

Prayers

Opening prayer

Glorious Lord, You know our hearts and You know us completely. Help us, on the one hand, not to forge ahead each day with our work presuming that we know what You might think about it. Help us, on the other hand, not to refrain from doing what is right because we feel uncertain about what You might think. Rather, help us to live each day as if You were by our side in the midst of everything we do, speaking actively to us in the midst of life and the many decisions we make each day. May we therefore live and work to Your praise and glory. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: BUILDING

1. For yourself

Read a passage of Scripture, I suggest from the last five of the book of Psalms, and praise use it to lift up your soul in praise

2. For your friends and family

Pray today for those you love; pray that they will be encouraged by the events of this day.

3. For the church and its work

Pray for your church community, and especially that they will be blessed in what they do each day for the furtherance of God's Kingdom

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray today for your own country, especially that it might grow in a godly way. Pray that it might be a country where young people are encouraged to learn and achieve their full potential. Pray for any young people you know.

Meditation

Every day, Lord God, is a glorious gift

Which You have given us out of Your grace:

A gift of precious and valuable time

To do what is right and keep on doing it

A gift of generous and liberating space

To fill with what is pleasing in God's sight

A gift of bright and glorious light

To shine on our path and reveal new things

A gift of comforting and radiant warmth

To sustain our bodies maintain their health

A gift of powerful and courageous strength

To draw upon when fighting the battles of life

A gift of inspiring and reassuring love

To keep us on the straight and narrow pathway

Every day, Lord God, is a glorious gift

And You have given it to us for good and for blessing

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 36:13-22

¹³ Then the Commander in Chief took his stand and shouted out in a loud voice in the Hebrew language:

'Hear the words of the great king, the King of Assyria! ¹⁴ This is what the king says:

"Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. ¹⁵ Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD by saying,

'The LORD will surely deliver us. This city will not be handed over to the King of Assyria.'

¹⁶ *Do not listen to Hezekiah. For this what the King of Assyria says: Make a peace treaty with me and surrender to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine and fig tree, and drink the water of his own cistern, ¹⁷ until I come and take you to a land like your own, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. ¹⁸ So do not let Hezekiah mislead you by saying,*

'The LORD will deliver us.'

Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? ¹⁹ Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? When did they deliver Samaria from my hand? ²⁰ Which of all the gods of these lands has rescued their lands from my hand? Will the LORD now deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"

²¹ *But they remained silent and did not answer him a word, for the king (Hezekiah) had commanded them not to answer him. ²² Then Eliakim son of Hilkiah (the master of the palace), Shebna (the secretary), and Joah son of Asaph (the recorder), came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and reported the words of the Commander in Chief.*

Review

This reading is the second half of a speech by the Commander in Chief of the Assyrian army, speaking outside Jerusalem with the authority of the king of Assyria. As we read his words (36:13-19) and the response of King Hezekiah's servants (36:21,22), it is certainly dramatic. Jerusalem's future hung in the balance; it was a small city state and had become isolated by an army that had conquered vast swathes of countryside for hundreds of miles to the North and East, beyond the Jordan River as far as the kingdom of Babylon. There is little that can be said, except that Jerusalem was a lost cause; she stood defenceless before a ferocious enemy with little help available from Egypt, the only ally who might have helped if it had reason to engage in politics beyond her boundaries. All hope had gone, except the hope of the people of Jerusalem in their Lord and God.

We must be careful, however, because this passage of scripture is not recorded here in Isaiah merely as a factual record. The same story is found in 2 Kings 18:28-37 where it is set out for this very purpose, but here, it has a different meaning. As we discovered yesterday, because this book is a book of prophecy, we must read the story in a quite different way. The Commander in Chief's words to King Hezekiah's servants had a wider purpose; they confirmed to people of later years that Isaiah was right in all his prophecies about the Assyrians. Because of this, Isaiah's prophecies about the coming of the Messiah as a suffering servant (see ch.53) could also be regarded as a true representation of God's will.

How does this work in this reading? The story line follows on from the first half of the chapter, in which the Commander in Chief of the Assyrian army came to Jerusalem, took up a commanding position (controlling the water – see 36:2) and undermined any trust the people of Jerusalem might have in their King, Hezekiah, their God, their politics and their military ability (36:4-10). Despite King Hezekiah's work to reform the worship of God in Judah (2 Chron 29-31), this challenge by the Commander in Chief fulfilled Isaiah's haunting earlier prophecy *'shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols what I have done to Samaria and her images?'* (10:11 – for the details of all this and its timing, see yesterday's study).

In this, the second part of the Commander's speech (36:13-20), he sought to spread further dissent amongst those in Jerusalem by refusing to negotiate directly and privately with King Hezekiah. He worked to place uncertainty in the hearts of the people of Israel; firstly suggesting that Hezekiah was deceiving them (36:14),

then saying that if they surrendered now they would gain their freedom, adding they would later be moved off their lands to start again elsewhere with even better prospects (36:16)! How much better their life would be in Assyria (36:17)! Finally, he sowed the seeds of doubt about God's ability to defend his people. He had begun this earlier (36:10) by claiming that he was doing the Lord's will; but he now dismissed the Lord as no greater than the gods of other nations (36:18-20).

All this clearly bruised and insulted Hezekiah's three representatives (36:21,22). However, Isaiah had said earlier (see 10:13-16) that Assyria, although used by the Lord to judge Judah and Jerusalem, would seek to vaunt itself higher than God, and for that, it would be punished; what was happening now was a fulfilment of this earlier prophecy. Those chosen by God to do His will should not raise themselves up, or they would themselves be defeated either then, or now. It would not be long before Assyria was indeed defeated by Babylon, and the prophet Nahum rejoices in this fulfilment of Isaiah's words.

For all the suffering of the people of Judah and Jerusalem, people of later years were able to read Isaiah's prophecies and confirm the truth of what he had said; they had their proof of the truth of Isaiah's prophecies here in the Commander's own words. So Isaiah's prophecy that a remnant of God's people would survive this terror (10:20f.) gave real hope to the people.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the text and translation
- 'Don't trust the King – surrender now!'
- Which is the greatest God of all?
- The importance of this part of Isaiah

Notes on the text and translation

V13 '...in a loud voice in the Hebrew language ...'

The original Hebrew says 'Judean' language, but this, of course, is Hebrew, so I have translated it as such

V15 'Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the Lord ...'

Technically, the verb 'trust' in this sentence is 'causative'; but you can't 'cause' someone to trust in the Lord by enforcing them or attempting to make them. For this reason, I prefer 'persuade ... to trust' as a reasonable translation of this verse.

V16 'make a peace treaty with me and surrender'

This is an awkward phrase. The Hebrew reads; 'make with me a blessing and come out to me.' Clearly, the word 'blessing' used in this rather military setting means some kind of agreement or treaty, probably to the advantage of the King of Assyria. I have also interpreted the call to 'come out' as an act of surrender.

V21 'those who delivered Samaria from my power'

This phrase is a little uncertain, and at first sight, it reads which suggests that Samaria was saved from Assyria. However, it was not, because it fell to Assyria just like every other country. If we turn the statement into a question, however, it changes the meaning around to fit in with the general flow of the Commander's speech which is that no gods whatsoever have stood in the way of Assyria!

It is fascinating to follow the action of a genuine set of events in Old Testament time, but we must not be carried away and forget that the story has a purpose. Yesterday, in the first part of the Commander's speech, 'trust in the Lord' was an important theme. Today, the same theme remains central, but it is a theme under pressure from a godless man who sought to play god with God, and dominate the people of Jerusalem; and the Lord eventually had an answer to that.

'Don't trust the King – surrender now!'

At the end of yesterday's reading, the servants of Hezekiah sought a private agreement with the Commander, possibly holding out for the hope that they might be able to buy their way out of trouble as they had done before (36:11,12 - see yesterday's study). They asked the Commander to speak to them in Aramaic so that negotiations could proceed without disturbing the people, but they clearly misread the Commander's intentions as he shouted at the top of his voice to all those who had gathered within earshot (36:13).

The words of the Commander were a form of temptation, and just as the serpent tempted Eve to suspect that God was not telling her the entire truth about the tree in the middle of the garden (Gen 3:1), so the Commander's temptation was evil. Hezekiah was the first King of Judah for several decades (see 2 Chronicles 27-29) who was a truly godly man who sought to do what was right for his people before God. Yet it was he who faced this impossible threat and the evil temptations which were now sown in people's minds. Hezekiah had spent the previous two decades encouraging the people to return to the Lord and place their trust in Him during troubled political times, and the Commander went to the heart of the matter, attempting to destroy all the trust Hezekiah had built up (36:14,15).

The Commander in Chief spoke over Hezekiah's head directly to the people, and told them to surrender. Yet again, he sowed uncertainty in his words. The people gathered in Jerusalem knew full well that twenty years previously under a different Assyrian King, Israel had been invaded. The consequence of this was that the Assyrians began a programme of mass deportation of people, re-settling whole cities and groups of people in different parts of the world (Ezra, writing centuries later, discovers Israelites in far flung parts of the old Assyria – see Ezra 4:1-3). Doubtless, they attempted to persuade people to leave their homes by promises of a new start in beautiful, fruitful lands elsewhere, just as the Commander promised the people of Jerusalem here (36:17). But was this true? Did the people in Jerusalem really believe this? Did some of them know that this was simply a cover for the establishment of a 'Greater Assyria' by destroying the religious, social and cultural fabric of each state they invaded? Were they tempted by the promise of freedom?

Which is the greatest God of all?

The evil trickery of the Commander's words was an attempt on his part to get the people of Jerusalem to surrender to Assyrian rule; all those who had not made it to Jerusalem from the other Judean towns would soon face the reality of the deportations and resettlements of which he spoke. However, at the climax of the speech, the Commander displayed his true colours. He had said earlier that he was doing the Lord's work (36:10), but even that as far as he was concerned, was just a word-game; in this passage (36:18-20), he besmirched the name of the Lord by comparing Him to the gods of the other nations who were powerless before Assyria. Later Jewish people could see the truth, which was that God was using this situation for His purposes; however, that did not mean that the Commander was acting in a godly way, he was doing the work of an agent of evil. His sin was that he placed himself in a position of domination over God's people, attempting to usurp the right of God to deal with His own people, and this is what Isaiah had foreseen and prophesied about (see above).

The Commander compared the Lord God with all the other gods of the nations in the region, and treated them all as the same, as subservient not to the gods of Assyria but to the King of Assyria (36:18). Assyria was one of those Empires which regarded its emperor as a god, and as far as the Commander was concerned, his military power meant that his god, the King of Assyria, was the highest god of all. He had no concept of God as the One and only Creator God who had chosen His people and was dealing with them according to His will, and he did not perceive that he was being used by God to do His will in ways he did not understand. Isaiah, however, saw this and prophesied it, not in the famous prophecies which we know and love, but in what we might regard as the 'less interesting parts of Isaiah (in chapter 10 – see above). But the truth of God's Word must stand if He really is God and Isaiah is one of his prophets; and for the early Judeans around the time of the Exile, this was the key truth and the reason why the story was included in Isaiah.

The importance of this part of Isaiah

It is essential that we read the Old Testament as from the point of view of later Jewish people, because it enables us to see why scripture is recorded as it is, and what it is telling us. The whole story of what happened to Jerusalem when Assyria invaded was regarded by Jews in later centuries as a parable, a story which helped them understand why two centuries later, Jerusalem was invaded not by Assyria (in 701BC) but by Babylon (in 587BC). As we read this story further, we will discover more about how this parallel works and how it was used.

This connection is crucial to our understanding of Isaiah, because we have already seen a strange interplay develop between prophecies about Assyria and Babylon in earlier chapters (as in chapters 10,12 and 13,14), and the two halves of Isaiah are also divided generally between prophecies about Assyria and Babylon (the Assyrian invasion in the first half, and the Babylonian invasion and Exile in the second half). The more we read in Isaiah, the more we will understand how Isaiah's prophecies worked and resulted in producing the greatest prophetic voice of the Old Testament.

Discipleship

Application

It is worth reading this passage to be reminded about how Satan works to tempt God's people into unbelief and doubt. Just as in the Garden of Eden when Eve was tempted (as above), the Commander promised good things, but his intent was to distract the people from real faith both in God and also in their anointed leader, King Hezekiah. Satan always tempts us in the same way even today. It always appears attractive to not go to church, to doubt that Christians are sincere, to question whether God has our best interests at heart when the world has so much to offer, and to think that what has happened in the past is of little use in the reality of today. I could think of several other ways by which we are tempted, but these are just a few, which are also demonstrated within this passage.

The best way for God's people to be armed against evil is to be aware of Satan's tactics, and scripture teaches us these tactics through passages such as this; the story is complex but interesting, and a preacher can extract a spiritual message from the story which is directly applicable to people's lives today. The servants of Hezekiah were speechless at what was said by the Commander (36:21), either because they were horrified or because despite their horror they did indeed trust in God and therefore came back to their king in loyal and humble repentance (with clothes torn). They at least had not been taken in by the Commander, whatever the other people who heard him thought and whatever the gossip on the streets. The leadership were shaken but stood firm in faith, and it is still true that where the leadership of God's people stands firm in faith, God's will is done and His Kingdom comes.

Questions for groups

1. Where do you see temptation to unbelief within this text? How common are such temptations today?
2. The Commander in Chief asked the people of Jerusalem to make peace with him (36:16). How does Satan tempt us to find peace outside of the church?
3. What gods claim our allegiance today as if they are more important than Almighty God?

Discipleship challenges

- *If possible, share with a close member of your family some of the ways in which you believe that Satan tempts you, and ask for prayer to help you stand firm.*
- *If you have not begun to do this since yesterday, read through 2 Chronicles 29-32 in order to help you understand the background to this story.*
- *Pray about the life of your own church, and in the light of today's reading, ask the Lord to protect its leaders.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, stand amongst Your people with power and authority. Dispel the powers of darkness that attempt to disrupt the light You would shed on the lives of your servants, and save us from every work of the enemy. This we ask through our Saviour Jesus, who by His death and Resurrection, overcame death and hell. Alleluia! AMEN
