

I Will Defend This City to Save It

How Prayer Proclaims a Personal Trust in Our Powerful God

Isaiah 36-37

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Context	1
Sermon Preview	1
1. Senaccharib's Threat	2
Application	3
2. Hezekiah's Prayer	4
Application	5
3. Isaiah's Answer	6
Application	6
The Gospel	8
Epilogue	10
Big Idea	11
Conclusion	11
Deliver and Defend	12
References	13

Introduction

Who do you trust? The world will say that it is foolish to believe in a God that you cannot see, in a God who controls the world, in a God who comes close to you. The world says that you need to trust the facts. You need to trust your feelings. You need to trust in yourself.

While we are tempted to trust in the ways of the world, I hope to show you that our Heavenly Father holds out his hands to you. Our sermon today is a story to help you trust in our incredibly powerful and intimately personal God.

Context

Isaiah 36 and 37 serves as a summary of chapters 1-35. The point is that God proves to be faithful when his people turn to him. We're going to see that play out in our sermon today. There are three main characters. Senaccharib is the king of Assyria. He has an ambassador, the Rabshakeh. They're the bad guys. Then we have Hezekiah, the king of Judah. Isaiah is also in our story, God's prophet at the time. They're the good guys. God is the hero of our story, and you'll see how Jesus is championed in the end.

Sermon Preview

We have three scenes in our sermon today:

1. Senaccharib's Threat (Isaiah 36)
2. Hezekiah's Prayer (Isaiah 37:1-20)
3. Isaiah's Answer (Isaiah 37:21-38)

The main threat is a physical threat. It's a threat that Senaccharib makes to Hezekiah. While the threat is of a physical fight, there is actually a *spiritual* battle beneath the surface. Any threat made to a believer, physical or otherwise, is meant to shake our faith. Our faith is what we call our trust in God. While Satan would seek to sift you like wheat so that you will fail or so that you will fall — God uses threats as trials meant to increase your faith, to strengthen your assurance, to tighten your trust in him. Let's get started.



1. Senaccharib's Threat

Our first scene is Senaccharib's Threat. Remember, Senaccharib is a bad guy — he's the king of Assyria. Isaiah 36:1 tells us that Hezekiah has been king of Judah for 14 years. Biblical history tells us that, for the most part, he was a good king. He was faithful to God. But in our story, his faith would be threatened. Assyria had a great army. They were eager to expand. Senaccharib sent his representative, the Rabshakeh, with a message:

*And the Rabshakeh said to them, "Say to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this **trust** of yours?' (Isaiah 36:4)*

This idea of trust is repeated in the message from the Rabshakeh. He specifically asks on *what* do you rest this trust of yours — speaking of man-made processes, systems, and institutions. He says that mere words, big talk, are not a strategy and power for war. He says that Judah had allied with Egypt, but Egypt is weak and will hurt them in the end. There is some truth to this, as Israel had relied on Egypt for chariots and horsemen. He taunts them saying that he'll even give them horses, but they won't be able to find their own riders. He says that Hezekiah had offended God by tearing down altars, and there is also truth in this as Hezekiah had taken down temples across the land, calling on everyone to worship in Jerusalem. He's hoping to paint Hezekiah in a negative light, as controlling, and oppressive of his own people. So the Rabshakeh continues, saying that it was the LORD who told him to take over. Now this was also sort of true, because Isaiah had prophesied that judgment would come. It sounds like the Rabshakeh is right.

In reality, the Rabshakeh was telling half-truths. While Israel had Egypt's chariots and horsemen, they were still able to trust in God alone for ultimate deliverance. While Hezekiah had taken down temples across the land, it was done in reform to take down false gods. And while Isaiah had prophesied judgment would come, Isaiah had also prophesied deliverance. Israel's faith was under attack, and it would have been wise to listen to what the LORD had said. These half-truths needed to be tested against God's Word. In the same way, we can test the lies of the world against the truth of God's Word.

Application

So, will you test the world? There are dangerous words and lies in the world, and you must have discernment. You must measure and judge what the world is telling you. The world says you need to trust the facts, we need to trust your feelings, we need to trust in yourself. The world tells you many lies.

The strategy that Senaccharib uses is similar to Satan's. Ever since Eve was interrogated in the Garden of Eden, the question has always been the same: Did God actually say that? Can you trust what God is telling you? And they confuse you with half-truths. This strategy is meant to undermine, to sabotage our trust in God's word. It's meant to shake your faith.

A counter-strategy you can try is to test the world. Testing the world means to measure what the world says against Scripture. When the world says to place your trust in colleges and careers, and that your academic achievement is most important, in loving what your grades can give to you — you need to test that. Jesus answered this question himself when he was threatened, saying: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment (Matthew 22:37). When the world says that you need to place your trust in the influencer economy, in followers and friends, in loving what a high social status can give to you — you need to test that. The Bible says that God sees in secret (Matthew 6:4), and we must not neglect the influence we have on those who are closest to us, simply by meeting and speaking to our family and friends (Hebrews 10:25). When the world says that you are unlovable — you need to test that. The Bible says that in love, God predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:4-5). The Christian life is not a walk in the park. It's a spiritual battlefield, where you combat Satan's lies with Scripture.

Our first scene shows Senaccharib's Threat, and we see that you must test the world as it threatens your faith.



2. Hezekiah's Prayer

We now transition to our second scene: Hezekiah's Prayer. Before Hezekiah goes to the LORD, the threat levels up. The men who hear the message try to quiet down the Rabshakeh, asking him to speak in Aramaic instead of the language of Judah. They don't want the citizens of Judah to hear and fear. But the Rabshakeh says that they are all doomed, destined to eat their own dung and drink their own urine:

*"Hear the words of **the great king, the king of Assyria!** Thus says **the king:** 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD by saying, "The LORD will surely deliver us. This city will not be given into the hand of **the king of Assyria.**" Do not listen to Hezekiah. For thus says **the king of Assyria:** Make your peace with me and come out to me... Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of **the king of Assyria?** (Isaiah 36:13-18)*

Notice how often he makes mention of the king of Assyria. While our first point questioned *what* their trust was in, our second point questions *who* their trust is in. He's comparing the king of Assyria with the king of Israel — and ultimately, Israel's God. He continues, placing the LORD God in the same category as little pagan gods. Hezekiah hears the message, mourns, and goes into the temple. Isaiah responds: The Rabshakeh will hear a rumor that will make him return back home. And he'll die there. God is the one that's going to do this. He will make it happen. And that's exactly what happens. The Rabshakeh returns home and finds the king of Assyria fighting against the city of Libnah. But they still don't back down. The threat levels up again, and they continue to boast. Backed into a corner, pressed against a wall, this is where we hear Hezekiah's prayer:

*And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: "**O LORD** of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, **O LORD**, and hear; open your eyes, **O LORD**, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, **O LORD**, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, **O LORD** our God, save us from his hand, **that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD.**" (Isaiah 37:15-20)*

Hezekiah's prayer is an excellent model to follow. He confesses that God is God alone, and that he is able to hear and see what is happening. He confesses the emptiness of idols, and — listen closely — he asks to be saved *in order to show* God's glory. In other words, he asks to be saved for the *goal* of God's glory.

Application

So, will you pray for God's glory? If you're a believer, I think we all know that prayer is something we should do. I want to challenge the way you pray. I think that sometimes our prayers can be selfish. At home, Jess and I like to ask our kids to pray. They'll thank God for the food, they'll thank God for our family, but then they start saying things. They'll say in their prayers, that they want to go to the park, or that they want to have a new toy. This is okay for now since my kids are still young. But as they get older, I'll need to teach them, and they need to understand that prayer isn't a way to ask God to do what you want.

Honestly, the more I think about it, I'm convinced that I pray like my kids. I thank God for my food, I thank God for my family, and then I start saying things like God I want to go here, or God I want to have this. It's always about what *I want*, and never about what *God wills*. You would think that I would pray differently, following Jesus' example by saying: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10). Praying for God's glory means that we prioritize Christ and his kingdom. We start praying about where *he* would want us to go. We start praying about what *he* would want from our lives. Of course, you temper this with what God has already revealed in his Word. You'll find that God works in and through your prayers.

God's glory is at stake with every decision that we make, and the way we pray reveals our faith. When we come to God humble and on our knees, we admit that he is the high and sovereign king. He is greater than the idols and gods of this world. And the heart of our prayers isn't for ourselves, but for the glory of God alone. Prayer becomes an act of worship when it's less about us and more about him.

Our second scene is Hezekiah's Prayer, and we see that praying for God's glory is a worshipful act of faith.



3. Isaiah's Answer

We switch immediately to Isaiah's Answer. Isaiah is the prophet speaking on behalf of God. There are no verses in between Hezekiah's Prayer and Isaiah's Answer from the LORD. It's a quick cut, playing out like an immediate answer to the prayer.

*Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: **Because you have prayed to me** concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, this is the word that the LORD has spoken concerning him: "She despises you, she scorns you-- the virgin daughter of Zion; she wags her head behind you-- the daughter of Jerusalem. "Whom have you mocked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? Against the Holy One of Israel! (Isaiah 37:21-23)*

God has heard the mockery and derision. He has heard the disrespect. And he has words for Assyria. Point 1 asked *what*, point 2 asked *who*, and point 3 answers with *why* you can trust in the Lord our God. He says that he was the one who determined Assyria's destiny. He planned and purposed and brought what they did to pass. He says he knows everything about them. He knows the smallest details, their sitting down and going out and coming in. And he has heard their words that rage against him. And because of their asinine bragging, he's going to make animals out of the Assyrians – they're going to obey his commands. God will put his hook in their nose, put a bit in their mouth, and with brute force he will turn them back on the way by which they came. God will make sure there is a surviving remnant of the house of Judah. Isaiah gave Hezekiah an answer from God — all that was left to do was to trust that it was true.

Application

So, will you trust the Word? You can trust the Word of God and be strong in faith. I want to direct my sermon towards the seniors here — those who are going to college this fall. The older you get, the more you will see that Christians cannot believe in happenstance. You cannot believe in coincidence. You cannot believe that "life worked itself out all by itself." You will be able to look back, and you will be able to see God's sovereign hand guiding you all along.

I'm in a small group for dating and married couples, and we recently talked about how even when it looked like we were going through tough times, God was actually working everything out for good. We shared testimonies about

how God had been faithful in everything from health scares to financial struggles. I want to encourage you to have the prophetic vision to see that God is paving your pathways now.

One of the most beautiful things about being a Christian is that you can believe that the Bible is true. There are promises here that are stronger than steel. Let me give you some short and simple verses that have served me well during my college years: Isaiah 4:10: Fear not, for am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Romans 8:28: And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Proverbs 3:5-6: Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

As you go off to college as a Christian, you can trust that God's word is true for you. You will find that God will not fail you. Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Our third scene shows Isaiah's answer, and we see that you must trust the Word of God and be strong in faith.



The Gospel

There is a wrong way to read and interpret this story. It would be wrong to think that God is saving Judah because Judah is great. While Hezekiah does pray to God, that doesn't make him great, either. God himself says the reason for why he will save the city:

*“Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. **For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.**” (Isaiah 37:33-35)*

God defends the city and saves it for his own sake. For his own glory. This is not selfish. God is God. He is the most important Person in the universe. He is the creator and sustainer of the entire cosmos. Time and space revolve around him. History and science, math and music, all created through him and for him. So when God's glory is at stake, when his reputation is on the line, he has every right to do what he wants.

But that's not really the interesting part. What's intriguing is that he will defend and save the city not only for himself, but also for the sake of his servant David. God had made a covenant with King David. He said that David would have an heir to the throne. That there would be a king to bless God's people. So when God saves the city, he's guarding their king. This is a prophecy made for Jesus, proof that God keeps his promises and has a purpose.

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which **he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ** (Romans 1:1-6)*

This passage is incredible. Listen closely: God defended the city for the sake of his name, for the sake of his son, and for the sake of your salvation. Hezekiah's prayer was answered, and God acted in history, and this has a

personal effect on you today if you would believe. He acted to bring about the obedience of faith of his name among all the nations – and this includes you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

So for those who are not yet Christians, I am calling you now to believe. This story just became personal. Throughout history, God has been moving. He has acted for the sake of his name, for the sake of his son, and for the sake of your salvation. God defended the city of Judah so Jesus could die on the cross. Jesus is the Son of God. And when he died, he bore the sins of those who would believe in him. And when he resurrected, he proclaimed victory over death. He's preparing you a home with you in heaven. This is *how* you can show your trust in him: If you would simply pray that God would save you by admitting that you're a sinner, believe that you need Jesus, and confess him as your Lord, Savior, and Treasure — he will not cast you away. Come to him now. You can rest and rejoice. You will be saved.

And for those of you who are already believers, I exhort you to see God in a more intimate way. You've heard that God loves the world. You understand that Jesus died for your sins. But perhaps there is a lack of a personal connection between you and the Lord. I want you to look at our passage and see how personal God takes things. Don't ever forget what it feels like to know that the Creator and Sustainer of all things hears your prayers. That he knows who you are. That he cares for you as a father who shows compassion to his children. That he loves you when you wander, and that he longs to have you home.



Epilogue

Before we get to our conclusion, there is a problem I now bring to your attention. What if God doesn't answer our prayers? This is most played out in physical persecution. What if God doesn't save you? I want to be sensitive here, because suffering is real and must be taken seriously. Think about Daniel, dropped into the lion's den. Thrown into the fire. Think about Paul enduring persecution. Getting shipwrecked and stoned. But they never doubted God's love for them. The fire of physical persecution served to sanctify them. Failure, suffering, and death threaten our faith. I pray that you will be able to say: Your steadfast love is better than life (Psalm 63:3). Believe that God is still good, and he will hold on to you. Even Jesus asked if there was another way, praying for deliverance, yet he still died on the cross. But if you are in Christ, and you die here on earth, you will be raised with him in glory, happy and in Heaven.

Let's see how the story ends:

*And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. **Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.** (Isaiah 37:36-38)*

This is a warning for those who oppose God. It's a warning for those who mock and misspeak against him. It's terrifying. These verses are placed at the end on purpose, and they're short as if to say that it was easy for God to do this. Sennacherib and Assyria did not take God seriously, so it's a brief and undramatic end for them. There's an irony here in that Hezekiah went to the LORD and was saved, while Sennacherib went to worship his gods and was assassinated by his own sons. Poetic justice, powered by prayer.

Big Idea

Let's review our points and application questions before our big idea.

Our first scene showed Senaccharib's Threat. Will you test the world as it threatens your faith? Our second scene was Hezekiah's Prayer. Will you pray for God's glory as a worshipful act of faith? Our third scene showed Isaiah's answer. Will you trust the Word of God and be strong in faith?

Here is the big idea for our sermon today: Trust in God, who delivers and defends his praying people – for the sake of his name and the praise of his son.

Conclusion

Let's go back to the beginning again for our conclusion. I asked you: Who do you trust? While we are tempted to trust in the ways of the world, our Heavenly Father holds out his hands to you. God is not far away. He is near to the broken-hearted. He comes close to the crushed in spirit. Our God is personal, and he wants you to seek him in prayer. Our God is also powerful. Nothing is too hard for him. He will show you who he is. He will show you what he can do. Your prayers proclaim a personal trust in our powerful God. From before the beginning of time, to the days of Isaiah and the Old Testament, to Jesus Christ and us here in the church age, and through future generations: Trust in God, who delivers and defends his praying people — for the sake of his name and the praise of his son.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)



Deliver and Defend

Holy holy holy!
God you condescend
To sinners who
Will trust you to
Deliver and defend.

Glory glory glory!
God your grace extends
To sinners who
Will trust you to
Deliver and defend.

Powerful and mighty,
Yet personal and true.
You hear our prayers and answer —
Nothing's too hard for you.

You save for your name's sake,
The praising of your son,
So we can come rejoicing —
Beholding him in love.

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Glory glory glory!
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Special thanks: Hanley Liu, Kevin Quan, and Jessica Lee