

13.02.2021 THE DEFEAT OF THE ASSYRIANS

“O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, the One who dwells between the cherubim, You are God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth” Isaiah 37:16

This week we study a historical section of Isaiah – the story of the defeat of the Assyrians by God. Before we look at story itself, we should look at the story of the reigning king of Judah, King Hezekiah. Hezekiah came to the throne after his father Ahaz, a king so wicked that his own people would not bury him in the tombs of the kings, for the record says the pagan gods he worshipped were the ruin of him and his people (2 Chronicles 28:23). In contrast, his son, Hezekiah feared God, cast down the high places of pagan worship, removed the idols from the Temple and restored the worship and feasts of Jehovah. His reforms culminated with a great feast of Passover to which Hezekiah invited the citizens of both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Hezekiah recognised that repentance and consecration were essential to true worship of God. And yet, he also recognised that God looked at the heart, not just for outward manifestations of consecration, for when some of the people had arrived too late to consecrated themselves before the Passover, Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, *“May the good LORD provide atonement for everyone who prepares his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, though he is not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary.” And the LORD listened to Hezekiah and healed the people.’ 2 Chronicles 30:18-20.*

Of his reign, the Bible says, *‘Hezekiah...did what was good and right and true before the LORD his God. And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, in the law and in the commandment, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart. So he prospered.’ 2 Chronicles 31:20, 21*

Nevertheless, as we shall see, even the most godly of men, can stumble, if they become proud because of the blessings they have received from God.

The detailed record of the above is found in 2 Chronicles chapter 29-31 and 2 Kings 18:1-8.

Strings Attached

Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. Isaiah 36:1

When Hezekiah came to the throne, Judah was paying tribute money to Assyria. Earlier kings of Assyria had defeated Israel. Ahaz had allied himself with an earlier Assyrian king and paid tribute to him. Now Sennacherib came against the northern cities of Judah and Hezekiah humbled himself before Sennacherib and offered to pay tribute money to him. What was demanded was so great, that Hezekiah was had to give silver and gold from the Temple of the Lord.

Then Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, “I have done wrong; turn away from me; whatever you impose on me I will pay.” And the king of Assyria assessed Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. So Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king’s house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord, and from the pillars which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria. 2 Kings 18:14-16

One wonders what would have happened if Hezekiah had called upon God at this first threat from the Assyrians? We know from earlier chapters in Isaiah (20, 28) that some of his courtiers wanted him to make alliances with Egypt, but Isaiah had warned him not to do so.

Despite receiving the gold and silver, Sennacherib acted treacherously and sent his army to Jerusalem to besiege the city. They came as far as Lachish, a town 30 miles to the south-west of Jerusalem.

Hezekiah then made arrangements to defend the city against siege by having a permanent water supply and cutting off the water supply to the enemy.

Propaganda: Isaiah 36:2-20

'Rabshakeh' was a title given to a high state official, probably the field commander in this context. He comes up to the water supply of the city. Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, Shebna the scribe, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came out to him. Rabshakeh sends an arrogant message to King Hezekiah. In his message we see the words of Satan himself, the mind behind all ungodly nations who rebel against God. Rabshakeh was a mouthpiece of the great enemy of God's people. How often does Satan come to us and trouble us with similar claims:

The gist of the message is:

1. Egypt cannot help you...*You are trusting in the staff of this broken reed, 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 trust in him. 36:6*

It is true that Egypt cannot help Judah. But the message is not to help Judah but to demoralise her. Doesn't Satan always tell us the truth... 'You are a helpless and hopeless sinner'? But he doesn't do it to drive us to Jesus who is our only hope. He does it to demoralise us and drive us to despair.

2. Don't put your trust in Judah's God...*"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 said to Judah and Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar?'" 36:7*

Satan loves to encourage our disobedience. God says, "Trust in Me". God said, "Worship me in Jerusalem" not in the high places of pagan gods. Today He dwells in the hearts of the humble and contrite; Satan encourages us to have worship in ways that do not encourage humility or contrition. He deceives us into not trusting God for every situation in our lives.

3. Your army is weak...*"I will give you two thousand horses—if you are able on your part to put riders on them! How then will you repel one captain of the least of my master's servants..." 36:8, 9*

Satan is not really interested in a battle. He knows he will lose, for when we trust God, the battle is not ours but the Lord's. He wants to demoralise us to the point that we give up, instead of fighting the good fight of faith.

4. Jehovah is on the side of the Assyrians! *"Have I now come up without the LORD against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, 'Go up against this land, and destroy it.'" 36:10*

Here is the voice of Satan who is a blasphemer, a liar and a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Firstly, he presumes to speak for God. Then he lies and his ultimate purpose was to destroy God's people.

Then Rabshakeh went on to speak directly to the people of Jerusalem. If they could be persuaded of the futility of defending their city, they will call upon King Hezekiah to surrender.

"Hear the words of the great king..." - he glorifies the enemy facing God's people.

"Do not let Hezekiah deceive you..." – his speech was intended to make God's people doubt their leaders.

"Nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD..." - he intended to build fear and unbelief in God's people.

"Make peace with me by a present and come out to me, and everyone one of you will eat from his own vine." He makes surrender an attractive option.

"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..." This surrender will play into the hands of Satan himself, who wants to destroy God's people and their land. It will destroy God's purpose that Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.

"Beware lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, 'The LORD will deliver us.'" Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered its land from the hand of the king of Assyria..." - he wanted to destroy their trust in God. His message is simple, and

Satanic, “The gods of other nations have not been able to protect them against us. Your God is just like one of them and cannot protect you either.”

Shaken but not Forsaken: Isaiah 36:21 -37:20

But they held their peace and answered him not a word; for the king’s commandment was, “Do not answer him.” 36:21

“Silence is our best reply to the allegations and taunts of our foes. Be still, O persecuted soul! Hand over thy cause to God. It is useless to argue, even in many cases to give explanations. Be still, and commit thy cause to God.” FB Meyer

Hezekiah then takes the following measures:

1. He tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth (a sign of mourning), and went into the house of the LORD.
2. He sent his three officers to Isaiah the prophet, to inquire of the Lord and to pray for the remnant that is left and receives a positive response.
3. In response to a blasphemous letter from Rabshakeh, who now addresses the king directly, Hezekiah takes it to the Temple and lays it before the Lord.
4. Hezekiah prays to the LORD (Isaiah 37:16-20):
 - a. *“O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, the One who dwells between the cherubim, You are God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth.”*
 - b. *Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God.*
 - c. *Truly, LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire; for they were not gods, but the work of men’s hands—wood and stone. Therefore they destroyed them.*
 - d. *Now therefore, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You are the LORD, You alone.”*

Hezekiah first acknowledges who God is – the Lord of the armies of Israel, the God who rules the universe from His throne between the cherubim, the Creator of heaven and earth. He then makes his requests and they are primarily that God will be glorified in His response to His servant Hezekiah’s prayer; glorified not only in Judah but through all the kingdoms of the earth.

‘Hezekiah’s pleadings in behalf of Judah and of the honour of their Supreme Ruler were in harmony with the mind of God. Solomon, in his benediction at the dedication of the temple, had prayed the Lord to *maintain “the cause of His people Israel at all times, as the matter shall require: that all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, and that there is none else.” 1 Kings 8:59, 60.* Especially was the Lord to show favour when, in times of war or of oppression by an army, the chief men of Israel should enter the house of prayer and plead for deliverance’ *Prophets and Kings p 359*

The Rest of the Story: Isaiah 37:21-38

“Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria: ‘He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor build a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return; and he shall not come into this city,’ says the Lord. ‘For I will defend this city, to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.’” Isaiah 37:33-35

Then the Angel of the LORD went out, and struck in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people arose early in the morning, there were the corpses—all dead. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went away, returned home, and remained at Nineveh. Isaiah 37:36, 37

In Sickness and in Wealth: Isaiah 38, 39

In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, "Thus says the Lord: 'Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.'" Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the Lord, and said, "Remember now, O Lord, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what is good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

And the word of the Lord came to Isaiah, saying, "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will add to your days fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city." ' And this is the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do this thing which He has spoken: Behold, I will bring the shadow on the sundial, which has gone down with the sun on the sundial of Ahaz, ten degrees backward." So the sun returned ten degrees on the dial by which it had gone down. Isaiah 37:1-8

This passage tells us that Hezekiah's sickness occurred before the final invasion of Assyria. Most commentators place it during the time of the siege of Jerusalem. In response to Hezekiah's prayer, God healed him and gave him an additional 15 years of life and confirmed it by a miraculous sign.

But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favour shown him, for his heart was lifted up; therefore wrath was looming over him and over Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah. 2 Chronicles 32:25, 26

The Babylonian king, hearing of the miraculous sign and the defeat of the Assyrians sent emissaries to King Hezekiah. The Babylonians probably thought it was a good idea to have an alliance with Judah, a small nation who had defeated Assyria.

And Hezekiah was pleased with them, and showed them the house of his treasures—the silver and gold, the spices and precious ointment, and all his armoury—all that was found among his treasures. There was nothing in his house or in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them. Isaiah 39:2

Without consulting either the Lord or Isaiah, he showed them his vast treasures, his abundant supplies of food, and his military armaments. Instead of giving God the glory, he wanted to show this great nation how much his little nation under his leadership had become rich and increased with goods. He who had prayed that 'the kingdoms of the earth would know that you are Lord alone' lost a wonderful opportunity to witness to this heathen nation of the God who is the Creator of the cosmic universe; the God who had turned the sun back by 10 degrees.

However, regarding the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, whom they sent to him to inquire about the wonder that was done in the land, God withdrew from him, in order to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart. 2 Chronicles 32:31

God made his displeasure known to King Hezekiah. He sent a message through Isaiah foretelling the dire consequences to his nation.

Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah, and said to him, "What did these men say, and from where did they come to you?" So Hezekiah said, "They came to me from a far country, from Babylon." And he said, "What have they seen in your house?" So Hezekiah answered, "They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shown them." Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: 'Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,' says the Lord. 'And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'" Isaiah 39:3-7

The response that this once godly king gave to the prophet Isaiah is tragic:

So Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good!" For he said, "At least there will be peace and truth in my days." Isaiah 39:8

God announces coming judgment, and all he can respond with is relief that it will not happen in his lifetime. He has become self-centred. There is no doubt that Hezekiah started out as a godly king, and overall his reign was one of outstanding godliness (2 Kings 18:3-7). Yet his beginning was much better than his end; Hezekiah did not finish well.

The greatest battle we have to fight is not against the enemy outside; it is the enemy within – self. At the times of our greatest spiritual victories we are in the greatest danger of self-confidence – trusting in ourselves instead of continuing to trust in the One who gives us victory over self and selfishness, moment by moment, hour by hour and day by day as we continue to depend on Him totally.

‘Had Hezekiah improved the opportunity given him to bear witness to the power, the goodness, the compassion, of the God of Israel, the report of the ambassadors would have been as light piercing darkness. But he magnified himself above the Lord of hosts. He "rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up."...The story of Hezekiah's failure to prove true to his trust at the time of the visit of the ambassadors is fraught with an important lesson for all. Far more than we do, we need to speak of the precious chapters in our experience, of the mercy and loving-kindness of God, of the matchless depths of the Saviour's love. When mind and heart are filled with the love of God, it will not be difficult to impart that which enters into the spiritual life. Great thoughts, noble aspirations, clear perceptions of truth, unselfish purposes, yearnings for piety and holiness, will find expression in words that reveal the character of the heart treasure.’ *Ibid.* 347, 348

*Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the Lord our God.
They have bowed down and fallen; But we have risen and stand upright.
Save, Lord! May the King answer us when we call. Psalm 20:7-9*
