

**Isaiah 36-37**  
**Enemy at the Gates**  
**Christ Church Liverpool**

Hezekiah was one of the best kings that the tiny nation of Judah, the southern rump of the once glorious kingdom of Israel had had in a long time.

Like a breath of fresh air in a house filled with alcohol fumes and cigarette smoke Hezekiah had come to the throne and reformed the nation. Gone were the sites for worshipping false gods. Gone too were the many unapproved altars and mountain shrines to the Lord, the one true God.

Hezekiah had done an enormous amount to bring God's people back to true and biblical worship.

But even these reforms, and they were good reforms to have made, were never going to prevent Judah being invaded by Sennacherib, the marauding and vicious king of the Assyrian empire. And they were not going to stop it because...

**1 God keeps his promises of judgment (36:1-3)**

Some of you will know that, over the last few weeks, I have been making a slightly better than average, for me, job of trying to exercise more and lose some weight.

It's not easy is it? What I find with dieting is that it's not the theory that's difficult – it's the practice. I've never bought a book about about weight loss and healthy living. The reason for that is that as far as I can tell the advice they give over several hundred pages can pretty much be boiled down to four words – eat less, move more.

So if, like me this week, you go out for a curry on Monday, have sausage and mash for lunch and lamb casserole followed by chocolate tort for dinner on Tuesday, and then cooked breakfast on Wednesday, and then scones with jam and cream in the middle of the morning, eat Gaynor's lemon and lime cream cheesecake on Friday night and go to Chris and Helen Gregory's for dinner on Saturday then, to be honest, it's pretty obvious you're not going to lose much weight that week!

The bottom line is that actions have consequences. Some immediate, some delayed for a week, a month or a year, and some that don't work out in history until after we are dead and gone.

And that is exactly what was happening 2,700 years ago as Sennacherib and his forces surrounded the city of Jerusalem.

I'm sure you noticed that Isaiah tells us very carefully where the Assyrian field commander stopped and talked with the representatives of King Hezekiah.

It was, v2, at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. Decades earlier God had sent Isaiah to meet a former King of Israel, Ahab, at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. And there Ahab had refused to trust God. He would not do what God required of him and ask for a sign to show God's trustworthiness. Ahab decided to rely on his own wisdom and diplomacy and submit to Assyrian rule.

God promised that the result of his wickedness would be judgment and destruction at the hands of the very man, the king of Assyria, who Ahab had decided was more reliable than God. And now, in 36:1, the judgment has arrived.

It's described remarkably dispassionately isn't it? *Sennacherib, king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.*

A single simple sentence covering the destruction of, on Sennacherib's estimate, 46 fortified towns and villages. Men, women, children killed. Homes destroyed, crops ravaged. Lives turned upside down. People deported out of the land, never to see those places again.

They might be described concisely, but that does not take away the terrible, bloody reality of what happened to Judah and its people in those days.

That's not at all to say that they didn't deserve it. Hezekiah and his officials had acted very foolishly in their relationship with the Assyrians. They had tried rebelling against them – and then tried offering them enormous quantities of cash – so much in fact that they had had to strip the gold from God's temple to pay.

And despite Hezekiah's efforts to remove the sites of false worship many of the people of Israel persisted in ignoring God's commandments.

God's judgment was just – and it was the judgment that he had promised.

It seems to me that as Christians we are still surprised by the terrible and disastrous decline of the Christian Church in Europe over the last hundred years or so.

I meet all sorts of people who seem to find it very perplexing that from a situation where the vast majority of people went to church and acknowledged the rightness of Christian values even if they weren't themselves believers, we have got to a point where in our universities most people are much happier for Muslims to share their beliefs than for Christians to share theirs.

We should find that shocking. We ought to find it profoundly disturbing and distressing for the millions upon millions on this continent who are perishing without God.

But Christians shouldn't find it surprising – any more than we should find earthquakes, suicide bombing or vicious wars surprising.

God has promised to pour out his judgment, in time and at the end of days, on a wicked and rebellious world. He tells us in his word that judgment begins with his own people; in the family of the church.

We should not be surprised that what God says actually happens.

God keeps his promises of judgment for wickedness and disobedience.

## **2 God's enemy taunts God's people (36:4-22)**

In almost every war since the invention of the aeroplane both sides have dropped leaflets, sometimes millions of them, to try and persuade the other side to surrender. Sometimes these leaflets are aimed directly at the troops, often just at the general civilian population.

They all have one thing in common. Like the Assyrian field commander talking to the representatives of King Hezekiah they seek to present the military situation for the other side in the blackest terms possible.

For starters Sennacherib's messenger offers the Jewish leaders four seemingly compelling reasons why the residents of Jerusalem should just give up now and surrender.

First he says the only military power who could help them is completely useless. Egypt, v6, is about as much use as a broken crutch. And, in any case, the defeat of Lachish would

have cut off any Egyptian army coming in support of Judah. The cavalry are not coming.

Secondly, the field commander points out, it's not much use saying you're relying in the Lord when your king has spend the last 14 years destroying most the places where the Lord was worshipped!

Thirdly he says you simply don't have the power to mount an effective challenge. He really descends into mick taking here – even if we, the enemy, gave you the horses to fight against us with you haven't got enough men to ride them. Not only are the cavalry not coming – you don't even have your own cavalry.

And in any case it's hopeless. Because your God, the Lord, is the one who has brought me here. He told me, the Assyrian says, to attack your nation. Even your own God isn't on your side – how well do you think you're going to fare in battle?

Judah's leaders are obviously disturbed by this speech. Erm, they say, I don't suppose you could tone the volume down a bit could you? Or maybe we could negotiate in French – the squaddies won't follow then.

They are worried that on hearing such a strong case set forward the troops might actually be persuaded to surrender.

Well the field-commander isn't having any of that. He wants this resolved – and quickly. So he engages in a bit of megaphone diplomacy – appealing over the heads of the generals to the regular troops manning the walls of the city.

If there's a siege they will have to suffer the same appalling conditions as the leaders. Why shouldn't they hear what's going on?

He adds two new arguments to his list of good reasons to surrender.

The king of Assyria, well, he's a decent bloke. Sure he'll deport you to another country. But it won't be that different – you'll have some land and you'll be able to grow corn and grapes. It's not home – but then what's home when you have to drink your own wee?

And it's no use your king giving you this “the Lord will save us” nonsense. Look at all the other countries! That's exactly what their kings said too. It's the kind of thing kings say. But where are they now? The gods of Hanath and Arpad, Sepharvaim and Samaria have disappeared as completely as the records of

Chumbawumba, Los Del Rio and Ace of Base.  
Sunk without trace.

To be honest the taunts from God's enemies that face God's people today aren't really that different are they?

You Christians have relied on Western democracy for years to protect you – but now we have Religious Hatred and equality laws that will stop you spreading your message.

Christianity hasn't got a hope of standing against the powerful tide of Islam with its followers willingness to go to all lengths to bring Islamic rule to the world.

The Christian Church is so weak and irrelevant that the only thing that will save it is remarketing, rebranding and relaunching.

You'd have just as good a life if you didn't worry so much about all this Christian stuff. You could keep all your money and you'd still have a job and friends and all the rest of it. After all what use is a church when it's constantly surrounded by people who believe differently to you?

You know why the church is in decline – it's because God himself has noticed how rubbish and irrelevant you all are and passed judgment on organised religion.

Now, as in Isaiah's day, the lies of God's enemy – lies that spring ultimately from the Devil himself, the Father of lies, are designed to discourage and demoralise God's people.

And the most effective of such lies, like many of the ones told by the Assyrian field-commander, sow doubt and unbelief not by telling whopping big porkies but by subtly twisting and altering the truth. He said a lot of things that were absolutely correct:

- Egypt wouldn't be any use to Judah.
- Hezekiah had destroyed most of the places where the Lord was worshipped.
- They didn't have the power to mount an effective challenge.
- God himself had brought the Assyrian army victoriously to the gates of Jerusalem.
- The gods of the other nations had fallen helpless before the advancing army of Assyria.

And the same happens today. Many of the discouraging things we are told by enemies of the Christian Gospel, some of whom pretend to be friends, are true things:

- Islam is often better organised and in many places much faster growing than Christianity.
- The Christian Church is weak and pathetic.
- Life is harder living in this world as a Christian.
- In the Western world God has passed judgment on much of what claimed to be the church and we can see the relics of its destruction in the hulks of church buildings on almost every street corner in this city.

But the field commander, like so many people in our world today, had forgotten one vitally important thing. A fact that meant that he drew exactly the wrong conclusions from the situation of siege and apparent defeat that Judah faced. He had forgotten that...

### **3 God promises salvation for his people (37:1-35)**

Hearing the field-commander's words the high powered diplomatic delegation rushed back to the royal palace (stopping only for a bit of robe tearing on the way) and reported to King Hezekiah. He too tears his robes. Not because he feels he needs a shopping spree at Gap but that he recognises the insult to himself and his God that has been offered.

And, wisely, instead of organising an emergency cabinet meeting Hezekiah does two things. He goes into the temple to pray – to talk to God. And he sends to find out what God has to say through his prophet Isaiah – to listen to God.

Hezekiah recognises that the people of Judah have come to the point of no return. They have fought the Assyrians, they have tried to buy them off with every penny they possess and they have tried negotiation. There is nothing left. Nothing but the Lord.

In humility Hezekiah recognises, v4, that the only thing that can stop this defeat is God taking vengeance for the insult to his name and character that Sennacherib has given.

Isaiah, notice, v6, doesn't take time out to pray. I imagine that Hezekiah was probably pretty surprised how quickly his messengers came back from the prophet.

But Isaiah didn't need to pray. He knew what God had said about this situation. In fact it was what Isaiah had been teaching for years. God had promised that Jerusalem would not be destroyed at this time.

Hezekiah had, v6, no need to be afraid of the words "with which the underlings of the King of Assyria have blasphemed me" (he describes them as underlings – lads – kids).

God has already planned the end of Sennacherib – he is, v7, going to face a violent death back in his own country.

In fact by the time the field commander returned to see Sennacherib it seems that God's words are already being fulfilled – the king is getting nervous and has opened up a second front in his war – fighting, v8, against Libnah. It seems that Sennacherib was afraid of an alliance of the Egyptians and the Ethiopians and wanted to reinforce his defensive positions.

And there is definitely a note of panic in Sennacherib's second message to Hezekiah. To the people of Judah his message was "Don't let Hezekiah deceive you.". To Hezekiah his message is "Don't let God deceive you."

Perhaps even Sennacherib has begun to have a sneaking suspicion that God really might have promised Hezekiah that he would deliver Jerusalem.

He stoops pretty low here in v13. He appeals to Hezekiah's base self-interest. "*Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivvah?*"

In other words: "surrender now Hezekiah and I'll spare you – I might even give you a decent job in the new government."

Well Hezekiah isn't going to be taken in by such a cheap trick. He takes the actual letter from this foreign king who would be God and presents it before the real God in the temple.

Not because God doesn't know what's in the letter already – of course he does. Hezekiah isn't saying to God "have you seen this?" Rather he takes the letter to the temple as a reminder to himself of the dreadful insult that this pagan has offered to the Lord.

And in his prayer Hezekiah shows that he knows exactly why he must reject this letter and the weasel words of the field commander.

Yes the kings of Assyria have become a regional superpower. They have laid waste to armies and overthrown nations. They have destroyed temples and thrown down God.

But they have only done it because those nations were idolators and their Gods were false. Now Sennacherib has come up against a different opposition entirely. Now he is facing the Lord, the living God, the one who made the earth and the nations and everything in them.

Yes God had brought the Assyrians to Jerusalem. He had enabled them to punish Judah for their disobedience. Judah was weak and pathetic and defenceless.

But that was the point. For God's aim was not to destroy his people. Not at all. It was to bring them to the point where they were at an end of themselves. God wanted his people to come to a point where they could do nothing other than cry out to God for rescue.

God wanted his people to be pushed to the point where they called to him to save them, not because they thought they deserved it but because, v17, God's enemies have mocked the God of all glory, the creator of the earth, the king of kings.

God had specifically promised his people both that there would be judgment and the Jerusalem would be spared. The Assyrian field commander thought that he had free reign to bring whatever destruction he wanted. But he didn't. Because God had promised salvation for his people.

Sennacherib might think, v24, that he had scaled the highest mountains and that he could dam the biggest rivers using his sandals.

But really, v29, he had no more power than a raging bull with a ring in its nose. And God was at the other end of the rope pulling him exactly where he wants Sennacherib to go. The Assyrians were well known for leading their prisoners like animals with hooks in their noses and bits in their mouths. Well God says that is the fate that will befall the Assyrian king himself.

God will humiliate Sennacherib, and indeed all earthly tyrants, for their pride and self-importance. He will send Sennacherib back to his home town the way he came, v29, with no spoils from Jerusalem. God promises salvation for his people.

As we look around the world, as we look around the Church, as we look around our church, even as we survey the landscapes of each of our lives there are lots of things that seem most discouraging aren't there.

Living the Christian life in our world is difficult. A lot of the time it does feel like we are under siege doesn't it? If you are at all open about being a Christian in your workplace and rejecting the values of the world around you there will be times of persecution. Times when God's enemies taunt you by telling your life would just be much easier if you didn't bother seeking to live God's way.

As they looked out from the walls of Jerusalem at the might of the Assyrian army it must have seemed to the men of Judah that it would be a better option just to join the rest of the world and surrender to the power of God's enemy.

And it seems like that today too doesn't it. So much easier to surrender to the world's values. To download whatever music and video you want from the web rather than only things you have paid for, to experiment sexually with your current partner rather than wait for marriage, to think that singleness is second best and be bitter about it rather than rejoicing in God's providence in every aspect of our lives, to have what you want to buy now and pay for it later rather than be prudent and generous with money, to be satisfied with people in the office knowing you go to church occasionally rather than actually talking about Jesus Christ. To allow the atheists to dominate debate on human origins, medical ethics, religious tolerance and so many other subjects rather than robustly defending what God says in his word about those subjects. It's so much easier isn't it to surrender to the world's values?

To be taken in by the taunts of God's enemies. To feel that God has abandoned us; either personally or as the Church.

In the midst of God's judgment on a fallen world, we find his salvation. The two things always come together. And the reason for that is that now, as then, God wants us to come to an end of ourselves. To realise that warfare, money and negotiation will not rescue us. To see that the only thing that hold out any hope at all is God's undeserved grace and mercy.

God promises salvation to his people and...

#### **4 God keeps his promise of salvation (37:36-38)**

V36 is as matter of fact as 36:1 isn't it? Just as quickly as Sennacherib and his army came – so the army was destroyed.

We don't know what that looked like humanly speaking – was there some terrible plague that swept through the camp?

But behind whatever the obvious cause was stood God himself. The angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is a divine character. He is somehow God himself. God came and judged the Assyrians. He kept his promise to his people.

20 years later Sennacherib, like Hezekiah, was in a temple. The temple of his pagan God in Nineveh. Normally even the lowest citizen would be safe from harm in a temple because of the respect of ancient people for what they considered holy places. But Sennacherib isn't safe. He is murdered by own sons – the most terrible betrayal imaginable. His god, Nisroch, was as useful as a chocolate teapot. His God could not save even the king of Assyria.

But the real God did save his people as he acted in judgment. 700 years later God's judgment fell once more on the city of Jerusalem. It went dark for 3 hours in the middle of the day and God's king cried out "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

As Jesus died God's judgment fell and his salvation was revealed.

His judgment and his salvation come together. A salvation that we we cannot earn by warfare, purchase or negotiation. A salvation that holds out hope only because of God's undeserved grace and mercy.

The cross of Christ should lead us to believe in God's judgment and his salvation and make us determined not to surrender to the values of the world.

As we look around our planet today what we see is God's judgment being worked out – in wars and natural disasters and the everyday ordinary wickedness of humanity. Supremely of course we see that judgment in the death of every single human life. But we also see salvation being offered. The word of hope, the gospel, travelling the world. Our experience of living in the world should lead us to believe in God's judgment and his salvation and make us determined not to surrender to the values of the world.

As you read the scriptures they constantly point us to a final day, the day of the Lord, a day of judgment and salvation. A day when Jesus Christ will solemnly separate those who trust in his mercy and grace for salvation and those who do not. What we read in God's

word of the future return of Christ should lead us to believe in God's judgment and his salvation and make us determined not to surrender to the values of the world.

In Hezekiah's day God's people chose to trust God. The question for us this morning, for every individual here and for the church as a whole is the same as the question that was posed to God's people then by the Assyrian field commander – *On what are you basing this confidence of yours?*

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