

An Attack on Faith

Isaiah 36

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**BIG BEND
BIBLE
FELLOWSHIP**

This begins a four-chapter section different than the prophecies recorded before or after. Isaiah 36 and 37 describe the LORD's work against the Assyrian threat. Isaiah 38 and 39 describe the response to the Babylonian threat.

- This is history at its best, not dull recital of statistics and dates but an account which enables us to sense the haughty arrogance of the Assyrian and the chilling clutch of despair at the hearts of the Israelites.

Isaiah 36:1-10 – Rabshakeh speaks to leaders (NIV)

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. ² Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. When the commander stopped at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Launderer's Field, ³ Eliakim son of Hilkiyah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went out to him.

⁴ The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah: "This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? ⁵ You say you have counsel and might for war—but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? ⁶ Look, I know you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him. ⁷ But if you say to me, "We are depending on the Lord our God"—isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar"?"

⁸ "Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses—if you can put riders on them! ⁹ How then can you repulse one officer of the least of my master's officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen? ¹⁰ Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the Lord? The Lord himself told me to march against this country and destroy it."

v1 – What does the time stamp here tell us?

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah: This was about the year 700 B.C., during the reign of the godly King Hezekiah of Judah. The events of this chapter are also recorded in 2 Kings 18:13-27 and 2 Chronicles 32:1-19.

- This Assyrian invasion has been the broad background for much of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah chapters 1 through 35. Now, Isaiah gives us a historical record of what happened during the time he prophesied about.

What did Assyria do?

Sennacherib King of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them: The Assyrian army swept down from the north, conquering Syria and Israel, as Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 8:3-4 and many other passages. The Assyrian army then came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took all of them except for Jerusalem, as Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 7:16-17 and many other passages.

v2 – What next threatened Judah?

Then the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem: At the time of Isaiah 36:1-3, the Assyrian army has conquered both Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel and has devastated the countryside and fortified cities of Judah.

- All that remains is Jerusalem, and if the Assyrians conquer her, then Judah is destroyed as a nation just as Syria and Israel were. These were the desperate times of King Hezekiah.

What was the Rabshakeh?

Actually, it is a title, not a name. It describes the "field commander" for the Assyrian army, who represented the Assyrian King Sennacherib.

- Rab-shakeh, possibly originally meant 'chief cup-bearer' but by this time some high officer of state.

The mention of Lachish is significant historically as an important fortress city of Judah thirty miles south-west of Jerusalem. Archaeologists have discovered a pit there with the remains of ~1,500 casualties. In the British Museum, there is Assyrian carving depicting their siege of Lachish.

v2-3 – What is significant about where the Rabshakeh was able to go?

He stood by the aqueduct from the upper pool....

Eliakim...Shebna...Joah...came out to him: The Rabshakeh seems to be in complete command of the situation walking right into the city of Jerusalem and standing at their crucial water supply. There, three officials from Hezekiah's government come to meet him.

v4 – How did God speak to Judah through the Rabshakeh?

What confidence is this in which you trust? One of the great battles for Hezekiah during this time was the temptation to make a defensive alliance with Egypt, which seemed to be the only nation strong enough to protect Judah against the mighty Assyrians.

How did the Rabshakeh rub salt in Judah's wound?

God wanted Judah to have no confidence in Egypt but the Rabshakeh isn't saying this to cause Judah to trust in the Lord. He does it demoralize and drive them to despair.

How does Satan use the same tactic to demoralize us?

Often, even when he tells the truth ("You are such a rotten sinner!"), he never does it to lead us to trust in the Lord, he seeks to demoralize us and drive us to despair rendering us incapacitated.

v5 – How does the Rabshakeh express his arrogance?

He is acting like he is already ruling Judah saying they were rebelling against him.

v6 – How did the Rabshakeh have a realistic grasp of the situation?

You are trusting in the staff of this broken reed, Egypt: The Rabshakeh could see the truth of Egypt's weakness better than many of the leaders of Judah could.

- Egypt had made its one attempt to fulfill its promises (28:14) and had been beaten at El Tekeh. The Rabshakeh had seen this, so his words exposed the criminal stupidity of Judah's leaders.

v7 – How did the Rabshakeh next expose Judah's vulnerability?

If you say to me, "We trust in the LORD our God": The Rabshakeh anticipated the response of the leaders of Judah. But implied in that anticipation is that this wouldn't help them either.

Is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away? The Rabshakeh knew that King Hezekiah had implemented broad reforms in Judah, including the removal of the high places (2 Kings 18:3-4).

- The high places were spots of "individual worship" which were prohibited by God's law (Leviticus 17:1-4).
- In the pagan world at that time, it was customary to offer sacrifice on altars built on high hills.
- Hezekiah did right when he took away the high places and the altars, demanding that people come to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifice.

How are people replicating the "high-hill" worship error today?

By entertaining an entirely individualistic way of coming to God, where each person makes up their own rules about dealing with God as they see Him.

In the book *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues interview a young nurse named Sheila Larson, whom they describe as representing many Americans' experience and views on religion. Speaking about her own faith and how it operates in her life, she says: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way.

Sheilaism is a shorthand term for an individual's system of religious belief apart from much theological consideration.

Why do we gather together to worship God?

John 13:35 – *By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*

You want to be with the ones you love. Not all who go to church are true born-again Christians, but all true born-again Christians go to church. And this applies even more in this time at the end of the Church Age...

Hebrews 10:24-25 – *And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*

What was the Rabshakeh's logic for why their God would not help Judah?

Is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away? In the Rabshakeh's thinking, Hezekiah's reforms should have really displeased their God. The Rabshakeh effectively said, "Since Hezekiah came in, there is only one place for worship. More is always better, so the God of Israel must be pretty sore at Hezekiah!"

How did the Rabshakeh express demonic logic?

A doctrine of demons is universalism which the church is increasingly buying into today. But God said there is only one way to Him...

John 14:6 – *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*

v8 – What solution to Judah’s dilemma did the Rabshakeh offer?

Give a pledge to my master the king of Assyria: This was the Rabshakeh’s whole strategy, to make Judah give up. This is the entire reason Rabshakeh was at the aqueduct, speaking to these leaders of Hezekiah’s government. He had the vastly superior armies; he could have just attacked Jerusalem without this little speech. But the Rabshakeh preferred that Judah would simply give up, out of fear, discouragement, or despair.

How does this give insight into the wiles of the devil?

The enemy of our soul uses the same approach. Satan is not “itching for a fight” with us because:

1. there is the strong chance you will win.
2. win or lose, the battle can draw you closer to the Lord.
3. what the Lord does in your life through the battle can be a great blessing for other people.

Satan would rather just “reason with you” into giving up.

- We see this strategy used against Jesus during His temptation in the wilderness. It didn’t work with Jesus, and it shouldn’t work with us.

How did the Rabshakeh’s offer of horses mock Judah?

I will give you two thousand horses — if you are able on your part to put riders on them: Here, Rabshakeh mocked Judah’s weak army. He said, “Even if we helped you with 2,000 horses, it wouldn’t do you any good.” His basic message was, “We could beat you with one hand tied behind our backs!” (*How then will you repel one captain of the least of my master’s servants*, v9).

v10 – How did the Rabshakeh strengthen his argument for Judah’s surrender?

Have I now come up without the LORD against this land to destroy it? The Rabshakeh saved his best thrust for last: “Admit it, Hezekiah. You know that your God has raised me up to punish you and is on my side.”

The LORD said to me, “Go up against this land, and destroy it”: This was the finishing blow of a brilliant attack. “Hezekiah, God told me to destroy you. I’m just doing His will, and there is nothing you can do to stop it, so you may as well surrender.”

How did this argument have credibility with Judah?

Like all good deception, it would have been easy for Hezekiah and his men to believe this one. After all, hadn’t the Assyrians been wildly successful? Surely, God must be on their side. Didn’t they have the most powerful army? Surely, God must be on their side.

How had the Assyrian army actually done God’s will?

Assyria’s attack on Judah fulfilled God’s prophesied plan! In conquering Syria, Israel, and bringing Judah to the brink, the Assyrians did the will of God! God prophesied that all this would happen (Isaiah 8:3-4, 7:16-17 and many other passages in Isaiah). He allowed it to happen so His prophesied plan would be fulfilled.

So, did God tempt an innocent man with an evil plan?

No, even though God predicted and planned this invasion of the Assyrians, the Rabshakeh was probably lying when he said, “The Lord said to me.”

- God did not have to do anything special to get the bloodthirsty, conquest-hungry Assyrians to attack Syria, Israel, and Judah. He simply allowed them to carry out the corrupt desires of their evil hearts.

The Assyrians could never excuse themselves by saying, “We were doing the LORD’s will!” even as Judas could never make that excuse regarding his betrayal of Jesus.

Isaiah 36:11-22 – Rabshakeh addresses the people (NIV)

¹¹ Then Eliakim, Shebna and Joah said to the field commander, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it. Don’t speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall.”

¹² But the commander replied, “Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things, and not to the people sitting on the wall—who, like you, will have to eat their own excrement and drink their own urine?”

¹³ Then the commander stood and called out in Hebrew, “Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! ¹⁴ This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you! ¹⁵ Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the Lord when he says, ‘The Lord will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.’ ¹⁶ “Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, ¹⁷ until I come and take you to a land like your own—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards. ¹⁸ “Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, ‘The Lord will deliver us.’ Have the gods of any nations ever delivered their lands from the hand of the king of Assyria? ¹⁹ Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? ²⁰ Who of all the gods of these countries have been able to save their lands from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?”

²¹ But the people remained silent and said nothing in reply, because the king had commanded, “Do not answer him.”

²² Then Eliakim son of Hilkiyah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went to Hezekiah, with their clothes torn, and told him what the field commander had said.

v11 – Why did Hezekiah’s men ask Rabshakeh to speak only to them?

Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it: We can just imagine how difficult this was for these leaders in Hezekiah’s government. They must have thought, “It’s bad enough we have to hear this. But since he is speaking in Hebrew, everyone will hear, and soon the people will become so discouraged they will rise up against us and make us surrender!”

v12 – How did the Rabshakeh’s response reveal his strategy?

Has my master sent me to your master and to you to speak these words, and not to the men who sit on the wall: Rabshakeh doesn’t care if the common citizens of Jerusalem hear him. That’s how he wants it! The more fear, discouragement, and despair he can spread, the better.

What was meant by saying the men on the walls will eat and drink their own waste?

The Rabshakeh pointed forward to what conditions would be like in Jerusalem after an extended siege. He wanted this to disgust everyone who heard it, and he wanted to magnify the sense of fear, discouragement, and despair.

v13 – How did the Rabshakeh double-down on his strategy to induce fear, discouragement, and despair?

Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out with a loud voice in Hebrew: Saying “don’t do that” to the Rabshakeh was like saying it to a naughty child. He couldn’t wait to speak to the people of Jerusalem.

- The Rabshakeh’s speech was intended to glorify the enemy facing God’s people.

v14 – What did the Rabshakeh want the men on the walls to believe?

Do not let Hezekiah deceive you: Rabshakeh’s speech was intended to make God’s people doubt their leaders.

v15 – What else did the Rabshakeh want the men on the walls to believe?

Nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord: Rabshakeh’s speech was intended to build fear and unbelief in God’s people.

v16 – What did the Rabshakeh want the men on the walls to do?

Make peace with me by a present and come out to me, and everyone one of you will eat from his own vine: Give up... the Rabshakeh’s speech was intended to make surrender an attractive option.

v17 – What threat did the Rabshakeh make to the men on the walls?

Until I come and take you away to a land like your own land: Here, the Rabshakeh refers to the policy of “ethnic cleansing” and “forced resettlement” practiced by the Assyrians. When they conquered a people, they forcibly resettled them in faraway places, to keep their spirits broken and their power weak. The Rabshakeh’s speech was intended to make this terrible fate seem attractive.

v18 – How did the Rabshakeh attack their faith in God?

Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered its land from the hand of the king of Assyria? The Rabshakeh’s message is simple, and cunning in its Satanic logic: “The gods of other nations have not been able to protect them against us. Your God is just like one of them and can’t protect you either.”

How should the people of Judah seen through the Rabshakeh’s satanic logic?

It is one thing to speak against Judah, its people and leaders. It was another thing altogether to mock the God of Israel this way by considering Him as “just another god.”

- Typical of the work of the enemy of our souls, the Rabshakeh was going well until he overstepped his bounds. There was no way God would let him off the hook for this one. He had offended the Lord in a way he’d soon regret.

v21 – How did the men on the walls respond to the Rabshakeh’s speech?

But they held their peace and answered him not a word: They didn’t try to argue with Rabshakeh. Often, it is useless — if not dangerous — to try and match wits with this demonic logic. How much better to keep silent and trust God, instead of trying to win an argument.

How do we see the wisdom of King Hezekiah?

For the king’s commandment was, “Do not answer him”: King Hezekiah was wise enough to make this command, and his officials and the people were wise enough to obey him.

v22 – How did the representatives of King Hezekiah report back to him?

Came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn: Though they were silent, they were still deeply affected by this attack. It didn't just roll off their backs as if it were nothing.

What should we keep in mind when we are under satanic oppression?

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 – We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

Our situation may look desperate, but the battle is not lost yet. God is still to make His move.

What applications come to mind from our discussion?

- Satan's strategy is to drive us to despair rendering us incapacitated... don't let him!
- Don't forsake the assembling of ourselves together... we get strength from one another!
- The path to eternal life is exclusive... don't be deceived by the world!
- Satan seeks to avoid the fight and tries to "reason with us"... don't buy his twisted logic.
- Satan will attack our faith in God... don't let him!
- Remember that by being on God's side, we have already won the battle against the enemy of our souls!