

ISAIAH

Chapter 36

Sennacherib Invades Judah

36 In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. **2** And 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. **3** And there came out to him Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder. **4** And 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? **5** Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? **6** Behold, 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. **7** But 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'? **8** Come 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. **9** How 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? **10** Moreover, 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.'"**11** Then 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." **12** But 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?" **13** Then 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! **14** Thus says the king: 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. **15** Do 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.'" **16** Do 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, **17** until 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. **18** Beware 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? **19** Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? **20** Who 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?" **21** But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, "Do not answer him." **22** Then 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.

36:1–39:8 Much of chs. 36–39 is paralleled, sometimes verbatim, in 2Ki 18:13–20:19. The compiler of 2 Kings may have used Isa 36–39 as one of his sources, or both may have drawn on a common source. Chs. 36–37 describe the fulfillment of many predictions about Assyria's collapse, while chs. 38–39 point toward the Babylonian context of chs. 40–66. (CSB)

THESE next four chapters are easy and clear, therefore we need not expend much labor on them. One point we need there, and that is faith, which we must have to recover from such dangers, as we see both the king and a few others lifted up by the promises of the prophet. This faith is set before us as an example, as we read in Heb. 11:4 ff. We can augment this passage of the apostle by this example, so that we may consider faith and its outcome, as well as its works and dangers, as we see in these four chapters again how the attack on faith and its near destruction take shape. Let this be our example, so that the more we are assailed and endangered, so much the more we may prosper by faith. "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Strength is perfected in weakness. Paul is strong in weakness. When all our strength fails, let us stand by faith alone. "As dying, and behold we live" (2 Cor. 6:9). I am a reproach to all; I am not. I am poor; I am not. This faith is clearly contrary to reason and human understanding. It is for you to enlarge this example rhetorically. First, look at the warring king, who comes with a whole army and fights after he has conquered almost the whole world. Secondly, look at his victory. He has subjected everybody and has also carried the ten tribes of Israel away to Media. And here this King Hezekiah, who is in this one city like a cornered mouse, wants to offer resistance. How absurd this seems to a reason that is trying to make things clear. "What are you going to do, you king of one city, with one to whom so many kings and peoples and even the ten tribes could offer no resistance?" Then Satan joins in with: "Do you think that you alone are upright and holy? Don't you think there were many saints and upright people among the ten tribes? And yet they were conquered. Do you put faith in the fact that you are a descendant of Abraham? Those ten tribes were also the descendants of Abraham." So the faith of King Hezekiah will have wavered; that is certain. So Satan mocks our faith. He sets the victory of the adversary before us. Then he reminds us of the destruction of our brothers. We do not think we are beyond this danger. (Luther)

36:1 *fourteenth year of ... Hezekiah's reign.* 701 B.C., the 14th year of his sole reign. Hezekiah ruled as sole king from 715 to 686 but was a co-regent from c. 729. (CSB)

Sennacherib. Reigned over Assyria from 705 to 681. (CSB)

That is, the spoiler coming out of the woods, a lurking thief, a savage name that frightens by its own sound. (Luther)

all the fortified cities. In his annals Sennacherib lists 46 such cities. (CSB)

Judah's line of defense along the hill country, which guarded access to Jerusalem. (TLSB)

This is a thunderbolt and battering ram against faith. If the Lord wished to deliver us, why did He not save those cities? From their destruction and capture we have our danger. (Luther)

36:2 *sent the Rabshakeh.* This a title for the king's official cupbearer, not a personal name. In this case, the cup bearer also served in a military capacity. (TLSB)

Cupbearer was the officer of royal household in charge of wines and drinking vessels and also known as the butler. (Concordia Bible Dictionary)

large army. 185,000 men. Cf 37:36. (TLSB)

He is close by in the area but not yet at the wall. Read about it in the books of Kings and Chronicles (2 Kings 18:17). It speaks more clearly about the king of Ethiopia, who was deprived of victory elsewhere. Hither is sent. (Luther)

Lachish. An important city about 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem that guarded the main approach to Judah's capital from that quarter (see Jer 34:7). (CSB)

conduit of the upper pool. Running east of the city in the Kidron Valley. (TLSB)

Over 30 years earlier he had met with Ahaz on the very spot when the Assyrian commander now stopped to parley with Hezekiah's delegation (See Is 7:3) Isaiah noted this spot of its ironic significance. King Ahaz had depended upon Assyria to defend Jerusalem against the combined forces of Israel and Aram. Ahaz chose not to trust in the Lord but to seek help from Assyria. Unfortunately, that decision eventually led to this invasion. During the 30 years since, Assyria had grown powerful and aggressive. She may have been an ally 30 years earlier, but now she was a powerful threat. Ahaz had opened the door for Assyria and actually set the table of Sennacherib's invasion. (PBC)

36:3 *was over the household*. In charge of the palace. (CSB)

An official position also associated elsewhere with "secretary" (see 1Ki 4:3). See also note on 2Sa 8:16. (CSB)

36:4 *he Rabshakeh*, that is, the master of provisions. *And the Rabshakeh said to them*. There follow the blasphemies and attacks of Satan by means of which he assails faith. Let those who were captives consider this blasphemy, how Satan assails a struggling faith by means of boastful examples in order to snatch the Word of the Lord out of the heart. They are deceitful and extremely dreadful schemes, more dreadful than all wars, and appalling blasphemies. (Luther)

When Hezekiah sent Eliakim and Shebna, Sennacherib interpreted this as a sign of rebellion, a refusal to surrender. The Rabshakeh is awestruck at such a move. (TLSB)

The speech of the Assyrian field commander is a masterpiece of military and political rhetoric. He intended to tell Hezekiah and Jerusalem how hopeless their situation was. He listed five arguments to demonstrate that Hezekiah had absolutely no basis for any confidence in being able to survive the coming siege. (PBC)

- a. First, he said that the military strategy of Hezekiah was only empty words. Perhaps he knew of Hezekiah's preparation or at least expected that Hezekiah had fortified the city in anticipation of the Assyrian invasion and siege. From the Assyrian commander's perspective, whatever had been done to strengthen Jerusalem was not enough. In the face of Assyrian might, it was only empty words. (PBC)
- b. Second, any alliance with any other power would be useless. Remember that some in Jerusalem sought an alliance with Egypt. Isaiah had warned of such an alliance. (PBC)
- c. Third, from Assyria's perspective, the Lord God of Hezekiah could not help them. The field commander knew that Hezekiah had completed a religious reformation earlier in his reign. He had purified the temple, celebrated the Passover, and destroyed the false worship of the Lord on the high places and altars throughout the land. But as general commander of military operation, he did not understand the worship of the Lord. He thought everyone worshiped like he did. In his world, everyone worshiped gods and depended upon these gods to protect and defend them. The more gods one had, the better. (PBC)
- d. Fourth, the Jewish military forces were outnumbered. By Assyrian military standards, they were also poorly equipped. The commander taunted them with a bargain. He would give them two thousand horses if they could find enough riders, but even then they could not defeat even one officer in the Assyrian army. He was right. The preparations of Hezekiah had not brought one victory. Sennacherib had conquered all the Jewish fortified cities. (PBC)

- e. Finally the field commander claimed that Sennacherib came on this campaign because the Lord had sent him. Years earlier, the Assyrians had been sent by God to destroy the Northern Kingdom. The Lord had foretold the coming of the Assyrian forces into Judah as well. It would seem strange that the Assyrian commander would know of Isaiah's prophecies or any of the other prophecies. Perhaps he simply concluded that the Lord had sent the Assyrians and had abandoned Judah as the gods of the other defeated nations had deserted their followers. A common ought of all religions is that when bad things happen, a god must be angry with his people. (PBC)

The field commander's oration was blunt, bold, and arrogant. But it had a ring of truth. (PBC)

36:4, 13 *great king*. As if he were God. Here he sets the great king against the little king. The devil is good at this. I am a very small candle; the whole world is nothing but a wind. This is the conclusion Satan and reason come to on the basis of such comparisons. (Luther)

what do you trust – This is an inductive argument by which he meets all arguments that could be brought up in reply: “(1) In you there is neither counsel nor power. (2) The trust you put in the king of Egypt amounts to nothing; it is vain. (3) You trust in your God. But He cannot help you and has no desire to do so.” Thus these words of the Rabshakeh are the devil's own words, whereby he attacks not the walls but the faith and heart of the king himself. The devil attacks you where you are most vulnerable. So they saw the king's faith wavering, and the devil assaults this also. “Hold on, I will help you!” (Luther)

36:5 *rebelled*. By refusing to pay the expected tribute (see 2Ki 17:4; 18:7). (CSB)

36:6 *Egypt*. Hezekiah had been under pressure to make an alliance with Egypt since 715 B.C. or earlier. (CSB)

Ironically, the Israelites would not listen to their own prophet Isaiah, so the enemy must remind them of the futility in trusting in Egypt. (TLSB)

broken reed of a staff. Egypt is compared to a reed again in Eze 29:6–7. (CSB)

Reason might easily do this and rely on physical resources, but faith will not. Thus by a clever device, Satan, that scoundrel, here turns a most beautiful statement of the Holy Spirit against the struggling Hezekiah. It is true. We must not rely on men, as this statement shows. Every human idea is a reedy staff. This is an outstanding maxim to be written over all human reliance, because it will apply to all in line with this comparison. It has been most useful to me to this very day. The comparison is very apt. Outwardly a reed looks whole and solid, but inside it is hollow and weak. It pierces like a spear, but it is nothing, nothing at all. Thus human power is nothing but an empty show. Let us therefore not be deceived by its outward appearance. For if we should lean on it, our hand would be pierced, that is, we would be put to shame in our faith. We are disappointed in the end. The end of this is confusion and destruction. This is what it means to pierce the hand. This is the godless comparison Satan employs against faith. Now follows the third attack. (Luther)

36:7 *if you say to me* – Here Satan himself attacks the supreme and unique fortification, namely, to trust in the Lord, something that Isaiah the prophet has long been building up with the utmost effort. The king of Assyria is saying, “You rely on your Lord, but He cannot help you.” He grants that He is their God, but he maintains that He is wrathful and does not want to help. “Imagine that your God can help (as He cannot), yet He does not want to, because you, O king, have an angry God, whose statues you have demolished. He would be on our side, not on yours.” These are indeed poisonous and loathsome arrows. (Luther)

high places and altars. Hezekiah had destroyed these popular shrines often dedicated to Baal worship. (CSB)

These are the techniques of slander. He turns this most godly work of the king into the most criminal rage against King Hezekiah, as if to say: “You have destroyed these altars, where God was worshiped by the fathers. Oh, what you have done?” (Luther)

In the eyes of polytheistic Assyria, destroying the “high places” was a ridiculous religious reform. However, Hezekiah was praised and supported by all Israel for this (cf 2Ch 31:1–21). (TLSB)

this altar. In Solomon’s temple. (CSB)

36:8 *two thousand horses.* A sizable number for any army. Horses and chariots were highly prized. (CSB)

“Experience teaches. Come on out and try it. I will give you two thousand, against which you will not stand with twenty.” This is a depreciation when we ironically belittle something that is already feeble. “I am sure they have scarcely ten horsemen in the city. What are they going to do?” (Luther)

riders. Probably charioteers, since cavalry was not employed by these nations this early (see v. 9). (CSB)

36:9 *you trust in Egypt* – “I go on the assumption that the king of Egypt is stronger than you.” This ridicule is full of ungodliness. (Luther)

36:10 Sennacherib argues that God has sent him to fulfill the warnings of prophets like Isaiah. As in v 6, he hits a raw nerve, repeating Isaiah’s message of 8:7–8; 10:5–6, where Isaiah proclaimed that the Lord would use Assyria against the people of Israel. (TLSB)

The LORD SAID TO ME. The Lord had used Assyria to punish Israel (see 10:5–6), but now it was Assyria’s turn to be judged. Pharaoh Neco claimed God’s approval on his mission according to 2Ch 35:21. (CSB)

That is to say: “I have a propitious God, you have an angry one.” So Christ was assailed on the cross. “Let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him” (Matt. 27:43). This is what Satan wants. He moves against our faith, as if to say: “God can help you (something the flesh easily believes), but He does not want to.” In this way Satan undermines the spirit of one who suffers wrong, as he did also to Christ on the cross. Above all, Satan bears down on the third confidence, namely trusting in the Lord’s mercy. For he says: “Hezekiah is mortal, he is a sinner, he has destroyed the worship of God.” Then he says: “I do not come on my own, but I have been ordered by God.” He has made of Hezekiah not a petty sinner, murderer, or adulterer but an ungodly idolater who has transgressed the first three commandments and whom God does not favor. This was the feeling in Hezekiah’s conscience as a result of the slanders of Satan, who makes us believe that all our best works are the worst. The devil makes us feel very guilty. Secondly, he frightens the king by analogy. “Yours is the guilt because you are ungodly. I am holy, and I come by God’s order. Yours are the scourges because you have deserved them by your sins.” By these fiery darts (Eph. 6:16), of which Peter speaks (1 Peter 4:12), Satan attacks the conscience and confidence, and he must be resisted by a very strong faith. Here the work and toil must not waver. We must say: “Whether I have committed sin or not, I shall not be condemned.” Satan must not be listened to, otherwise he will put us to shame. We must not give in to him by agreeing with him, but let us say: “I do not concede this point. Even if I were in the wrong, I would not give in to you.” This is what we must do when we are attacked because of the Gospel. Let us not listen to his slanders but say simply, “I believe most certainly

that this is true.” We must flee for refuge to the Lord’s Prayer, lest Satan tempt us beyond our strength. Here, then, you see with what destructive weapons Satan attacks faith. Therefore we must cling to the Word alone. (Luther)

36:11 *Aramaic*. The diplomatic language of that day. (CSB)

Don’t speak... in the language of Judah. The officials feared that the commander’s speech might damage the people’s morale. (CSB)

Here is an example of the trial of one who is near despair. He seeks some little support and counsel (as human reason is wont to do) so that the matter might be held in check. So it is in our time. When people say that a peaceful Word should be preached, the result is that the devil becomes all the more insulting, as we see here. These people have asked for quiet, and Satan shouts all the more. Learn this: One must not debate with Satan. Keep this well in mind. The more we wrestle with him in this debate, the more we despair. Do not argue with Satan. Note this, for example: The more someone thinks about the evil lust that should be laid aside, the more he falls into those thoughts, so that one follows closely upon the other and finally he will be in a frenzy. The same happens in the case of the anger that is directed against someone and that should be laid aside. And so it goes in all dangers. When we strive for the remedies, we play into Satan’s hands, so that he argues with us all the more and you finally fall into despair, hang yourself, and fall down headlong. So it is always in great trials. Other thoughts keep occurring to a person, as happens in the case of the sick and the troubled. Let go of those thoughts. Consider an example from *The Lives of the Fathers*. One of them had many thoughts and complained to a brother about the evil thoughts. The brother said, “You have sometimes seen the birds in the air flying over your head. If you do not let them fly about overhead, they have not built nests on your head. So let those thoughts fly away and do not keep them in your head. Here is another picture. When you pass an entrance where a dog is sleeping, quickly pass by the sleeping dog, or if he is barking, do not irritate him, for the more you oppose him, the more frenzied he becomes. You must do likewise with the ambushes and deceptions of the devil. Let them pass by. In short, I give you this advice (for I speak as one who knows): You must completely despise such thoughts and arguments of Satan. For Satan is in the habit of disturbing the tenderest consciences in this way, as happened to a very virtuous girl when I was young. While the host was being elevated in the Mass, she thought, “What a great rascal is elevated here,” and with this thought she fell to the ground and almost died. When she finally got up, she told what had happened. If such thoughts arise, let them go quickly. We must become like one of the least of the children (Matt. 18:3). Do not let the devil come near you. For when his words are listened to here, the hearers soon despair and already ask for support. But by this request the speaker gave Satan an opening to vent his rage, so that he spoke all the more and by his extremely boastful words led the people to despair. (Luther)

36:12 *eat ... filth ... drink ... urine*. A crude way of describing the horrors of famine if Jerusalem was to be besieged (cf. 2Ki 6:25). Contrast v. 16. (CSB)

With mocking and most poisonous words he confounds the weak. His endeavor is altogether contrary to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reforms, terrifies, and crushes the exalted and the proud and lifts up and nurtures the lowly. The devil, on the contrary, puffs up the proud and causes them to be haughty, but he confounds and destroys the weak and the lowly. Learn to distinguish one spirit from another. Be sure to learn this. In all dangers stop arguing with Satan altogether. Do not listen to him and think about him. If you do want to think, think about the opposite. If he argues about death, then think about life. (Luther)

36:13 *loud voice*. Rather than speaking quietly in Aram, he shouts in Hbr to entice the people of Jerusalem. (TLSB)

After endless terrors he offers promises by way of contrast. That is what I call real temptations. These are immeasurable promises. Not only does he promise them land, but beyond that he promises to give them a far more fertile land. Who can stand firm under these conditions? Note that Satan is the supreme orator, who can turn the worst cause into the best one, and the purest faith into treachery and disobedience. So he came to a nun who was touching branches of a tree and a leaf and drove her to despair, accusing her of being disobedient. He can set all of heaven and earth afire from one little spark and make an enormous sin out of a little one. He never stops attacking us. Do not listen to him. (Luther)

The entire speech attempted to undermine the resolve of the citizens of Jerusalem by calling their faith into question. The speech divides into three parts. (PBC)

- a. First, from the Assyrian commander's perspective, hope in the Lord was only a delusion used by the Jewish king to keep his people on the walls and ready to defend their city. He thought that Hezekiah was deceiving his people. It was religious fanaticism at best, according to the Assyrian mind. Defeat would bring death and slavery. (PBC)
- b. In second part, the field commander proposed a realistic offer of peace, actually, it was an offer of surrender. If the citizens of Jerusalem would surrender and come out, they would eat from their own vines and fig trees. This, however, would only last until they were deported. But, then he promised that the new land would be like Judah, "a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards."
- c. The third part of the speech returned to Hezekiah's faith in the Lord. The field commander reminded the people on the wall that no god had previously delivered anyone from Assyrian military power. (PBC)

36:16 *Make your peace with me.* The Rabshakeh promises riches and luxury if only the people would honor Sennacherib as king. (CSB)

own vine...fig tree. Symbols of security and prosperity in the best of times (see 1Ki 4:25; Mic 4:4). (CSB)

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cistern – During a siege, water sources would have been crowded and a point of contention. (TLSB)

36:17 *come and take you.* The Assyrians deported rebellious peoples to reduce their will to revolt (see 2Ki 15:29; 17:6). (CSB)

Threat of deportation is veiled with a promise of a better land. (TLSB)

grain and new wine. Two of the staples of Israel (cf. Dt 28:51; Hag 1:11). (CSB)

36:18–20 The commander's words echo the boasts of the proud Assyrians in 10:8–11. See note on 2Ki 18:33–35. (CSB)

36:18 *Lord will deliver us* – Satan cannot forget these words. He said earlier, “The Lord does not want to help you, because you are sinners.” Now he draws a different conclusion. “Granted: He may be merciful to you; He wants to save you. But He cannot.” That is indeed an attack! He proves it by citing an example. (Luther)

36:19 Sargon of Assyria occupied the Syrian city of Hamath in 720 BC. Tiglath-pileser III did the same to Arpad in 740 BC. The Rabshakeh uses this common knowledge to demonstrate the futility in trusting in a god for deliverance from the Assyrian war machine. (TLSB)

Hamath and Arpad. That is to say: “So many and such great gods were not able to protect their own people from me. How do you expect to be saved by one small god?” Thus you see Satan’s oratory pictured in all its unlimited colors and shapes. The king’s great army did not have as much force as that internal conflict of the consciences struck by Satan’s words. That is: Fighting without, and fears and terrors within (cf. 2 Cor. 7:5). (Luther)

Sepharvaim. Probably located in northern Aram (Syria) not far from Hamath. Residents of Sepharvaim were deported to Samaria, though they still worshiped the gods Adrammelech and Anammelech. See 2Ki 17:24, 31. (CSB)

Samaria. The Assyrians assumed that each people had its own gods and so did not associate the God of Judah with that of Samaria. (CSB)

Capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which fell in 722 BC. (TLSB)

36:21 *they were silent.* The Assyrians had hoped that the masterful psychology of vv. 4–20 would produce panic. (CSB)

The people show solidarity with their king. (TLSB)

You may earnestly observe this advice of the king, for it is thoroughly dependable. This is true, because the more we hear him arguing, the more he reviles us. The more we answer him, the more he wins. Keep still. This is what Ps. 4:4 teaches: “Be angry, but sin not. Be silent.” So here we see the king’s counsel: “Do not answer him.” (Luther)

In a way, their silence demonstrated faith in the Lord. They chose to trust the Lord rather than pursue the offer of surrender given by the field commander. Sometimes it is better to remain silent in the face of arrogant unbelief. (PBC)

36:22 *clothes torn.* Sign of humility, sorrow, and dependence on the Lord. (TLSB)

The delegation of Hezekiah returned to the city in disgrace. They tore their clothes as a sign of their deep emotion. They were distressed by the blasphemy of the Assyrian field commander. He had defied their God, just as Goliath had defied the living God. They understood that the Assyrian threat was real and ominous. No doubt, that disturbed them greatly. Finally, they had accomplished nothing. Sennacherib had the gold and silver of Jerusalem. He could not be convinced to break off the attack. Instead, he had boldly sent his forces to Jerusalem to continue the campaign against Hezekiah. The situation was desperate and grim. It is no wonder that they tore their clothes. (PBC)

Ch 36 The Rabshakeh entices and threatens Jerusalem to surrender or suffer. The people resist, remaining loyal to faithful King Hezekiah. When godly leaders are challenged, curb your complaints but cry out to

the Lord on their behalf. The Lord is faithful to His Word and will deliver His people. • Lord, bless our spiritual leaders with faith and with faithfulness. Defend and prosper Your house. Amen. (TLSB)