

Defeat of the Assyrians



SABBATH AFTERNOON

A gaunt man walks barefoot with his two sons. Another family has loaded all their belongings onto an oxcart pulled by emaciated oxen. A man leads the oxen while two women sit on the cart. Less fortunate people have no cart, so they carry their possessions on their shoulders. Soldiers are everywhere. A battering ram smashes into the city gate. Archers on top of the ram shoot at defenders on the walls. Hectic carnage reigns supreme.

Fast forward. A king sits grandly on his throne, receiving booty and captives. Some captives approach him with hands upraised, pleading for mercy. Others kneel or crouch. Above the king the words appear: “Sennacherib, king of the world, king of Assyria, . . . sat in a . . . throne and the booty of the city Lachish passed in review before him.”—John Malcolm Russell, *The Writing on the Wall* (Winona Lake: Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1999), p. 138.

These pictures, which once adorned the walls of Sennacherib’s “Palace Without a Rival,” are now in the British Museum, and what a story they tell about the plight of God’s professed people.

The Week at a Glance: How hopeless did the situation in Judah appear? How did the Assyrians try to undermine the morale of the people in Judah? How did Hezekiah respond? What happened to him during prosperity?

Memory Text: “O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth” (*Isaiah 37:16, NRSV*).

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 15.

Strings Attached *(Isa. 36:1)*

What happened to Judah? *2 Kings 18:13, 2 Chron. 32:1, Isa. 36:1.*

When faithless Ahaz died and his faithful son Hezekiah succeeded him, Hezekiah inherited a kingdom that had lost full independence. Having purchased Assyrian aid against the alliance of Syria and northern Israel, Judah was forced to continue paying “protection money” in the form of tribute to Assyria (*see 2 Chron. 28:16-21*). When the Assyrian king Sargon II died on a distant battlefield and was succeeded by Sennacherib in 705 B.C., Assyria appeared vulnerable. Evidence from Assyrian and biblical texts reveals that Hezekiah seized this opportunity to rebel (*compare 2 Kings 18:7*), taking aggressive action as the ringleader of an anti-Assyrian revolt among the small nations in his region.

Unfortunately for him, Hezekiah had underestimated the resilience of Assyria’s might. In 701 B.C., when Sennacherib had subdued other parts of his empire, he lashed out against Syria-Palestine with devastating force and ravaged Judah.

How did Hezekiah prepare for a confrontation with Assyria? *2 Chron. 32:1-8.*

When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib intended to take Jerusalem, the capital city, he made extensive preparations for a confrontation with Assyria. He strengthened his fortifications, further equipped and organized his army, and increased the security of Jerusalem’s water supply (*see also 2 Kings 20:20, 2 Chron. 32:30*). The remarkable Siloam water tunnel, commemorated by an inscription telling how it was constructed, almost certainly dates to Hezekiah’s preparation for a potential siege.

Just as important as military and organizational leadership, Hezekiah provided spiritual leadership as he sought to boost the morale of his people at this frightening time. He encouraged them by saying: “ ‘Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him; for there is one greater with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles’ ” (*2 Chron. 32:7, 8, NRSV*).

If Hezekiah trusted the Lord so much, why did he put forth so much effort on his own? Did his works negate his faith? See Philippians 2:12,13 on cooperating with God, who provides the power that is truly effective.

Propaganda (*Isa. 36:2-20*).

The rulers of Assyria were not only brutal, they were intelligent. Their goal was wealth and power, not simply destruction (*compare Isa. 10:13, 14*). Why use resources to take a city by force if you can persuade its inhabitants to surrender? So, while he was engaged in the siege of Lachish, Sennacherib sent his *rabshakeh*, a kind of high officer, to take Jerusalem by propaganda.

What arguments did the *rabshakeh* use to intimidate Judah? *Isa. 36:2-20; see also 2 Kings 18:17-35, 2 Chron. 32:9-19.*

The *rabshakeh* made some rather powerful arguments. You cannot trust Egypt to help you because she is weak and unreliable. You cannot depend on the Lord to help you because Hezekiah has offended Him by removing His high places and altars throughout Judah, telling the people to worship at one altar in Jerusalem. In fact, the Lord is on Assyria's side and told Sennacherib to destroy Judah. You don't even have enough trained men to handle 2,000 horses.

To avoid a siege in which you have nothing to eat and drink, give up now and you will be treated well. Hezekiah cannot save you, and because the gods of all the other countries conquered by Assyria have not saved them, you can be sure that your God will not save you either.

Was the *rabshakeh* telling the truth?

Because there was much truth in what he was saying, his arguments were persuasive. Backing him up were two unspoken arguments. First, he had just come from Lachish, only 30 miles away, where the Assyrians were showing what happened to a strongly fortified city that dared resist them. Second, he had a powerful contingent of the Assyrian army with him (*Isa. 36:2*). Knowing the fate of armies and cities elsewhere (including Samaria, the capital of northern Israel: *2 Kings 18:9, 10*) that had succumbed to Assyria, no Judahite would have reason to doubt that from a human point of view Jerusalem was doomed (*compare Isa. 10:8-11*). The *rabshakeh* was also right in saying that Hezekiah had destroyed various places of sacrifice in order to centralize worship at the temple in Jerusalem (*2 Kings 18:4, 2 Chron. 31:1*). But had this reform offended the Lord, who was the only hope His people had left? Would He, and could He, save them? It was up to God to answer this question!

Have you ever been in a "similar" situation, where, from a human standpoint, all seemed lost? What's your only recourse?

Shaken but Not Forsaken *(Isa. 36:21–37:20)*.

How did the clever oratory of the *rabshakeh* affect Hezekiah and his officials? *2 Kings 18:37–19:4, Isa. 36:21–37:4.*

Shaken to the core and mourning in distress, Hezekiah turned to God, humbly seeking the intercession of Isaiah, the very prophet whose counsel his father had ignored.

How did God encourage Hezekiah? *Isa. 37:5-7.*

The message was brief, but it was enough! God was on the side of His people! Isaiah predicted that Sennacherib would hear a rumor that would distract him from his attack on Judah. This was immediately fulfilled.

Temporarily frustrated, but by no means giving up for long, Sennacherib sent Hezekiah a threatening message: “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. . . . Have the gods of the nations delivered them . . .?” *(Isa. 37:10, 12, NRSV; see also 2 Chron. 32:17).*

This time Hezekiah went straight to the temple and spread the message out before the Lord of hosts, “enthroned above the cherubim” *(Isa. 37:14-16, NRSV).*

How did Hezekiah’s prayer identify what was at stake in Jerusalem’s crisis? *Isa. 37:15-20.*

Sennacherib had pointedly attacked Hezekiah’s strongest defense: faith in his God. Rather than buckling under, Hezekiah appealed to God to demonstrate who He is, “so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord” *(Isa. 37:20).*

Read prayerfully Hezekiah’s prayer *(Isa. 37:15-20)*. What aspects of God does he focus on? What principle do we see in this prayer that can give us encouragement and strength to stay faithful in our own personal crises?

The Rest of the Story (*Isa. 37:21-38*).

According to Sennacherib, as reported in his annals, he took forty-six fortified towns, besieged Jerusalem, and made Hezekiah the Jew, “a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage.” —James B. Pritchard, editor, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 288. But in spite of his penchant for propaganda as an extension of his monumental ego, neither in text nor in pictures does he claim to have taken Jerusalem. From a human point of view, this omission is amazing, given the inexorable power of Sennacherib and the fact that Hezekiah led a revolt against him. Rebels against Assyria had short life expectancies and gruesome deaths.

Scholars admit that even if we did not have the biblical record, we would be compelled to admit that a miracle must have taken place. The fact that Sennacherib lined the walls of his “Palace Without a Rival” with reliefs (carved pictures) vividly depicting his successful siege of Lachish appears to be due to his need for a face-saving device. But for the grace of God, these pictures would have shown Jerusalem instead! Sennacherib did not tell the rest of the story, but the Bible does.

What is the rest of the story? *Isa. 37:21-37*.

In response to Hezekiah’s prayer of total faith, God sent him a message of total assurance for Judah that boils over with molten fury against the proud Assyrian king who had dared slap the divine King of kings in the face (*Isa. 37:23*). Then God promptly fulfilled His promise to defend Jerusalem (*2 Kings 19:35-37*; *2 Chron. 32:21, 22*; *Isa. 37:36-38*).

A big crisis calls for a big miracle, and big it was! The body count was high: 185,000. So Sennacherib had no choice but to go home, where he met his own death (*compare Isaiah’s prediction in 37:7 to vs. 38*).

If Sennacherib had conquered Jerusalem, he would have deported the population in such a way that Judah would have lost its identity, as northern Israel did. From one perspective, then, there would have been no Jewish people to whom the Messiah could be born. Their story would have ended right there. But God kept hope alive.

What do you say to someone who, not yet believing in the Bible, or the God of the Bible, asks this question: Was it fair that these Assyrian soldiers, who just happened to be born where they were, should die en masse like this? How do you, personally, understand the Lord’s actions here?

In Sickness and in Wealth (*Isaiah 38, 39*).

The events of Isaiah 38 and 39 (*2 Kings 20*) took place very close to the time God delivered Hezekiah from Sennacherib, even though the deliverance, as depicted in Isaiah 37 (*see also 2 Kings 19*) had not yet occurred. Indeed, Isaiah 38:5, 6 and 2 Kings 20:6 show that they still faced the Assyrian threat.

“Satan was determined to bring about both the death of Hezekiah and the fall of Jerusalem, reasoning no doubt that if Hezekiah were out of the way, his efforts at reform would cease and the fall of Jerusalem could be the more readily accomplished.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 240.

What does the above quote tell us about how important good leadership is for God’s people?

What sign does the Lord give Hezekiah to confirm his faith? *2 Kings 20:8-10, Isa. 38:6-8*.

By rejecting signs offered by God (*Isaiah 7*), Ahaz had started the course of events that led to trouble with Assyria. But now Hezekiah had asked for a sign (*2 Kings 20:8*), so God strengthened him to meet the crisis his father had brought upon Judah. Indeed, reversing the shadow on the sundial of Ahaz was possible only through a miracle.

The Babylonians studied movements of heavenly bodies and recorded them accurately. Thus, they would have noticed the sun’s strange behavior and wondered what it meant. The fact that King Merodach-baladan sent envoys at this time is no accident. The Babylonians had learned of the connection between Hezekiah’s recovery and the miraculous sign.

Now we know why God chose this particular sign. Just as He later used the star of Bethlehem to bring wise men from the East, he used a solar shift to bring messengers from Babylon. This was a unique opportunity for them to learn about the true God. Merodach-baladan spent his entire career trying to win lasting independence from Assyria. He needed powerful allies, which explains his motivation for contacting Hezekiah. If the sun itself moved at Hezekiah’s request, what could he do to Assyria?

How did Hezekiah lose an incredible opportunity to glorify God and point the Babylonians to Him? What was the result? *Isaiah 39*. Hezekiah, who should have been witnessing to them about the Lord, pointed, instead, to his own “glory.” What is the lesson for us?

Further Study: “Only by the direct interposition of God could the shadow on the sundial be made to turn back ten degrees; and this was to be the sign to Hezekiah that the Lord had heard his prayer. Accordingly, ‘the prophet cried unto the Lord: and He brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz.’ Verses 8-11.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 342.

“The visit of these messengers from the ruler of a faraway land gave Hezekiah an opportunity to extol the living God. How easy it would have been for him to tell them of God, the upholder of all created things, through whose favor his own life had been spared when all other hope had fled! . . .

“But pride and vanity took possession of Hezekiah’s heart, and in self-exaltation he laid open to covetous eyes the treasures with which God had enriched His people. The king ‘showed them the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armor, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah showed them not.’ Isaiah 39:2. Not to glorify God did he do this, but to exalt himself in the eyes of the foreign princes.”—Pages 344, 345.

Discussion Questions:

❶ **How is Satan like the Assyrian *rabshakeh*? Does he tell the truth when he says that you have sinned (*Zech. 3:1*)? How does God respond? See *Zech. 3:2-5*. What is our only hope against these accusations? *Rom. 8:1*.**

❷ **Does Satan stop his accusations when you are forgiven? See *Rev. 12:10*. After you are forgiven, when Satan goes on saying that you belong to him because of your sin, what is the nature of his accusation? See *Deut. 19:16-21* (law of a lying, malicious witness).**

Summary: In response to the cry of a faithful king, God saved His people and showed who He is: the omnipotent King of Israel who controls the destiny of earth; not only does He destroy those who attempt to destroy His people, He also provides opportunities for others to become His people, no matter how “Babylonian.”

God-Given, Part 1

DIOSDADO FERNANDEZ

I hated my name, which means God-given, until God gave me my life back.

I live in Cuba, and although my mother claimed to be a Christian, I grew up not believing in God. Then in 1996 I learned that I had rectal cancer. The doctors operated; then they began radiation treatments. But the treatments did more harm than good, and I was in incredible pain. Doctors gave me morphine for the pain, but I became afraid to even eat. I lost weight, and paralysis was slowly setting in. The doctors gave me little hope that I would survive.

While I was still in the hospital, a fire in the hospital set off a severe asthma attack. I coughed so hard that I tore out my stitches and fell to the floor. When nurses rescued me, I could not breathe.

X-rays showed that the fire had damaged my lungs, but worse, I also had lung cancer from heavy smoking over the years. Doctors operated to repair my torn stitches, but they stopped midway through surgery, thinking I was dead.

I awoke to see a beautiful city and a bright, shining being. I felt peaceful and well, and I began to talk to the beautiful being. Doctors heard me and stared in disbelief, thinking I had died. They quickly completed the surgery and took me to recovery.

Just hours after surgery I felt better than I had felt in months—years, even. I got out of bed and walked, where just a day before I was paralyzed and could not walk. It was as if superhuman strength poured through my body. A hospital worker asked my son, a doctor, if I was a believer, and he told the man that my only loves in life were women, tobacco, and alcohol. Then the worker told my son I had been quoting Scripture to them, though I had never read the Bible. And when breakfast came I ate hungrily for the first time in months.

Clearly God was working wonders, miracles in my life, though I did not yet know Him.

[Continued next week]

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