Isaiah – Chapters 37:8-38

That All the Kingdoms of the Earth May Know

> Isaiah 37:10, 14, 20, 35–36 – "Thus you shall say to Hezekiah king of Judah, 'Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you, saying, "Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria."'" … Then Hezekiah took the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it, and he went up to the house of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. … "Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God." … "For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake." Then the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead.

Context

The first round of the confrontation between Assyria and Jerusalem in 36:1–37:7 ended with a promise and no visible change outside the wall. Hezekiah had gone to the house of the LORD in sackcloth and sent to Isaiah; the LORD had answered, "Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me" (37:6). Four things were promised concerning Sennacherib in 37:7: the LORD would put a spirit in him, he would hear a rumor, he would return to his own land, and he would fall by the sword in his own land. At the close of verse 7, not one of those four things had yet taken place, and the Assyrian army still stood before Jerusalem.
Verses 8–38 record the second round of the crisis and the execution of the promise. The parallel accounts stand in 2 Kings 19:8–37, which is nearly word for word the same, and in 2 Chronicles 32:17–22, which summarizes the letter, the prayer, and the slaughter.

Event	Isaiah	2 Kings	2 Chronicles
The report of Tirhakah and Sennacherib's letter	**37:8–13**	**19:8–13**	**32:17**
Hezekiah spreads the letter and prays	**37:14–20**	**19:14–19**	**32:20**
The LORD's word against Sennacherib and the sign	**37:21–35**	**19:20–34**	**not recorded**
The Angel of the LORD strikes the camp; Sennacherib's death	**37:36–38**	**19:35–37**	**32:21–22**

The geography and the players belong to the campaign of 701 BC. Sennacherib has moved his headquarters from Lachish to Libnah, a fortress city in the Shephelah a few miles north of Lachish. From the south comes the report that Tirhakah, king of Cush, has marched out to fight him (37:9). Cush (ancient Nubia, south of Egypt) ruled Egypt at this time as the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty. Tirhakah did not come to the throne as sole Pharaoh until about 690 BC, eleven years later; in 701 BC he led the northern expedition as a royal prince and

commander, and the narrative calls him "king of Cush" by the title he held when the history was written.

What changes in this second half of the narrative is the target of the Assyrian boast. In the first round, the Rabshakeh tried to divide the people from their king: "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you" (36:14). That failed when the people kept silent and Hezekiah turned to the LORD. In the second round, Sennacherib drops the pretense that the LORD sent him and aims his charge at God Himself: "Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you" (37:10). The contest is no longer between Sennacherib and Hezekiah; it is between the king of Assyria and the Holy One of Israel, and Hezekiah's prayer names what is at stake: "that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God" (37:20).

Structure of the Chapter

The passage follows the same three steps as 36:1–37:7, and adds a fourth in which the promise is carried out:

- 37:8–13 - Sennacherib's second message, sent by letter. The charge shifts from Hezekiah deceiving the people to God deceiving Hezekiah.
- 37:14–20 - Hezekiah's second response. The letter is spread out in the house of the LORD, and the king prays directly.
- 37:21–35 - The LORD's second answer through Isaiah: the taunt against Sennacherib (21–29), the three-year sign for Hezekiah and the surviving remnant (30–32), and the decree that Jerusalem will be defended (33–35).
- 37:36–38 - The deliverance and the end of Sennacherib: 185,000 struck in a single night, the retreat to Nineveh, and the sword in the house of Nisroch.

Exposition

The Rumor and the Letter (37:8–13)

The Rabshakeh leaves the wall of Jerusalem to consult his master and finds that Sennacherib has already moved from Lachish to fight against Libnah. Then verse 9 records the first piece of the promise of verse 7 coming true. The LORD had said, "he will hear a rumor" (*shemuah*, a report); verse 9 begins, "When he heard them say concerning Tirhakah king of Cush, 'He has come out to fight against you.'"

This report is the test of everything the woe oracles of chapters 30 and 31 said about Egypt. Judah's counselors had sent treasure south to buy chariots and horsemen (30:1–6; 31:1), and the Cushite-Egyptian army has in fact marched out. Yet its march achieves nothing for Jerusalem. Scripture never mentions Tirhakah's army again and never credits Egypt with striking a blow. The LORD had said, "Even Egypt, whose help is vain and empty" (30:7), and "the Egyptians are men and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit" (31:3).

Judah's reliance on men and horses does not save her. All the report of Tirhakah does in the narrative is fulfill the LORD's word that Sennacherib would hear a report, and prompt Sennacherib to send messengers back to Hezekiah with a letter to force Jerusalem's surrender before he deals with his southern flank.

The letter repeats the argument of the second speech, but with the mask off. Here the narrative gives Hezekiah his full title, "Hezekiah king of Judah" (37:10), even inside Sennacherib's message, and the verb *batach* (trust) returns. In 36:10 the Rabshakeh had claimed that the LORD commissioned Assyria; here the LORD is simply another local deity who will fail to save His city when Assyria arrives.

Verses 11–13 widen the roll call of conquered places. Earlier campaigns had taken Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the sons of Eden in Telassar across Mesopotamia and northern Syria, along with Hamath, Arpad, Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah (37:12–13). None of their gods delivered them, and the letter asks where their kings are now.

The Letter Spread Before the LORD (37:14–20)

In 37:1–4 Hezekiah went to the temple and sent officials to ask Isaiah to lift up a prayer. Here he takes the letter from the messengers, reads it, goes up to the house of the LORD, spreads it out before the LORD, and prays himself. The physical act is the heart of the scene. Sennacherib had put his blasphemy in writing; Hezekiah lays the document before the Judge of Israel and of all the earth.

The prayer begins in verse 16 by naming who the LORD is before asking for anything. He is "the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim." Sennacherib's letter had treated the LORD as the god of one small kingdom among many. Hezekiah answers with two truths: He is the God of Israel by covenant, seated above the mercy seat in the temple (Exodus 25:22), and He alone is the God of "all the kingdoms of the earth," because He made heaven and earth. A Creator is not in the same category as the gods of Gozan and Haran.

Verse 17 asks the LORD to incline His ear and to open His eyes and see. The phrase "words of Sennacherib" points to the letter lying spread out before Him, and the offense is named again with the verb from 37:4: he sent it "to reproach (*charaph*) the living God."

Verses 18–19 grant the Assyrian's historical premise without granting his conclusion. "Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated all the countries and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire." Hezekiah does not deny the Assyrian annals; the empire really had burned the gods of the nations. He explains why: "for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them." What Sennacherib offered as proof that no god could stop him was only proof that wood burns. This is the same charge brought against Judah's own idolatry in 2:8 ("they worship the work of their hands") and the truth the book will press at length in chapters 40–48 (44:14–20).

Verse 20 brings the petition: “deliver us from his hand.” The motive is not Judah’s merit. It is “that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God.” Sennacherib had appealed to “all the lands” as the witnesses of Assyria’s power (37:11); Hezekiah appeals to “all the kingdoms of the earth” as the witnesses of the LORD’s deliverance. It is the same request Solomon made at the dedication of this temple (1 Kings 8:60) and the same reason David gave before Goliath: “that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel” (1 Samuel 17:46).

The Taunt Against Sennacherib (37:21–29)

Hezekiah did not send to Isaiah this time, yet Isaiah sends to Hezekiah: “Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, this is the word that the LORD has spoken against him” (37:21–22). The answer is in poetry, returning to the prophetic style of chapters 1–35.

It opens in verse 22 with “the virgin daughter of Zion” despising Sennacherib and shaking her head behind him as he retreats. In ancient warfare a captured city was spoken of as a violated woman; calling Jerusalem “the virgin daughter of Zion” is the LORD’s declaration that Sennacherib will never set foot inside her gates.

Verse 23 answers the boast. “Whom have you reproached and blasphemed? And against whom have you raised your voice and haughtily lifted up your eyes? Against the Holy One of Israel!” (37:23). This title has run through the book since chapter 1 (1:4). Now the Holy One of Israel answers the empire that mocked Him.

Verses 24–25 quote Sennacherib’s own self-praise back to him, matching the inscriptions of Assyrian kings who boasted of taking their chariots over the highest passes of Lebanon, cutting down its tallest cedars for their palaces, digging wells in foreign lands, and drying up the rivers of Egypt with the soles of their feet. What Isaiah 10:12–14 had foretold, that the LORD would punish the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria who said, “By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this,” is now spoken directly to Sennacherib.

Verses 26–27 give the true account of Assyria’s rise, and they state the reason prophecy sits at the center of this book: “Have you not heard? Long ago I did it, from ancient times I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass, that you should turn fortified cities into ruinous heaps” (37:26). Sennacherib conquered nothing by his own strength. Every city that fell before him fell because the LORD had planned it long ago (*lemerachok*) and brought it to pass in the present, stripping the inhabitants of their strength until they were like grass on the housetops scorched before it grows up (37:27). This is the fulfillment of 10:5–6 and 14:24–27: Assyria was the axe in the hand of the One who chops with it (10:15), and the proof that the LORD alone is God is that He planned the end from the beginning and announced it beforehand.

Verses 28–29 close the word against the king. The LORD knows his sitting down, his going out, his coming in, and his raging against Him. Because of that arrogance, the LORD will put His hook in Sennacherib's nose and His bridle in his lips, and turn him back by the way that he came. Assyrian reliefs show conquered captives led away with literal rings in their noses and lips; the LORD puts the Assyrian's own iron on the Assyrian king.

The Sign and the Remnant (37:30–32)

At verse 30 the address turns from Sennacherib to Hezekiah: "Then this shall be the sign for you: you will eat this year what grows of itself, in the second year what springs from the same, and in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit." Unlike the sign offered to Ahaz before the crisis (7:11), this is a sign that follows the deliverance, like the sign given to Moses at the bush (Exodus 3:12). Sennacherib's campaign of 701 BC had ravaged the Judean countryside and prevented the normal planting; for two years the people would live off what grew on its own, first the volunteer growth (saphiach) and then what sprang up from it (*shachis*); by the third year normal sowing, reaping, and vineyard-keeping would resume because the Assyrians would be gone for good.

Verses 31–32 tie the agricultural recovery to the people themselves: "The surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root downward and bear fruit upward. For out of Jerusalem will go forth a remnant and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this." The immediate fulfillment is historical: in 701 BC the survivors who had been shut up inside the walls of Jerusalem go back out to repopulate the devastated towns of Judah, so that the nation and the house of David continue. This is not a dual fulfillment. Yet the remnant preserved in 701 BC is the vessel through which the Davidic line is kept alive for the future eschatological Remnant, and the closing seal, "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this," repeats, word for word in the Hebrew, the guarantee attached to the Messianic throne in 9:7.

The Decree and the Stroke (37:33–38)

Verses 33–35 state the verdict in plain terms. The king of Assyria will not come into this city, will not shoot an arrow there, will not come before it with a shield, and will not throw up a siege ramp against it. He had taken forty-six walled cities of Judah with siege ramps, shields, and arrows, as his own annals boast and his reliefs from Lachish depict; against Jerusalem he will not raise one spade of earth. By the way he came, by the same way he will return (37:34). Verse 35 gives the ground: "For I will defend (*ganan*, the verb of the hovering birds in 31:5) this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake." Two things stand behind Jerusalem's survival: the LORD's own name, which Sennacherib had blasphemed, and the covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:12–16).

Verse 36 records the act in a single sentence: "Then the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning,

behold, all of these were dead." The Angel of the LORD is the pre-incarnate Christ, the Messenger who speaks as God Himself from the burning bush (Exodus 3:2–6), who stood with His drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem in the days of David (1 Chronicles 21:15–16), and who "encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them" (Psalm 34:7). Judah does not draw a bow, and Egypt does not arrive. In chapters 29 and 31 the LORD had promised that the multitude crowding Ariel would vanish in a night (29:7–8) and that the Assyrian would fall "by a sword not of man" (31:8). Here judgment and mercy fall in the same night: the one stroke that judges the Assyrian camp is the LORD's mercy to Judah. He is good to those who take refuge in Him, and He is consuming fire to the army that reproaches His name.

Verses 37–38 close the ledger on the remaining promises of 37:7. Sennacherib breaks camp, departs, and returns to Nineveh, fulfilling the third part of verse 7 ("he will return to his own land"). Between verses 37 and 38 lie twenty years of history that the narrative passes over without mention, because they have nothing to do with Jerusalem. In 681 BC, while Sennacherib is worshiping in the house of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer strike him down with the sword and flee to Ararat, and his son Esarhaddon reigns in his place (37:38). The king who mocked the living God for failing to save Jerusalem dies on the floor of his own temple, while his own god does nothing to save him, fulfilling the fourth word of 37:7 to the letter: "I will make him fall by the sword in his own land."

Why Is This Here?

Previously we noted that the first thirty-five chapters of Isaiah announced what the LORD would do with Assyria, and that chapters 36–37 stand in the book as the court record proving that He did it (Deuteronomy 18:22; Isaiah 30:8). In 36:1–37:7 the threat and the boast matched the earlier prophecies; in 37:8–38 the deliverance matches them point for point.

Tying the Narrative to the Prophecy

What Was Said (Chapters 1–35 & 37:7)	What Happened (37:8–38)
The fourfold word of 37:7: a spirit, a rumor, a return to his land, and a fall by the sword.	He hears the report of Tirhakah (37:9), returns to Nineveh (37:37), and is killed with the sword by his sons (37:38).
When the LORD finishes His work on Mount Zion, He will punish the arrogant heart and boastful look of the king of Assyria (10:12–16).	The LORD rebukes Sennacherib's haughty eyes, puts His hook in his nose, and turns him back (37:23–29).
"To break Assyria in My land, and I will trample him on My mountains" (14:24–25).	185,000 are struck dead in the Assyrian camp in Judah (37:36).

"At evening time, behold, there is terror! Before morning they are no more" (17:14); the multitude of nations vanishes like a dream of the night (29:5–8).	"When men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead" (37:36).
"Like flying birds so the LORD of hosts will protect (ganan) Jerusalem. He will protect and deliver it; He will pass over and rescue it" (31:5).	"For I will defend (ganan) this city to save it" (37:35); the Angel of the LORD passes through the camp at night (37:36).
"And the Assyrian will fall by a sword not of man, and a sword not of man will devour him" (31:8).	The Angel of the LORD strikes the army without a human hand raised (37:36).
A surviving remnant of Jacob will return and rely on the LORD (10:20–22); "the zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this" (9:7).	The surviving remnant of Judah takes root downward and bears fruit upward; "the zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this" (37:31–32).

The Proof of the One True God

Every detail spoken over nearly forty years of ministry, from the waters reaching the neck in chapter 8 to the sword not of man in chapter 31, has come to pass in history. When Hezekiah prayed that all the kingdoms of the earth might know that the LORD alone is God (37:20), the LORD answered by proving what He had already written in the scroll (30:8). The gods of wood and stone could neither speak beforehand nor save in the crisis (37:19); the Holy One of Israel planned it from days of old, declared it through His prophet, and finished it in a single night (37:26, 36).

Looking Ahead to Chapters 38–39

With verse 38, the Assyrian question that has run through the book since chapter 7 is closed. Yet the narrative section is only halfway finished. Chapters 38 and 39 record Hezekiah's mortal illness and the embassy from Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon. Chronologically, both events took place before the deliverance of 37:36, while the Assyrian shadow still hung over Judah (38:6). The book places chapters 36 and 37 first on purpose, to bring the entire Assyrian case to its conclusion before opening the door to the next empire. Lesson 40 takes up chapters 38 and 39, where the book turns the page from Assyria to Babylon.