

Prayer

We praise You, Living Lord; for You have a plan for the whole of Your Creation from beginning to end. You have given us the privilege of living in Your world; help us therefore not just to enjoy the benefits of what we have been given, but also to look after our world, to maintain it and manage it; and so find fulfilment in living to Your praise and glory. Thanks be to God, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: the Bible

Pray today for all those people who still work on translating the Bible into some of the many languages which still do not have a version of the Bible. Pray God's blessing on their work.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for your local fire brigade*
- *Praise God for all forms of renewal in the church around the world*
- *Pray that governments around the world will respect civil liberties*

Meditation

(Encouragement)

There is no life essentially better than yours

For the Lord to use for His will:

There is no time that will prove to be better than now

For deciding to do the Lord's will:

There is no place better than the place where you are

For beginning to walk the Lord's ways:

There are no circumstances better than yours

For the Lord to start a new work:

There is no greater potential in anyone else

For the Lord to prefer them, not you;

There is nothing greater than what you do for your Lord

For His glory will be found through you.

Alleluia!

Bible Study - Isaiah 36:1-12

¹ In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. ² The king of Assyria sent his Commander in Chief from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a powerful force, and took his stance at the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the 'Washing Field'. ³ Eliakim son of Hilkiyah (the master of the palace), Shebna (the secretary), and Joah son of Asaph (the recorder), went out to him.

⁴ The Commander in Chief said to them, 'Tell Hezekiah that this is what the great king, the king of Assyria says: "What is this hope in which you have placed your trust? ⁵ I ask you this; are mere words sufficient as plans and resources for battle? On whom are you depending that you rebel against me? ⁶

Look, you are trusting in the staff of a broken reed, Egypt, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, is like this to all who trust in him! ⁷ Now if you say to me, 'We trust in the LORD our God,' is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You must only worship before this altar'? ⁸ Come now, gamble with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you on your part, you can set riders on them! ⁹ How can you possibly turn back a single captain among the least of my master's servants, whilst relying on Egypt for chariots and horsemen? ¹⁰ Moreover, have I come up to destroy this land without the LORD? The LORD told to me to march against this land and destroy it!"

¹¹ Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Commander in Chief, 'Please speak Aramaic to your servants, for we understand it; do not speak to us in Judean within the hearing of the people on the wall.' ¹² But the Commander in Chief said, 'Has my master sent me to speak these words to you and your master, and not to the people sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own excrement and drink their own urine?'

Review

This is an intriguing part of the prophecy of Isaiah. The chapters Isaiah 36 to 39 are quite different from the rest of Isaiah, even the story found in Isaiah 7 and 8, because although Isaiah figures relatively strongly in what happens, the story is primarily about King Hezekiah and the Assyrian invasion of Judea around 701 BC. This is a harrowing tale of what happened when a city was besieged in ancient times, and some of the details are extremely unpleasant (for example, the last verse of this passage). The big question we face is this; why is this story placed right at the heart of the book of Isaiah?

In the coming days we will follow the story of the siege of Jerusalem, and we will find that it is clearly intended to bring us a spiritual message. It tells us that when God's people trust in their Lord, then He will bring them through the trials of this life. This is a valuable message of itself, but there is much more to Isaiah 36-39 than this. Isaiah prophesied in the eight century BC at a time of great change, and many years later (after the Exile of Judah in Babylon during the sixth century BC), people began to look back and see that what Isaiah had said many years previously was indeed fulfilled in the centuries that followed. One of Isaiah's key themes was that whatever happened to Israel in the upheavals of the day, God would save a small number of His people (a 'remnant' – see Is 10:19f.) and would return His own people to Zion (see 10:12,24,32, 12:6, 14:32 etc.). Isaiah also prophesied that God would eventually remake the world and create a new place of His dwelling, a new 'Zion' of peace and security (see Isaiah 25,26, 35). People had confidence in Isaiah's prophecies because much of what he said had come true.

Clearly, our passage today tells us about the siege of Jerusalem, when the armies of Assyria came and took their stance against the city. How should the king of Jerusalem and Judea together with his people deal with this dire circumstance? It was obvious that the commander of the Assyrian army was in complete control of the situation and he belittled the efforts of king Hezekiah to hold Jerusalem (36:4-6). The Assyrian commander had the cheek to say that Israel's own God had sent him against Jerusalem, and he even ridiculed Hezekiah's attempts to centralise the worship of God in Jerusalem (36:7)! Hezekiah had in fact done a great deal to reinforce Jerusalem and withstand the Assyrian threats (see 2 Chronicles 32), but even with help from Egypt (36:4), it seemed that little could be done to save Jerusalem. Assyria mocked Jerusalem's citizens; they were

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group whether you believe that the Commander was doing God's will, and if so, why?
2. Why was Jerusalem invaded by Assyria when they had just attempted to reform their worship of God? Read 2 Chronicles 29-32 to help answer this question.
3. Does God work through every situation we face?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have had to be careful with myself as I have studied for this work today; the background material is not all that it seems, and one is pulled to and fro in one's sympathies for the people of Jerusalem. I have learned that only by keeping the whole prophecy of Isaiah in mind can I get the context of each part of the book right. I hope you have followed this!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Read through 2 Kings 18,19 and 2 Chronicles 29-33 in order to gain a fuller picture of the life and times of Hezekiah and Isaiah.
- If you have friends with whom you can have a good conversation, ask them 'what is the hope in which you have placed your trust?' See how they respond!
- Go on a long walk and ask yourself this same question; 'what is the hope in which you have placed your trust?'

Final Prayer

Dear Lord. You have seen everything that has happened to us, and You are gracious to us still. Receive our confession of wrongdoing, and convince us about how we should change our behaviour for the better. Keep us in Your will, we pray; AMEN

unafraid to frighten the people of the city by shouting out their threats of violence in Hebrew, so that everyone would understand them (36:11,12)!

Earlier in his prophecies, Isaiah had prophesied that Judah and Jerusalem should not fear Assyria; they should instead fear Babylon (see Isaiah 10:1-19, and also 13&14). So although the Assyrian's approach to Jerusalem was dramatic and frightening, we will find out on that Isaiah remained calm. He advised Hezekiah, the king, to hold firm to his faith in God's salvation despite the obvious dangers and apparent imminent collapse of the state of Judah and its capital city Jerusalem. This whole story is an important part of Isaiah because it eventually proves his prophecies to be right; when we realise this, we will understand why this strange and rather insulting story is included in the book of Isaiah.

Ultimately, the truth of Isaiah's prophecies has always been of great importance. His later prophecies speak about the coming of God's Servant, the Messiah, sent to bring about God's redemption, and all of us must decide whether we believe Isaiah was a true or a false prophet. If we follow this story begun here in this passage, we must conclude that Isaiah was indeed a prophet of God because his historic predictions came true. We must therefore go one stage further and believe his prophecies about God's Messiah.

Going Deeper

Now we know why the passage is in scripture, we can read the story with more insight. The first thing we must do is to check out what is said here against how Hezekiah's reign is described in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles; then we can gain a good picture of what was really going on in the conversation between the representatives of the King of Assyria and King Hezekiah.

Notes on the text and translation

V1 *Literally, the text says that the King of Assyria 'came up against' the cities of Judah and then 'took' them. Clearly, this is an ancient way of saying that he took them by military force, or as I have translated; he 'attacked' them and 'captured' them*

V2 *In most Bibles, it says that the King of Assyria sent 'the Rabshakeh'. The word 'Rabshakeh' means a senior military figure of some kind because the word 'rab' means 'chief'. In order to make sense of the following narrative, I have called him the 'Commander in Chief'*

V2 *the Commander in chief came with what is called a 'powerful force'. Most other Bible versions interpret this as a 'large army', though I prefer the original expression because it captures the sense of foreboding.*

V4 *the phrase 'What is this hope in which you trust?' is a fairly literal rendering of the Hebrew, but although many other versions of the Bible fill this out (e.g. 'on what do you rest this confidence of your?' – NRSV), I prefer this because it conveys both the terse nature of the exchange and the religious significance of the words (see text)*

V5 *My translation 'I ask you this; are mere words sufficient plans and resources for battle?' is close to the Hebrew, but other translators have tried to make this more clear by using a parallel text from 2 Kings 18:20 which says 'do you think that mere words are a strategy and power for war?'*

V6 *The word 'staff' is a shorthand for political and military strength.*

V7 *'You must only worship before this altar' – meaning in Jerusalem*

The Biblical background to Isaiah 36-39

Our passage today is almost the same as that found in 2 Kings 18:13-27. The previous chapter (2 Kings 17) is an important scripture which records the invasion of the northern

Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrian King Shalmanesar in 721 BC, and it explains why God had to punish Israel in this way, leaving only Judah and Jerusalem as an independent state containing God's people. Just prior to this King Ahaz of Judah died (725BC). He was the king against whom Isaiah had fought so fiercely (Isaiah 7,8), and was replaced by his son Hezekiah, who turned out to be a godly man who did all he could to re-establish the worship of God in Jerusalem and repair the damage done by his father (2 King 18:1-8).

Hezekiah (and Isaiah) could only watch in 721BC as Shalmanesar invaded Israel (2 Kings 18:9-12), but were glad that he did not come further south against Judah and Jerusalem; but it was a warning. Hezekiah then sought to fortify Jerusalem by ordering fortifications, creating a new regime in the army (2 Chronicles 30,31, 32:5-8), so when the Assyrian King Sennacherib sent his armies south in around 701BC, Hezekiah and all Jerusalem were as ready as they were ever going to be, or so they thought. They had prepared militarily, practically and spiritually (see 2 Chron 29,30,31).

There is one small matter which is confusing. In Isaiah 36:1 and 2 Kings 18:13 it says that the invasion occurred in the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign, but if we add up the years according to other Biblical sources and also the Assyrian records of these military campaigns (which still survive), the invasion was in 701 BC which is the twenty fourth year of Hezekiah's reign! Why this discrepancy should exist, no-one knows, except that someone must have copied a date wrongly somewhere!

The challenge of the Commander in Chief

According to the Assyrian records of the campaign in 701BC, 46 Judean towns were quickly taken by Assyria as their army headed for Jerusalem. Large numbers of people fled to the city (see 2 Chron 32:4) and sought to stop up the wells around the city to disadvantage the enemy, knowing the Jerusalem itself had a substantial water conduit system which they believed would keep them safe. Against this background the Assyrian Commander came close into the outskirts of Jerusalem. He had done his homework well and knew exactly where to stand to pose the greatest threat to those crammed into the city of Jerusalem. He stood 'at the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the "Washing Field"', in other words, at the heart of the water supply to Jerusalem! One who controlled the city's water controlled the city itself!

In the face of this threat, King Hezekiah sent out his senior officials to negotiate; Eliakim, Shebna and Joah. Some time earlier, Hezekiah had managed to pay off the Assyrian king by giving him 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold (2 Kings 18:14,15), and perhaps he hoped to do the same on this occasion, but it quickly became clear that this would not be the case, because Sennacherib wanted more than money this time. The Commander asked the telling question 'what is this hope in which you put your trust?' He firstly questioned Judah's official policy of relying on help from Egypt (36:6), but that criticism was wide of the mark because there is no evidence that Hezekiah (unlike his father Ahaz and the Israelite King Hoshea – see 2 Kings 17:7) had attempted to seek such help. This part of the Commander's speech was pure rhetoric, and the really cutting remarks came next.

The Commander next questioned the religious state of Jerusalem in a cunning 'divide and rule' tactic. He challenged Hezekiah over his closing down of local sanctuaries and centralising all the worship at Jerusalem (36:7). This is described in 2 Chronicles 29,30 and 31 where it is regarded as a major achievement of Hezekiah's reign; however, it was not popular with the people in the towns who had lost their sanctuaries because their priests had lost their livelihoods and sources of income. Some of these same people were now clustered into Jerusalem for fear of Assyria, but the Commander's words would have inflamed feelings about this within Jerusalem itself, and the Commander knew it.

'Trust in the Lord'

Finally, the Commander challenged Hezekiah's ability to wage war in a cynical gesture (36:8,9), and then added insult to injury. He said that the Lord had led him to Jerusalem, for how else had he gained success in his campaigns (36:10)? Again, the purpose of the speech was to undermine the morale of the people of Jerusalem. No wonder that the three representatives of Hezekiah sought to negotiate in Aramaic rather than Hebrew; they did not want the people nearby to hear a word of what was being said because it would have fomented trouble within the city. But that is exactly what the Commander wished to do, and he cursed the people of Jerusalem with the threat of siege directly in their hearing (36:12).

It is our natural reaction to be sympathetic to the citizens of Jerusalem in this situation and dismiss the words of the Commander simply as intimidation, but part of the speech was more than that. The speech began with a challenge about trust (36:4) and ended with a claim the Lord had sent the Assyrians against Judah and Jerusalem. Now if we stop our natural tendency sympathise with the inhabitants of Jerusalem for a moment, we should recall that Isaiah had prophesied that the Lord would use Assyria to judge His own people, even up to the edge of Jerusalem (10:1-19). From the point of view of later generations of Jewish people, they saw the words of the Commander as fulfilling Isaiah's prophecies!

If we now re-work our thinking, the siege of Jerusalem about to take place then became a true test of faith. A test of faith for those who endured it, and a test of faith in the truth of Isaiah's prophecies about what would happen to God's people! Isaiah said that God would judge His people but that Jerusalem would survive the Assyrian assault and at this point in our story it is impossible to see how this could happen! As the story unfolds we will explore more of the meaning of this event for Jewish people of later years, because faith in the truth of what Isaiah said was strongly liked in people's minds with their faith in what he said about a Messiah!

Application

It is certainly true that you will only gain a good understanding of what was going on in the days of Hezekiah and Isaiah if you read the passages of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles to which I have referred in the text, and also remember what Isaiah Himself had said. The key text within this passage is 'what is the hope in which you have placed your trust?' This is a telling question which comes from the lips of a foreign commander, but it is as if God had spoken the words Himself. One might almost say that Isaiah could not have stated Jerusalem's predicament more succinctly, and I suggest that this is part of the reason why this story is in Isaiah.

Isaiah's prophecies constantly asked people to place their hope in a God who would bring them through all the troubles of the world, even if only a 'remnant' of individuals in any place survived and maintained faith. At the time of Christ, one could say that despite the complex and legalistic faith of the people of Israel in his day, only Jesus Himself was the remnant who was completely faithful to God in the crisis of faith generated by His arrival in the world as Messiah. This is why Jesus was raised from the dead, and why we gain our salvation only through Him and through our trust and faith in Him alone.

The question 'what is the hope in which you have placed your trust?' is a powerful evangelistic question; one of many in the Old Testament along with 'where are you?' (Genesis 3:9) and 'who can endure the day of His coming?' (Malachi 3:2). This question searches out the true heart of a man or woman and asks for a committed response. People of Old Testament times prevaricated too often and brought judgement on themselves. We have the evidence of Jesus' life death and resurrection to help us decide that we will trust and have faith in our God.