

Isaiah Part 20: Hezekiah and Sennacherib

Isaiah 36 and 37

Wednesday 23 March 2017, 12.45 – 1.30 pm

These next four chapters form a distinctive historical interlude. Isaiah 36 and 37 describe God's work against the Assyrian threat, and Isaiah 38 and 39 describe the response to the Babylonian threat. These chapters can be summarised as Isaiah 36: Hezekiah's trouble; Isaiah 37: Hezekiah's prayer; Isaiah 38: Hezekiah's illness; Isaiah 39: Hezekiah's folly. These events are also recorded in 2 Kings 18 v 13 to 2 Kings 20 v 19, and some of the events are also summarised in 2 Chronicles 32.

Sennacherib invades Judah (Isaiah 36 v 1 to 22)

“In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah” (v 1) – this is 701 BC, during the reign of the godly King Hezekiah of Judah. “Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them” – the Assyrian invasion has formed the background for much of the Isaiah's prophecy in chapters 1 to 35. Now, Isaiah gives us a historical record of what happened during that time. The Assyrian army swept down from the north, conquering Syria and Israel, as Isaiah prophesied in chapter 8 v 3, 4; the army then came up against the fortified cities of Judah and captured them, as Isaiah prophesied chapter 7 v 16, 17 and other passages. “The king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem” (v 2) – all that remained was Jerusalem, and if the Assyrians conquered her, then Judah would be destroyed as a nation just as Syria and Israel had been. These were desperate times!

‘The Rabshakeh’ was the title of the Assyrian ‘field commander’. As there were three Assyrian envoys, so three Jewish high officials (Eliakim, Shebna and Joah) were sent to meet them (2 Kings 18 v 17, 18).

- How did the Rabshakeh try to shake the confidence Jewish leaders in the power of God to save them? See v 4 to 10, 13 to 20. What important factor did he ignore? See Isaiah 37 v 18 to 20, 23 to 29.

“On what do you rest this trust of yours?” (v 4) – one of the great issues for Hezekiah was the temptation to make an alliance with Egypt, the only nation strong enough to protect Judah against the Assyrians. Isaiah did everything he could to discourage the leaders of Judah from putting their trust in Egypt (Isaiah 19 v 16, 17; 20 v 3 to 5; 30 v 1, 2). “You are trusting in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff” (v 6) – strangely, the Rabshakeh could see the truth of Egypt's weakness better than many of the leaders of Judah could! “But if you say to me, ‘We trust in the LORD our God,’ is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, ‘You shall worship before this altar’?” (v 7) – whether in ignorance or by subtle design, the Rabshakeh spoke of Hezekiah's religious reforms (2 Kings 18 v 1 to 5) as if it had been an act of disrespect towards God – possibly to an Assyrian mind it appeared in that light.

“Hear the words of the great king” (v 13) – the Rabshakeh's speech was intended to glorify the enemy facing God's people. “Do not let Hezekiah deceive you” (v 14) – his speech was intended to make God's people doubt their leaders. “Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD” (v 15) – his speech was intended to build fear and unbelief. “For thus says the king of Assyria: Make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine” (v 16) – his speech was intended to make surrender an attractive option. “Until I come and take you away to a land” (v 17) – here, the Rabshakeh refers to the policy of ‘forced resettlement’ practised by the Assyrians. “Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?” (v 19) – his speech was intended to destroy their trust in God. The Rabshakeh was going well until he overstepped the mark: it is one thing to speak against Judah and its leaders. It was quite another thing to mock the God of Israel, counting him as ‘just another god’.

“But they were silent and answered him not a word” (v 21) – they didn't try to argue with the Rabshakeh. They “came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn” (v 23) – though they were silent, they were deeply affected.

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Hezekiah seeks Isaiah's help (Isaiah 37 v 1 to 13)

“He tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth” (v 1) – tearing clothes and wearing sackcloth were expressions of mourning. Hezekiah takes this report regarding the Rabshakeh seriously, knowing how dedicated they are to conquering Jerusalem. “And went into the house of the LORD” – Hezekiah knew it was more necessary than ever to seek the LORD. “He sent Eliakim... Shebna... and the senior priests to the prophet Isaiah” (v 2) – the king sought out the word of the LORD, given through the prophet of the LORD.

- “Both Hezekiah and Isaiah recognized in Sennacherib’s challenge a blasphemous insult to the living God (v 6, 7; and see also v 17, 23). Why would this have given them confidence?”

“Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard” (v 6) – a gentle rebuke, as if God is saying, ‘Hezekiah, it is good for you to seek me, but the words of Sennacherib are only words. Do not be afraid of them.’ “Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumour and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land” (v 7) – God assures Hezekiah that he will indeed deal with Sennacherib. He has heard his blasphemy, and will bring judgment against him – as happened in v 36 to 38. “The king heard concerning Tirhakah king of Cush [Ethiopia]” (v 9) – the Assyrians learned that Egyptian troops (under an Ethiopian king) were advancing from the south. This was the Egyptian intervention that many in Judah trusted in. But as Isaiah prophesied, it would amount to nothing (Isaiah 20 v 3 to 5; 30 v 1, 2).

Hezekiah's prayer for deliverance (Isaiah 37 v 14 to 20)

- When Hezekiah received Sennacherib’s letter, what did he immediately do (v 14)? What can we learn from Hezekiah’s prayer (v 16 to 20)? What did he pray for? What were his overriding concerns?

“Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord” (v 14) – Hezekiah effectively fulfils the command of 1 Peter 5 v 7, ‘casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you’. “O LORD of hosts” (v 16), where ‘hosts’ refers to heavenly armies; “God of Israel”, recalling that the LORD was the covenant God of Israel, and that he should not forsake his people; “enthroned above the cherubim”, Hezekiah recognizes the majesty of God, who will not let Sennacherib’s blasphemies to go unpunished; “you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth” – Hezekiah remembers that God is God, and Sennacherib and the Assyrians are not; “you have made heaven and earth”, and so God has power and rights over every created thing... We can almost feel Hezekiah’s faith rising – and he prays confidently that the living God will save them, “that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD” (v 20).

Sennacherib's fall (Isaiah 37 v 21 to 38)

“Because you have prayed to me” (v 21) – the amazing answer which fills the rest of the chapter came because Hezekiah prayed. What if he had not prayed? Perhaps no answer would have come, and Jerusalem would have been conquered. Hezekiah’s prayer really mattered. How many blessings, victories, souls saved for Jesus, lie unclaimed in heaven until the LORD can say, ‘because you have prayed to me’?

- “The... remnant of... Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward” (v 31) – as much as the Assyrians wanted to crush Judah, they could not: God would preserve his remnant. In what ways are we encouraged to ‘take root downward and bear fruit upward’? See Psalm 1 v 1 to 3.

“The angel of the LORD went out” (v 36) – simply and powerfully, God destroyed this mighty nation in a single night. 185,000 died at the hand of the angel of the LORD. Against all odds, the Assyrian army was turned back without having even shot an arrow into Jerusalem...

Prayer – O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are Lord of all the kingdoms of the earth; for you have made heaven and earth. O LORD our God, save us from our enemies, and strengthen us in times of trial. As we abide in you, Lord Jesus, help us to take root downwards in good soil, and bear fruit upwards, for your glory, Amen.