

SUMMER 2 - In Whom Shall We Trust?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 January 1999

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] to understand your word, that we may the better trust in you and serve you and follow you all the days of our life. Amen.

Who is the real king? Who is the real God? In whom then shall we trust? That is at heart the issue of these two chapters.

They're very different in character from what we saw last week. Indeed, they're very different in character from everything preceding in Isaiah and everything following chapter 39 in Isaiah.

These four chapters are what's called narrative, it's story or prose, whereas much of the rest or almost all the rest of Isaiah is in a poetic style of writing.

These chapters have many parallels, very clear parallels with two kings, chapters 18 to 20, so much so that clearly they come from either a common source or Isaiah is borrowed from the writer of kings or vice versa.

[1 : 1 3] But there are differences and in part in those differences we understand some of the emphases. I won't worry too much about that tonight and pointing those things out.

But certainly we now jump into, in a sense, into the real world from the glorious vision that ended chapter 35 of the redeemed coming back to Zion and clapping and shouting for joy, everlasting being on their heads.

Now we find Zion, Jerusalem, is under siege, in strife, in crisis. So it's a jolt from chapters 35 to 36.

The king is Hezekiah, on the whole a good king and one whom we'll see here has his finest hour in these two chapters. He was a reforming king.

He followed King Ahaz, the bad king of the early part of Isaiah, the one who refused to trust in God. Rather, Hezekiah was one who cleaned up the shrines and the temple and so on.

[2 : 1 5] He got rid of the idols from the temple and he closed down all the illicit shrines out in the country because, as Deuteronomy 12 says, there shall be one central shrine for the worship of Yahweh.

So Hezekiah went a long way to correcting a lot of the religion of his day. And when you read two kings, as some of you may know, it finishes each king by saying he was a goody or a baddie.

Most of them are baddies. Hezekiah is a rare goodie. In fact, after Solomon, there would probably be only one king better than him for either North or South Kingdom and that would be Josiah another 60, 70, 80 years later.

The time is 701 BC. Assyria is the superpower. It's spreading its wings and it's on the doorstep of Jerusalem.

Throughout the book of Isaiah, Isaiah has been exhorting the people and the king and the nobles and the officials and the priests to trust in God, not to trust in another nation, whether Assyria or Egypt or themselves or any other nation for that matter.

- [3 : 26] And in part, Hezekiah is to blame in some of that time. Isaiah's prophecy extends before Hezekiah to his father Ahaz and so on as well to Uzziah back in chapter six and so on.
- But Hezekiah is also in part to blame for his lack of trust in God and his placing of trust in Egypt, an alliance with Egypt to thwart mighty Assyria.
- But now as we see and we've heard read, this is the time when he repents of all that. Now his opponent here is a man called Sennacherib, one of the many great Assyrian emperors of the 8th and 7th centuries BC.
- His father Sargon had died in 705 and inevitably in the ancient world when an emperor died of any nation, that was the opportunity for conquered peoples out in the outskirts of the empire to rise up in rebellion.
- Seize your chance. New emperor on the throne, he's too busy with, you know, great big Westminster Abbey coronation services probably to worry about us for a while. So the first couple of years of Sennacherib's reign were spent cleaning up some little revolts.
- [4 : 38] Babylon and then, and other parts of the west and a bit south of that. And then he turned his attention, east rather, and then he turned his attention to the west, that is to Palestine and Syria, the Philistines down the coast, even down towards Egypt and so on.
- So in the two years immediately preceding these events, Sennacherib's army has defeated every nation in turn. Some of them capitulated before he got there.
- They paid them tribute and they became an Assyrian province, willingly, because they saw that they were no match for the mighty Assyrians. So Sidon and Tyre in modern Lebanon became Assyrian provinces.
- Syria, the Philistine cities, some of them they conquered, others capitulated early, and even Egypt was defeated in 702 BC. The only nation or people state remaining in opposition was Judah.
- 20 years before the northern kingdom had been destroyed, Samaria had been taken by the predecessors of Sennacherib. But Hezekiah's kingdom is the only one left standing against Sennacherib.
- [5 : 50] One of the things that Hezekiah does in his early part of his reign is strengthen Jerusalem. And if you go to Jerusalem, as some of you I hope may in November, there's a little plug here, you'll see two things at least that relate to this passage.
- One is that Hezekiah extends the wall around Jerusalem. The city had grown outside the old walls. In order to protect the inhabitants, they built a bigger wall, in a sense, around some of the bit that wasn't walled.
- And we're told in Isaiah 22 that they actually went, in effect, over houses. And today, right on the point where a house is destroyed by the wall, you can still see the remnants of that house over part of Hezekiah's wall in the old city of Jerusalem.
- Exactly what Isaiah said happened, we see from archaeology itself. And the other thing that you can still see today from Hezekiah's time is a water tunnel, half a kilometre long, 512 metres long.
- You can walk through it. I've done it a couple of times. It's not all that pleasant. The water's not all that clean. But the point of this water tunnel, through solid rock, was to channel the water from a spring outside the wall, in under the wall, into a place so that they had secure water.
- [7 : 15] Now the point of that is that when a city's under siege, the water supply, if it's outside the wall, is cut off, quickly. And it doesn't take very long then for inhabitants inside a city wall to capitulate or die without water.

So Hezekiah, you see, was taking precautions to strengthen Jerusalem by channeling this massive work of a water tunnel under the wall so that it would come out at the Pool of Siloam and they would have safe water under a siege.

Now that's all by way of background to this, these events here in 701 BC. And these two chapters hang together and I thought about trying to separate them because they are long, but in the end the whole thing fits together.

So then, chapter 36. And really, chapter 36 is about the demand by Sennacherib for Hezekiah, the king of Judah, to surrender.

And so we're told in the 14th year that makes it 701. King Hezekiah was the king. And already Sennacherib has attacked the rural cities of Judah.

[8 : 26] In fact, the Assyrian, his own annals, if you like, which have been found, tell us that 46 cities had fallen, the last of which was Lachish.

Lachish was sort of, if you like, the Geelong of Melbourne, that is the second city of the state. It fell. Jerusalem is the only one left. And city by city fell.

And at Lachish, one of the things they found on little bits of pottery, and you can see these in the British Museum amongst other places, are inscriptions telling us that now the light from Azekah, the next town up the road, has gone.

A beacon that would be burning there. It's gone. That means the Assyrians have taken the town. And they said, we are the last left. And it was a message from Lachish to go to Jerusalem.

It appears it never got there because it was found in Lachish, one of these letters. We also know that from Sennacherib's own annals, many of which have been found, that 200,000 prisoners in Judah had been captured in this time.

[9 : 30] That's a lot of prisoners to capture and then to take off into deportation. So Sennacherib from Lachish, 25 miles or so from Jerusalem, sends his envoys, we're told, in verse 2.

The Rabshakeh is the key one, the one who speaks for him. Some say that he's a cupbearer. It's a field commander, it seems. One of his leading officials, top brass, if you like, is sent.

And probably a strategic person because he speaks Hebrew, as we'll also see shortly. I should also say, by the way, at Lachish, there's another plug for going to Israel, that you can still see remains in the soil of human blood dating from 700 BC from the massacre of Lachish.

1500 corpses have been found dating from the same period. So it was a very bloody battle to destroy Lachish. They fought very hard to keep it. We can still see remains of their armaments and their cannonballs that they'd hurl over the wall.

But they fell and there's still traces of human blood in the soil dating from that period. What happened, it seems, when Lachish fell was Hezekiah paid a bit of money to Sennacherib to try and stave him off and say I'm a friend.

[10 : 47] But Sennacherib isn't convinced by that and probably it was a shock to Hezekiah to look up one morning and find the Assyrian army on his doorstep and their field commander, in a sense, banging on the gate, saying, right, it's time to negotiate some terms here.

I think Hezekiah was thinking that he might have been safe from paying money. And the commander comes, we're told at the end of verse 2, to the aqueduct of the upper pool on the road to the washerman's field.

Now that's one thing you can't see in Jerusalem today, no one knows where it was, but the point is that it's exactly the same point, place, where Isaiah spoke to Hezekiah's father Ahaz in chapter 7.

At the time he was worried about the Assyrians and Isaiah said to him, God will protect you, trust in God, he'll even give you a sign to show you that he'll trust in you.

And Ahaz refused point blank. The irony is that now at the very point, the field commander of the Assyrian army is standing there, demanding terms with Hezekiah.

[11 : 54] And the whole reason he's there is because Ahaz failed to trust in God back in chapter 7, and if you read into Isaiah chapter 8, you'll see the outcome of that. Hezekiah sends three of his top officials.

They would have been the very senior people in the kingdom, probably, out, the equivalent of the sort of prime minister and treasurer and so on, out to discuss things with this Rabshaker.

The king doesn't go, but his officials go. And what we're then told in verses 4 onwards is in effect the first speech of this field commander, the Rabshaker.

And this speech is one of the masterful displays of subversion that you'll find in the Bible. It is full of threat, half-truth, insult, intimidation, innuendo.

It is misrepresentation of Isaiah and Hezekiah as well. And it is just like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, misrepresenting, yes, a lot of truth, but distorted truth, twisted truth.

[13 : 06] There's enough untruth or falsity to make this evil, but there's enough truth to make it persuasive. It is a satanic attack in the end, I think, on the faith of Hezekiah and his people.

And the speech is persuasive because so much of it is in a sense true. The problem is its basic premise is false. The premise about God being weak.

Well, not only are they seeking to intimidate the king Hezekiah, but they're also seeking to put fear up the common people, as we'll see in a few verses time.

So verse 4 says that the Rabshaker said to them, say to Hezekiah, thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, on what do you base this confidence of yours?

And in a sense, that's the summary question of these two chapters. On where or what or whom should confidence be based? Notice that Sennacherib is described as the great king, the king of Assyria.

[14 : 14] That's exactly the expression that's found in his own annals about himself. It's clearly a reliable transcription of what was going on at that time. But notice also what is said in verse 4, say to Hezekiah, not to king Hezekiah, say to Hezekiah, because what's going on in these two chapters is also this tension or tussle between who's the king?

King Sennacherib, the great king of Assyria, Hezekiah. The Assyrians are making themselves out to be the real king. Hezekiah is nothing.

And four points are made in verses 4 to 10 or 5 to 10. The first is that trusting in Egypt is futile. So in verse 5, do you think that mere words are strategy and powerful war?

On whom do you now rely that you have rebelled against me? See, you are relying on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff. You imagine getting a reed or even a long bit of plant if I pluck one of the flowers from the vase there and lent on it.

It wouldn't support me. It would collapse. That's the point of Egypt being a reed. It won't take the weight. Rely on Egypt and it will fall. Indeed, just one or two years before these words were spoken, Egypt had been defeated, not quite decisively, but at least defeated by the Assyrians in a battle at El-Takar.

[15 : 40] So trust in Egypt, and that's futile. That's the point. But you see, this is a very subtle statement here because these are almost exactly Isaiah's own words from earlier in his book.

Isaiah's been saying for chapters, don't trust in Egypt. Egypt cannot help you. So you see, part of the difficulty that Hezekiah would have faced is this sounds like Isaiah the prophet.

There's truth in what is being said here by this field commander, the Rabshaker. Yes, Egypt cannot help you. They're weak now. Rely on them, you won't get very far.

There's also irony, of course. The question about on whom do you now rely is almost ironic because it's Isaiah's question through and through the book.

They should be relying on God, but now of all people, the question comes from the enemy. Israel, Judah is clearly in a bad way when it's the enemy that actually challenging them about their faith.

[16 : 46] But then it goes on in the next verse 7, the second point, trust in Egypt futile, now secondly, trust in God is futile, verse 7. If you say to me, we rely on the Lord our God and whenever you get Lord with capital letters in the Old Testament, the word is Yahweh or Jehovah and in some respects it's sad that our modern English translations don't always do that.

They don't do that because Jews would not say the word Jehovah or Yahweh for fear of taking the name of the Lord in vain, so it becomes the word Lord. But in many places in the Old Testament, it's much better to think in terms of a personal name and that I think is what we should have in mind through these chapters as well.

We rely on Yahweh our God, it's a personal name for God and it's distinct from the other gods who also probably had some sort of personal names as we see at the end of chapter 37.

Sennacherib is in his temple worshipping his God Nisroch. So we've got Nisroch over there and we've got Yahweh here. And what this Rabshakeh is saying in effect is your own God will not help you.

And he won't help you because this surely is the God whose high places Hezekiah is removed. Now clearly this Assyrian field commander knows what's been going on within Judah.

[18 : 13] Clearly they probably had spies but also of course they've just taken most of their cities so they've probably also seen what's been going on. Hezekiah was a reforming king. He was closing down all the rural shrines that were idolatrous and syncretistic and ought not ever to be there in the first place.

So in the Assyrian viewpoint they think well the less shrines you've got the weaker your God is. If you've been closing them all down well what are you going to rely on?

Rely on your God and you've only got Jerusalem left. So your God is weak. Don't worship don't rely on him. The implication is that Hezekiah's own strategies have weakened his position ironically.

Now also what's probably going on in these words of verse 7 and certainly what's going on after verse 11 more explicitly is this also. But this field commander is speaking in the hearing of people within the wall and on the wall and what he's trying to do probably is to drive a wedge between king and people because no doubt that for many people Hezekiah's reforms though good were unpopular.

There were many who would have made their living from false religion. And so probably what he's doing is divide and conquer. Get the people to disagree with the king and we've got our case won.

[19 : 38] So that's probably part of his strategy here as well. So the first point was trusting in Egypt's futile. Secondly, trust in Yahweh is futile. And thirdly, in verse 8 and 9, even if you had some weapons, we'd still be too strong for you.

That's the point of making this wager or bargain in verse 8. Come on, look, I'll show you how weak you are. We'll give you 2,000 horses. You couldn't even get people to ride them.

And even if you could get people to ride them, then you wouldn't even be able to defeat a single captain amongst the least of my master's servants. That is, if you like, the smallest part of the army, you couldn't even defeat that, let alone any other part of the army.

That's how weak you are. So that's the third point that's being made. Hezekiah is being told that he is in a position of absolute powerlessness here.

He cannot hope to defeat the Assyrian army. God is on our side.

[20 : 44] Now, in some sense, there's an inconsistency here. If in verses 7, he's saying Yahweh is weak and now he's saying Yahweh is on our side, one can see the inconsistency.

But when you're full of propaganda, you don't worry too much about inconsistency. Verse 10 says, Now, we might think that that's so obviously false that Hezekiah and the people would instantly have rejected it.

But it's very close to what Isaiah himself has said on some occasions earlier, chapter 10 and others, because Isaiah hasn't shrunk back from saying, God's own people, the nation, will suffer defeat at the hands of even Assyria.

Yes, there's a longer term hope than that. So there's a sense of truth here, Isaiah 10 verse 5 onwards in particular. So it seems that this Rabshake has done his spy work, he's done his homework, he knows what's going on.

No doubt there are people who've defected from Judah to the Assyrians when they saw the might and have told him things that he needs to know in order for this propaganda statement. Well, what happens?

[22 : 06] That's his first speech. And the officials of King Hezekiah now object to what he's saying in verse 11. And they say, please speak to your servants, notice how it's your servants, which is very self-humbling and condescending, they see their own place of weakness, it's probably also a statement of politeness, in Aramaic rather than Hebrew, for we understand it.

Don't speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall. Now, the language of Judah is Hebrew and everybody would have spoken it in Isaiah's day at least. But Aramaic was the international language, the language of diplomacy, perhaps say like Latin was at some point in earlier history, a language of the upper classes and the powerful, but not necessarily the language of the everyday people in the street.

Within a hundred years, Aramaic had become the lingua franca of the whole of the Middle East and even the people of Judah who were left would have spoken Aramaic. But at this point, Aramaic was still the upper class diplomatic international sort of language.

And these diplomats, these senior officials in Hezekiah's government are saying, speak to us in Aramaic because we don't want the people to hear what you're saying. We're trying to protect their morale. One can understand that, of course.

But of course, this field commander of the Assyrians is not going to listen to their statement. So the commander replies in verse 12, Alas, has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you only, that is, and not to the people sitting on the wall who are no doubt hearing what's going on because they're anxious for their own survival.

[23 : 52] people, and not only those who are sitting on the wall, but he says, who are doomed with you to eat of their own dung and drink their own urine. That's a pretty awful sort of statement to make, and indeed the words are very strong, four-letter type words about what you'd eat and drink.

It's revolting in a way, and of course it's meant to be intimidating for the people who are listening. It's describing siege conditions, and we know that in the ancient world when towns were besieged in various parts of the world, not only in biblical times and places, that sometimes people would drink their own urine, sometimes even perhaps eat their own dung.

Certainly we know of many instances in history where people would kill their own children in order to stay alive because they run out of water and food. That's how a siege was often won. You just sit around the wall for long enough, three, four years, and in the end the people inside just die.

It's a pretty awful statement, and he's trying to send the shivers up the spines of the people who are listening to his words. And so he calls out loudly in verse 13, in Hebrew, refusing the plea of the people, the officials, and he shouts, hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria.

Again, he's the king, not Hezekiah. Verse 14 mentions Hezekiah by name, but not King Hezekiah. He's just Hezekiah. 15 the same and so on. Hezekiah's not given his title.

[25 : 19] It's a put down time and time again. And he's telling the people in verses 14, 15, and 16, don't be deceived by Hezekiah.

Don't place your trust in him. What he says isn't going to happen. He's trying to divide the people from the king. He's making a mockery of Hezekiah, a put down.

And he also makes a very, let's say, generous invitation to peace in a way. Because he's saying, come on, if you defect in a sense, then it won't be too bad for you.

Because you'll be out of the siege conditions. You won't have to worry about dung and urine. You can have food. You can have proper food. You can each have your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern in verse 16.

Now that's sort of like promising somebody arriving in Australia their own quarter acre block in a way. Because cramped in Jerusalem, they wouldn't each have their own cistern and there'd probably be very few, if any, vines or fig trees.

[26 : 21] They'd be all outside the city walls. Now he's promising them here a peaceful life. It sounds very nice. Surely it would have been tempting for the people beginning to face siege conditions that they knew would probably lead to disaster.

Food and water rather than urine and dung. Which would you choose? It's very persuasive, isn't it? Well maybe this Rav Shaker, and probably he didn't know about the water tunnel that Hezekiah had built.

Probably the people, the reason why the people don't capitulate at this point is they think we actually have safe water. He's standing at the very point where the water supply would have been if there hadn't have been the tunnel.

That's why King Ahaz had gone out there in chapter seven because it hadn't, the tunnel hadn't been built and that was where his water came from. But now the tunnel's built, who cares about the washerman's field? Because we've got safe water.

But maybe also the Israelites know all too well how badly the Assyrians treated their captives. It wasn't so nice as this. And they probably knew that.

[27 : 33] They'd probably seen it and heard stories and seen the pictures on the TV and so on. Verse 17 is sort of like a tourist brochure, isn't it? Until I come and take you to a land like your own.

Yes, you see what happened when the people fell before the Assyrians is that the Assyrians would take them to another land. They would repopulate them, not just back in their capital Nineveh, but what they do is sort of mix people up, sort of like a, you know, welcome to newcomers type game at a parish weekend or camp.

So that you're not with people you know and therefore when you're not with people you know or can speak with, then you're less likely to form a little clique and a little rebellion or a little coup. And they would invariably take the leaders and the influential people away from their land and scatter them amongst the other conquered peoples and they'd bring others back and repopulate them there.

That was their policy and he doesn't shirk from that in verse 17. He says, yes, that's what we're going to do, but we're going to take you to a nice place. It would be better than here. Here's the tourist brochure.

Have a look. Come on, defect from your king. Give up. We'll look after you. He's in effect what he's saying in verse 17. Don't let Hezekiah mislead you.

[28 : 47] He goes on in verses 18 and 19 and 20. He lists various places that Assyria has already defeated. The point here is not so much the issue of, yes, life will be better on the outside, so come out of the wall, but rather now you've got no chance because we are the mightiest of all.

Every nation before us has fallen. And that's true. It's not a lie. That's part of the danger of propaganda is the mixture of lies and half-truths. And in the ancient world, when a nation would conquer another nation, it was seen in religious terms that the God of this nation was more powerful than the God of this nation.

And that's part of what's being said here in verses 9 or 18 and 19. Has the God of any nation ever delivered His land from the hand of the king of Assyria? No, the answer is Babylon, Egypt, Syria, Tyre, Sidon, the Philistines, all the towns of Judah, Israel 20 years before, and a whole host of other little nation states as well, have all fallen like dominoes before Assyria.

That is, the Assyrian gods are more powerful than their gods. So where are the gods of these nations, verse 19? Defeated, gone, tossed away, burned and so on.

Even Samaria, which was the capital of Judah's brother nation, Israel in the north, where their God's gone. This is one place in this whole talk by this Rabshakeh that it seems that he doesn't know something right about the people of God.

[30 : 21] He seems to imply in that verse that Samaria worshipped a different God from Judah. Now in one sense both were idolatrous, but both in the end had of course the same God of the Bible.

So it's the one point I think where the Rabshakeh perhaps makes a little mistake. Indeed, you see if he'd known it, it would have strengthened his case, wouldn't it? Your God has already been defeated at Samaria.

He could have said if he knew that, but it seems he doesn't know it. He just says the Samaritans, God that's defeated already. The implication is if all these nations have gone and some of them are in the places that you probably don't know about, Hamat and Arpad and Sefer Vahim are in probably in ancient Syria, what chances your God got?

You see the logic in their thinking is your God's just like any other national God. There's lots of gods around. Why is your God special? He's not special. The only God that's powerful at the moment is the Assyrian God.

All the others have fallen. Inevitably yours will be next. Of course, it's a wrong argument, but you see how much truth is there. See how persuasive it would be to a people who struggle to have faith in their God to think, yeah, what chance have we got against this nation?

[31 : 41] Our God is weak. I think Hezekiah has done the wrong thing in his reforms. Before the reforms, it looked as though we were stronger. You can see the persuasion.

And yet, surprisingly, I think, the people are silent in verse 21. And they obey their king's command. Do not answer him.

I think that's extraordinary. Because this is so persuasive propaganda. And the people have been so full of lack of faith in the years before, one would expect them to give in here.

But they don't. And I think that's amazing. But notice also it's because of the king's command.

Because there's a way in which Isaiah is telling the story here and saying, Hezekiah is not just a nobody. He is the king. The great king, the king of Assyria, no. Now begins the challenge back.

[32 : 40] The king's command and the people heed the king's command. And they're silent in verse 21. And so all these three officials who've gone out to talk to this field commander, they come back inside the wall.

And they come to Hezekiah. They tear their clothes. Tearing their clothes is a sign of grief and distress. A sign of mourning and predicament. And now in chapter 37, 1 to 7, we come to Isaiah's first own personal intervention in this.

And this is the critical moment really. How is Hezekiah going to respond to this propaganda? This is the time. This is the crucial hour. And it is, I think, Hezekiah's finest hour.

When Hezekiah heard this, he didn't give in. He didn't say, well, come on, we've got to get our army together. He didn't say, well, let's keep waiting for Egypt. He said, well, he tore his clothes.

He put on sackcloth. And he went to the temple. That is a statement of faith. Not only the grief and distress of the crisis, but the sackcloth of repentance and penitence.

[33 : 55] Hezekiah is going to the temple to confess his sin. He's heard Isaiah for all these years. And suddenly, at the very extreme, he's now going to confess his sin.

Sometimes God brings us into catastrophes in order to restore us to faith or strengthen our faith.

And that seems to be what's happening to Hezekiah. At last, he's heeding Isaiah's words. And he goes to the temple in an act of great faith.

Doesn't even just send the priests there. He's doing exactly what Isaiah has urged the people and king to do in chapter 30, chapter 31, and dozens of other times as well.

Return to the Lord. Repent of your betrayal of him. Rest in him. And he sends two of those three officials.

[34 : 50] We don't know why not the third, but that doesn't matter. All wearing sackcloth. And he sends priests with them to the prophet Isaiah. So Hezekiah goes to pray and confess. And he sends the others to Isaiah at the same time.

He's seeking the prophet of the Lord. And that also is a remarkable thing. Because when Isaiah was commissioned in that great vision in chapter 6, he was told that people will not hear your word.

They'll have deaf ears. And time and again in chapters in between, we've seen instances of that. Ahaz was the first. He refused to hear Isaiah's word.

But the people generally time and again have refused to hear. But now Hezekiah is seeking out the prophet to hear his word. This is a great change that's going on here in the book of Isaiah.

And so they tell Isaiah in verse 3, saying what Hezekiah has told them to say. It's a day of distress, rebuke, disgrace.

[35 : 53] Then there's an analogy. Children have come to the birth and there's no strength to bring them forth. I think that's an analogy rather than literal, but it might just be literal. But it seems to be in the way it's written, saying that we've come to a crisis and we've run out of strength to deliver.

Or it could be saying if Jerusalem is going to be delivered like a baby safely, we don't have the strength to do it. And in those days they would have been familiar with breach births and births, many more that would fail in childbirth.

They wouldn't have had the equipment to save those sorts of babies and mothers probably as well. So it's probably an image that's perhaps used more widely as a metaphor.

We are at the point of helplessness and lack of strength. He's confessing his inadequacy. And that's often the first step in being restored to God and finding his strength.

Time and again the Bible tells us that we have to come to God helpless. If we don't acknowledge our helplessness, as Hezekiah is doing here, then we have no claim on God.

[37 : 01] It's in Romans 5 that Paul says it's while we're weak or helpless that Christ died for us. As the hymn writer so perfectly puts it, nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

That's Hezekiah illustrating that here, I think. He's got no strength left. There is nothing he can do, even the king, to save his city.

He knows that only God can save. And they say to Isaiah in verse 4, that it may be that the Lord your God heard the words of the Rabshaker, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the Lord your God has heard.

So pray. They're asking Isaiah to pray. And pray for the remnant, that is, those who are left in Jerusalem, because the rest of the nation has gone.

Notice that they say to Isaiah, the Lord your God, not as though it's not our God, but there's a sense in which they acknowledge that Isaiah has remained faithful to God throughout.

[38 : 09] Clearly, it is Isaiah's God. They are, in a sense, latecomers to that faith, I think. They're acknowledging that the only hope is that God will act.

And God will act not because we're nice people, not because we've repented. Come on, God, we've repented now, so act for us. The reason God will act is that he might have heard the words that mock the living God.

Now, it's very important to understand that what happens in this chapter is that God acts because he himself is mocked. He doesn't act because he likes the people. He doesn't act because he likes the city Jerusalem.

He doesn't act because he doesn't like Sennacherib. He acts because his name has been mocked. And he'll not stand that. He acts for the honour of his name.

As we sang in that song, Restore, O Lord, the honour of your name in all the world. And that's what's going on here. And that's why. That's so important to grasp because the salvation that comes is based on that issue.

[39 : 17] Well, Isaiah doesn't, we're told, we're not told that he prays, but he tells them a word. Now, it may well be that Isaiah already had a word, but it's also probable that Isaiah doesn't need a new word.

All the old words that he's been speaking for the last 30 years are all there. Now's the time to heed them. He doesn't need a new word. Anyway, he tells these people to go back to Hezekiah and say, do not be afraid.

The most common command in all of scripture and the same one that was given to Ahaz by Isaiah 30 years before. Ahaz refused it. Will Hezekiah, his son, do the same?

Or will Hezekiah heed it? Don't be afraid because God's more powerful is the implication of this. God's the one who's in control. Notice that he says these words, which the underlings or the lackeys of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.

It's a derogatory term, a put-down term of the Rabshaker and his words. And notice also that what Isaiah says in verse 6 is, this is what the Lord says.

[40 : 22] This is what Yahweh says. Now back in chapter 36, the Rabshaker kept saying, this is what the great king, the king of Assyria says. Now you see the challenge.

This is what the Lord says. And at the end of the chapter, we'll see which word prevails. It's the Lord's, not the king of Assyria's.

A greater king has now spoken. God, not even Hezekiah. And the word in verse 7 is that God will put a spirit in him to make him retreat.

Doesn't necessarily mean an evil spirit. It's just the sense of an attitude. Something will happen. A report will come. We're told a certain report will persuade Sennacherib to be to retreat, basically.

And he'll go back and then he'll be cut down with a sword. Exactly what happens to him as it happens. You see, God can control not just the external circumstances, but the hearts of people.

[41 : 22] That's what's going on here. As the Book of Common Prayer says in its colleague, for the queen, God who rules, for whom the hearts of kings are in his rule and governance. That's true in the Bible time and again.

God rules not just the external things, but the hearts of kings. Indeed, people generally. The heart of Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus. The heart of Sennacherib here.

He doesn't say that Assyria is going to be destroyed. He doesn't promise victory. All those words have come earlier in Isaiah. He just promises that Sennacherib will be to retreat.

And all of those words give Hezekiah strength and courage, as we'll see. Now, presumably, a negative report is given back to the Rav Sheikah.

No, we're not going to listen to your words. We're going to stand firm and we're going to trust in God. That's presumably what happened. But the field commander retreats or withdraws in verse 8 of chapter 37.

[42 : 23] And he goes back to the king, Sennacherib, who's moved on from Lachish, which has fallen. And he's gone to a place called Libna, fighting there. It may be a pocket of resistance that has flared up again.

It may be something else. We're not really sure where Libna is. Nobody knows, it seems, where Libna is, but it's probably not far from Lachish. And Sennacherib had received a report, we're told in verse 9.

Exactly what we're told in verse 7, Sennacherib would receive a report to make him beat a retreat. He now gets a report. It's a report that Tahaka, who's a Cushite king of Egypt in the NRSV, it's got her king of Ethiopia.

Cush is Ethiopia in the Old Testament. Probably Tahaka was actually an Egyptian king, but an Ethiopian of origin is the point. And it seems some rumour has come, or report, that he's on his way now to fight again.

Now, Egypt had been defeated a couple of years before, but just like the AFL football season, another winter comes round and it's time to fight again. And off he goes to fight. And Sennacherib is probably not afraid, but it seems to have given him a bit of caution.

[43 : 32] In verse 8 and 9. Anyway, he sends another messenger to Hezekiah. It seems that it's a letter from what we see in verse 14.

And now he says in verse 10, Thus you shall speak to King Hezekiah of Judah. Do not let your God on whom you rely deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.

Before it was, don't let Hezekiah deceive you, the people. Now it's, don't let your God deceive you. He knows that the reason they've said no is we're going to trust in God.

So now he's got to attack the God. You see how it's implying what Isaiah's words were in the words to Hezekiah. See, you've heard what the king of Assyria has done.

The kings of Assyria, going back a few years, have done to all lands, destroying them utterly. Shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them? The nations that my predecessors destroyed and various ones are mentioned.

[44 : 33] Where are these? Gone. It's repeating the end of the Rabshaker's point, but it's underlying the fact that how on earth can you expect your God to bring victory, where every other God has fallen?

Now in this return, and there's a bit more to this speech as well, there's a few things different. The Sennacherib's a little bit more moderate here than the Rabshaker was.

It's not quite so provocative. It may be because he's feeling vulnerable with the Egyptian rumor. We're not sure. But also Hezekiah looks a bit different because there's no mention of Egypt here.

There's no mention of relying on Egypt. It seems that Hezekiah's got that out of his system now from the threats and from Isaiah's words. Clearly Hezekiah's faith is placed solely in God, and that's the issue.

And so Jehovah is the object of the attack in 19 and 20, trying to undermine the power of God in their eyes.

[45 : 42] A futile thing, as we'll see. Verse 13 adds the issue of the king himself. Where are these kings so much? Not the gods now, but where are the kings? I think that's a personal challenge to Hezekiah.

You're a king and all these kings are being killed. Do you want to save your life? Give in. Will Hezekiah stake his life on God or will he give in?

We know, of course, that he stakes his life on God. Sennacherib probably thought he wouldn't. Sennacherib probably thought he'd save his skin. And most people would.

Most kings probably would. Maybe we would as well. But God wants his people and his followers to be prepared to give up their life even for him.

As his son gave up his life for us. Well, when Hezekiah gets his letter, this time in verse 14, he reads it and he goes up to the house of the Lord again, the temple, and he spreads it before the Lord.

[46 : 46] Maybe as if to show God, here God, this is what they've written. Read it. Tell me what you think. And Hezekiah prays to the Lord. Now, here again, I think we see a development in Hezekiah.

Earlier, he said, sent messengers to Isaiah saying, pray. But now the king prays. So it seems to be a king who's got a bit more faith than he did just in the previous section of the chapter.

And this astonishing prayer follows in verse 15 onwards. He prays, Now the heart of his prayer is God.

Not himself. Not the people. Not the city. God. A God-centered prayer. He's not asking God for help because I'm a good chap.

Give me another go. Well, this is a nice place. He's praying about God. It's a confession and an acknowledgement that God is sovereign.

[48 : 08] That God is not just like an Assyrian God or a God of Sephirvim or any other town or place. This is a unique God. The living God. The powerful God. He's full of majesty and sovereignty and power.

All the things that Sennacherib has been challenging. He's enthroned, we're told. That is because he's a king. He's the real king. I think his prayer is an acknowledgement of where the real king is.

Not Sennacherib, but God himself. And he's enthroned above the cherubim because in the Holy of Holies in the temple, there was the little box called the Ark of the Covenant. And on the sides of it were two golden cherubim with their wings outstretched facing each other.

And in between them, in the space between, the air between, was God's throne. The Ark was his footstool. He's enthroned between the cherubim in the Holy of Holies.

Because the temple was the place where God ruled from and where God was present with his people. The instructions for the building of that are in the book of Exodus. But the enthroning of God is between the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant.

[49 : 15] And it's an appeal to God, the creator, at the end of verse 16. You, the creator of all. That is, you're not just a national God. You're an international God.

And he exhorts God to hear and to open his eyes and see. Ironically, the sorts of things that people haven't been doing to God through the book of Isaiah.

Because their ears and eyes have been shut. But now he's asking God to open his ears and eyes. Not that he needs to, but anyway. And to hear the words of Sennacherib. Which he has sent to mock the living God.

Not to mock me, the king Hezekiah. Not to mock the people or the city. Because in the end, what Sennacherib is doing is mocking God himself. And yes, it's true, verse 18, that all these nations have been destroyed.

And all the gods of those nations have been hurled into the fire when the nations were destroyed. Because they're just idols. They're the work of human hands, he says in verse 19. But the God to whom Hezekiah prays is not the work of human hands.

[50 : 22] He's a living God. The only living God. And so now, O Lord our God, save us from His hand. But not save us so that we can live.

So that we can enjoy life. So that we can get back into a happy routine in Jerusalem. Save us, O Lord. So that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.

Now that's a very important motive in prayer. It happens in Elijah's prayer on Mount Carmel. Elijah doesn't pray, God, destroy this sacrifice so that I'm shown to be right.

He prays, destroy this sacrifice so that all the nations will know that you are the God. And how often we ought to pray that. Because sometimes we pray for the means, not the end.

We pray, Lord, make us well. Or make our church go well. And very often it's a self-centered prayer. Make it go well because I'd like it to go well. But the honour of God ought to be the motivation and goal of our prayer.

[51 : 23] God, heal this person or me. God, bring blessing to our church. Or God, provide so and so a job. Or God, do this. So that people will see that you are God.

Because that in the end is what we're on about. And what God's on about is that the people of all nations of the world know that He is God. So when you're praying for a fine day, don't just pray for a fine day.

That's a bit trivial anyway. But don't just pray for a fine day because, you know, you want to do something out in the sunshine. Pray for a fine day so that people will see what a great God has made the fine day.

Or whatever you're praying for. Correct your motives in prayer. Pray that the world will see that God is God. That's Hezekiah's prayer.

That's why it's such a powerful prayer. That's why it's such an effective prayer. And why God answers it as well. A God-centered, God-motivated prayer. It ought to be a challenge to the way we pray and why we pray as well.

[52 : 29] Any of our own prayers. And we can extend that to all sorts of things. You know, praying through Iraq and for peace. Why pray for peace? So that the nations of the world will know that God is God.

But that may not happen through peace. It may happen through another means. If you see our motive is praying that God's name and honour will be known amongst the world, then we're praying what Jesus taught us to pray anyway.

Your kingdom come, your will be done. Hallowed be your name in all the earth. That ought to be our prayer. Whatever the international resolution is in Iraq or anywhere else or sickness or whatever.

Well, Isaiah now responds. An important response because Isaiah sent to Hezekiah.

It seems unsolicited, though it may be and we're just not told about that. But it seems somehow that God has told Isaiah that Hezekiah has just been praying and what he's been praying. And now unsolicited, Isaiah sends a message to Hezekiah and it says, because you have prayed, this is what God says.

[53 : 37] Notice the connection. Because you've prayed, God speaks. There's a direct connection between the two. God is giving an answer to the prayer here. One that will certainly be fulfilled.

It's also extraordinary because it reminds us again that prayer accomplishes things. Prayer prompts God to act in certain ways.

And in one sense we think, well, how can that be? Because if God's God, how can we prompt God? If we prompt God to act or cause God to act, then He's no longer God. We're God. But in another sense, what prayer is here prompting God to do is what God had determined before the foundation of the world He would do.

When you get to verse 26, He says, Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? So, in this great mystery of God's sovereignty and prayer, God, yes, has determined what will happen, and yet He answers our prayers and heeds our prayers.

It doesn't in any way challenge His sovereignty. Yet somehow in the mystery and condescension of God, He involves us in His eternal purposes when we pray, and certainly when we pray according to God's will.

[55 : 00] It ought to always be, whenever we think of the sovereignty of God and His eternal purposes and plans, not something to dampen our enthusiasm to pray because we think it's ineffective, but rather always an encouragement to pray because we can see that it will be highly effective when praying in faith.

Well, the response comes in verse 22 onwards, and this becomes poetic language. I'll just skip over this really.

It's talking about virgin daughter Zion in verse 22 because it's saying Zion won't be violated, won't be touched. She'll be pure, kept free from the hands of Sennacherib.

Who is it you've insulted, verse 23? It's not just the nation or the king. It's God Himself. That's the issue. Sennacherib will be made to see that, that he's insulted the living God, the Holy One of Israel, Isaiah's favourite term for God.

When Assyria acts on its own and acts in control, it is, as verse 23 says, blasphemy. They're pretending that they're God. But God is saying, hey, hang on a minute, I'm God, and I'm going to show you that I'm God.

[56 : 11] And then verses 24, 25 talk about the things of Assyria's boast, quoting Assyria. Notice the eyes in it.

By your servants you've mocked the Lord and you've done these things. You've said, in effect, I've gone up to the heights of the mountains, I felled its tallest cedars, I came to its remotest heights, I dug wells, I dried up with the sole of my foot, I, I, I.

That's Assyria's boast. We're in control here, I, I, I. But verse 26, have you not heard that I, God, determined it long ago?

God is the one who's in control, not Assyria after all. Quite a change in verse 26. God is sovereign. And yes, Assyria has done mighty things, but that's just as an instrument of God.

He determined all that far, far before these events happened. God is sovereign, not Assyria. Be careful, therefore, when you judge by appearances. Don't think Assyria's the mighty power, because it's actually God the hidden hand behind it.

[57 : 15] And he's planned all these things in verse 26 and 27, and 28 and 29 as well, we'll skip over. It's really saying in every way, God is in control, and he will not stand their blasphemy and insults against him.

He promises in verse 30 to 32 a sign to Hezekiah. Now, the Hebrew is a bit complicated, and it's not all that obvious what it's saying, but probably what it seems to be saying is that for the first two years after the siege, you will only eat things that are self-sown.

It's only in the third year that things that you plant will begin to take root and bear fruit, and you'll eat from that. That seems to be what it's saying in the things that grows of itself in verse 30 and so on.

And it's a sign not before the event. Sometimes God gives signs before the event to encourage faith and anticipation, but rather it's a sign after the event, so you can look back and see, yes, that siege did end, and Sennacherib did beat a retreat, and it wasn't just a natural explanation.

It was God. And this little strange thing about the crops and the agriculture for the first three years, that makes it clear that it is God. Now, so many times people and even Bible scholars try to undermine God's sovereignty in these things.

[58 : 32] They try to give human explanations to the plagues on Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea and so on. There's no explanation in the end apart from God, and that's what this sign is about.

Ahaz was given a sign. He didn't heed it. Hezekiah is given a sign, and presumably he heeded it. Verses 33 and 34 and 35 are a specific promise to save Jerusalem and defend it.

He won't get into this city. He won't shoot an arrow here. He won't come before it. He won't build a siege ramp against it. Often that's what would happen if you go to Israel in November.

You will see a marvellous siege ramp at Masada that the Romans built and then wheeled up a great big battering ram to batter down the walls on the top of Masada. He won't do that to Jerusalem.

God will make sure you're protected. In the end, you see, what matters is not the king of Assyria's words, but rather the king of the world's words, and they're the ones that come true.

[59 : 38] And God will act this way to save Jerusalem. Why? Verse 35, for two reasons. For my sake, for God's sake, for God's honour, but also for the sake of David, my servant.

And that could mean one or both of two things. It could mean because God promised David, when would it have been? 250 years before, a bit more than that, that there would always be a Davidic king on the throne of Jerusalem.

That is, I'm going to keep my promise. But the other thing that this could also be implying is that David, my servant, is also the future David, the future servant, the Messiah who will come.

For the sake of Jesus, ultimately, God will save Jerusalem. And then what happens to finish this episode off?

The angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp. Extraordinary number. More than you get at the grand final, by twice, more or less. And we think, and many think, oh gosh, that's too many.

[60 : 44] But we also know that Assyrian armies were big. Some claim that there were 300,000 in the Assyrian army at times. So this figure probably is quite realistic.

And when the people got up the next morning, there were all the dead bodies. And so Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, broke camp and withdrew. Exactly what God said would happen. And he returns to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, and he stays there.

There in Nineveh, the archaeologists have found his own account of these very things. His boast about caging Hezekiah up as a bird in Jerusalem. His boast about conquering 46 cities.

And if you go to the British Museum, one of the rooms there, you'll see this most magnificent reliefs of Sennacherib's boast of the defeat of Lachish. All around the room that were in his private room chamber in Nineveh, the Assyrian army defeating Lachish and taking all the people of Judah off into exile, hooks through their noses because that's how they led them, like animals.

And what God says comes true in the end. His army was defeated. He beat a retreat. Sennacherib doesn't say anything about that in his annals because who would want to talk about their own defeat in their own records?

[62 : 03] None of the ancient worlds ever did that. Only the Bible. The real king has won. The great king of Assyria has met the real king and lost.

And then one day, 20 years later, mind you, looks as though it's about the next week, but it's not. It's 681 BC. He was worshipping the temple of his God and he was killed with the sword by his sons, no less.

And one of his sons, Ezra Haddon, succeeded him as king. There's great irony in that last verse or last two verses of this, last verse of this chapter. Because even back in Nineveh, Sennacherib was not safe from the living God.

Because Yahweh, the God of the Bible, is sovereign over all lands of the earth. And more ironic and quite humorous, really, almost mocking, is that he's in his own temple praying.

Hezekiah goes to his temple and prays and receives God's blessing. Sennacherib goes to his temple and prays to his God and he's killed. Who's the real God? God. Yahweh's.

[63 : 15] Not Nisroch or any other Assyrian God for that matter. There's only one God and it's the God of the Bible, the living God. And just like Belshazzar in the book of Daniel or Herod the Great, you cannot defy the living God and get away with it.

By contrast, this is Hezekiah's greatest hour. The city is saved. His kingship is saved. He is a living example in the end of all the truths Isaiah's been pushing in chapters 13 to 35.

That's why I think this is here as the climax to give an example to show exactly what happens when you do what Isaiah's been saying for 22 chapters. Trust in God and you will be delivered.

Here's Hezekiah's example. He's also there as a contrast to his father Ahaz who refused the sign and brought upon strife in chapters 7 and 8. But even within the book of Isaiah there is a sense in which is Hezekiah the one promised to Ahaz, the child Emmanuel, the wonderful counsellor, the mighty God?

We'll see next week that though there are hints that some might have thought that, in the end, of course, he wasn't. Well, they were two long chapters.

[64 : 35] I apologise for going so long but there's a lot to get through. Next week is a bit shorter. Let's stand and sing a song, stretch our legs as well and then we'll have a brief time of questions before the final song and finish.

Well, thank you. Please. Thank you, footage. Thank you.