

7. Defeat for the Assyrians (1Q 2021—Isaiah)

Biblical Material: Isa. 36:1; Isa. 36:2–20; Isa. 36:21–37:20; Isa. 37:16, 21–38; Isaiah 38, 39.

Quotes

- Right is right even if nobody does it. Wrong is wrong even if everybody is wrong about it. *G K Chesterton*
- To say that you can kill in the name of God is blasphemy. *Pope Francis*
- There are two kinds of pride, both good and bad. ‘Good pride’ represents our dignity and self-respect. ‘Bad pride’ is the deadly sin of superiority that reeks of conceit and arrogance. *John C. Maxwell*
- Arrogance is an unhealthy ego in need of repair. *Thomas Faranda*

Questions

How does God deal with warring nations? What is the lesson here? Does the direct challenge to God by the Assyrian spokesman have an impact on what happened? Were all the 185,000 Assyrians bad people? Did they deserve death? What was wrong in Hezekiah’s display to the Babylonian visitors? What’s the application of these stories to us? How does God look?

Bible summary

Isa. 36:1 details the Assyrian conquest of Judah, with the exception of Jerusalem. Assyrian accounts confirm the capture of the fortified towns of Judah, but avoid mentioning the defeat at Jerusalem. Isa. 36:2–20 is the account of the Assyrian army general’s speech, boasting that no god could oppose them. He even cites the fall of Samaria. Isa. 36:21–37:20 gives us the account of Hezekiah’s response, and Isaiah’s assurance of behalf of the Lord that Sennacherib would return home only to be assassinated there. Isa. 37:16 is Hezekiah’s affirmation that the Lord is the only true God. Isa. 37: 21–38 is the conclusion of the story and the death of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. In Isaiah 38 and 39 Hezekiah prays that he won’t die, but then does not act wisely in showing the Babylonian ambassadors everything he had in his treasury.

Comment

“The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, / And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold; / And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea/ When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.... And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail, / And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal; / And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword, /Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!” *George Gordon, Lord Byron*

Byron’s poem commemorates this story, an example of praise for divine intervention—in this case God’s disposal of multiplied thousands of the enemy. But while for the people of Jerusalem, the action of God in killing 185,000 Assyrians was a clear sign of divine favor, what of the larger implications? How does God look? How does this relate to the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill?” What impact does this have on God’s reputation?

An in-depth reading of the story reveals that more is going on than first meets the eye. More than a conflict between nations, this is a direct attack on the nature and power of God himself. While God does not always choose to defend himself, in this instance he chooses to display his power as a way of trying to convince various sets of rebellious people that he is to be listened to. Again the great controversy perspective must not be lost sight of—for God is very

much involved in this human conflict, and is seeking to win enough time and respect to be taken seriously—by his people as well as by the arrogant Assyrians.

Just as an aside, it's interesting to note that Isaiah records that while Sennacherib is worshiping his god, then he's murdered by his sons. Obviously his god was not able to protect him, is the inference here. In a culture that viewed a god's reputation by his ability to gain battle victories and personal protection, the true God often had to work at a very basic human level.

Hezekiah's miracle, and then his later failure to witness wisely, reveals that God still works with us, even knowing our faults and failings, and even our future mistakes!

Let's imagine the perspective from the Assyrian side, from the army general. He sees himself as the king's right-hand-man, getting the job done. He is willing to try negotiation—a negotiated surrender—and fear tactics. But he is more than willing to use brute force, recognizing that this will also gain the Assyrians respect among other peoples. In fact the Assyrians had a reputation for extreme violence and cruelty. As he deals with Judah he must think they have a death wish, having rebelled after promising to be subject to Assyria. By now Lachish, and almost all the other towns have fallen.

“Why are you bothering to resist,” he asked them. “You can't win against us. Look at what you have on your side. Nothing! You have no military strength, and if you're thinking the king of Egypt is going to come to your rescue—think again! He's like a broken reed that if you use it as a walking stick to lean on will jab splinters in your hand. And if you're thinking that Yahweh god of yours will save you—forget it. Isn't he the one whose high places and temples Hezekiah destroyed, saying you could only worship at the temple in Jerusalem? An offended god! Look—I'll even give you 2000 horses if you could find riders for them! Some hope! Anyway, it's your god Yahweh who told me to come and destroy you anyway. This god Yahweh didn't help the Israelites just twenty years ago, and he won't help you people in Jerusalem now. We're making ready. Long siege or brutal attack—whichever way, we'll win. We always do. I received some report that Hezekiah was desperate, laying out lord Sennacherib's letter before his god Yahweh, praying for this pitiful, weak god to help. How futile! In the morning, you'll see. The whole world will see. Then everyone will know I'm right.”

Ellen White comments

The long-expected crisis finally came. The forces of Assyria, advancing from triumph to triumph, appeared in Judea. Confident of victory, the leaders divided their forces into two armies, one of which was to meet the Egyptian army to the southward, while the other was to besiege Jerusalem.

Judah's only hope was now in God. All possible help from Egypt had been cut off, and no other nations were near to lend a friendly hand.

The Assyrian officers, sure of the strength of their disciplined forces, arranged for a conference with the chief men of Judah, during which they insolently demanded the surrender of the city. This demand was accompanied by blasphemous revilings against the God of the Hebrews. Because of the weakness and apostasy of Israel and Judah, the name of God was no longer feared among the nations, but had become a subject for continual reproach. {PK 352}

When Sennacherib, the haughty Assyrian, reproached and blasphemed God, and threatened Israel with destruction, “it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand.” “So he returned with shame of face to his own land.” 2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chronicles 32:21. {GC 511}