

Psalm 46: The Enemy Attacks

Hezekiah wrote Psalm 46 just after Jerusalem was besieged by the mighty Assyrian army. The background for this psalm is recorded in Isaiah 36-37. You'll remember that Hezekiah was king of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, and he was a godly man. During his reign, the prophet Isaiah lived in Judah, and the nation was close to the Lord.

Also during this time, Sennacherib was king of Assyria. His nation was always at war, on the offense to gain lands and people. Assyria had attacked Judah many times unsuccessfully. This particular attack, which Isaiah records in chapters 36 and 37, is also unsuccessful because Hezekiah, the king of Judah, takes his case to the Lord.

Sennacherib's army was the strongest in the world at that time. Its strength began under the rule of Sennacherib's father, Sargon II. History is filled with the exploits of Sargon and how he molded a small country into a polished war machine.

Prior to Sargon's time, Assyria had very little defense. There were no natural barriers around the country, so Sargon built up an army that terrified the nations all around Assyria. When Sargon died, his son Sennacherib carried on. In Isaiah 20, we learn that in one year, Sennacherib had conquered Egypt, Phoenicia, Ethiopia, Syria, Philistia, and others.

Each time Assyria attacked and conquered a country, the inhabitants were deported to another land controlled by Assyria. By intermingling the nations in this manner, there was less likelihood of a conspiracy to overthrow the Assyrian command.

The first step of an Assyrian attack: was a propaganda campaign. The Assyrian commander would offer the besieged city hope of peaceful existence if they would surrender without fighting. Of course, that peaceful existence was in another country, since Assyria always deported its captives to other places, as previously mentioned.

Now let's begin reading Isaiah's account of the attack upon Jerusalem. It's recorded in chapters 36 and 37.

1. Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the defenced cities of Judah, and took them. (So far, the Assyrian strategy against Judah was working.)

2. And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field.

In verse 2 we see Sennacherib calling his best commander away from a battle he's fighting over at Lachish. This city was putting up quite a resistance (see 2 Chronicles 32:4). So Rabshakeh leaves Lachish and goes over to Jerusalem. When he gets there, he stands by the upper water reservoir where all the people of the city could see and hear him. This is the opportunity for Rabshakeh to offer Assyria's propaganda campaign, since all the people of Jerusalem are gathered on the wall to listen to him.

Don't be mistaken; Rabshakeh is not standing out there alone. He's backed by the Assyrian army assembled out there with him. And Hezekiah sends an envoy to meet him and discuss the matter, as we read in the next verse.

3. Then came forth unto him Eliakim, Hilkiah's son, which was over the house, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah, Asaph's son, the recorder.

4. And Rabshakeh said unto them, Say ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence is this wherein thou trusteth?

5. I say, sayest thou, (but they are but vain words) I have counsel and strength for war: now on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me?

In other words, Rabshakeh is saying, "I'll tell you what you're probably thinking. And it won't work! You're thinking you and your puny group of residents in Jerusalem are strong for war. You aren't going to accept our terms for peaceful surrender. Well, who do you think is going to save you from the mighty Assyrian army?"

Then Rabshakeh points out the only two alternatives open for King Hezekiah: Egypt and God.

6. Lo, thou trustest in the staff of this broken reed, on Egypt; whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust in him.

7. But if thou say to me, We trust in the Lord our God: is it not he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away, and said to Judah and to Jerusalem, Ye shall worship before this altar?

The first alternative, Egypt, is compared to a broken reed, or literally, a cane. Now what do you do with a cane? Well, you put your weight on it. But Egypt is a broken cane, so when you lean on it, it pierces through your hand. So Rabshakeh is telling Hezekiah's envoy that Egypt is untrustworthy. That nation will turn on its allies and do them damage. And in addition to that, Assyria has reduced Egypt's army to almost nothing.

The second alternative, God, is mentioned by Rabshakeh as a possibility, since Rabshakeh knows that King Hezekiah has lead his nation close to God. But then Rabshakeh goes on to say, "Let me tell you what will happen if you put your trust in Him."

8. Now therefore give pledges, I pray thee, to my master the king of Assyria, and I will give thee two thousand horses, if thou be able on thy part to set riders upon them.

9. How then wilt thou turn away the face of one captain of the least of my master's servants, and put thy trust on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?

10. And am I now come up without the Lord against this land to destroy it? the Lord said unto me, Go up against this land and destroy it.

Rabshakeh tells Hezekiah that trusting in the Lord will get him nowhere since it is the Lord who told Rabshakeh to destroy Jerusalem. This is just more of Rabshakeh's intimidation to cause Jerusalem to surrender.

He poked fun at the city in verse 8 above. He made a bet that if he provided two thousand horses for Hezekiah's men, that there weren't even two thousand riders to ride them. And if that wasn't enough insult, he goes on in verse 9 to tell them that even if there were two thousand men to put on the horses, it would take only one of Rabshakeh's trained soldiers to defeat all two thousand.

Hezekiah wasn't about to take him up on that bet, since the whole city of Jerusalem knew Rabshakeh was right. They were facing the most finely equipped, highly trained army in the world. But when Rabshakeh bragged that God had sent him to destroy Jerusalem, Hezekiah's envoy interrupted and asked him to speak in Aramaic so the whole population of Jerusalem that was listening couldn't understand the conversation.

11. Then said Eliakim and Shebna and Joah unto Rabshakeh, Speak, I pray thee, unto thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand it: and speak not to us in the Jews' language, in the ears of the people that are on the wall.

But Rabshakeh wasn't about to have a secret conversation. He wanted to cause all the people to fear the Assyrian army and to doubt their God. The tactic Rabshakeh is using is to identify himself as a follower of God, just like they are.

He says, "Your God speaks to you? Well, He speaks to me, too, and He told me to come and get you. So who is listening to God. you or me? And I have a whole army with me, I have your God, I have all this human strength, and I have divine strength, too." And all the people of Jerusalem were sitting on the wall, listening.

When Hezekiah's envoy tried to stop this boasting, Rabshakeh replied,

12. But Rabshakeh said, Hath my master sent me to thy master and to thee to speak these words? hath he not sent me to the men that sit

upon the waif, that they may eat their own dung, and drink their own piss I with you?

Rabshakeh is threatening such a total destruction that the people will have nothing left to eat except their own waste. But as he makes his threats in the hearing of all Jerusalem, the people didn't respond.

There is a principle here that we should note. When satan comes at us with his lies, many times you have half the battle won by just saying nothing, rather than possessing his threats by repeating them with your mouth. So Hezekiah had commanded that the people say nothing in response to the threats of Assyria.

So Rabshakeh wouldn't heed the request of Hezekiah's envoy to speak in another language.

13. Then Rabshakeh stood, and cried with a loud voice in the Jews' language, and said, Hear ye the words of the great king, the king of Assyria.

14. Thus saith the king, Let not Hezekiah deceive you: for he shall not be able to deliver you.

15. Neither let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord, saying, The Lord will surely deliver us: this city shall not be delivered into the hand of the king of Assyria.

16. Hearken not to Hezekiah: for thus saith the king of Assyria, Make an agreement with me by a present, and come out to me: and eat ye every one of his vine, and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his own cistern;

17. Until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards.

18. Beware lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, The Lord will deliver us. Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?

Back in verse 16, Rabshakeh is telling the Jews to make themselves a present to the king of Assyria by walking out the city gates in surrender. He's promising them that if they do this, he'll make an agreement that he won't hurt them; in fact, he'll let them continue to enjoy the produce from their own labor until Rabshakeh moves them to another city "just like Jerusalem".

In case they have doubts about Rabshakeh's intentions, or in case they still think they can trust in the Lord to deliver them, Rabshakeh is quick to point out the failure of other nations who trusted in their gods to protect them from Assyria.

19. Where are the gods of Hamath and Arphad? where are the gods of Sepharvaim? and have they delivered Samaria out of my hand?

Now Hamath is the capitol of upper Syria, one of the largest cities in that day, a very strategic city. Rabshakeh says Hamath depended on their god when his army attacked, and their god didn't help them at all. What about Arphad? That is another important city in the same locale, and it is mentioned in 2 Kings 18:34. Hena and Ivah are two more cities that were trusting in their gods but fell to the Assyrian army. So Rabshakeh wants to know why the Jews think they'll have any better success with their God.

But my friends, that's where confusion starts. When you pull Christianity down to the level of all other religions, you lose your way out. Christianity is not a religion. Religions are counterfeits for the only true way. Jesus said in John 14:6 that He is the way, the truth and the life.

So Rabshakeh is trying to get the Jews to rationalize, to become confused, to doubt the superiority of their God. And the Jews are being put to the test. They are going to believe either Hezekiah and Isaiah, or they will believe Rabshakeh and Sennacherib. Rabshakeh finished his taunt and then we see the response of the Jews.

20. Who are they among all the gods of these lands, that have delivered their land out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?

21. But they held their peace, and answered him not a word: for the king's commandment was, saying, Answer him not.

Thank God, the people were obedient to follow the command of their king! Hezekiah was taking full responsibility for the safety of his people, and he didn't want them talking without his authority, coming to terms with the enemy. Here's what he did instead:

22. Then came Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, that was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah, the son of Asaph, the recorder, to Hezekiah with their clothes rent, and told him the words of Rabshakeh.

Chapter 37:1. And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord.

As Hezekiah sought the Lord for deliverance, the Lord sent Isaiah to him with the answer. Let's skip down to verse 33 where the Lord tells the fate of Sennacherib.

33. Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it. (That is, send a flank of men against it.)

34. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord.

35. For I will defend this city to save it for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.

Isn't it deeply reassuring to realize that we don't have to defend ourselves, that God said He would take up our part against our enemy? And God's defense is always steadfast and unshakeable, regardless of the enemy's tactics and advances. Here's God's defense of the city of Jerusalem when Assyria was encamped against it.

36. Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand; and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.

Who is the "angel of the Lord"? It is Jesus. Jesus single-handedly killed 185,000 able-bodied soldiers in one night. Compare that to Rabshakeh's boast about one Assyrian killing two thousand Jews! But the people of Jerusalem just sat quietly on the wall, knowing their God was more than a match for any army, no matter how large or well trained.

Just how did the angel of the Lord kill those men? Hezekiah tells us in Psalm 46. We often think of a big man in shining white robes with a sword in his hand, walking among the enemy's tents and killing the soldiers. But that isn't how it happened. We'll discuss this in the next issue when we take an in-depth look at Psalm 46.

That psalm will have much more meaning to you when you realize that Hezekiah wrote it after the defeat of the Assyrian army. Can you picture the morning after this happened?

Rabshakeh goes running back to Sennacherib with an incredible tale - and no army. Hezekiah discovers the Lord has rescued his people and calls for a celebration. Can you imagine the praise and worship that went on? Hezekiah began to prophesy as the celebration continued, and that was preserved for us as Psalm 46, which we'll discuss next month. [Click Here to Read Part 2](#)

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