

“Deliverance from an Overwhelming Enemy”

Isaiah 36-37

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

¹In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. ²And the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. ³And there came out to him Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder.

⁴And the Rabshakeh said to them, “Say to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this trust of yours? ⁵Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? ⁶Behold, you are trusting in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him. ⁷But 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 shall worship before this altar”? ⁸Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. ⁹How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰Moreover, is it without the LORD that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, “Go up against this land and destroy it.””

¹¹Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it. Do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall.” ¹²But the Rabshakeh said, “Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and drink their own urine?”

¹³Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah: “Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! ¹⁴Thus says the king: ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver

you. ¹⁵Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD by saying, “The LORD will surely deliver us. This city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.” ¹⁶Do not listen to Hezekiah. For thus says the king of Assyria: Make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, ¹⁷until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. ¹⁸Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, “The LORD will deliver us.” Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? ¹⁹Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? ²⁰Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?”

²¹But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, “Do not answer him.” ²²Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh.

Chapter 37

¹As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the LORD. ²And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz. ³They said to him, “Thus says Hezekiah, ‘This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. ⁴It may be that the LORD your God will hear the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the LORD your God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left.’”

⁵When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, ⁶Isaiah said to them, “Say to your master, ‘Thus says the LORD: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the young men of the king of Assyria have reviled me. ⁷Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a

rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.’”

⁸The Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah, for he had heard that the king had left Lachish. ⁹Now the king heard concerning Tirhakah king of Cush, “He has set out to fight against you.” And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, ¹⁰“Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah king of Judah: ‘Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. ¹¹Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? ¹²Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? ¹³Where 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?’”

Hezekiah's Prayer for Deliverance

¹⁴Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD. ¹⁵And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: ¹⁶“O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. ¹⁸Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, ¹⁹and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. ²⁰So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD.”

Sennacherib's Fall

²¹Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, ²²this is the word that the LORD has spoken concerning him:

“She despises you, she scorns you—
the virgin daughter of Zion;
she wags her head behind you—
the daughter of Jerusalem.

²³ “Whom have you mocked and reviled?
Against whom have you raised your voice
and lifted your eyes to the heights?
Against the Holy One of Israel!

²⁴ By your servants you have mocked the Lord,
and you have said, With my many chariots
I have gone up the heights of the mountains,
to the far recesses of Lebanon,
to cut down its tallest cedars,
its choicest cypresses,
to come to its remotest height,
its most fruitful forest.

²⁵ I dug wells
and drank waters,
to dry up with the sole of my foot
all the streams of Egypt.

²⁶ “Have you not heard
that I determined it long ago?
I planned from days of old
what now I bring to pass,
that you should make fortified cities
crash into heaps of ruins,

²⁷ while their inhabitants, shorn of strength,
are dismayed and confounded,
and have become like plants of the field
and like tender grass,
like grass on the housetops,
blighted before it is grown.

²⁸ “I know your sitting down
and your going out and coming in,
and your raging against me.

²⁹ Because you have raged against me
and your complacency has come to my ears,

I will put my hook in your nose
 and my bit in your mouth,
 and I will turn you back on the way
 by which you came.’

³⁰ “And this shall be the sign for you: this year you shall eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that. Then in the third year sow and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. ³¹ And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward. ³² For out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

³³ “Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. ³⁴ By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. ³⁵ For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”

³⁶ And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. ³⁷ Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. ³⁸ And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.

- Isaiah 36-37, ESV

Introduction: A Problem too Big for Us

From February 23rd until March 6th of 1836, a small Spanish mission in Texas was surrounded by 2,000 Mexican soldiers. Inside, somewhere between 185 and 260 men defended The Alamo, including Davy Crocket and Jim Bowie. By the end of the final assault on March 6th, only two men fighting for Texas had survived.

You probably already knew something about The Alamo, but here’s something you might not have known: The men in the Alamo had sent to the United States for reinforcements on Feb. 23rd, when Mexican troops first approached

San Antonio. But because the United States had a treaty with Mexico and didn't want an open war, they sent only 100 men, woefully inadequate to fight off the 2,000 Mexican soldiers.

When was the last time you faced a problem or an enemy that was just too big for you to handle? My guess is it was probably more recent than you realize. Every day, we face opposition from the world, which hates God and lies to us constantly, from the devil and his horde of tempters and harassers, and from our own raging flesh. These enemies are all too strong for us to defeat on our own, and they create problems too big for us to solve. Sadly, most of the time, we're unaware of the ways we're under attack. Thankfully, God is continually guarding us, and Jesus is continually praying for us.

We need to remember today's passage when we're struggling, because two things are very clear:

1. **God's people were facing an enemy who was much too strong for them, and they had no hope of victory in and of themselves.**
2. **The enemy they faced was absolutely no match for the Lord.**

Poisonous Propaganda

The powerful Assyrians who came against God's people in Jerusalem came speaking poisonous propaganda. The Rabshakeh who speaks in this passage is a master of political rhetoric. He knows very well how to intimidate people and get them to surrender before a battle is even fought. When Satan comes against you or when the world comes against your Christian faith, their goal is very simple: Get you to quit, to surrender, to give into the temptation and to give up the fight.

The political rhetoric of the Rabshakeh is delivered in two messages: The first is a speech that is longer and delivered in chapter 36:4-20. The second speech is much shorter and is delivered in chapter 37:10-13.

- **Who do you trust?**

The Rabshakeh's speech in chapter 36 is brilliant because it's delivered loudly in Hebrew within the hearing of the men on the wall. He is trying to discourage these men, get them to give up and come out and surrender. He

doesn't need King Hezekiah to agree to surrender if the men on the wall abandon their post and surrender.

The heart of this speech is a compelling question: Who are you trusting?

“On what do you rest this trust of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me?” – 36:4-5, ESV

He mocks them for trusting in Egypt, which is like leaning on a broken reed. He's right about that.

He also tries to use their faith in the LORD against them – criticizing Hezekiah for removing the pagan-style High Places that had been dedicated to the LORD and requiring everyone to worship in Jerusalem at the Temple. Of course, Hezekiah was correct to do this, and this pleased the LORD, but the Rabshakeh doesn't know his theology very well, and he might also be appealing to the grass-roots sentimentality of the people, who had probably grown attached to the High Places.

He even claims to have the Lord's blessing on their endeavor, which is true to a point, of course. But not quite like he thinks.

Then, he uses carrot-and-stick fear tactics by shouting about how the men on the wall would be condemned to eat their own dung and drink their own urine, which definitely happened during long sieges, while at the same time offering them land and a comfortable life if they surrender.

The Rabshakeh is really very Satanic in his cleverness here. Here's what we can learn:

1. Political speech designed to make God's people afraid and to act out of fear is a snare of the devil designed to entrap and enslave.
2. The false dichotomy presented is that God's people either have to trust in Egypt, which is foolishness, or trust in the Assyrians by surrendering to them. These are the two great earthly powers, and so it certainly seems like God's people have to choose one or the other – but faithfulness to God and reliance on His promises and protection is the right choice, always!
3. Bad theology corrupts God's word and leads God's people astray.

4. Fear of worldly punishments and hope of worldly rewards are often used to motivate God's people to sin by distrusting God.

The wise response of Hezekiah's officials was to remain silent and not answer. They followed orders and were faithful.

- **Who will deliver you?**

The second message from the Rabshakeh comes after King Sennacherib has just taken Lachish.

[By the way, as a side note, this campaign of King Sennacherib is very well attested to from ancient historians and from archaeology evidence. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus wrote about this campaign and how King Sennacherib took Lachish but was defeated before he took Jerusalem. In Herodotus' account, it is a plague of mice that attack and destroy the Assyrian army. Archaeologists uncovered Assyrian monuments describing King Sennacherib's campaign against Judah, including the conquest of Lachish, and that monument says that King Sennacherib had King Hezekiah shut up in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage – BUT never says that he succeeded in conquering him.]

The letter from the Rabshakeh is short and strong because he has heard a rumor that the king of the Cushites is preparing to march out against him. This letter asks "Who will deliver you?"

Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them – Isaiah 37:11-12, ESV

These two key questions from the Rabshakeh have political purpose, but they end up backfiring, because they are really great questions, questions we should be asking all the time- Who am I trusting? Who is going to deliver me?

King Hezekiah and the leadership in Jerusalem ultimately trusted that if the LORD wanted to deliver them, He alone could.

Prophetic Prediction

The first reaction of Isaiah to the long speech of the Rabshakeh was a simple prophetic prediction. While all the officials and the King had torn their clothes

in anguish and Hezekiah had declared it a day of distress, rebuke, and anguish, Isaiah was not anguished. He didn't tear his clothes. He simply told Hezekiah's servants, "Say to your master, 'Thus says the LORD: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard.'" He tells Hezekiah that King Sennacherib is going to go home and be killed in his own land. God had already given His word through Isaiah that Jerusalem would not be taken into the hands of the Assyrians.

When God has spoken, we do not need to be afraid of what people say.

Powerful Petition

Hezekiah's response to the second message, the letter, was to take it to the LORD and spread it out before Him. Hezekiah's prayer before the LORD in 37:15-20 is a model prayer for us. He praises God first and contrasts God with the idols of the world before asking for deliverance "*that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD.*"

When we pray, we need to ground our prayers in the character of God and aim our prayers at the glory of God among the nations. We pray best when we pray on the basis of who God is and for the glory and honor of His name in the world.

Prophetic Proclamation

The LORD's response to Hezekiah's powerful prayer is a beautiful prophetic proclamation. It's a poetic message in a section of historical prose. God promises His people that they will be delivered and that they will gradually spread out and re-fill the land of Judah which has been devastated by the Assyrians.

Painful Punishment

And then, God acts swiftly and decisively to deliver His people by striking down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in a single night. Then, King Sennacherib turns away and goes home where his sons strike him down while he's worshipping his false god.

This is well known and historically true that the Assyrian Empire conquered the entire Middle East and Egypt but could not ever conquer Judah. They

remained defended by the LORD. They survived for another 100 years until the Babylonians arose.

We do not ever need to be afraid of what the world threatens, nor should we ever be led astray into trusting what the world says we should trust. The LORD must be our only trust, and He will be our deliverer. His deliverance from the Assyrians proves it, but an even greater deliverance proves it even better.

700 years after Sennacherib failed to take Jerusalem, something else even more remarkable took place outside the city walls. There, the Son of God accomplished an even greater deliverance for God's people from an even greater enemy – not the Roman legion but the legions of hell itself and the consequences of sin, death, and eternal condemnation. Jesus hung outside the city walls, and there He defeated all that stood against us, when He died and then rose again three days later.

So, today, ask yourself – ***Who are you trusting? Who will deliver you?***