

ISAIAH: **THE GLORY OF GOD IN A WORLD OF CHAOS**

Part 6: “Faith or Fear?”

Isaiah 36:1-5, 18-20; 37:33-38

By David A. Ritchie

September 20, 2020 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. And the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field. And there came out to him Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder. And the Rabshakeh said to them, ‘Say to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this trust of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me?’” (Isaiah 36:1–5, ESV).

“Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, ‘The LORD will deliver us.’ Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?” (Isaiah 36:18–20, ESV).

“Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.” And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place” (Isaiah 37:33–38, ESV).

Almighty and everlasting God, may your Holy Spirit illuminate our understanding of your Holy word, so that our trust may be in you. We pray this in the mighty name of our king, Jesus Christ. *AMEN.*

Introduction

This fall, at Redeemer Christian Church, we have been exploring a sermon series called *Isaiah: The Glory of God in a World of Chaos*. Isaiah the prophet ministered in the kingdom of Judah in the 8th century B.C., during which, the mighty and brutal Assyrian Empire invaded and conquered much of the ancient Near East [show image [1The Assyrian Empire](#)].

The Assyrian invasion was the defining crisis of Isaiah's generation. In this situation, the people of God were tempted to place their greatest hopes and greatest fears in the kings and kingdoms of men. And Isaiah's message is an invitation to open our eyes to behold the glory of God, even in the midst of such chaos. Isaiah's words were important for God's people to hear then. Isaiah's words are important for us to hear now.

Isaiah's ministry began with his prophetic commissioning in chapter 6. At that time, the last golden age of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah came to an end. The dark clouds of Assyrian invasion were gathering over a distant horizon. Now, in chapter 36, that threat has become reality. Assyria has invaded and conquered the nations of Syria, Philistia, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The southern kingdom of Judah knows that they are now next.

But something has changed: the nation of Judah now has the best king they have had for centuries. His name is Hezekiah [show [2King Hezekiah](#)].

When Hezekiah becomes king, he leads the kingdom of Judah in a revival of devotion to God (see 2 Kgs 18:1-8; 2 Chrn 19-21). He tears down idols and high places. He restores worship at the Jerusalem temple. He even summons the nation to observe the feast of Passover for the first time in generations. Passover, if you remember is the feast that celebrates God delivering the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

But Hezekiah is not only calling the kingdom of Judah to go through the motions of religious ritual. In the midst of international crisis, he is leading them to remember and embrace their identity God's beloved, chosen, and delivered people.¹

But now comes the test. Hezekiah has refused to submit to Assyrian rule. In response, the Assyrians invade Judah. Several cities of Judah fall before the Assyrian armies. And, now, the Assyrian army has surrounded Jerusalem. The enemy is at the gate.

Initially, when the Assyrian army knocks on Jerusalem's door, Hezekiah tries diplomacy. He gives the King of Assyria a gift from the treasuries within the temple. Assyria takes the bribe, but they do not leave. They want both the land and people of Judah.

¹ Corporate worship continues to call us to remember and embrace our identity as God's people.

Now, as a historical side-note, it's important to understand how Assyria went about their conquests. Many scholars credit Assyria as the first true empire; that is, a nation composed of multiple nations, controlling a vast territory from a centralized authority. But empires composed of multiple nations are difficult to maintain and control. If you're an empire, you might be able to defeat a nation on the battlefield, but how do you prevent rebellion and insurrection?

Assyria had a novel, but cruel solution to this problem [show image **3Assyrian Resettlement**]. After they conquered a nation, they transported and relocated the entire population to somewhere else in their massive empire. By doing this, Assyria would break the bond of a people-group with their land and often the god of that land.

For this reason, Hezekiah cannot and will not comply. He will not give up the Promise Land, the birthright of the people of God, to a pagan king. But if Hezekiah resists the king of Assyria, he risks brutal annihilation.

So now, Hezekiah faces the greatest test he has ever faced. He has a choice. Will he respond with faith or will he respond with fear? And as we look deeper into this story, we might do well to ask the question: in our own time of crisis, in a year of pandemic, natural disaster, racial tension, political division, and personal struggles, will we respond with faith or will we respond with fear?

Exposition

1. Fear

At the beginning of chapter 36, we meet a new character – “the Rabshakeh” (רַב־שָׁקֵהָ). The Rabshakeh is the “chief spokesman”² of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king. He has been sent and commissioned to declare the word of the Assyrian king, and when he speaks, he says, “*Thus, says the great king, the king of Assyria.*”

Does that sound familiar to you?

The Rabshakeh is cast as a dark-mirror version of Isaiah the prophet. The Rabshakeh is sent by a king who thinks he is God. Isaiah is sent by a God who is the king above all kings. The Rabshakeh proclaims the words of the king of Assyria that create fear. Isaiah proclaims the words of God that create faith.

In other words, the Rabshakeh is not just a political leader or military commander, Isaiah wants us to see that he is a false prophet. In fact, this whole scene has some pretty profound spiritual undertones.

² Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1173.

You see [show 4Aššur], the nation of Assyria was named after a god named Aššur (אֲשׁוּר), who was considered to be the embodiment of the Assyrian empire.³ For the Assyrians, the god was the nation and the nation was god. Aššur was to be worshipped and served above all other loyalties. Sennacherib [show 5Sennacherib of Assyria] was viewed as Aššur's anointed representative on earth, who accomplished the will of Aššur by expanding the dominion of the Assyrian empire.⁴ So to sum it up, the Rabshakeh is a false prophet of a false messiah of a false kingdom of nationalistic imperialism.

The greatest weapon of the Rabshakeh is *fear*. He makes threats, and instead of speaking the language of Aramaic, which was the language of diplomacy, he intentionally speaks in Hebrew so that all Jerusalem can hear his taunt (Isa 36:11-13).

The Rabshakeh wants the people of Judah to be afraid. He wants Hezekiah to make his decisions out of fear and desperation.

The key thrust of his argument is, "Who do you trust, Judah?" (Isa 36:4).

Hezekiah has two options. The first is a political solution. He can place his trust in the Pharaoh of Egypt. In fact, in Hezekiah's day, there were some in Judah who wanted to make a military alliance with Egypt in order to defend from the Assyrians (Isa 31:1-9; 36:6-9). In other words, if we feel like we are getting bullied, we are just going to find a bigger bully to be on our side. But this option would be a sin, because it is putting hope in man (see Dt 17:16). Moreover, if you're in Hezekiah's kingdom and you just finished celebrating the first feast of Passover for generations, you might be thinking, "Maybe putting ourselves under the authority of Egypt is not a great idea."

The only other option Hezekiah has is to put his trust in the Lord; the Lord who led his people out of Egypt; the Lord who gave his people their Promise Land, and dwells among his people in the temple of Jerusalem.

But the Rabshakeh, has a retort. He says, "Do you trust your God? We have defeated all kinds of nations and all kinds of gods."

Look at the Rabshakeh's words in Isa 36, beginning in verse 18: ***"Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?"*** (Isa 36:18–20, ESV).

Now, admittedly, the Assyrians had good reason to be conceited. They had beaten every nation that they have fought. In fact, the temple of Aššur included idols taken from temples of nations that Assyria had conquered. This was an image of all the gods of the

³ Karen Radner, *Ancient Assyria: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3

⁴ Here is a nationalistic distortion of the divine mandate for humanity in Gen 1:28.

various nations bowing down to god of Assyria.⁵ However, Assyria has never gone toe to toe with the living God who created the galaxies.

As the story moves forward, the Assyrian king sends a final letter of warning to King Hezekiah, which is filled with even more threats (Isa 37:10-13). Sennacherib's message is clear: surrender and be exiled, or resist and endure unimaginable suffering. These words are designed to make Hezekiah be led by fear.

But what does it mean to be led by fear?

To make cautious and well-thought out choices is not to be led by fear. Fear is *not* the same thing as being careful. In fact, as a king, Hezekiah has a responsibility to rule God's people with wisdom, and the book of Proverbs tells us that wisdom dwells with prudence (Pr 8:12).

Fear is something else entirely.

Fear is believing that our challenges are bigger than our God. Fear is believing in a future in which God is neither powerful nor good. Fear is choosing to believe the threats of our spiritual enemy more than we believe in the promises of God.

And Hezekiah will not be led by fear. But he doesn't write a letter of threats back to the king of Assyria. Nor does he ride out into a battle that he knows he cannot win.

Instead, he takes the letter of threats from Sennacherib. He goes into the temple. He places the letter before the Lord. And he bows in humble prayer.

Here are the words of his prayer: *"O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. 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 mock the living God. Truly, O 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 no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD"* (Isa 37:16–20, ESV).

Hezekiah literally takes the words of his enemy, and he places them before God. He humbles himself under the mighty hand of God, so that God might exalt him; he casts his cares before the God who cares for him (1 Pt 5:6-7).

Hezekiah is a positive model for us when we feel overwhelmed by fear. We must learn to pray our fears instead of meditating on them, and letting them drive us to anger or despair. We must trust that no matter how big our fears are, they are not bigger than our infinite God.

⁵ Radner, 16.

The opposite of fear is not prideful overconfidence. The opposite of fear is prayerful humility.

2. Faith

Hezekiah does not make an alliance with Egypt. Hezekiah does not surrender to Assyria in cowardice. Hezekiah does not foolishly ride out into battle in his own strength and hope that it will all work out. He is very much wise and prudent as a leader. But he is also a leader who is full of faith.

Hezekiah acknowledges his weakness. Although he is a king, he humbles himself and places his trust in God's word.

It's very important to understand that Hezekiah's faith is not simply believing what he would like to be true. Hezekiah's faith is a response to the word of God, as proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah. We've heard a lot of what the Rabshakeh and king of Assyria have had to say. But here are the words of God, delivered by Isaiah just a few chapters before the account in our passage today: *"The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together. For thus the LORD said to me, 'As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey, and when a band of shepherds is called out against him he is not terrified by their shouting or daunted at their noise, so the LORD of hosts will come down to fight on Mount Zion and on its hill'... And the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of man"* (Isa 31:3-4, 8a, ESV).

Isaiah is telling Hezekiah and the people of Judah: "Don't put your hope in a military alliance or a kingdom of man, and certainly don't put your hope in Egypt. Put your hope in God. He will defend us."

So, when the threat comes, Hezekiah comes before the Lord. He reminds himself of what is true. He declares the truth of God's character and nature. He does ask to be blessed because he has been a good person. Rather, he asks God to vindicate his own name and glory and to defend his people, on the basis of his word.

This is what faith looks like. But unfortunately, "faith" is one of the most misdefined words in the Christian vocabulary.

Faith is not wishful thinking. Faith is not foolhardiness or foolish decisions. Faith is not doing what you want to do and then expecting God to bless it. Faith is not putting your hope in a man-centered solution.

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17). For the words of God are not mere words. The words of God are the basis of all reality, for by the word God, our Creator spoke the galaxies into existence (Heb 11:3). Faith is the "assurance" (ESV), "reality" (CSB), "substance" (NKJV) (ὑπόστασις) of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb 11:1).

Faith is a thoroughly God centered-reality; it derives from the word of God. Our role is simply to know, to believe, and to rest in what God has declared to be true in his word.

Christians, this is why, in a world that is shaking with thousands of voices shouting for our attention, we must be a people who seek to hear the still, small voice of God (1 Kgs 19:11-13). We need to saturate ourselves in the word of God individually (through private spiritual disciplines) and corporately (through gathered worship and gospel community).

If you were honest with yourself, whose words are you allowing to define your reality? Whose words have you been baptized into? Do the majority of the words that you allow to be inputted into you mind and heart come from the word of God? Or do they come from 24/7 cable-news, social media, and memes?

Hezekiah heard and read the words of the Rabshakeh and the king of Assyria. But he did not meditate on them, and he did not allow them to define his reality. Rather, Hezekiah rested in word of God.

Fear comes by believing the word of the enemy. Faith comes by believing the word of God.

3. The Faithfulness of God

God hears the prayer of King Hezekiah. He declares that he will fight on behalf of his people: *“Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David”* (Isa 37:33–35, ESV).

Then, two things happen that no one would have ever thought possible. The first is that the Assyrian army retreats. This action has confounded secular scholars. Here is what one archeologist has to say, *“The failure of the Assyrian king Sennacherib to capture Jerusalem is...baffling. Even the ancients couldn't explain why the Assyrians, who had rolled over the region and were known for their might and cruelty, did not crush the Judahite capital and kill its king, Hezekiah.”*⁶

But Scripture tells us the solution of this mystery [show image **6“The Defeat of Sennacherib” by Peter Paul Rubens (1612-14)**]. Our text tells us that the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 soldiers in the camp of the Assyrians (Isa 36:36). Some scholars theorize on the basis of an Egyptian account that perhaps this angelic attack came in the form of a mouse-borne plague⁷ that suddenly ransacked the

⁶ Philippe Bohstrom, “How Mice May Have Saved Jerusalem 2,700 Years Ago From the Terrifying Assyrians.” *Haaretz*. April 18, 2018. <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/.premium.MAGAZINE-how-mice-may-have-saved-jerusalem-2-700-years-ago-from-the-assyrians-1.6011735>

⁷ Ibid.

military camp of the Assyrians while they prepared to lay siege against Jerusalem. Regardless, the mightiest military power in the world is defeated, and Hezekiah doesn't even have to lift a finger.

And then, secondly, to top it all off, God defeats the Assyrian king in his hometown: *"Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place"* (Isa 37:37–38, ESV).

This is perfect literary irony. In weakness, King Hezekiah goes to the temple of the true God and is delivered. In pride, King Sennacherib goes to the temple of his false god and is murdered.

Hezekiah places his faith in God, and God is faithful to win the battles that Hezekiah and the kingdom of Judah could have never won in their own strength.

Conclusion

This moment of testing was a national crisis for Judah. But it was a personal crisis for Hezekiah.

King Sennacherib of Assyria had a vicious reputation, especially as it related to kings he had conquered. He would not only murder defeated kings. He would torture and publicly humiliate his vanquished foes before their own people.⁸ And to make matters worse, the Assyrians prided themselves innovating new ways to make their enemies suffer, and thereby inspire fear among all who would oppose them. The Assyrians would flay defeated kings, they would impale defeated kings, and the Assyrians even invented a new form of public execution, whereby they would *crucify* defeated kings.

God saves Hezekiah from this horrific death despite his failures. After all, while Hezekiah was one of the great kings of Judah, he was not perfect. He was guilty of pride, self-centeredness, and short-sightedness that set his kingdom on a trajectory to defeat and exile (Isa 38-39). In this way, this story of Hezekiah is meant to provoke our longings for an even greater king.

Seven centuries after the events of Isaiah 36 and 37, Hezekiah's direct descendant will not be spared as Hezekiah was spared. Jesus Christ of Nazareth will be led outside of the gates of Jerusalem and will be publicly crucified by an empire in front of his own people (cf Heb 13:12).

Hezekiah places his faith in God by going to the temple. But Jesus places his faith in God by becoming the sacrifice. Hezekiah humbles himself in prayer. But Jesus humbles himself to the point of death (Phil 2:8). Hezekiah is vindicated by God in his escape from death because he is a son of David (cf Isa 37:35). But Jesus is vindicated by God in

⁸ Ibid.

his resurrection from the dead because he is the true and better son of David (cf Rom 1:4).

Through the story of Hezekiah, God has displayed that he is sovereign over human powers like Assyria. But in the gospel of Jesus Christ, God has displayed that he is sovereign over the cosmic power of death.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, in a world and in a moment in history when there are so many voices trying to lead us by fear, may we be a people of faith. May we entrust ourselves to a God who is faithful, a gospel-word that is true, and a Savior who is able to defeat all powers of this world – even the power of death!

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

- 1. Read Isa 36:1-5, 18-20, and 37:33-38. For the full picture, read all of chapters 36 and 37. Summarize this story in your own words. How would you characterize the contrast between the beginning of Isa 36 and the end of Isa 37.*
- 2. Look at the character of the Rabshakeh in the early part of Isa 36. In what way does the Rabshakeh serve as a mirror-opposite of Isaiah the prophet?*
- 3. What are some ways the Rabshakeh tries to motivate the people of God by fear in Isa 36? What are some ways we might be tempted to be motivated by fear today?*
- 4. Isaiah 37:14-20 shows how Hezekiah literally brings his fears before the Lord. Instead of putting his hope in an earthly kingdom, like Egypt, Hezekiah casts his anxieties before the God who cares for him (see 1 Pt 5:6-7). How can we learn to pray our fears?*
- 5. What role does the word of God play in reducing our fear and increasing our faith?*
- 6. At the end of the story, God defeats the king of Assyrian in a way no one would have ever expected. In the gospel of Jesus Christ, God defeats the powers of sin, Satan, and death in a way no one would have ever expected. How can we learn to trust in the victory of God in our daily lives as Christians?*

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