

Isaiah – Chapters 36:1-37:4

What Is This Confidence?

Isaiah 36:4, 15, 37:6 – Then Rabshakeh said to them, “Say now to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, “What is this confidence that you have?” ... nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD, saying, “The LORD will surely deliver us, this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.” ... Isaiah said to them, “Thus you shall say to your master, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me.”

Context

The poetry of Book 1 ended in chapter 35 with the ransomed of the LORD coming to Zion. Chapter 36 opens in prose, with a date, a king, and an army. Chapters 36-39 are narrative; it tells what happened in Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah. Very little in these four chapters is new prophecy. They are the record of prophecy fulfilled, and the question that governs this lesson and the two that follow is why a book of prophecy stops to tell what happened. The closing section of the lesson answers it.

The same account stands in 2 Kings 18:13-20:19, much of it being word for word, and a shorter one in 2 Chronicles 32. It should not be assumed that the book of Isaiah repeats Kings. Isaiah ministered in the days of Hezekiah, and the book was written in his lifetime. The Book of Kings closes with the release of Jehoiachin in the thirty-seventh year of the exile (2 Kings 25:27), about 561 BC, more than a century later. Scripture also states where the acts of Hezekiah were written down:

“Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah and his deeds of devotion, behold, they are written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel” (2 Chronicles 32:32).

The prophet was also the historian of the reign, as he had been for Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:22). Either Kings drew from the account in Isaiah, or both rest on the same court record; Scripture does not say which. The vocabulary of the narrative belongs to this book. “The Holy One of Israel” is the title that runs through Isaiah, and it appears in Kings only once inside this account (2 Kings 19:22). The narrative was recorded in this book on purpose.

Event	Isaiah	2 Kings	2 Chronicles
Hezekiah’s reform	not recorded	18:1-8	29-31
The invasion of Judah	36:1	18:13	32:1
The tribute paid at Lachish	not recorded	18:14-16	not recorded
The Rabshakeh’s two speeches	36:2-22	18:17-37	32:9-19
Hezekiah sends to Isaiah; the LORD’s first answer	37:1-7	19:1-7	32:20

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The year is 701 BC. The fourteenth year of 36:1 is counted from Hezekiah's sole reign, which began in 715 BC after a co-regency with his father, Ahaz. Sennacherib had come to the throne of Assyria in 705 BC, and Hezekiah "rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him" (2 Kings 18:7). The Assyrian answer was invasion. Sennacherib's own record claims forty-six walled cities of Judah taken and Hezekiah shut up in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage, and the reliefs from his palace show the siege of Lachish, the fortress about thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem from which the Rabshakeh was sent. Before the embassy came, Hezekiah had tried to buy peace with three hundred talents of silver and thirty of gold (2 Kings 18:14-16); the book of Isaiah leaves the payment out and goes directly to the confrontation at the wall. The recording of this situation and what information is here is important to the point of the book.

The Rabshakeh stops at "the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller's field" (36:2). This is where Isaiah met Ahaz more than thirty years earlier (7:3). Ahaz was told, "Take care and be calm, have no fear" (7:4), and was warned, "If you will not believe, you surely shall not last" (7:9). Ahaz would not believe. He hired Assyria with the silver and gold of the temple (2 Kings 16:7-8), and the word to him was that the LORD would bring on Judah "the king of Assyria" (7:17). The army at the conduit in Chapter 36 is the outcome of the choice made at the conduit in Chapter 7. The son of Ahaz is now brought to the same place and asked the same thing.

Structure of the Chapters

The passage moves in three steps: the Assyrian speaks, the king responds, and the LORD answers.

- 36:1-3: The invader at the conduit.
- 36:4-10: The first speech, to the king's officials. The key word is *בַּתַּחֲוִי* *batach*, persuasion, confidence, (LXX *πείθω* *peitho*).
- 36:11-12: The request for Aramaic, refused.
- 36:13-20: The second speech, to the people on the wall. The key word is *נָצַל* *natsal*, to deliver (LXX *ῥύομαι* *ruomai*).
- 36:21-22: Silence and torn clothes.
- 37:1-4: Hezekiah in sackcloth, in the house of the LORD, sending to Isaiah.
- 37:5-7: The LORD's answer: "Do not be afraid."

The same three steps are repeated in 37:8-38, the subject of the next lesson: a second message from Sennacherib, a second response from Hezekiah, and a second and longer word from the LORD. This first round ends with a promise. The second ends with the promise kept.

Exposition

The Invader at the Conduit (36:1-3)

Verse 1 covers a whole campaign in one sentence. “All the fortified cities of Judah” were taken, and Jerusalem was left standing alone. This was the word of Chapter 8: the king of Assyria would “sweep on into Judah,” overflow and pass through, and “reach even to the neck” (8:7-8). The water has reached the neck. Judah is under it, and only the head, Jerusalem, remains.

“Rabshakeh” is a title and not a personal name. It designates a high officer of the Assyrian court, and 2 Kings 18:17 names two other officers sent with him. He is the one who speaks; he speaks Hebrew (36:11, 13), and he comes “with a large army.” The speech is backed by force.

Three officials come out to him, and two of them were named in Chapter 22. There Shebna was the steward “in charge of the royal household,” and the LORD said to him, “I will depose you from your office,” and promised his authority to Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah (22:15, 19-21). In 36:3, Eliakim is “over the household” and Shebna is the scribe. The change announced in Chapter 22 has been concluded. It is the first fulfilled word in the narrative. Interestingly, there is no commentary, just the fulfilled Word of God in a simple sentence.

The First Speech: Your Trust Is Empty (36:4-10)

The Rabshakeh speaks in the form a prophet uses. “Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria” is the messenger formula, the form of “Thus says the LORD,” with Sennacherib in the LORD’s place. Hezekiah is given no title at all, here or anywhere in either speech. The narrative calls him “King Hezekiah” (36:1, 2); the Assyrian calls him “Hezekiah.”

The question of verse 4 is the subject of this lesson: “What is this confidence that you have?” The noun “confidence” and the verbs that follow it, “rely” and “trust,” come from one Hebrew root, *batach*, and it is repeated through verse 9. It is the word of the woe oracles. “In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength,” the Holy One of Israel had said, and the verdict then was, “you were not willing” (30:15). The enemy now asks Judah what the LORD had been asking Judah for years. The speech brings four arguments against that trust.

Egypt (36:6). Egypt is “the staff of this crushed reed,” which goes into the hand of the man who leans on it. On this point the Rabshakeh is right, and the book had said it first. Judah’s court had gone down to Egypt “without consulting Me” (30:2). The LORD had called Egypt’s help “vain and empty” (30:7) and had said, “the Egyptians are men and not God”

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(31:3). The Assyrian and the prophet agree about Egypt. They differ on what to do instead. The Rabshakeh's alternative is surrender to Assyria; the alternative in this book is the LORD.

The high places (36:7). The Rabshakeh expects the reply, "We trust in the LORD our God," and has his answer ready: Hezekiah has taken away the LORD's high places and altars and has told Judah to worship before one altar. To an Assyrian, fewer altars meant a god less honored. The reform he describes is the reform of 2 Kings 18:4, and it was obedience to the Law, which required worship at the one place the LORD chose (Deuteronomy 12:5-14). What he presents as an offense against the LORD is the reason Scripture says of Hezekiah, "He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel" (2 Kings 18:5). The argument may also have been aimed at those in Judah who resented the loss of their idolatry altars.

The horses (36:8-9). The offer of two thousand horses, if Judah can find riders for them, is mockery. Judah has no cavalry to speak of and is counting on Egypt for chariots and horsemen. This also had been said already: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses" (31:1).

The LORD Himself (36:10). "The LORD said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.'" The claim has a basis in what the prophets of Israel had preached. The LORD had called Assyria "the rod of My anger" and had said, "I send it against a godless nation" (10:5-6). Assyria had been His hand of punishment on the northern tribes and was now His hand on Judah, and the Assyrians probably had some report of this preaching. There is no indication that the Rabshakeh believes it. He is using the prophets of Israel against Hezekiah. The passage that calls Assyria the rod goes on, "Yet it does not so intend" (10:7), and it sets the limit: when the LORD has completed His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, He will punish "the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria" (10:12). The Rabshakeh cites the commission and leaves out how it ends.

The Request Refused (36:11-12)

Aramaic was the language of diplomacy between the empire and the small kingdoms. "Judean" is Hebrew, the speech of the people on the wall. The officials ask for Aramaic so that the people will not understand, and the Rabshakeh refuses because the people are the ones he came to address. The embassy was never a negotiation with the king. It was meant to separate the people from the king, and verse 12 tells them what a siege will bring them to.

The Second Speech: The LORD Will Not Deliver (36:13-20)

The second speech goes over the heads of the officials to the wall, in a loud voice, in Hebrew. The key word changes from confidence/trust to deliver (*natsal*), and it is used in turn of Hezekiah, of the LORD, and of the gods of the nations.

Three times the people are warned against their own king: "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you" (36:14), "Do not listen to Hezekiah" (36:16), "Beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you" (36:18). What Hezekiah has been telling them is quoted by the enemy: "The LORD will

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surely deliver us, this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria” (36:15). That is the message of this book, that the LORD of hosts “will protect and deliver” Jerusalem (31:5). By 701 BC, the king is saying to the people what Isaiah had said to the king.

The offer follows (36:16-17). Each man will eat of his own vine and his own fig tree and drink from his own cistern. This is the language of peace under the LORD’s king; in the days of Solomon, Judah and Israel lived in safety, “every man under his vine and his fig tree” (1 Kings 4:25). The king of Assyria offers what is not his to give, and the offer has a term: “until I come and take you away to a land like your own land.” This is deportation, the policy that had emptied Samaria about twenty years earlier (2 Kings 17:6). The land of grain and new wine, of bread and vineyards, imitates the description of the land the LORD gave to Israel (Deuteronomy 8:7-9).

The speech ends in 36:18-20 by placing the LORD in a list with the gods of Hamath, Arpad, Sepharvaim, and Samaria, none of whom delivered his land. This boast was already written in the book. In Chapter 10, the king of Assyria names Hamath, Arpad, and Samaria and says, “Shall I not do to Jerusalem and her images just as I have done to Samaria and her idols?” (10:9-11). The words spoken at the wall in 701 BC had been recorded beforehand as the words Assyria would speak.

Two things are exposed. The first is that the Rabshakeh does not believe his own claim. In the first speech the LORD sent him (36:10); in the second the LORD cannot stop him (36:20). Both cannot be true, and the second shows what he thinks. The second is his error about Samaria. Samaria did not fall because its God was weak. The LORD gave Samaria to Assyria for its sins (2 Kings 17:7-18). Assyria read the LORD’s judgment as its own strength, which is the charge of 10:13: “(Speaking of Assyria) By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this.”

Silence and Torn Clothes (36:21-22)

No one answers. The silence is obedience to the king’s command, and it means that the speech failed: the people do not come out. The officials tear their clothes, the sign of grief and of horror at what has been said against the LORD, and they report every word to Hezekiah.

Hezekiah’s Response (37:1-4)

Hezekiah tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth, and goes into the house of the LORD. Then he sends to the prophet. Each act is the reverse of his father’s. Ahaz went to the house of the LORD for its silver and gold to pay Assyria (2 Kings 16:8); Hezekiah goes there in sackcloth. Ahaz refused the word that was offered to him, “I will not ask” (7:12); Hezekiah sends his highest officials and the elders of the priests to ask. And the court that had gone down to Egypt “without consulting Me” (30:2) now consults the LORD through Isaiah.

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The message of 37:3-4 claims nothing. “This day is a day of distress, rebuke and rejection.” The children who have come to birth with no strength to deliver them describe a crisis that has reached its moment and a people with nothing left to meet it. Hezekiah offers no plan and names no ally. “Perhaps the LORD your God will hear” is not doubt that the LORD is able. It is the speech of a man who knows that he cannot require it.

Two phrases carry the request. The first is “the living God.” The Rabshakeh set the LORD beside the gods of Hamath and Arpad; Hezekiah’s answer is that those gods are not alive and the LORD is. The verb “reproach” (*charaph*) joined to “the living God” is the language of David before Goliath: “who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?” (1 Samuel 17:26). Hezekiah did “according to all that his father David had done” (2 Kings 18:3), and he sees this matter as David saw it. The offense is against the LORD, and the LORD has heard it.

The second phrase is “the remnant that is left.” Here, the phrase is historical. It names the people who have not yet been killed or carried off in the Assyrian invasion; it’s those still alive in Jerusalem after the fortified cities fell. It is not a reference to the Remnant of the last days.

The LORD’s Answer (37:5-7)

The answer is given at once; the passage records no interval between the request and the reply. “Do not be afraid” is the word given to Ahaz at this same place (7:4), and it is the word already given to Zion about this enemy: “O My people who dwell in Zion, do not fear the Assyrian” (10:24).

The LORD also renames the delegation. The Rabshakeh spoke for “the great king.” The LORD calls the officers “the servants of the king of Assyria,” and the Hebrew word is *na’ar*, a boy or young attendant, not the usual word for a royal official. He names what they did as well. The Assyrian thought that he was pressing terms on a small kingdom. The LORD says that they “have blasphemed Me.”

Verse 7 promises four things concerning Sennacherib: a spirit, a rumor, a return, and a sword. The meaning of “spirit” (*ruach*) is debated. It is best taken as a disposition, a thought that the LORD places in the king’s mind so that he is ready to leave when the report comes. An actual spirit sent to influence him, as in 1 Kings 22:21-23, is possible, but the disposition is the simpler reading. On either reading the LORD is the one who does it. The great king will not be driven off by Judah’s army or by Egypt’s. He will be turned around by something he hears and will die in his own land.

The answer says nothing yet about the army outside the wall. It deals with the king who sent the words. Hezekiah is given a promise and nothing that he can see, and the passage ends there. The remainder of Chapter 37 records how each of the four came to pass.

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Why Is This Here?

The first thirty-five chapters said what the LORD would do with Assyria. Chapters 36-37 record that He did it. That is the reason for the narrative. The Law gave Israel the test of a prophet: “if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken” (Deuteronomy 18:22). What this book said about Assyria could be tested within the lifetime of those who first heard it, and the narrative is the record of that test. The prophet had been told to write the message “that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever” (30:8). A witness is believed when what he has said can be checked, and in Chapters 36-39, the reader is able to check it.

Tying the Narrative to the Prophecy

What Was Said (Chapters 1-35)	What Happened (36:1-37:7)
Assyria will overflow Judah and “reach even to the neck” (8:7-8, 17).	All the fortified cities are seized; Jerusalem alone remains (36:1).
Shebna will be deposed and his authority given to Eliakim (22:15-21).	Eliakim is over the household; Shebna is the scribe (36:3, 37:2).
Egypt’s help is “vain and empty” (30:1-7, 31:1-3).	The Rabshakeh says the same of Egypt (36:6, 9).
The LORD sends Assyria as the rod of His anger (10:5-6).	The Rabshakeh claims the commission (36:10).
Assyria’s boast: “Shall I not do to Jerusalem and her images just as I have done to Samaria and her idols?” (10:11).	The boast is spoken at the wall (36:18-20).
“In quietness and trust is your strength” (30:15).	The people are silent; the king goes to the house of the LORD (36:21, 37:1).
“Do not fear the Assyrian” (10:24).	“Do not be afraid” (37:6).

Seven words of prophecy are matched in twenty-nine verses, and the largest are still to come. At the end of this passage, the Assyrian army is still outside the city. The word that the LORD would “break Assyria in My land” (14:25), that He would “protect and deliver” Jerusalem (31:5), and that the Assyrian would fall “by a sword not of man” (31:8) waits for the next lesson.

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The King Who Was Willing

The narrative also answers the demand that the book has made since Chapter 7. Ahaz stood at the conduit of the upper pool, was told not to fear, and would not believe. He trusted Assyria, and Assyria came. Hezekiah stands at the same place under a far greater threat, is asked outright what he is trusting, and goes to the house of the LORD. He is not presented as faultless. His court had looked to Egypt, and he had paid the tribute. What the narrative records is where he turned when both had failed. The book had said, “If you will not believe, you surely shall not last” (7:9). In Ahaz, the warning was carried out. In Hezekiah, the book shows a king of Judah who believed, and the remainder of Chapter 37 records the outcome.

What This Does for the Rest of the Book

A prophet whose near word has come true exactly is to be believed about what has not yet come. The same chapters that spoke of Assyria spoke of the Day of the LORD, of the King who will reign in righteousness, and of the ransomed returning to Zion. Those words have not yet been fulfilled, and they rest on the same authority as the words that have. The reader who reaches Chapter 40 has just seen the word of this prophet proved against the greatest power of his day.

Lesson 39 takes up 37:8-38 – Sennacherib’s letter, Hezekiah’s prayer, the LORD’s word against Assyria, and the deliverance of Jerusalem.