

Isaiah 36 & 37

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The previous chapters have prophecies of the distant future. People will come from Assyria and Egypt to worship the Lord! (27:13). The redeemed and ransomed will return on a Way of Holiness, (35:8-10); they will see the glory of the Lord (35:2); they will not worship idols or sin any more (30:21,22). God will lay a cornerstone in Zion, the Lord Jesus, a precious Stone for men to trust (28:16). Christ is the King who will reign in righteousness, the Man Who is our shelter (32:1,2). Now threatening Jerusalem is the mighty army of Assyria. How do the promises of God relate to the current danger? The Lord had promised to defend the throne of David (9:6,7). God had promised in 10:15-19 that He would be a fire to devour Assyria; yet an Assyrian official stood outside the wall claiming the Lord cannot deliver them. All the promises of the glorious future are meaningless if the Lord does not keep the promise related to the imminent danger. So at this point, Isaiah switches from prediction to history. Chapters 36-37 tell of Assyria's defeat. God has kept his word, so we can trust his promises for the future.

36:1-3 Just as 1:7-9 says, Jerusalem was a city under siege, its surrounding cities burned with fire. The Egyptian army had already been defeated; now a high Assyrian officer demands Jerusalem's surrender. He met Jewish officials [see names in 22:15-25] at the very place when Isaiah once met with King Ahaz some years earlier (7:3). At that location Ahaz had rejected the promise of the Lord when he decided to put his faith in Assyria. The aqueduct was the water supply Jerusalem trusted rather than the Lord (22:8-11). Now in Isaiah 36, with Assyria on the verge of overwhelming them, the officer made his threats beside the famous aqueduct.

36:4-10 The first message to Hezekiah

The Assyrian officer argues that Egypt can be no help, that they have a problem with the Lord, that they lack a powerful army and the Assyrians even have a mandate from the Lord to attack Jerusalem. This pagan man had two misunderstandings about the Lord:

- 1.** In his mind it would be a sign of rebellion against the Lord for Hezekiah to remove those high places and altars. Hezekiah had reestablished the worship of the Lord at the Temple (1 Chronicles 29:35; 2 Kings 18:1-4). The officer interpreted this as Hezekiah drawing back from the Lord, but it was really the opposite.
- 2.** He was aware of Isaiah's prophetic predictions but misunderstood them. He had heard that the Lord would bring Assyria against Jerusalem. That the Assyrian was there was a fulfillment of prophecy! (7:17). At the time the enemy was to come against them (29:3) the people of Jerusalem would be brought low. God would hear their whisper (29:4) and be a

devouring fire to fight the hordes that attack Jerusalem (29:6,7). The Assyrian official did not know God promised to defend Jerusalem.

Isaiah had appealed for trust in the Lord. His countrymen would not listen. Then he said they would hear the same message in a foreign language (28:11), a message not to trust Egypt. Here is the fulfillment; an Assyrian in a foreign tongue telling them the same thing in vv.6 & 9.

36:11-21 The second message

Here is one of the most famous blasphemies in history. The officer spoke of the Lord as if he were like one of the false gods. (See 10:9-11.)

The officer spoke so Jerusalem would be terrified of a siege. He knew somehow that Hezekiah's view was to trust the Lord. This he quoted accurately and contradicted. Like Satan, he invited with sweet words that they should accept slavery in Assyria. But his greatest error and sin was to compare the covenant-keeping Almighty Lord with the gods of other nations. He ridiculed the Living God (37:4). God takes it personally when he is blasphemed (37:6; Exodus 20:7). That officer had no idea that Assyria was a mere tool in the hand of the Sovereign God (10:5-7,15). God was using Assyria for his purpose (Proverbs 21:1). The Assyrian mistakenly thinks of his king (v.4) as "the Great King". (See Psalm 95:3.) He asks the right question, "Who of all the gods is able to save...?" He will get a shocking answer when God displays his glory. (The Book of Isaiah stresses that God is Savior. In Isaiah 43-63, God is called *Savior* seven times, but only four in all the other prophets combined.)

The Glory of God God has given us the prophecy of Isaiah that we might know his glory. The earth is full of his glory (6:3). He will not be thought of as one like the idols (42:8). He cannot yield his glory as God to anyone, or allow his Name to be defamed (48:11). Among his people he gains glory (26:15), and thus he must enlarge that nation and not let Jerusalem fall to Assyria when his people trusted him. He displays his glory in Israel (44:23), a glory Israel will proclaim to the nations (66:19). The nations will see this (62:2) and join in giving glory to the Lord (24:15,16).

36:22 – 37:7 The appeal to Isaiah

The intimidating message comes to Hezekiah, and he sends word to the prophet. Finally, they are taking the Lord seriously; they seek the intercession (37:4) of Isaiah – the same prophet who earlier had been ridiculed (28:9,14). Notice they ask prayer for a remnant because that is all that is left. They were in more than distress, since Hezekiah added “rebuke and disgrace” (v.3). Here is the fulfillment of 29:4. The rebuke was that God controlled events to show their past strategy was wrong when they rejected his Word through Isaiah. Their foolish choices led to disgrace. Their Egypt policy had made fools of them, yet God is a God of mercy to all who will humble themselves before him. Here is the fulfillment of 30:18. There is no record that Isaiah stopped to pray. The Word of the Lord had already been revealed, so Isaiah gave it immediately

That message was that they should not be afraid; the Assyrians will leave. The so-called great king will return home and eventually he would be the one to be cut down with the sword (37:38). The king of this world will be destroyed; Hezekiah, the son of David, will live. God would put a spirit in Sennacherib to cause him to go home (after great loss of life for his army). God would confuse him. The Lord sent an evil spirit on Saul (1 Samuel 16:14). He controls even demons and rumors. The report was false, one God used for his purpose. (See 19:14; Revelation 17:17)

37:8,9 The rumor

The report of v.9 is not the same as the report of v.7. The immediate report or rumor is that the Egyptians were approaching. That made the Assyrians leave Jerusalem for a while to go join the rest of their army at Libnah, about 50 km west of Jerusalem, in the path an Egyptian army would likely use. It was just a rumor; no army was coming, so the Assyrians would return to Jerusalem – this time led by their king.

37:9-13 The letter

The letter was from Sennacherib himself. It meant the Assyrians would return. He speaks of Assyria’s past military conquests as proof that the other gods were not able to deliver those defeated nations. He was sure it would be no different with Jerusalem, because he was convinced that Jerusalem’s God was no better. Earlier he urged, “Do not let Hezekiah mislead you.” His letter now dares to speak of God deceiving them. By such words Sennacherib compounded his blasphemy. (The cities mentioned are not all known to us today.)

37:14-20 Hezekiah’s prayer

Earlier Hezekiah showed repentance. Before that he had succumbed to paying off the Assyrians, an act which was certainly not one of trust in the Lord (2 Kings 18). He also made an alliance with the Babylonians in Isaiah 39! His good reforms of 2 Chronicles 29-31 preceded the Assyrians appearing outside Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 32:1). In the two messages from the officer, he turned to Isaiah for his intercession. Later on receiving this letter, Hezekiah did not send for Isaiah, he went directly to the Temple and prayed. The earlier sin of trust in alliances, weapons, walls and water supply is over. We can do good things but still have a divided heart (James 1:6-8). In this prayer, Hezekiah with singleness of heart trusted in God alone. God was now the only hope he had, but the Lord did not despise him when he repented. It is the simple prayer of a man in weakness threatened by overwhelming force, a man who is sure that God is the One who rules over all. In this prayer of simplicity and clarity, Hezekiah –

- goes to the Lord in trouble. Because he was trusting, he was not in a panic (28:16).
- recognizes God as the living God, standing in the tradition of his fathers, reiterating the true faith of Israel. God the Creator is sovereign over all kingdoms. (Hezekiah’s prayer was the result of sound theology.)
- recognizes the covenantal bond: God dwells only in Israel in the Temple between the cherubim. (See Psalm 80.) He is their God since God had graciously chosen them as his people (Deuteronomy 7).
- presents Sennacherib’s words as blasphemy.
- admits the Assyrians had had great success against everyone else.

- views idols as powerless gods of wood and stone.
- prays to be delivered. His prayer says more about God than it does about the deliverance he sought.
- prays that God's action will glorify God in the observation of all kingdoms on earth, a request that can be fulfilled only if they learn that the Lord alone is God.

Sennacherib's letter indicates that he was informed that Hezekiah was depending on the Lord (37:10). It is possible that Sennacherib knew this from a reply to his officer, a reply not recorded in Scripture. Earlier, in 38:6 God had told Hezekiah he would defend Jerusalem. (I will show in the next lesson why Hezekiah's sickness in Isaiah 38 is earlier than the events of 36,37.)

37:21-35 The Lord's response The Lord sent word to Hezekiah through Isaiah, "*because you prayed to me,*" (v.21). The answer to Hezekiah's prayer was deliverance promised and new information given, the opposite of a false report. God revealed his thoughts about the Assyrian King (vv.22-29) ending with a word that he will return home. The Lord also gave to Hezekiah another sign, words of comfort, and even some detail of the deliverance to come (vv.30-35), ending again with Sennacherib not entering Jerusalem (v.34). Isaiah then records that Sennacherib returned to Nineveh (v.37). The fact that they would leave receives greater emphasis in the predictions than the number of soldiers who died.

37:22-25 It will be Jerusalem who will shake her head at Assyria, for Assyria will flee, not the people of God (v.22). The Holy One of Israel takes the King of Assyria's arrogant words and deeds seriously. His boasting includes words against God and arrogant actions towards its neighbors. God speaks with contempt for such boasting. Assyria claimed self-sufficiency as it seemed able to do whatever it wished. This is the prerogative of God alone in Psalm 115:2-4. The two references to water in v.25 fit the pattern of ability to supply their own needs. To this falseness we must remember it is only God who can say, "I live" as One dependent on no one and nothing. Sennacherib spoke as if he were God. (See Deuteronomy 32:39,40.)

37:26 These words are from God to the King of Assyria, whether he ever heard them or not. They continue to reside in Scripture as a Word from God suitable for every arrogant ruler. God claims sovereign direction over the deeds of the King of Assyria. That king thought he was acting on his own, but his decisions fit into the divine plan, even though the Assyrian did not know it. (See Micah 4:11,12.) In v.26 the Holy Spirit repeats the same doctrine given in 10:5-19. That longer passage in Isaiah 10 makes clear that Assyria was God's tool, doing what God had planned for his purposes. The Assyrian deeds were cruel and arrogant, yet Assyria's victims were receiving, by such a tool in God's hands, what the Lord did to them in his justice. This truth is mysterious to us, but it is as clear as it is perplexing to our minds. Now in Isaiah 37, God adds another element; he not only had planned and ordained what Assyria has done, he planned these deeds "long ago"

and "in days of old". This is just a way to state that it all fit in with his eternal plan, (Ephesians 1:11), because Sennacherib's deeds were determined prior to them ever entering Sennacherib's mind. V.26 says even more. It does not stop at the concept of a prior plan acted out by Sennacherib; it is explicit that his attacking those fortified cities was actually God bringing his plan into events. In other words, God's ordained plan was being executed when Sennacherib was conquering those cities. The Assyrian really was a tool in God's hand, and by means of this tool, God was active in human history. When Assyria attacked Israel and Judah, it was God punishing his people; it was God's hand upraised (5:25) calling a faraway army to come (5:26) as punishment for his peoples' sins. The Lord is the One who brought the King of Assyria into his land (7:17,18). Sennacherib was doing an errand for God; he was God's razor to shave Judah (5:20). Men seek to hide their plans from the Lord (29:15); here the Lord shows some of his secrets to his own. (For more on God's plan see especially 14:24-27.)

37:27-29 V.27 speaks of the weak victims of Assyrian power. All Assyria did and said was under God's scrutiny (v.28) and therefore under his judgment. In the same way Assyrians treated their captives, God will put a hook in Sennacherib's nose and lead him home. God can use them and then punish them (10:12). (See also Acts 2:22-24 and Acts 4:27,28.)

37:30-35 God has spoken to the Assyrian king, and there follows a word for his ordained son of David, Hezekiah. Hezekiah's father Ahaz rejected the

sign God offered him to support his faith, (7:10-14). Now another sign has been given to Hezekiah. With so much disruption of agriculture (32:12,13) how would they be fed? God promises this sign: enough food is growing wild to feed them for two years and then they can plant and harvest crops normally. The remnant/survivors (1:9) of Jerusalem would be preserved. The zeal of the Lord would protect the people of God (v.32) and the throne of David (9:7). For the sake of David (v.35), the Lord preserved that line and through it brought to us our Lord Jesus in that line of ancestors (Matthew 1).

37:33,34 Detail on the Assyrian return

They would not enter the city, nor would they even come close enough to reach it by arrow. The Assyrians were not so distant as not to be seen at all, as we can tell from v.36. The Lord once spoke of a hedge removed because of sin (5:5); now that circle of protection was restored (Psalm 34:7). As birds hover overhead so the Lord would shield Jerusalem (31:5). Jerusalem would have no casualties in a battle in which they did not participate.

37:35 God did not save Jerusalem because its people were good. Hezekiah's faith was genuine, but the people are described in previous chapters as those who would not listen to the Lord. After Hezekiah died, Manasseh, a most wicked king, followed; Judah sank into idolatry more and more, not finally cured

till the Babylonian Captivity (2 Kings 21:10-16). Legend says that Isaiah himself was murdered by being sawn in two – what Hebrews 11:37 may have had in mind. God saved them for his own glory – “for my sake”. He did not save them because they were good. He remembered the patriarchs (Romans 11:28). “ ... If we are faithless he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself!” (2 Timothy 2:13).

37:36-38 The Fall of Assyria

God promised Jerusalem a “Passover” type of visitation (31:5). As in Egypt (Exodus 12:23), he would pass over and strike only Assyrians. The Assyrian army returned. The Lord struck; when the people got up the next morning, they saw 185,000 who did not get up. Isaiah 10:16,17 speaks of what God would do in a single day through a wasting disease. (Perhaps ‘disease’ is literal, and they died of the plague). It was still the sword of the Lord (31:8). Sennacherib had run into the consuming fire of God (31:9). God took Sennacherib home by the nose; his kingdom decayed; eventually his city fell to the power of Babylon.

He went to worship his god Nisroch one day and his own sons murdered him. This man had mocked the Holy One of Israel thinking the Lord powerless to save, and then died in the temple of his false god who was unable to save him.