

The Road to Jesus: The Gospel According to Isaiah
Isaiah 36-39
December 2, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

The verb “trust” is used 12 times by Isaiah. Eight of those times are prior to this section. Once it is found in this section (37:10) and then three more times through the end of the book.

The verb “rely,” which is a synonym, is found ten times, four of those times are in this section, 36:5-6, 9. Five times were found before this section and once afterward.

The verb “wait,” also used as a synonym, is used by Isaiah 14 times. None of those occasions are found in chapters 36-39 but the whole idea of waiting, trusting, relying is found throughout Isaiah’s preaching.

This section is in narrative form. The word “narrative” is simply the literary term for a “story.” That is, this section is not poetry or apocalyptic language that we have grown accustomed to with Isaiah. These four chapters are history, here in the middle of Isaiah’s preaching. It serves to draw together the first 35 chapters that deal largely with the Assyrian invasion of Israel and only barely looks forward into the Babylonian exile and these chapters introduce to us, by way of foreshadowing, the invasion by Babylon and the subsequent return from exile under the Persians. All along the way, Isaiah is going to be directing the Jews to the coming Savior, His kingdom, and the peace that will come to those who walk by faith and not by sight.

Sennacherib is the king of Assyria. He came to the throne in 704 B. C. We see more events in 2 Kings 18-19 - King Hezekiah had revolted against Sennacherib.

SENNACHERIB INVADES JUDAH - chapter 36:

Hezekiah has served as king for fourteen years and has had something of a treaty with Assyria. He has kept them at bay. But, Sennacherib, the king, wants more. Hezekiah refuses. So, Sennacherib takes several cities (46; and 200,000 prisoners had been taken) in Judah, on his way to Jerusalem. He is camped at Lachish (30 miles SW of Jerusalem) and sends his personal advisor (“chief cupbearer” in Akkadian), translated as *Rabshakeh* to King Hezekiah. He meets Hezekiah on the highway of the fuller’s field, the exact same place where King Ahaz was when Isaiah met him. We see then, a contrast between Ahaz on the fuller’s field and he refuses to trust in God and Hezekiah and his response to God.

Rabshakeh asks Hezekiah through his delegation (Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah): “What is this confidence that you have?” While it is not always appropriate to translate the same Hebrew or Greek word the same every time, it is unfortunate that it is not done here. The word “confidence” in verse 4 is the same word for “rely” in verse 5. In fact, the word is used twice in the question in verse 4: “What is this *trust* in which you *trust*? Then in verse 5: “Now on whom do you *trust*, that you have rebelled against me?” We see then, that trust is the central issue. Do you do trust?

The point is this: You obey the one you trust. You develop a relationship with the one you trust. You cannot divorce obedience from trust. That’s why faith only is such an irrational doctrine. Baptism in water, for the New Testament, is an obedient act of trust.

Rabshakeh first points out the folly of trusting in Egypt - verse 6. In that regard, he is preaching the same message as Isaiah. But then Rabshakeh warns against trusting in their God, the Lord of heaven - verse 7. Hezekiah had begun a restoration movement in Israel in

which he was destroying the altars of false gods, idols, and reestablishing true worship according to the law of Moses. So Rabshakeh either misunderstands or misrepresents what Hezekiah meant to do by tearing down those altars.

So, in verse 8, Rabshakeh offers to renegotiate the treaty with Assyria and Hezekiah would receive military assistance - against whom, we might ask? In verse 10, Rabshakeh goes so far as to claim inspiration for his offer from the God of heaven. Now, how do the Jews know that Rabshakeh is speaking error while Isaiah is speaking the truth? Isaiah is not known to perform miracles - how do they know? Isaiah is calling people to honor God by obeying the law of Moses; Rabshakeh worships false gods. The written law is always the immutable standard!

Hezekiah's delegation try to get Rabshakeh to speak in Hebrew instead of Aramaic (the language of the Assyrians) so the common people will not be discouraged by his message. Propaganda is always an important aspect of war. Eventually, Aramaic (under Assyrian occupation) becomes the language of the common people and Hebrew becomes the language of the educated scholar. Rabshakeh refuses and reiterates his demand of Hezekiah. In verses 18-19, Rabshakeh adds a new touch - none of the other gods (of Syria and Samaria) have saved the other conquered peoples from destruction by Assyria. Why should they think puny Israel and her invisible god would be any different?

The delegation was silent but brought the message back to King Hezekiah. Clearly, however, they were distraught for they came with their clothes torn.

When you stand face-to-face with your "Rabshakeh," whom are you going to trust? Whom are you going to obey? When you face your Goliaths, what are you going to do?

In contrast with King Ahaz, King Hezekiah trusts in God. He does exactly what Isaiah has been preaching to his people to do for decades!

HEZEKIAH SEEKS ISAIAH'S HELP - chapter 37:

The first thing Hezekiah does is show remorse, penance. He tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth. Then he goes to worship! From the house of the Lord, the temple, Hezekiah calls for the preacher - Isaiah. In verse 4, Hezekiah asks for two things - that God will hear what Rabshakeh is saying and rebuke the Assyrian and that Isaiah will offer a prayer for deliverance of the "remnant" - those who were left who still trusted God. Even though Hezekiah was leading a restoration movement among God's people, we should not get the idea that everyone was on board with what he was doing. I'm sure he did not have universal support. "Hezekiah's greatest concern is the honor of God. ...He is not first concerned with his or his nation's survival" (Oswalt, 646).

In verses 6-7, through Isaiah, God tells Hezekiah not to be afraid of the message of Rabshakeh. In fact, the king will be moved to return home and there, he will be killed. Notice that God is in control: "I will put a spirit in him," "I will cause him to hear a rumor," "I will cause him to fall by the sword." This is all done, not for the sake of the Jews (they have been horrendously sinful themselves), but for God's own glory and His own plans.

In the meanwhile, the king of Assyria has become distracted by a battle with the king of Cush. So, the Rabshakeh sends a message, in the form of a letter, to Hezekiah not to get any bright ideas while the king is distracted and he repeats his message from chapter 36.

HEZEKIAH'S PRAYER - 37:14-20:

Hezekiah takes this letter and returns to the place of worship, the house of God, and prays again to the God of heaven. "Unlike his father, Hezekiah would not let the fear of man prevent him from trusting God" (Oswalt, 652). Notice in Hezekiah's prayer (vss 16-20) that Hezekiah focuses on the unique nature of God and His power. Hezekiah focuses on who God is (vs 16; there are six descriptions here of God), His honor (17), His uniqueness (18-19), and the revelation of His glory in the world (vs 20). There are five imperatives addressed to God: Incline (the ear), hear, open (the eyes), see and listen. "This is the kind of unselfish prayer that God honors, for its primary purpose is to bring glory to the name of God" (Smith, 621).

It is clear that Hezekiah does not believe that Jehovah God is one god among many. He understands that idols are just works of man's hands. So, he believes God can deliver Judah from the hand of the Assyrian, even though they are outmanned and the enemy is only 30 miles away!

Young writes: "Revealed religion is exclusive; God demands absolute obedience and submission, for Yahweh is alone" (487).

GOD ANSWERS THROUGH ISAIAH - 37:21-35:

In response to this prayer, God sends a message through Isaiah to King Hezekiah. Notice in verse 21 that this response is due to Hezekiah's *trust* in God - "because you have prayed to Me..." In verse 22, God speaks of Assyria's attitude toward Judah. In verse 23, He speaks directly to Assyria about her attitude toward God Himself. Verses 24-25 picture Assyria's arrogant attitude toward those she has conquered.

Yet, in verse 26, God points out that *He* is the power behind Assyria. *He* has allowed her to do what she has done - not her own gods and certainly not Sennacherib. God knows what is going on in the head of Sennacherib, verse 28, but God will lead the king around by the nose, just as he has done his captives - verse 29.

Beginning in verse 30, Isaiah turns his message back to King Hezekiah. In a few short years, things are going to be normal in Judah. Verse 31 - The remnant are going to thrive. God will see to it - the zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

Then, in verse 33, God promises King Hezekiah that the king of Assyria will not come into Jerusalem nor will he even shoot an arrow into the city. Observe the negatives in verses 33-34. In verse 35, we see that it is God's covenant with David - the Messianic Promise - that stands behind His desire to spare Jerusalem. It is only because Hezekiah responds with an obedient faith like David that God will give him this blessing.

And in verses 36ff, we see where God fulfills His promise to Hezekiah and the Jews. Isaiah had foretold this way back in 14:24-27. God sends an angel who kills 185,000 Assyrians in one night. That motivates Sennacherib to leave Judah and return home to the capital of Assyria, Nineveh. While he was even worshiping his own god, Nisroch, his two sons kill him. This happened in 681 B. C. Sennacherib mocked the God of Jerusalem, saying that He could not save Judah from him. Yet, Sennacherib's own god was not able to save him from his own sons, much less from the God of heaven!

Who are you going to trust? You obey the one you trust.

HEZEKIAH HEALED - chapter 38:

We have another incident in the life of King Hezekiah recorded in chapters 38-39 which open up for us the future as Isaiah deals with it beginning in chapter 40. Here in chapter 38, Hezekiah is deathly ill. God sends Isaiah to Hezekiah with the message: "You are going to die. Get your affairs in order." In fact, this chapter - where Hezekiah goes to the temple of his God and is healed is contrasted with Sennacherib who went to the temple of his god and was killed.

Consistent with Hezekiah's character that we saw in the last chapter, Hezekiah prays to God. He mentions to God that he was basically a righteous man in behavior and attitude. The implication is that he wants to be healed of this great illness. He weeps greatly.

So, through Isaiah, God responds, saying, "Yes, because you have been a good man, I will give you 15 more years to live on earth." Additionally, God promises that He will save Jerusalem from the hand of the king of Assyria, showing us that this text chronologically comes some time in chapter 36 or so.

To emphasize God's truthfulness, He gives Hezekiah a sign that he will, in fact, live 15 more years. The shadow on the stairway will go backward, inverse, ten steps. And it happened just that way.

So, in thankfulness, Hezekiah sits down and writes some words to praise the God of heaven, verses 9-20. In verse 9, Hezekiah laments that he thought he was going to die sooner than he had expected. He will not exist in the land of the living anymore. He thought his life was over like pulling up a tent or cutting the last strand of yarn from a loom. He pictured his end as a lion breaking his bones, God making an end of him.

He twittered like birds, moaning like dove. He felt oppressed and called on God for security (vs 14). In verse 15, he says that God had spoken to him and he asks God to restore his health that he might live (vs 16). Notice in verse 17 that Hezekiah connects his improved health with the forgiveness of sins. For that reason, death and Sheol have been robbed of a new occupant - at least for now. They will not thank God for that. The living (as is Hezekiah) gives thanks to God and can share the news about God's faithfulness with the next generation (vs 19). Hezekiah sees himself worshiping again in the house of the Lord (vs 20). What a word of trust! "This is a mark of the redeemed. They can sing because they have been delivered. In the deepest sense, it is the free heart which sings" (Oswalt, 689).

We have some narrative again in verses 21-22 where Isaiah seems to add some physical treatment - figs - to the work of God. All of this seems to have been in response to Hezekiah's question about going up to the house of the Lord. He wanted to worship God. Yet, chapter 39 shows us that "trust must become a way of life and not merely a magic talisman to be rubbed at critical moments" (Oswalt, 693).

HEZEKIAH SHOWS HIS TREASURE - chapter 39:

Babylon had been under subjugation to the Assyrians, just like everyone else. But, they also wanted to be free, like everyone else, and dominate the world as Assyria had done. Merodach-Baladan was intent on doing that. He reigned from 722-710 B. C. and for about nine months from 704-703 B.C. before he was driven from power by Sennacherib. Here, he sends a delegation to make a visit to Hezekiah, following his illness, very probably to make a treaty or alliance with Hezekiah and Judah. "Forgetfulness of the word of God is the prime enemy of faith; pride in one's own importance runs it a close second" (Motyer, 271).

Verse 2 is a very sad verse. It shows us that Hezekiah opened up both his Federal Reserve Bank notes as well as the Pentagon with all of their secrets to Merodach-baladan. Isaiah is quite emphatic that Hezekiah left *nothing* closed to these delegates. What did all this mean? Does it not imply that Hezekiah is leaning toward trusting in Babylon and forming in alliance with them? After all that had been done against Assyria and all the preaching Isaiah had done? Truly, staying faithful to God and His word is a day-to-day, event-to-event active trust. It can never be shelved and expected to remain vibrant and powerful.

When Isaiah asks about these delegates, I assume that Isaiah already knew the answer but was trying to get Hezekiah to meditate on the answer. These men were from Babylon - are you now going to trust them?

Because Hezekiah had taken great pride, apparently, in what he had "in his house," God, through Isaiah, tells him that all that was in his house was going to be carried away to Babylon. "Nothing will be left." Here is an explicit promise of the coming invasion by Babylon and the exile in Babylon. "God's response to this failure to trust him completely was to remove every material source of human trust" (Smith, 658).

Even Hezekiah's own children will be led away as captives - verse 7.

I'm not sure what to make of Hezekiah's answer in verse 8. It seems quite short-sighted and self-centered to me. First, he says, "The word of the Lord is good." But then he says, "At least there will be peace and truth in my days." What could Hezekiah have done to alleviate this future invasion? Really, nothing. It was going to happen. But what he would need to do is to teach and train his people, including his own sons, as best he could to stay faithful to the God of heaven. Salvation from sins is far more important than who leads your country and whether you live in Palestine or Babylon.

"To be sure, Hezekiah was the demonstration that God can be trusted. But he is also the demonstration that our trust can no more be in good human beings than in bad ones. Our trust is in God alone" (Oswalt, 697).

CONCLUSION:

When you face your Rabshakeh, who are you going to trust? In chapter 40 and beyond, Isaiah will send a strong spiritual message to his people: God's people are coming home!

Next week:
God's People are Coming Home!
Isaiah 40