

Overcoming an Irresistible Force

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening everyone and a big thank you to Rachel and Lynn for bringing us these very long chapters with quite a few tongue twisters in them. Not an easy reading, but well done. It was great to read, I think, the whole passage and hopefully we'll be able to get at least a bit of an overview of it this evening.

I wonder when you're reading prophecies in the Old Testament whether you sometimes wonder, well, how did it work out? So the prophet is printing God's judgment on Moab or one of the other nations, Edom, one of the other nations around Israel or on Israel and Judah themselves.

And you think, well, what actually happened? Here are the prophecies, what actually happened? Now, if you have a good study Bible, it will probably tell you, at least tell you a bit about it. But it's not often that in the book, in the prophecy, you also see the fulfillment.

And to some extent, that's what we're getting in these chapters of Isaiah this evening. If you've been following over the last number of weeks when we've been going through the book, you undoubtedly recognize that Assyria has been the big power that Isaiah has been prophesying about.

The one both which would be used as God's instrument and also would be judged by God. And the question then is, well, what happened to Assyria and to his king?

[1 : 1 8] And that is what is largely given to us in chapters 36 and 37. It forms kind of the end of the first section of Isaiah.

So the chapters up till now, the big power which the Israelites are having to worry about has been Assyria. When we go into the second part of the book, the big power is Babylon.

And Isaiah is looking forward to the captivity of the Israelites and all the things that happened then and afterwards. And chapters 36 to 39 kind of act as a hinge in the middle of the book.

36, 37, look back. 38, 39, look forward to the exile in Babylon. And they both serve to give some kind of historical substance in the midst of all the prophecies that Isaiah gives.

Here is what happened. These chapters have two kings. I think it's worth taking just a few minutes to remind ourselves of the two kings that feature here.

[2 : 2 4] The first is Hezekiah, the king of Judah. Now, if you remember the history of the kings of Israel and Judah, all the kings of Israel were bad. They were all evil.

Most of the kings of Judah also were evil, but there were a handful of good ones. And of the good ones, Hezekiah was arguably the best.

I think only Josiah would be a rival in that. Hezekiah was definitely a good, godly king. He was the one, as referred to in the passage in chapter 36, he was the one who got rid of all the shrines around the country, which instead of being used to worship God, were used for idol worship.

He was also the king who reinstated the Passover. The Passover, which had been neglected for many years, reminding the Israelites of the exodus from Egypt. It was in the time of Hezekiah and at his initiative that it was restored.

And we see quite a number of instances of Hezekiah showing a real faith in God. Now, that's not to say it's perfect. We'll see that this evening. We'll see it again next week when I think it's great.

[3 : 31] It's taking us through the following chapters. But Hezekiah was a good, godly king, albeit king only over a relatively small nation state in terms of world powers in that day.

Judah was pretty insignificant and no more powerful than half a dozen others that surrounded it in the area. Second king is this man named Sennacherib, the king of Assyria.

A few years ago, Andrew Marr did a quite ambitious television series, which he called The History of the World. And the second program in that was called The Age of Empires.

And he started with the story of Sennacherib. He described him as an empire-building maniac, ruthless to the old, merciless to the young.

And that is a pretty good description of the man we have here. He was a pretty nasty piece of work. He was cruel. He was evil. He was in many ways the total opposite of Hezekiah.

[4 : 37] But he was very, very powerful. Perhaps because it's so long ago, we perhaps don't realize just how powerful Assyria was in its time and for a very long period.

I think the Assyrian Empire was maybe the longest lived of all the ancient empires. And Sennacherib was a very powerful king. Let me just take a second because I think there's relevant background to what we're going to be looking at this evening to talk a bit about the early years of Sennacherib.

So we're going to put a couple of maps. Sennacherib's campaign. So concentrate at the moment on the one on the left. This is the Middle East. You probably can recognize the shapes of the land.

The Middle East in about 700-odd BC. I don't know how much you can read there, but the red circle up near the top is Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria.

And down in the bottom left, the kind of green, is Judah and Israel. But the key point is the empire was huge. The kind of green area is what it looked like immediately after the capture of Samaria.

[5 : 48] Remember, 725 BC, Samaria was captured by Assyria. Its people were carted away, and that was the end of the old kingdom. It then spread under Sennacherib and successors and eventually ended up down in Egypt.

Sennacherib became a king in 705 BC. At that point, as well as the empire he directly controlled, there were lots of states like Judah, which weren't part of the empire, but were paying tribute to him.

In other words, they were paying kind of protection money. So the Israelis were saying, if you pay us regularly a large proportion of your GDP, then we won't come and attack you.

And there were lots of nations like that at that point. King changes in the empire, and what happens? The states that have been paying tribute to him think, ah, here's our opportunity.

New king, he's going to have lots of things to occupy him for a while. He may have some rivals in his own country. We'll stop paying tribute to Assyria. And that's what Judah did, and what a lot of the other nations around about did.

[7 : 03] They kind of had mutual defense treaties saying we'll help each other. And they also brought in Egypt, down in the very bottom left of the map, Egypt, which was the great power in that part of the world in their day, although nothing like as great as Assyria.

So what happened then was that Sennacherib fairly quickly established himself. And the first thing he did was go down to Nineveh, which is a bit below. Babylon, rather, is a bit down below Nineveh there to sort out some problems there, because that was a real threat to him.

And then he went on the rampage through the lands to the west. And when he reached Judah, which was about 701 BC, as you'll see in the map on the right, he went down the right-hand side of the land.

And as it says in our passage, he captured all the fortified cities. And eventually, in the center of passage again, he came to a place called Lachish.

Now, Lachish is significant because when Sennacherib was attacking Lachish, he got his court artists out and he said, I want you to draw what happens. In all the gory detail, I want to have what happens so we can put it up as an example to others.

[8 : 15] And so Andrew Marr, when he was talking about Sennacherib, it was the siege of Lachish that he particularly looked at, because that's what we know about. It was quite stark what happened.

They built huge siege ramps. They built massive battering ramps, tore the walls down, went on the rampage through the city. The leaders of the people were killed publicly in particularly gruesome ways.

We won't go into detail about that. And those who were left were carted away, and then the city was burned to the ground. That was what Sennacherib did. That was the way he acted.

And it's almost a kind of early form of shock and awe. If I do this to this city, then the next one I come to, maybe they'll give in more easily, and they'll realize that they can't trifle with me.

And so having been to Lachish, he turns his attention to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, of Judah, rather. So on one hand, we have this good, but rather powerless in the world's terms, king Hezekiah.

[9 : 21] On the other hand, we have this really powerful, really cruel king, Sennacherib. And it's a totally unbalanced contest. In human terms, there is no way that Hezekiah can stand up to Sennacherib.

If he allows the city to be besieged, he is really just delaying the inevitable. Sennacherib will win, and will make an example of Hezekiah and others.

And then, as he's done with other cities, he'll cart everyone away into exile. And that's the background that we have in chapter 36. Sennacherib focuses attention on Jerusalem and saying, this is the next one I'm going for, and this is the big prize in terms of Judah, because this is where Hezekiah is.

Now, he's a bit of a problem. Jerusalem was a lot more difficult to take than the other cities. The way it was built, it was built on a hill, and it's very difficult, even with a siege, to take it.

Alongside that, Hezekiah knew this was going to be coming. And Hezekiah had taken quite a lot of steps to both fortify Jerusalem and to secure his water supply, the water supply being the thing that you really need if you're under siege.

[10 : 39] He built some clever tunnels and so on to make sure that was still there. So this wasn't going to be a quick win for Sennacherib. And it appears that he thought, well, let's try and get it without having to fight.

Let's see if Hezekiah and the Jews will give in. They've seen what we've done elsewhere. Let's see if they'll give in, and we can just take the city, and then we can head back to Babylon, to Nineveh, rather, having done our job.

And that's what's happening in chapter 36. Sennacherib has sent his envoys, and their job is to persuade the Jews to give in without a fight.

And it's very clever the way they go about it. It's a mixture of kind of half-truths and distortion of the truths, and some things which are pretty close to being blatant lies.

But it is very much trying to persuade the Jews that they have no chance, and they should give in without a fight. So let's just talk about a few things that's happened.

[11 : 45] I've called it tempting voices. So Sennacherib's representatives come, and Hezekiah sends some people out to meet them, and they start having a conversation.

And Sennacherib's representatives say, Egypt, you can't rely on Egypt. Egypt is just a splintered reed of a staff. Lean on it, and all that will happen is we'll go through, and we'll pierce your hand, and we'll wound you, but it won't help you at all.

Probably right. I'm not sure that Egypt would have come, to any great extent, to the defense of the Jews, but very much trying to say, you have no strong allies.

Second thing they said is that Hezekiah has removed the high places and altars. True, he'd done that.

We said that earlier. But they were saying, because Hezekiah's done that, your God's not going to help you. You've taken away the places where you worship Him, so He's not going to be pleased with you, and He's not going to come to your aid.

[12 : 57] Not true. Hezekiah, in taking down these altars, had taken away the places of idol worship. It had been a good thing that he'd done. Third thing that they said was, well, we could give you lots of horses.

Let's make this a bit more of a fair contest, and even at the moment, why don't we give you 2,000 horses? Only problem is, you've not got any riders to go on them.

You're so weak, you're so inadequate, you Jews, that even if we give you an advantage in the battle, you still couldn't do it. You still wouldn't be able to win.

And then the final thing they say at this point is that the Lord has sent them. We're down to verse 10, if you're following in the passage. As Sennacherib said, actually, this is God's will that I should take your city.

God is judging you. Judah, you've done lots of bad things, you've done lots of evil things, and God will judge you for that. Well, there's a half-truth there, because a lot of what we've read about in Isaiah was about God judging his people for going against him.

[14 : 08] But he had always promised that there would be a remnant who would enjoy his grace. And there was no way that God had sent Sennacherib with the purpose that Jerusalem should be destroyed.

So four lies, half-truths, call of what you like, said to Hezekiah's envoys that had been sent out. Now, at this point, the people who Hezekiah sent out are beginning to panic a little bit.

Not just because of what the messengers from Sennacherib are saying, but also because they can be heard by the soldiers and others who are guarding the wall. Because they're speaking in Hebrew, which was the language of the common people, and they were worried there could be a revolt here.

If these people on the wall hear it and are really terrified by what happens, then perhaps they will turn against Hezekiah and we will end up conceding.

So they say to the messengers that come from Sennacherib, look, can't you talk in Aramaic? Aramaic being the kind of trade language which the common people wouldn't know, but rulers would. And that just provokes Sennacherib's envoys even further, and they start speaking to the guards on the wall.

[15 : 23] And the things they say are, well, Hezekiah can't deliver you. Hezekiah, he's just weak. How can he possibly deliver you? Then they say, actually, you'll be much better off if you give in.

If you give in, you will get all your harvest back. You'll be able to come with us to our land, which would be exile and take away in disgrace effectively. But it'll be much better. You'll have new wine.

You'll have corn. Everything will be fine. In any case, they say, your God can't deliver you. He's not powerful enough to stand against Sennacherib.

And here's the evidence. All these nations round about, they had their own gods. And what good did it do to them? They're all destroyed. They've all been beaten.

So again, there's the powerful voice coming to the guards on the wall and saying to them as well, look, there's no point. Just give in. That's their credit.

[16 : 23] They don't. They all remain silent. And the ploy doesn't work. Let's have a bit of application for that. But doesn't that remind you of the tempter's voice of Satan tempting us?

Whether it's through inward voices in us or it's through people outside who are saying things to us and arguing against us, we hear lies and half-truths all the time.

So people saying, all religions are equally useless. What good did any religion do? So we've got the new atheists who perhaps not quite as strong as they were a few years ago but certainly have a lot of influence over many people.

And essentially their take on the world is religion is bad. It just leads to war and bad things happening. Religion is useless. And a lot of people might say that to us if we talk to them about our faith.

Or when we're tempted, we might have this thought that the devil would plant in, well, it'll be better. I'll enjoy it. I'll be happier if I do this thing even though I know it's not what God would really want me to do.

[17 : 36] After all, doesn't God want me to enjoy my life? Well, if I do this, I will enjoy it. Sometimes even gets to the extent that it is an accurate messenger said, almost of thinking, could this be God's will?

Is this what God wants? And tempting us to do something and to throw doubts into our mind, the way that Satan did with Eve, to throw doubts into people's mind about what God's will is and what God wants for us.

And then the two that I think are most powerful as the devil attacks us, God can't help you and you're not strong enough. As we face temptations, at times do we feel that.

I just can't cope with this. I know it's wrong. I know I shouldn't be doing it. But I can't help it. I'm not strong enough.

I will have to give in to temptation. And perhaps like the messengers here, the thought is almost, well, I could give in quickly and easily and then it'll all be over. Or I could hold out for a long time, but I'll still end up giving in and it will be worse for me overall.

[18 : 50] These are the kind of temptations, perhaps, that we sometimes feel in our daily lives, whether coming from outside, from people who would be attacking the gospel, or coming from inside, from the voice of the devil inside us, seducing us and wanting us to think we're better off if we do what we know is wrong.

But it's all lies. And as in these chapters, God very clearly made it apparent to everyone that he was powerful, that he could save them from the predicament they were in.

So we should know that there is no temptation that faces us that we shouldn't be able to overcome. One of my favorite verses in the New Testament from 1 Corinthians 10, God is faithful.

He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. And then it says he will always provide a way out. And if at times we feel, I've just got to do this.

I just can't resist it. It's too strong. The temptation is too strong. I'm too weak. Not even God can protect me from it. We need to look at verses like this and say God can protect me.

[20 : 09] God is stronger than the devil. And if I trust in the Lord, I can resist the temptation. I can overcome in the way ultimately the people of Judah did here.

Yes, we will be tempted. Yes, we will be tested. At times it will be really, really difficult. We'll almost feel I can't bear this. And yet God will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear.

There is always a way out. There is always a way to overcome the wiles of the evil one. So I think it's the key lesson from chapter 36.

Now chapter 37 is very long. We're not going to go through it in great detail. You'll be pleased to hear. But let me just talk through a few of the key points from it. I've called it take it to the Lord.

Take it to the Lord in prayer, of course, from the old hymn, What a Friend We Have in Jesus. And that's what happens in chapter 37.

[21 : 11] In chapter 36, we have the devil at work trying to persuade the people of Jerusalem that they can't win. In chapter 37, Hezekiah realizes the only way he can overcome is through the Lord's strength.

And he does a number of things. The first thing is he sends people to consult Isaiah. Now Isaiah, for many years, had been Hezekiah's advisor, confidant, someone who he knew he could go to and could trust.

So in this time of greatest difficulty, of greatest trial, he sends to Isaiah. And gets a very positive message back.

Don't be afraid. This is verse 6. Don't be afraid of what you have heard. These words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.

Listen, when he hears a certain report, I will make him want to return to his country and then I will have him cut down with the sword. So they go to the prophet, they go to the spiritual advisor, and God speaks through him and speaks a very positive message.

[22 : 23] Good listen there for us. If we're really struggling with something, if we're not sure what to do, if we think things are going to be too strong, too powerful for us to cope with, one of the things we definitely should be doing is finding someone we can trust and seeking their help and their guidance.

Perhaps an older Christian, perhaps someone who we know is particularly godly, perhaps someone who's been through difficult times themselves and can help us in our situation.

But when things are hard, when times are bad, it's good that we can know that there are others round about us, in our church, possibly elsewhere as well, who can give us wise guidance and can pray for us and can help us to know what is the best way ahead.

So Hezekiah consults God's servant. Secondly, it happens is that Hezekiah very directly seeks God's help.

So yes, here and in the past, he's gone to Isaiah and looked for Isaiah to pray for him. But actually, in this dire circumstance that he finds himself, he decides he needs to really get before God and to pray himself.

[23 : 40] So we're at the beginning of this section of the chapter. We have Sennacherib, or through his commanders, coming back and saying, well, no point resisting.

We're going to beat you. Let's just, you give in and things will be much better for you. How can you prevail when all the other nations round about and their gods have proved powerless?

So a bit of a repetition of some of the stuff from chapter 36. But then the key verses in the chapter are verses 16 through to 20.

Hezekiah's prayer. And this is one of the great prayers, I think, of the Old Testament. It's a prayer of desperation, and at the same time, it's a prayer that really recognizes how great God is.

So verse 16, Hezekiah recognizes God, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim. You alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth.

[24 : 45] You have made heaven and earth. And whenever we come before God, the first thing that we need to know and realize is just how great our God is.

To recognize that before Him, all of us, even the most powerful people in our world, are absolutely helpless and weak. He is the God of heaven.

He is the maker and the sustainer of our world. He is the one who raises up kings and who takes them down again. And in our own personal circumstances, He is the one who is powerful to help us.

So we need to recognize God's greatness. Second thing in Hezekiah's prayer, I've called we need to guard God's reputation.

Verse 17, Give ear, O Lord, and hear. Open your eyes, Lord, and see. Listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.

[25 : 48] Hezekiah shows that he is jealous for God's reputation and that people should know just how great God is. I wonder sometimes whether that's something perhaps we are lacking a bit in as we live as Christians.

Yes, we recognize God's greatness. But there are so many things going on around about us that we seek to belittle God or to say He's insignificant or He doesn't exist or He doesn't matter.

We should be jealous for God's reputation and we should be praying, Hallowed be your name. That is really what that bit of the Lord's Prayer is about.

It is about God's reputation and how that is maintained in our world. So that's verse 17. Verses 18 to 19 is proclaiming God's uniqueness.

So he said, Yes, it's true, Lord. The Assyrian kings have laid waste all these people on their land. They've thrown their gods into the fire. But they were only gods of wood and stone fashioned by human hands.

[27 : 00] And Hezekiah said, I know that you are not a god like that. Their gods were powerless. It was no good them trusting in them because they didn't really exist except in a way that had been made into an idol.

You, God, are unique. You're the only true God. And again, as we come to God in prayer, we need to recognize God's uniqueness and how much he sits above everything in this world that he is all powerful.

And then finally, in verse 20, Hezekiah seeks God's glory. Now, Lord, our God, deliver us from his hand so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, Lord, are the only God.

When we pray, is our primary objective that God may be glorified? Yes, there are things we would love God to do. Yes, there are things we need in our lives and our Heavenly Father wants us to come and to ask for them.

But what is our key motivation as we ask? It shouldn't be our comfort or our ease. Rather, it should be that God will be glorified as he works among us, as he works in our lives, that people will see what God does and will give glory to him.

[28 : 20] And ultimately, Hezekiah says, that is why I am praying this prayer. Yes, it's so that Jerusalem can be spared, so that my life can be spared, which is in great danger.

But ultimately, it is so God may be recognized as the only true God. Now, it's worth taking a few minutes with that prayer. It's such a great prayer. We're taking time to walk through it.

We're not going to walk through the rest of the chapter in any detail. 21 to 35, our God speaking through Isaiah, speaking first to Sennacherib and pointing out the futility of what he's doing.

Speaking also later on to Hezekiah and saying to him that things are going to be okay. You will be preserved and more than that, there will be a sign you will even have enough food to eat despite the great siege that's been going on, despite the Assyrians and all they've done.

There will be, in the first couple of years, wild food to eat and after that food that you've sown. And the key message here is that Hezekiah needs to trust God's word and to believe what has been told to him.

[29 : 33] And then finally at the end, I put this, recognize God's work. So we have what finally happened. Get there in the end. There's a plague in the Assyrian camp.

The angel of the Lord goes out and puts to death 185,000. Sennacherib at that point gets really discouraged and thinks there was no point going on and he heads back home and the city is saved.

And then the final verse is about 10 years later that Sennacherib was killed by his sons as Isaiah had prophesied. So as Hezekiah took it to the Lord, the Lord acted, the city was saved and ultimately the evil one was done away with.

So a good outcome to a very difficult situation for Israel. But just to finish, let me reflect on what has happened over the longer period.

Why was Israel, why was Jerusalem and Hezekiah in such a mess? And the answer is because they had tried lots of different things to break free from the Assyrians and all of them had failed and it wasn't until right at the end when Hezekiah prayed that God acted.

[30 : 56] So Hezekiah for many years had paid tribute to the Assyrians. He stopped that for a while but then when Sennacherib came and attacked, Hezekiah offered to restart paying the tribute.

I think at that point Sennacherib wasn't very impressed and wanted to make an example of him. Hezekiah tried to form an alliance with Egypt. Now Isaiah had warned against that but Hezekiah in an attempt to bolster his position and to give him some kind of defence against Assyria had tried to form an alliance with Egypt and as Sennacherib's messenger said rightly, Egypt turned out to be a broken reed.

It was no good at all. Hezekiah, as I said, prepared for a long siege. He got things in place so the city could hold out for a reasonable period. Now to be honest, unless Sennacherib got a bit fed up and went away, there was no way ultimately they could hold out but Hezekiah had done these things and thought by doing this I can maybe make things okay.

And then he tried to negotiate a settlement. I think that's what's happened in chapter 36 when his people go out to meet with Sennacherib's people. They're hoping they'll be able to negotiate some kind of settlement that the Assyrians will withdraw.

And all of these fail. And it's only at the last minute when Hezekiah is in absolutely dire straits that he turns to God in prayer and he sees the answer to his prayers.

[32 : 30] You wonder what would happen if right at the beginning Hezekiah had brought it to the Lord. Perhaps none of this would be in our Bibles because God would have acted.

And I think it's quite significant that God allows Hezekiah to come right to the edge before he acts. To get to that point of desperation when Hezekiah recognizes there's nothing he can do in this situation but throw himself on the Lord and seek the Lord's help.

If Sennacherib had been killed in one of the other battles or if he'd been killed back in his own city of Nineveh, then that might have been a cause for rejoicing for the Israelites. But it wouldn't have strengthened their faith in the Lord or their understanding of the importance of bringing things to God in prayer.

And what a really important lesson that is for us when things are difficult when times are hard what do we do? Do we look for lots of solutions of our own?

Do we try to work things out and think, yes, if I do this and I do that and I do the other, that might work and that might make things better for me? Or is the first thing we do to come and to bring it before the Lord in prayer and to seek His help recognizing that only with Him and through His power can we really prevail, can we find the solutions to all the issues in our lives?

[34 : 03] I, and I'm sure you as well, can think back in situations where if the first thing had been prayer and yes, after prayer there may all be actions that the Lord directs us in, but if the first thing is prayer then God will bless us much more quickly than if we wait till we're in a dire situation and almost as a last resort we bring it to God in prayer.

As the hymn says, Oh what peace we often forfeit Oh what needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

Let's go away with that thought in our minds. It's a kind of strange passage in many ways in some ways quite interesting but in some ways quite foreign to us and yet it has these very important lessons lessons about how we deal with temptation and make sure we don't give in to the tempter's voice but particularly lessons about how when we are in any kind of difficulty we should bring it to the Lord and we should leave it with him knowing that he is much more powerful than we are.

Let's pray together. Father we thank you for your word to us this evening. We thank you for this account of your dealings with your ancient people and of how you demonstrated how much greater you are than even the greatest powers in our world.

We thank you that when Hezekiah prayed you answered in wonderful ways and you rescued him and your people. Help us in our lives not to give in to the snares of the tempter not to be taken in by the deceiving words that we may hear but when we face difficult situations to know that you are able to protect us through them and to bring them to you in prayer.

[35 : 56] Thank you for your word. We thank you for the privilege of meeting together as your people. We commit ourselves to you now in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.