knew Hebrew, even the specific dialect – Judean - and had been speaking loudly enough for people to overhear him. Aramaic was the trade language of the Assyrian Empire. It would become the language of Israel after the Babylonian exile, but was not at this time. The Judean officials want to minimize who might understand the Rabshakeh’s message, so as not to weaken moral any further . But that’s exactly what the Rabshakeh wants. So, he continues on with Hebrew, speaking loudly to the men on the walls, and elevating his trash talk as he continues. This is 36:12-21, the message to the people of Jerusalem.

¹² But Rabshakeh said, “Has my master sent me only to your master and to you to speak these words, *and* not to the men who sit on the wall, *doomed* to eat their own dung and drink their own urine with you?” ¹³ Then Rabshakeh stood and cried with a loud voice in Judean and said, “Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria. ¹⁴ “Thus says the king, ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you; ¹⁵ nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD, saying, “The LORD will surely deliver us, this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.” ¹⁶ ‘Do not listen to Hezekiah,’ for thus says the king of Assyria, ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree and drink each of the waters of his own cistern, ¹⁷ until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards. ¹⁸ ‘Beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you, saying, “The LORD will deliver us.” Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? ¹⁹ ‘Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? And when have they delivered Samaria from my hand? ²⁰ ‘Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the LORD would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?’ ”²¹ But they were silent and answered him not a word; for the king’s commandment was, “Do not answer him.”

Did you hear what the great king Sennacherib offers?

¹⁶ ‘Do not listen to Hezekiah,’ for thus says the king of Assyria, ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree and drink each of the waters of his own cistern, ¹⁷ until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.

The people who have closed themselves up in Jerusalem can return to their homes. If they make peace, they are free to enjoy their own vineyards and fig trees. Free, while Sennacherib completes the siege of Lachish and organizes the exile. They will have to say goodbye to their homes. But all is not lost. Just as Yahweh long ago granted to Israel a land of milk and honey, so also their new overlord Sennacherib promises a good land of vineyards and bread.

He continued to undermine their hope. He had already mocked their trust in Egypt and he had already claimed that Hezekiah’s reforms angered God. Here, he emphasizes Assyria’s power proven by victory over Judah’s northern neighbors. The list moves in a north-to-south direction, starting with the Syrian city-state Hamath. Hamath fell. Arpad fell. Sepharvaim fell. Samaria fell. The fall of each state implies the defeat of each state’s god.

Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? [...] Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the LORD would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?

That’s not only a challenge against Hezekiah, the son of David. The Rabshakeh has just crossed a line. Sennacherib is greater than the Holy One of Israel.

How will Hezekiah respond? Let’s read it, 36:22-37:4,

B. Hezekiah Responds (36:22-37:4)

²² Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn and told him the words of Rabshakeh. ¹ And when King Hezekiah heard *it*, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth and entered the house of the LORD. ² Then he sent Eliakim who was over the household with Shebna the scribe and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz. ³ They said to him, “Thus says Hezekiah, ‘This day is a day of distress, rebuke and rejection;

for children have come to birth, and there is no strength to deliver.

⁴ ‘Perhaps the LORD your God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to reproach the living God, and will rebuke the words which the LORD your God has heard. Therefore, offer a prayer for the remnant that is left.’ ”

It’s a day of distress, rebuke, and rejection. Hezekiah is at the bottom of a pit. Everybody is. They are all wearing sackcloth. They are in mourning. Hezekiah uses the image of death in childbirth to describe his feeling of helplessness he has. “For children have come to birth and there is no strength to deliver.” It’s hard to think of a more personally tragic moment than the almost birth of a child, a child dying because the midwife, or doctor, or mother could not overcome the complication in delivery. And that’s how Hezekiah feels. Jerusalem is his child and he can’t save it. He is hopeless.

He is broken. He is afraid. He realizes his own impotence. Hezekiah’s father Ahaz never sought God, never reached out to Isaiah. Hezekiah, on the other hand, where does he go? He goes into the Temple. He goes before God. And he sends word to Isaiah and asks him to pray for the remnant of Judah that still exists in Jerusalem.

Isaiah, acting as mediator between Hezekiah and Yahweh, sends a word back to Hezekiah from God. Isaiah 37:5-7.

C. The Lord’s Word to Hezekiah through Isaiah (37:5-7)

⁵ So the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah. ⁶ Isaiah said to them, “Thus you shall say to your master, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. ⁷ Behold, I will put a spirit in him so that he will hear a rumor and return to his own land. And I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.’””

The message from Isaiah is strikingly similar to the message he gave Ahaz a generation earlier. “Do not be afraid.” Sennacherib will leave. He will fall by the sword in his own land. The first part of that prophecy will come true very soon. The second part of that prophecy will come true, but not for another 20 years, when Sennacherib is killed by his own sons.

That’s the promise from Isaiah. What will Hezekiah do with that promise? He recognizes his own inability to save the people of Jerusalem. He has been humiliated and broken. But will he now trust?

The second message from Sennacherib comes in the form of a written message. We will see the same pattern as before. Sennacherib will speak. Hezekiah will respond. God will speak. We start with Sennacherib’s message in 37:8-13.

II. Sennacherib’s Word to Hezekiah through a Written Message (37:8-38)

A. Sennacherib’s Written Message (37:8-13)

⁸ Then Rabshakeh returned and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah, for he had heard that the king had left Lachish. ⁹ When he heard *them* say concerning Tirhakah king of Cush, “He has come out to fight against you,” and when he heard *it* he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, ¹⁰ “Thus you shall say to Hezekiah king of Judah, ‘Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you, saying, “Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.”

¹¹ ‘Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the lands, destroying them completely. So will you be spared? ¹² ‘Did the gods of those nations which my fathers have

destroyed deliver them, *even* Gozan and Haran and Rezep and the sons of Eden who *were* in Telassar? ¹³ ‘Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, *and of Hena and Ivvah?*’ ”

The Rabshakeh heard that Sennacherib left the siege of Lachish to confront Tirhakah the king of Cush. The rulers of Cush conquered Egypt, unifying the Nile River valley. Tirhakah will be the last of the Black Pharaohs of Cush. So this reference to Cush is the same thing as reference to Egypt at this point. Tirhakah’s brother Shebitku was king at the time of this invasion. Tirhakah, apparently, led an army that now threatens Assyrian forces. The reference to him as king fits with the custom of giving him the title he would have had when Isaiah wrote down the narrative. The town of Libnah is not known, but that is where Sennacherib has moved his forces, and that is what keeps him from coming to Jerusalem himself.

In light of this further delay, before Sennacherib can march on Jerusalem, he has a message sent to Hezekiah, reinforcing his earlier message. The written letter expands on the last point in the previous message. Assyria has defeated everyone they ever faced. Why would Hezekiah think Judah is any different? And this time Sennacherib mentions minor Mesopotamian kingdoms he had suppressed: Gozan, Haran, Rezep, and Telassar. And he re-emphasizes his previous theological point: Yahweh is a regional god no stronger than the gods of these vassal states.

Verse 13 is targeted directly at Hezekiah as king. Sennacherib asks, “Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, *and of Hena and Ivvah?*” Where are these Syrian kings, Hezekiah? Impaled, flayed, beheaded. Kings come to a bad end when they rebel against Sennacherib, the self-styled king of the world.

How will Hezekiah respond to that? Isaiah 37:14-20.

B. Hezekiah Responds (37:14-20)

¹⁴ Then Hezekiah took the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it, and he went up to the house of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. ¹⁵ Hezekiah prayed to the LORD saying, ¹⁶ “O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, who is enthroned *above* the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷ Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to all the words of Sennacherib, who sent *them* to reproach the living God. ¹⁸ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated all the countries and their lands, ¹⁹ and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them. ²⁰ Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God.”

It’s a powerful scene. Hezekiah takes the letter from the hand of the messengers, and he takes it into the House of the Lord, and he spreads it out before the Lord. It’s a very visual, concrete way of laying his problem down before God. And this time we don’t see Hezekiah sending word asking Isaiah to pray. This time Hezekiah prays himself. He has been broken. And now, he shows his belief. This is a prayer of faith. And in it, he follows the Biblical example of men like Abraham and Moses and David, men who had a true heart for the Lord, by grounding his request in the desire for God’s glory. “Sennacherib has reproached you, God. Deliver us, Lord, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are God.”

Interestingly, in the prayer Hezekiah recognizes spiritual beings in Heaven. There is a host that surrounds Yahweh, though not a host of lesser gods. Hezekiah knows his Biblical theology. It is a host of created beings that help us imagine the power of God. He is enthroned above a heavenly army of cherubim that He can send in to battle anytime He desires.

Hezekiah goes on to reject the assumption that ancient battle is battle between the gods of two nations. “You are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth.” There is one God, and He is sovereign over all nations. He is creator. “You have made heaven and earth.”

Hezekiah then calls God's attention to the blasphemous proclamation of Sennacherib.

Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to all the words of Sennacherib, who sent *them* to reproach the living God.

There is some irony here. In general, Judah has failed to hear and see who God truly is. Though, in this moment we're seeing that Hezekiah sees. And in his seeing, he is asking God to hear and see who Sennacherib truly is.

I love the next part. Hezekiah has heard the theological message of Sennacherib and rejected the fundamental assumptions of that message. Sennacherib claims that his victory over the nations is a spiritual victory over the gods of those nations. Hezekiah is not confused by that twisting of the truth. He stands firm on his Biblical convictions. He believes the Old Testament word that he has been taught. And because he has believed the Biblical word, he is able to refute the false message of Sennacherib as he prays. Verses 18-19.

¹⁸ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated all the countries and their lands, ¹⁹ and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them.

Sennacherib has not defeated the gods of the nations, because those gods are not gods. Hezekiah ends with a request for God's glory to be displayed through victory.

²⁰ Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God."

Could that be a bit of manipulation on Hezekiah's part? He really just wants to save himself, right? So, he frames his prayer as though all he wants is to see God glorified. We all know how to make our prayers sound appropriately spiritual and selfless. "I just want this for you, God, not for me. I just want it for you." Is that what Hezekiah is doing?

No. Of course, there is desire for himself mixed in there. There always is. Of course, he wants to see his family safe. He wants his city to go undamaged. He wants his nation to survive and recover. But a true believer can also come to the point where he or she sees things as God sees things. Hezekiah's eyes have been opened. He realizes that it really is more about God than it is about himself. The throne of David is God's. Jerusalem is God's. The Israelites are God's. God's glory is at stake. Hezekiah has been broken. And he is able to lift up his eyes from his own circumstances to see his God and King.

How do we know this is sincere? The way we usually do in the Bible. We see the heart of a person in the way God responds to that person. God sees into Hezekiah's heart. And he accepts Hezekiah's prayer.

We again get the Lord responds to Hezekiah delivered through Isaiah. The response is in three parts: a short word to Hezekiah, a longer word to Sennacherib, and then another short word to Hezekiah. The first part to Hezekiah is just two verses. Isaiah 37:21-22.

C. The Lord's Word to Hezekiah through Isaiah (37:21-35)

1. The Word to Hezekiah (21-22a)

²¹ Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent *word* to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, ²² this is the word that the LORD has spoken against him:'"

There is one key phrase here. "Because you have prayed to me about Sennacherib." Hezekiah's expression of faith through prayer made a difference. God will always carry out His promises. We don't defeat God's promises. At the same time, there is room for our response to also bring about an effect. Back in chapter 7, God promised Ahaz he would save Judah from Syria and Israel. Ahaz responded by being spiritually dismissive of Isaiah and seeking security in Assyria. God kept the promise of deliverance that He had already made. But in response to Ahaz' lack of faith and idolatry,

God also permitted Assyria's king Tiglath-Pileser to partially invade Judah. Ahaz' faithlessness brought about consequences.

In these current circumstances, God has already promised through Isaiah that Judah will be delivered from Assyria. Even so, like with Ahaz, there may have been an "option A" fulfillment of promised deliverance based on a positive faith response from Hezekiah, and an "option B" fulfillment of promised deliverance based on a lack of faith from Hezekiah. God's sovereign promises are always kept. And our behavior has consequences. Both of those truths apply. Even when God is keeping His promises, there is still room for further consequences, whether good, based on our faithfulness; or bad based, on our unfaithfulness. In this case, God has promised to save. That's going to happen. And Hezekiah's faith contributes to how that salvation will be realized.

So, God says, "Because you prayed, I now have a word for Sennacherib." And that is recorded in 37:22b-29. It is in poetic verse.

2. The Word to Sennacherib (22b-29)

The first verse is going to turn Sennacherib's trash talk back against him. Sennacherib sent his messages to Jerusalem, like a rapist standing outside a home, mocking the father of the house, threatening his daughter. That is a strong image, but that is the image of war and devastation. Sennacherib boasts in his own power to knock down the door, and come in, and do whatever he wants. But when the day dawns, the virgin daughter is going to mock this strong king. This is verse 22b,

She has despised you and mocked you,	The virgin daughter of Zion;
She has shaken <i>her</i> head behind you,	The daughter of Jerusalem!

The next verse questions who Sennacherib was really mocking.

²³ Whom have you reproached and blasphemed? And haughtily lifted up your eyes?	And against whom have you raised <i>your</i> voice Against the Holy One of Israel!
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Lifting up and being lowered down is a regular theme in Isaiah. It never turns out well for the human being who lifts himself up. Sennacherib has lifted his eyes against the Holy One of Israel, as though a man could claim equal status with God. This is the Holy One of Israel. Remember Isaiah's vision from chapter 6: His glory fills the earth.

God takes Sennacherib's threat as a direct challenge to Himself. Verses 24-25 sound like boasts from Sennacherib that come out of his own royal annals.

²⁴ Through your servants you have reproached the Lord, I came up to the heights of the mountains, And I cut down its tall cedars <i>and</i> its choice cypresses.	And you have said, 'With my many chariots To the remotest parts of Lebanon; And I will go to its highest peak, its thickest forest.'
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²⁵ "It is I who dug and drunk And with the sole of my feet I dried up	The waters of foreigners, All the rivers of Egypt.'
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In his pride Sennacherib has misunderstood how these human events were truly allowed to unfold. He takes all the credit. He believes it's all his power. Sennacherib could have fallen at any time like any other king and any other man. A stray arrow could have caught him. He could have fallen sick. He could have fallen of his chariot. A rainstorm could have stuck his armies in the mud. His victories happened because God permitted them to happen for the working out of His own sovereign plans. That is what God says in 26-27,

²⁶ Have you not heard? Long ago I did it, Now I have brought it to pass,	From ancient times I planned it. That you should turn fortified cities into ruinous heaps.
²⁷ Therefore their inhabitants were short of strength, They were <i>as</i> the vegetation of the field As grass on the housetops is scorched	They were dismayed and put to shame; and <i>as</i> the green herb, before it is grown up.

The reason you were strong and your enemies were weak, Sennacherib, is because I, the Lord, decreed it. Sennacherib has failed to know God. God know Sennacherib. Verses 28-29,

²⁸ But I know your sitting down and your going out and your coming in	And your raging against Me.
²⁹ Because of your raging against Me	And because your arrogance has come up to My ears,
Therefore I will put My hook in your nose And I will turn you back by the way	And My bridle in your lips, which you came.

There is an artful turn in verse 28. The first verset, “I know your sitting down and your going out and your coming in.” It’s like speaking to a rebellious child. “I know when you leave the house. I hear you creeping back up the stairs. And I also know what you say about me when you’re not here.” That’s the next verset, “And your raging against Me.” There is no secret that God does not know.

Sennacherib has lifted haughty eyes and mocked the Holy One of Israel. God will put a hook in his nose, like one who has no more sense than a beast of burden. God has no problem controlling him. With a hook in the nose, he will be turned around and sent back home in shame. There will be no boast in Sennacherib’s annals about a conquest of Jerusalem. That’s God’s word to Sennacherib.

He has one more word for Hezekiah, 37:30-35.

3. The Word to Hezekiah (30-35)

³⁰ Then this shall be the sign for you: you will eat this year what grows of itself, in the second year what springs from the same, and in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ³¹ The surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root downward and bear fruit upward. ³² For out of Jerusalem will go forth a remnant and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this. ³³ Therefore, thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, ‘He will not come to this city or shoot an arrow there; and he will not come before it with a shield, or throw up a siege ramp against it. ³⁴ By the way that he came, by the same he will return, and he will not come to this city,’ declares the LORD. ³⁵ ‘For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.’

God has a plan for the Messianic throne. The word, “sign,” in verse 30 is significant, but I’m going to talk about that in the next lesson. The land has been scoured by Sennacherib. It will take time to recover. This year they must eat whatever comes up. And next year, too, since they will not fully recover in time to plant their fields. But in the third year they will sow and harvest. That is a promise of recovery and also of security. You have to be secure to recover. God is going to keep Judah safe as they replant and rebuild.

Sennacherib boasts in his annals that he carried into exile 200,000 Judeans. That’s why verse 32 speaks of a remnant coming out of Jerusalem. The land has been devastated. Many have been taken away. But those who sought safety behind Jerusalem’s walls will come out again. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. That’s the second time we have heard that phrase in Isaiah, “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.” The first time was in 9:7 concerning the child who would be born to establish the kingdom of David, who would be of the throne of David and would be Mighty God. There will be no end to the increase of His government. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.

Remember this, people of Jerusalem! God declared ahead of time through His prophet Isaiah that He would save you from Sennacherib. Did that come true? Yes, it did. You know it did. You lived through it. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts accomplished it. God has also declared ahead of time, through His prophet Isaiah, that a divine son of David will establish His Kingdom and eventually reign over a renewed Zion. He will be the stone laid in Zion. He is the costly cornerstone. Do you believe? Just as the zeal of the Lord turned away the mightiest army ever seen on Earth up to this point, just as you saw that in your generation; even more wonderfully, the zeal of the Lord will establish for His people a new kind of Kingdom governed by a new kind of King. Do you believe this?

III. God's Triumph over Sennacherib (37:36-38)

We conclude with the third and final part of the narrative. Just three verses. This is God's triumph over Sennacherib. Isaiah 37:36-38.

³⁶ Then the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead. ³⁷ So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned *home* and lived at Nineveh. ³⁸ It came about as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons killed him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son became king in his place.

God said Sennacherib would be turned back, but not by the sword of man. 185,000 died over night. Sennacherib's annals boast that he captured 46 walled cities in Judah and took away an enormous amount of plunder, people, animals, gold, and silver. But he never mentions Jerusalem. On that point he is silent. He is silent about Jerusalem because God put a hook in his nose, and turned him around, and sent him back on the way he had come. Twenty years later, his own sons assassinated him. He died just like any other man.