

Pentwater Bible Church

Isaiah Message 84

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Jerusalem Delivered from Sennacherib, Cir. 1860 woodcut by [Julius Schnorr von Karolsfeld](#)

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Pentwater Bible Church

The Book of Isaiah

Message Eighty-Four

THE ASSYRIANS ATTEMPT TO INVADE JERUSALEM

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Isaiah 36:1–10

Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah, and took them. ²And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field. ³Then came forth unto him Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah, the son of Asaph, the recorder.

⁴And Rabshakeh said unto them, Say, ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? ⁵I say, thy counsel and strength for the war are but vain words: now on whom dost thou trust, that thou hast rebelled against me? ⁶Behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust on him. ⁷But if thou say unto me, We trust in Jehovah our God: is not that he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away, and hath said to Judah and to Jerusalem, Ye shall worship before this altar? ⁸Now therefore, I pray thee, give pledges to my master the king of Assyria, and I will give thee two thousand horses, if thou be able on thy part to set riders upon them. ⁹How then canst thou turn away the face of one captain of the least of my master's servants, and put thy trust on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰And am I now come up without Jehovah against this land to destroy it? Jehovah said unto me, Go up against this land, and destroy it.

¹¹Then said Eliakim and Shebna and Joah unto Rabshakeh, Speak, I pray thee, unto thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand it: and speak not to us in the Jews' language, in the ears of the people that are on the wall. ¹²But Rabshakeh said, Hath my master sent me to thy master, and to thee, to speak these words? hath he not sent me to the men that sit upon the wall, to eat their own dung, and to drink their own water with you (ASV, 1901)?

INTRODUCTION

This very long, two-chapter story tells about a time of imminent danger concluding with an awesome miracle, the invasion of Sennacherib and the overnight decimation of his army. The basic story about this event is found in the Books of II Kings 18-19 and II Chronicles 32:1-33. These events are told in the Book of the Kings as part of the story of the reign of the Judean King Hezekiah, and explained here from the perspective of God as told through His prophet Isaiah. The reason for its placement at this point seems to be that after foretelling (Isaiah Chapter 32) the

destruction of Jerusalem and then continuing with the downfall of its enemies and the ultimate redemption of Israel, the Book testifies to the truth of Isaiah's prophecy. Hezekiah's faith and righteousness were impeccable. God permitted the Assyrians to invade his kingdom and humble him because of the shortcomings of the people of Judah, not of Hezekiah. Although he succeeded in ending the spiritual atrocities of his father, King Ahaz, the nation as a whole did not rise to his level, and his personal merit was not immediately sufficient to shield them from Assyrian attack. He eventually placed all his trust in God for his circumstances after consultation with Isaiah.

In Hezekiah's fourteenth year reigning over the Southern Kingdom of Judah (701 B.C.), the Assyrian Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) invaded against all the fortified cities of Judah (II Kings 18:13-27). There were forty-six according to the Assyrian's count, and Sennacherib seized them.

Sennacherib's capital was the city of Nineveh, where his palace was located. Its walls were lined with sculptured slabs, which were found during archaeological expeditions between 1847 and 1851. Early in Sennacherib's reign, Hezekiah revolted against Assyria, along with other surrounding countries, precipitating the Assyrian invasion in 701 B.C. The campaign is recorded in the annals of Sennacherib inscribed on clay cylinders (the Taylor Prism in the British Museum and a copy on a prism in the Oriental Institute of Chicago).



Cylinder of Sennacherib. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_Rm-1

On these Sennacherib mentions Sidon, Beth Dagon, and other cities as having capitulated to him and extols his victories in a great battle fought near the city Altaku (Eltekeh; Joshua 19:44; 21:23) in which Israeli armed forces were aided by Egyptian bowmen and chariots. He claims that “the terrifying splendor” of his majesty overcame Hezekiah and “in addition to 30 talents and 800 talents of silver” he gave other valuables to the Assyrian as tribute. ¹ The following is a direct quote from the cylinder of Sennacherib.

“As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to his strong cities, walled forts, and countless small villages, and conquered them by means of well-stamped earth ramps and battering rams brought near the walls with an attack by foot soldiers.... Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage....” “... I still increased the tribute and presents to me as overlord ... Hezekiah himself did send me, later, to Nineveh, my lordly city, together with 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, precious stones, antimony, large cuts of red stone, couches inlaid with ivory, nimeru-chairs inlaid with ivory, elephant hides, ebony wood, boxwood, and all kinds of valuable treasures, his own daughters and concubines....”²

The Assyrians were warlike and ruthless people. They lived for the glory of war and loved their military exploits. They had a highly advanced war machine using sheer terror to place their subjects into submission. Some of the methods they employed upon conquered peoples included burning them alive, flaying alive and blinded then beheading. Following this they impaled the heads on sharp stakes for other to see. The terror they produced was widely communicated to other nations. They employed psychological techniques that were designed to frighten their targeted conquests.

The major doctrines of this story shows us what is important to God.

1. Trust in Him in all things.
2. Blasphemy
3. Pride
4. Arrogance
5. Blackmail
6. Physiological warfare
7. God’s judgment

THE INVASION

Isaiah 35:1–3

Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah, and took them. ²And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller’s field.

¹ Finegan, Jack, *Light From The Ancient Past, The Archeological background of Judaism and Christianity*. Published by Princeton University Press, 1946. Pg.211–212

² *ibid*

³Then came forth unto him Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah, the son of Asaph, the recorder (ASV, 1901).

Earlier in the sixth year of the reign of Hezekiah, eight years before this, Sennacherib took Samaria, the Northern Kingdom and carried the ten tribes captive, (II Kings 18:10, 11). He then came against the fortified cities of Judah, which were the frontier towns, and barriers of the Southern Kingdom of Judah *and took them*; that is, some of them, not all of them (Isaiah 37:8). He thought to have taken all forty-six of them, which was his intent, (II Chronicles 32:1), but was motivated to stop because of a payment of 300 talents of silver, and 30 talents of gold to him, by the king of Judah, (II Kings 18:14, 15, 16). He went from the north along the coast defeating (among others) the towns of Aphek, Timnah, Ekron, and Lachish. Lachish was then his staging area for attacking a number of other towns. From Lachish he sent a large army against Jerusalem to surround it and to demand its surrender.

The reasoning of Sennacherib for this war against Judah was the fact that Hezekiah had shaken off the yoke of Assyria, by which his father Ahaz and the nation had suffered so much under Tiglath-pileser, or Shalmaneser (II Kings 18:7). This was an aggressive act of vengeance by Sennacherib to reclaim the pride of Assyria. Therefore, his desire was to reduce Judea again to subjection, as it was under Ahaz and then continue on into Egypt to conquer it as well.

Even though he had taken Hezekiah's money to withdraw his army out of his country, he nevertheless sent Rabshakeh and two other generals, Tartan and Rabsaris to place a preliminary siege event of fear upon Hezekiah (II Kings 18:17). Tartan and Rabsaris are not mentioned in the Isaiah text, only Rabshakeh, because he was the principal person, the chief speaker. Lachish was a city in the tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:39) which Sennacherib was now besieging, (II Chronicles 32:9). This message was sent, three years after the former expedition: *and he stood by the conduit of the upper pool, in the highway of the fullers' field*; This pool lay just outside the city, near the walls, which clearly show the rude aggressive attitude of Rabshakeh to come so very close. This put him in close proximity to the Jews who were upon the walls so as to hear him.

Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah were sent by Hezekiah to meet with Rabshakeh. Rabshakeh had the impudence to call to the king directly, in order to negotiate, and tell him to surrender the city of Jerusalem to Sennacherib.

RABSHAKEH'S ARROGANT THREAT TO HEZEKIAH

Isaiah 36:4–10

⁴And Rabshakeh said unto them, Say, ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? ⁵I say, thy counsel and strength for the war are but vain words: now on whom dost thou trust, that thou hast rebelled against me? ⁶Behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust on him. ⁷But if thou say unto me, We trust in Jehovah our God: is not that he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away, and hath said to Judah and to Jerusalem, Ye shall worship before this

altar? ⁸Now therefore, I pray thee, give pledges to my master the king of Assyria, and I will give thee two thousand horses, if thou be able on thy part to set riders upon them. ⁹How then canst thou turn away the face of one captain of the least of my master's servants, and put thy trust on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰And am I now come up without Jehovah against this land to destroy it? Jehovah said unto me, Go up against this land, and destroy it (ASV, 1901).

Rudeness characterizes the Rabshakeh. With Hezekiah not meeting him he commands the envoys to speak to Hezekiah, and in referring to the king adds an insult by not referring to Hezekiah's kingdom. He just issues a blunt, impolite command. However, when he refers to Sennacherib the Rabshakeh calls him "*the great king, the king of Assyria*"

After insulting the team and Hezekiah he continues his insult by deprecating the source of the trust the Israeli's placed in their future, *What kind of a trust,*. More than that, however, there is the tone of astonishment. It is as though Rabshakeh had said, "What has happened to you that you place your confidence in a reed as weak as Egypt? What kind of an object is that to trust in?" Rabshakeh speaks in the singular; as he essentially by-passes the three envoys and speaks directly to the king alone.

Continuing with his insulting speech the Rabshakeh says that counsel and strength for war of Hezekiah is just vain talk. The Judahites have taken counsel and amassed strength, but all of this is no more than mere pretension and empty words. You will not avail against the might of Assyria he says. Then he asks, who it could possibly be that was worthy of trust so that Judah would rebel against Assyria. He speaks in the first person as though Hezekiah had rebelled against him personally.

Rabshakeh answers his own question, and calls attention to the answer with a *behold!* It is as though he had said, "You do not answer, but I tell you in whom you trust." He characterizes Egypt as a staff which is a broken reed. Egypt was a land of reeds, so that the designation is appropriate. What he makes reference to are the reeds which grow along the banks of the Nile. To trust in a reed is foolish for it cannot support anyone; but to rely upon a reed that is bruised is more foolish, for it is no support at all. Such was Egypt and Pharaoh. Such a reed would only go into one's hand and pierce it, so that the one who trusted in Egypt would come off worse than before. Egypt had never proved to be an advantageous ally.

He proclaims that suppose, however, that Judah trusted in Jehovah its God? Should Egypt prove to be false, would not Jehovah be a true support? Rabshakeh had heard of Hezekiah's religious reform, how he had removed the high places and called men to worship before the altar of the Lord. He had sought for a centralization of the worship of Jehovah (II Kings 18:4; II Chronicles 31:1). Not really understanding the true nature of the situation, the Rabshakeh is actually reproving the king. The reference to the Lord is disparaging. Certainly, the Rabshakeh implies, He whose high places Hezekiah had removed could be of no help to the people at this time. He thinks that the pagan high place are of the Lord instead of the idolatry that they were in opposition to the Lord.

He continues to make an offer *And now*, as a result of what I have been saying, *strike a bargain*. The one with whom Hezekiah is to engage is none other than the master of Rabshakeh, the king of Assyria. Alluding to the scarcity of horses in Judah, Rabshakeh declares that he will give to Hezekiah two thousand horses if Hezekiah on his part could provide two thousand men capable of serving as a cavalry. It was a tempting offer, for at that time Judah thought she could find safety

in horses (Isaiah 30:16). In disobedience to the earlier promises (Deuteronomy 17:16; 20:1) she looked to Egypt for horses (Isaiah 31:1, 3). But Judah's cavalry could not stand up against the might of Assyria.

Rabshakeh then believes that he has good grounds for continuing his argument and strengthens it. Hezekiah cannot refuse whatever is proposed to him, he must accept; he can reject nothing! Surely if the Assyrian king himself would demand; Hezekiah would be forced to grant his demand. But the same applies even to the governors of the smallest, most insignificant of the king's servants. Even their demands Hezekiah must grant! He can turn none of them away. It would be difficult to express more cogently their demand for the complete dependence of Hezekiah upon Assyria. And yet, Judah trusted earlier in Egypt with respect to horses and chariots (Isaiah 31:1). The last words of the verse show the utter futility of what Judah was doing.

Adding to the fear of the Judahites, the Rabshakeh says that he has come up against Jerusalem with the help of their God. Even their God is against them and on the side of the attacker. Rabshakeh makes no pretense about his purpose in coming against Jerusalem. He is to destroy Jerusalem, and in this attempt, he believes the Lord is with him. Indeed, he claims that the Lord commanded him to go up and to destroy Jerusalem. Coming from conquering the northern ten tribes and the walled cities in Judah the Rabshakeh is very emboldened.

THE INSULT INTENSIFIES

Isaiah 36:11–12

¹¹Then said Eliakim and Shebna and Joah unto Rabshakeh, Speak, I pray thee, unto thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand it: and speak not to us in the Jews' language, in the ears of the people that are on the wall. ¹²But Rabshakeh said, Hath my master sent me to thy master, and to thee, to speak these words? hath he not sent me to the men that sit upon the wall, to eat their own dung, and to drink their own water with you (ASV, 1901)?

Although the Rabshakeh used crude and insolent means, he was a skillful diplomat who understood human psychology. He employed the language of Judah, that is, the popular Hebrew language. Intentionally he did not use the Aramaic language which was the current diplomatic language of the period.

Hezekiah's messengers became worried, because the people who were sitting on the wall listening to the speech could understand what was said and were becoming agitated. But that was precisely the Rabshakeh's intention. Those who were "sitting on the wall" were primarily the guards, but as well there were ordinary people who were curious to watch this diplomatic confrontation. That is why the messengers of Hezekiah requested the Rabshakeh not to speak in Hebrew. Naturally the latter refused and continued to shout even louder. It was of course part of his job to speak directly to the people and to incite them to rebel against Hezekiah and to surrender to the Assyrians.

The Rabshakeh then gave a further description of the fate of the people if Jerusalem were to be besieged. Those who would suffer most were the poor who would be doomed to "eat their own dung and drink their own urine" (36:12). However, this was an exaggerated picture, because in

fact within the city of Jerusalem were several pools and aqueducts connected with subterranean springs (Isaiah 8:6; II King 20:20). Clearly the imagery used was given in order to intimidate and incite the common people against Hezekiah, who refused to surrender. Moreover, the Rabshakeh alleged, the messengers of Hezekiah themselves would share the same fate. In this way the leaders and the authorities of Jerusalem were also being incited to oppose Hezekiah.

Next message: THE ASSYRIAN ATTEMPT TO INVADE JERUSALEM II

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