

Explore the Bible: God Answers

September 29, 2020

The threat of the Assyrian empire dominates most of Isaiah 1-39. This massive, powerful nation to the northeast of ancient Israel was carving a path of conquest and destruction across the ancient Mediterranean during Isaiah's prophetic career.

Our text for this lesson covers what may have been Judah's darkest hour during the Assyrian period. Under the leadership of Sennacherib, Assyrian forces successfully invaded Judah and are now right at the edge of Jerusalem. While he is off fighting battles elsewhere, Sennacherib sends some of his lieutenants to handle Jerusalem.

This story is recorded in both Isaiah 36-37 and 2 Kings 18:13-19:37. The city of Zion is under siege, with only the city walls and Judean soldiers standing between Jerusalem and the Assyrian forces—or so it would seem.

Hezekiah's Prayer

Hezekiah stands out in the history of Israel and Judah as one of the few godly kings to reign over God's people. Of all the men to rule either the Northern or Southern Kingdom, Hezekiah—along with Josiah—stand far above the rest as godly and faithful rulers (2 Kings 18:5; 22:2). It is Hezekiah's trust in the Lord that will make all the difference in this story.

As Sennacherib's forces surround Jerusalem, all hope seems lost. In the verses immediately prior to our passage, Sennacherib's lieutenant Rabshakeh mocks the Judeans and their God. Rabshakeh points out Assyria has conquered numerous kingdoms, and there is no god who has yet delivered their people from the hand of the Assyrians. It would be foolish, Rabshakeh claims, to trust YHWH for protection now (Isaiah 37:8-13).

How does Hezekiah respond? He takes the letter from Rabshakeh to the temple and spreads it out before God (37:14). Then the king prays. Hezekiah begins by emphasizing that YHWH alone is the creator of the universe and Lord over everything in it (37:15-16). Hezekiah then refers God to Rabshakeh's letter and the way it mocks the Lord (37:17).

Hezekiah proceeds to acknowledge the Assyrians' conquest of other nations. But he points out the real reason none of those nations' gods could save them: they are not gods. They were "only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands" (37:19). *Of course* the idols of other nations could provide no protection from Assyria; the idols are weaker than the hands that crafted them.

But YHWH is different. The God of Israel is living, active and all-powerful. And Hezekiah, being the faithful and righteous king that he is, trusts in this God for deliverance. But Hezekiah does not call upon God to save Jerusalem for Jerusalem's own sake. Hezekiah is concerned with God's glory. The king asks God to save Jerusalem and Judah "so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, Lord, are the only God" (39:20).

The Lord's Response

Since Hezekiah has cried out to God in faith, God answers. He will not let Rabshakeh's insult stand, and he will not let the Assyrians conquer Judah.

YHWH will remove Assyria from the land of Judah by the end of the year. The people will be able to start planting crops by the next year, because the Assyrian forces will have left the land free (37:30). While the conquest and siege has left the land devastated and the people with little food, by the third year the people will again enjoy the fruit of the harvest from the land.

God also tells Hezekiah that he will preserve a remnant in Judah. While many, many people have died at the hands of the Assyrians, God will not let

his people be destroyed. This remnant, preserved and protected by God's power, will "take root" and grow into a nation once more. But this remnant will not survive by their own strength or resiliency; "The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this" (37:32).

God then turns to the immediate issue at hand: Rabshakeh and his forces outside the gate. God promises the Assyrian forces will utterly fail to take Jerusalem (37:33-34). But God makes clear why he will save Jerusalem in verse 35: "I will defend this city and save it, *for my sake and for the sake of David* my servant!" (emphasis added)

God will not save Jerusalem because Jerusalem deserves it or because Jerusalem is innocent. God will save Jerusalem to vindicate his name in the wake of Rabshakeh's insults, to demonstrate to the world that God alone is Lord. And God will save Jerusalem to honor the covenant he made with King David centuries earlier (2 Samuel 7).

Contemporary Application

There are a few points of application we modern Christians can take from this text. First, we should not trust in our own devices. We may not literally bow down before figurines carved from wood and stone, but we often commit idolatry by trusting in our own methods and schemes over God.

Second, we must remember the salvation we have from God through Jesus Christ is not something God has given us because we are innocent or because we deserve it. God saves us to demonstrate his mercy and his faithfulness, not to affirm us as sinless or as better than everyone else.

Third, we can take comfort knowing that even though circumstances may look very bad—even hopeless—we are never beyond hope. God's promise of salvation, both for us as individuals and for the whole created order, stands unshakeable and certain. There is *nothing* that is "able to separate us from

the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

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