

Prayers

Opening prayer

We praise You, Lord God; You have never let us down even though we have often failed You, and You have loved us faithfully when we have returned after wandering away from You. You have a plan for each of us, and it unfolds throughout the turmoil of life, because You have chosen us for glory despite our unworthiness. We praise You for the blessings You give us so generously, and ask to be made worthy of our call. AMEN!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: BUILDING

1. For yourself

Pray in those moments when there is a break between the things you are doing; pray for what comes next, just a prayer placing what you are doing in God's hands, or whatever comes to you

2. For your friends and family

Using the moments of the day again, pray for the members of your family and your friends; you can get through quite a few in the course of a day!

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the churches of your neighbourhood, and seek God's blessing on the work that they do

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

Pray for those whose work is to gather taxes. Remember that Jesus blessed a tax collector, and seek to do the same. At this time of economic uncertainty, we need the tax systems of our countries to collect everything that is legally due, for the good of governments as well as the whole world.

Meditation

God has called His people to act with courage
And in His name, to address the world's needs

To identify corruption and greed in society
And in His name, refute it and expose it

To perceive that everyone on earth can be fed
And in His name, make governments do it

To have a heart for those who have little
And in His name, share our wealth with others

To understand that the world is God's
And in His name, safeguard our planet

To have the bravery to confront the world's bullies
And in His name, demonstrate the way of love

To have the passion to believe in justice
And in His name, seek just jurisprudence for all

To have the vision to grasp the future
And in His name, stop Satan from claiming it

God has called His people to act with courage
And in His name, proclaim the Kingdom of God

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 37:1-20

¹ And so when King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the LORD. ² He sent Eliakim (the Master of the Palace), Shebna (the secretary), and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the son of Amoz, the prophet. ³ They said to him,

'This is what Hezekiah says;

"This day is a day of distress, rebuke, and disgrace, for children are ready to be born, and there is no strength to give them birth. ⁴ Perhaps the LORD your God has heard the words of the Commander in Chief who has been sent by his master the King of Assyria to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the LORD your God has heard; so lift up your prayer for the remnant that is here."

⁵ When King Hezekiah's servants came to Isaiah, ⁶ Isaiah said to them,

'Say this to your master,

"This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, by which the King of Assyria's youths have blasphemed against me. ⁷ Look, I will put a spirit in him, so he will hear a rumour and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land."

⁸ When the Commander in Chief heard that the King of Assyria had left Lachish, he returned and then found the King fighting against Libnah. ⁹ The King (of Assyria) then heard a report about Tirhakah King of Ethiopia reporting that he had set out to attack him, so when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah to say,

¹⁰ *'This is what you will say to King Hezekiah of Judah:*

"Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you into thinking that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the King of Assyria. ¹¹ Look, you have heard what the Kings of Assyria have done to destroy all lands; will you be delivered? ¹² Have the gods of the nations that my fathers destroyed saved any of them, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? ¹³ Where is the King of Hamath, the King of Arpad, the King of the city of Sepharvaim, the King of Hena, or the King of Ivvah?"

¹⁴ Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it; then he went up to the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD. ¹⁵ Then Hezekiah prayed to the LORD:

¹⁶ *'O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you alone are the God of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷ Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; hear all the words Sennacherib has sent in order to mock the living God. ¹⁸ It is true, O LORD, that the Kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, ¹⁹ and have thrown their gods into the fire. They were not gods but the work of human hands, made of wood and stone, so they were destroyed. ²⁰ So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you are the LORD; You alone.'*

Review

The plot thickens! The terrible threats made by the Assyrian Commander in Chief against King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem were conveyed to the King, and his response was to contact Isaiah immediately. This was a significant choice by Hezekiah, because it was important that he chose to take the advice of a prophet, something his forebears had not always done (see Ahaz in Isaiah 7). Being consistent with the prophecies he had been given (see chapters 10 and 12), Isaiah dismissed the threat of Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, (37:5-7). From this point onwards, however, it is easy to become confused about what was really happening.

In the previous chapter (36), the text tells us that the Assyrian Commander in Chief stood close by to the city of Jerusalem with a significant army nearby, and speaking in the name of the King of Assyria who was elsewhere. However, we now find out that the picture is a little more complicated than this! In our passage (37:8), we read that the Commander had to leave Jerusalem hurriedly to go and assist his master, the King of Assyria, named Sennacherib. He had defeated the city of Lachish, a dozen miles to the southwest of Jerusalem, and was heading towards nearby Libnah; and he now heard about a threat from the king of Ethiopia (37:9). Clearly, the Assyrian army was divided up and operating in several places.

The upshot of the various military manoeuvring was although Judah was infiltrated with a significant Assyrian presence controlling all the towns and regions of Judah, and with a powerful army laying siege to Jerusalem, the Assyrians were a long way from 'home' and considerably stretched. Although they were not willing to launch a full scale assault on Jerusalem they had every intention of finishing what they started, so a strongly worded letter was sent to Hezekiah warning him of the power of Assyria to destroy everything, gods, lands and Kings (37:10-13). Hezekiah would have hoped that the Assyrians would leave Judah but was dismayed at their continued threats, and came before the Lord in urgent prayer (37:14-20), showing his piety and zeal. He had a clear understanding of his duties as King of Judah (1 Samuel 8, see also Deut 17:13f, and 28:36f.), but because the Assyrian threat was not yet over, Hezekiah pleaded with the Lord for salvation (37:20).

Two things are worth noting. Firstly, when it comes to interpreting what was happening, the picture I have just described may seem obvious, but others see it differently! The timing of what the Commander in Chief did in verse 8 is so confusing that some people think this is contrived, and the message sent to Hezekiah by the King of Assyria (37:10-13) was merely a different 'version' of what we read in chapter 36. Personally, I do not agree with this theory, because some confusion should be expected in the complexities of war, and while the Assyrian troops surrounded Jerusalem, it is not surprising that several efforts were made to persuade Hezekiah to surrender.

Secondly, the most important feature of this passage is that God's people, as represented by King Hezekiah, were submissive to their God, and not to the worldly events happening around them. The city of Jerusalem was desperately weakened by the Assyrian assault and was relatively defenceless, but the Assyrians did not attack the city. The opposing King was elsewhere, and his Commander in Chief was recalled from his duties in Jerusalem to help him in other battles! Isaiah perceived the wider picture and prophesied that the Assyrian king would go home (37:6,7); his words were of great comfort to king and people alike, confirming that despite the threats, God was able to look after His people because they accepted Him as their Covenant God and Creator (37:16,20).

Hezekiah's confession of faith in the face of insuperable odds is the key to the whole narrative and the eventual salvation of Israel from the Assyrian threat. This was something which later generations of Jewish people greatly admired in Hezekiah and the people of that time. They showed a quality of faith in the face of adversity which was and is inspirational.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Hezekiah's response
- Isaiah's prophecy
- Sennacherib's letter and the circumstances surrounding its writing
- Hezekiah's prayer

Notes on the text and translation

- V2 *In Hebrew a rare phrase occurs which reads; 'the elders of the priests'. Nowhere else in scripture do we hear of any hierarchy amongst priests except with the High priestly families descended from Aaron. I have translated this phrase 'the senior priests' because it is what the phrase broadly means, but it is possible that this really refers to the members of the high priestly family of the day.*
- V8 *In strict order, the text reads 'the Commander in chief returned and found the King of Assyria fighting against Libna, for he heard that he had left Lachish'. If you read this several times, you can become quite confused as to who was going where and why. Fortunately, the grammar of the Hebrew allows me to re-arrange the words to make sense of this as in my translation above (sentence order is normally different in Hebrew than in English).*
- V9 *The Ethiopian King's significance to the story is a bit of a mystery (see below); the Hebrew word is 'Cush' which in the Old testament normally means Ethiopia.*
- V11 *The King of Assyria speaks about 'destroying' all lands. The Hebrew word here has no real equivalent in English, but means 'a religious duty to destroy', and is sometimes translated 'devoted to destruction.*

In that sense it speaks of a terrible religious zeal for the destruction of people, their lands, their culture and their gods.

V20 *'You are the Lord, You alone' at the end of the passage, 'You alone' is emphatic, which is the main point of the verse.*

There are a number of interesting features of this part of the story of the siege of Jerusalem. Apart from the complexities of what the Commander and King Sennacherib were doing, there is the initial response of King Hezekiah as reported to Isaiah (37:3f.), the prophecy of Isaiah itself (37:5-7), the challenge of King Sennacherib and Hezekiah's final prayer. Each are interesting in their own right.

Hezekiah's response

Previous kings of Israel, notably Hezekiah's father Ahaz, and certainly many others over the previous two hundred years had spurned the Lord's advice as given through the prophets (see Isaiah 7,8). The word used for 'disgrace' in verse 3 is often used in scripture to describe the contempt for God which was shown by successive Judean and Israelite kings. Here, however, Hezekiah accepts 'this is a day of distress, rebuke and disgrace', which had fallen on them, not on the Lord. One can almost hear Isaiah's approval!

The strange expression 'children are ready to be born, and there is no strength to give them birth' (37:3) is probably a proverbial expression which indicated the weakness of Judah and Jerusalem, and Hezekiah uses it to re-enforce his message to Isaiah. At the beginning of this crisis, Hezekiah asked Isaiah to pray for the people (37:4). However, the passage ends with Hezekiah himself going spontaneously into the Temple to pray for the people. Kings of past generations had done all manner of things wrongly, performing sacrifices and assuming the role of priests and prophets, inciting God's wrath on more than one occasion (1 Samuel 13). But there was never any prohibition on the King praying for the people, and Hezekiah's prayer has become well known just as Solomon's prayer in the Temple (1Kings 8:22f.) and David's prayer after his vision (2 Samuel 7:18f.).

Isaiah' prophecy

Isaiah's message was one of encouragement. He knew that whatever had happened in the past, Hezekiah was now acting in a godly way and the Lord was always quick to forgive and respond to a repentant king. The gist of Isaiah's prophecy was 'do not fear' which is a classic scriptural word of reassurance. However, you may have noticed the manner in which it was given, preceded by the words 'This is what the Lord says ... (37:6). If you look through chapters 36 and 37, it looks as if there is a competition for power and authority between the King of Assyria and the Lord, each with his messengers using the same formula 'This is what ... says' (36:4,14; 37:5,10). This is a small indication of the way that the King of Assyria valued himself highly, and in a manner which Isaiah saw as insulting to the Lord and about which he had prophesied earlier (10:13f.)

Isaiah belittled the King of Assyria, describing his army and its Commanders as 'youths' (37:6), a term for those only just older than children. Perhaps Isaiah had noticed that many of the people in the Assyrian army were very young and inexperienced; certainly the Assyrian empire was huge and the army must have been extensive because it was an empire enforced by military might rather than by the political subtleties of the later Greek and Roman Empires. If the Assyrian army was in places young and inexperienced, perhaps that was one of their weaknesses, as revealed prophetically by Isaiah. In addition, their arrogant blaspheming against Almighty God was ignorant, and they did not have the wisdom to recognise the difference between the gods of the nations and the Lord God who created the world. They did not threaten God, rather, God would use them, through gossip, to wreck their leader's plans (37:7)!

Sennacherib's letter and the circumstance surrounding its writing

In verse 8, the Commander in Chief leaves Jerusalem to go and help his King, who had been taking the city of Lachish. Lachish was a town in the Judean countryside near to Jerusalem; but why was the King of Assyria fighting there and not with his Commander at the far greater city of Jerusalem, the one city which survived the Assyrian onslaught in 701 BC? It is something of a mystery, as are the dates of the events we are describing. Everything we know about this passage suggests that it happened in 701 BC, but there are no records of a King Tirhakah in Ethiopia (then, a lower region of Egypt) until later in the 680's BC (according to the accepted dates of Egyptian Kings), so his appearance as a threat to the King of Assyria in verse 9 is odd. It is very unclear whether any battles with Egypt (or Ethiopia) took place in 701BC according to the 'conventional wisdom' of Biblical studies and Egyptology. You will find detailed discussions of this in some commentaries, but recent developments in Egyptology cast doubt on the accuracy of the dates for the so-called 'Ethiopian Dynasty' of Egyptian kings and the battles they fought with the kings of Assyria. So, until archaeologists are in closer agreement about these matters, it is better for us to work from the text as we have it; and perhaps Isaiah's prophecy of gossip to confuse the enemy is closer to the mark than we think!

King Sennacherib's letter to Hezekiah goes over the same points threatened by the Commander in Chief in chapter 36. However, the letter focuses on the issue of trust in God. This is particularly interesting at this point in the story, because Hezekiah has already dug his heels in on this matter, showing great trust God. It repeats the arrogant assertion that no other gods have saved the people of other lands and implies that the King of Assyria himself is a more powerful 'god' than any other (see also yesterday's study). In his speech he describes the lands he has conquered as 'devoted to destruction' (see notes above), and describes Hezekiah's influence as 'deceptive'. It is fascinating to see the King of Assyria speak like a politician, with complete conviction and persuasive power, but being totally wrong, and completely misconstruing what was going on. In this way, Sennacherib showed himself to be a mere pawn in God's hands, as prophesied by Isaiah!

Hezekiah's prayer

'O Lord God of hosts, enthroned above the cherubim ...' is an impressive beginning to a prayer. By saying this, however, Hezekiah invoked the days of David, who said the same words when bringing up the ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (1 Chron 13:6). Such words are not repeated in scripture without meaning, for it shows that Hezekiah knew that the very foundation of Jerusalem and the Temple was at stake. He prayed in acknowledgement of God as Creator of all things (37:16), and with these words echoed the great prayer of Solomon in the dedication of the Temple (2 Chron 6:14f., 18f.). Hezekiah was expressing the truth which is enshrined within the Old Testament, that there is only one God and He is the One who has made everything; there can be no other God! This may be a statement of faith which we readily make today, but it is rarely heard expressed with such conviction by any of the kings, apart from David and Solomon.

It is also interesting that Hezekiah's prayer echoes some of the prophecies of Isaiah himself, who earlier spoke of idols made with human hands (2:8), moreover, the prayer shows that paradoxically, the king of Assyria was doing the Lord's work by destroying idols which were insults to the divinity of the true God. Sennacherib was not wrong about the other gods, he was wrong about himself and the One true God.

The most memorable feature of this passage is the manner in which Hezekiah is described as spreading out the letter before the Lord (37:14). This is the incident which lies behind the expression we use today 'laying all on the altar' before God. Note that it does not say that Hezekiah placed the letter on the altar, but this mental picture is easily created. A crisis is not a time to gather one's own strength, but a time to show that you trust in God, which is what Hezekiah did.

Discipleship

Application

This passage encourages us to believe that the Lord is working through the events of history in a way which we may not be able to see; and although we may feel deeply threatened by what is happening around us, there is no reason for us to lack confidence in God's ability to control the world and world events. Certainly, Christians who avoid studying such passages of scripture in the Old Testament may not gain this sense of God's majestic power throughout the life of the world, and it is essential for us to have confidence in God and His providence if we are to stand firm in the highly complex world in which we now live. Frankly, no one knows how the dangerous situations faced by our world will turn out, so everyone today faces the question; 'in whom do you trust?' Hezekiah is a good example of one who maintained faith against all odds, and we may gain confidence in the Lord through reading his story.

The evidence is all there that many people abandon faith today when life becomes difficult. But if our faith is rooted in the promises of God and His Son Jesus, which are that He will sustain us and provide for us in all circumstances, then we can take heart from this sometimes convoluted story. Moreover, we can learn to praise God that all things can 'work together for good' for those who love the Lord!

Questions for groups

1. In what ways has the life of the church been most threatened in recent years? How can God's people stand firm in Him in such circumstances?
2. As God's people, we do not fight wars today, so who and what do we fight spiritually, and why?
3. Discuss the significance of 'other gods' in the life of people today. How are people deceived by 'gods made by human hands'?

Discipleship challenges

- *Make a list of people you know who have left the church at times of personal stress or because of other difficulties. How can the church grow to prevent such desertions happening?*
 - *Discuss with a church leader whether you feel that God's people are being attacked spiritually, and if so, how. Pray about how to face this evil.*
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Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the wonder of love, for happiness and friends, for the joy of fellowship, for overcoming trials for all that is past, for hopes for the future. Thank You, Lord Jesus for our salvation in You.
AMEN
