

6. The Lord defends His people

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 April 2010

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at page 326, and we'll have a moment of prayer. See how in Scripture Christ is known.

Father, we praise you. You have preserved for us this story in all its power, in all its magnificence, and yet this is a story which has life-bearing truths for heart and mind.

We pray, indeed, that our hearts will burn, our minds will be stretched, and we will be led to walk more firmly and strongly in the way of faith, as we look at your word together, and we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. I don't know how many of you watched the leaders' debate last Thursday.

I'm not going to make a political point. The pulpit is not for political points. We make our own mind up about what we think on politics and politicians. The interesting thing about that debate wasn't just the debate.

[1 : 12] It was the spin that was put on it by the various parties and by the various newspapers, because the great British media don't trust us to make up our minds on our own, and the whole thing has been analysed from top to bottom and from side to side.

We might well imagine that spin was invented in the last few decades. Nothing of the sort. Listen to these words from the 8th century BC, written by Sennacherib or by one of his spin doctors, more likely.

If you go to the British Museum in the so-called Lachish Room, which is the city of Lachish, which is mentioned here in this chapter, you'll find what's called the Taylor Prism, and fortunately a translation beneath it.

And this is what Sennacherib says, Hezekiah, the proud and ambitious king of Judah, who did not submit to my yoke, I shut up in his royal city like a bird in a cage.

Now there is spin for you from many centuries before Christ. That is how Sennacherib saw the situation, this ambitious, jumped-up man.

[2 : 30] Now we would have to concede that Sennacherib knew a great deal about ambition, a great deal about posturing and bluster, but here we have it. Hezekiah, king of Judah, I shut up like a caged bird in his royal city.

And the situation is absolutely dire. Sennacherib has most of Judah defeated. He's come against the cities of Judah, he's destroyed them, he's destroyed Judah's second city, Lachish.

I'll come back to that later on, not as a lesson in ancient history, but because it's important what the chapter means. He's destroyed Lachish, and now he's on his way to Jerusalem.

And in case you're worrying, which you're probably not, in verse 9 about who Terkaha, king of Cush, was. Cush is Ethiopia, by the way. Sennacherib had heard word that the king of Cush, shortly to be the pharaoh, had come out of Egypt, no doubt to oppose him.

So Sennacherib goes to mop up operations there, and then he sends an insulting message to Hezekiah, basically saying, Hezekiah, you're finished.

[3 : 37] You're history. There is no point in standing up to me. And that's the situation then, which, as I say, Sennacherib writes, and we can hear it after the centuries, he is in charge, and this petty, jumped-up kinglet, this proud and ambitious man, as he calls him, is totally within his power.

Now this whole series we're looking at, I've called Divine Power in Human Weakness. And this is what this story is about. This is a story of how the Lord defends his people.

There is no contest if it's just Hezekiah and Sennacherib. There is no contest if it's just Judah and the king of Assyria. But the new dynamic that's coming into this is this is no longer a contest between the king of Assyria and the king of Judah.

This is a contest between the king of Assyria and the king, the Lord of hosts. Now let's look at the story then as it develops in three parts. First of all, in verses 1 to 12, we have an urgent plea. As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, that's the threatening words, he covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord.

[4 : 52] Now sackcloth is a sign of grief and of mourning. There's an interesting sub-theme run through scripture about clothes as an outward sign of the inward heart which culminates in the phrase in Romans, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's not about the clothes we wear outwardly, but about the character we have inwardly. So Hezekiah wearing sackcloth is not showing off and being ostentatious. It's showing he means business.

He wants a word from the Lord. Hezekiah turns not to his political advisors and his spin doctors. He turns to the prophet Isaiah.

He sent Shebna and the senior priest to the prophet Isaiah, son of Amos. And in verse 4, he says, it may be that the Lord your God...

Now, when Hezekiah says, the Lord your God, he doesn't mean he himself doesn't have a personal relationship with the Lord. What he means rather is that he recognizes Isaiah as the source of authentic revelation from the Lord.

[6 : 00] He turns to Isaiah knowing that he'll get the truth from him. He's not going to get it necessarily from the court. He'll certainly get it from Isaiah. He wants a word from the Lord.

And notice the way in which he expresses it. Verse 4, it may be the Lord your God heard all the words of the Rabshakeh, the principal spokesman of Sennacherib, whom his master, the king of Assyria, and hears the phrase, has sent to mock the living God.

This word mock is the key to what's happening. Flash back to 1 Samuel 17. We won't look it up just now, but over and over again, David says to Goliath, you have come to mock the living God.

Like I said a week or two ago, that this story in many ways is a rerun of the David-Goliath story. A new David is facing up to a new Goliath. Mockery of the living God.

In other words, what Sennacherib is saying, from his perspective, seems absolutely true, but he is not facing up to reality.

[7 : 10] Verse 12, have the gods of the nations deliver them, says Sennacherib, Gozan, Haran, Rezef, all the other things. He's saying don't listen to Hezekiah.

Indeed, he's actually going further than his ambassadors. His ambassadors said, don't listen to Hezekiah. Sennacherib said, don't listen to Yahweh, don't listen to the Lord. He's no word for the situation.

Isn't there so much been the case throughout all the centuries, including our own time? The idea that the living God speaks is something that's foreign to so many people.

The idea if we want advice on how to live, if we want a word for today that we go to an ancient book, that seems crazy. Except that this is not just an ancient book.

This is the living word of the living God. So this urgent plea of Hezekiah and the confidence of the prophet in verse 6.

[8 : 09] You notice in verse 4, Hezekiah says, it may be perhaps. Now, Isaiah doesn't do perhaps and maybes.

Isaiah says, say to your master, thus says the Lord. Now, what Isaiah does here is something very important. If Isaiah is wrong here, he is going to be exposed as a false prophet.

If what he says doesn't come true, then he is going to be utterly discredited. Notice he doesn't say, oh, cheer up Hezekiah, stiff upper lip and all that.

Things are not as bad as they appear to be. He says the Assyrian king is going to be sent back to his land. He doesn't specify how it's going to happen. And that's why Hezekiah needs faith.

Isaiah doesn't specify what we are told in verses 32 and 33 of how the Assyrians are going to be destroyed. He simply tells them the Assyrians will not be able to destroy you.

[9 : 15] That's why faith always has to look beyond the visible. Remember what's said of Moses in Hebrews 11. He endured because he saw him who is invisible.

And that's why God's people as often have to pray in the words of the psalmist. Why, oh Lord? How long, oh Lord? That's the situation here. This urgent plea, this gives urgency to our prayers and realism to our faith.

Isaiah would be no help at all if he had simply said, be strong, be brave, Hezekiah. Because Hezekiah was doing his best to be strong and brave. Isaiah brings a word from the Lord, but it's not a word from the Lord that actually takes away the need for faith.

Now remember that in this world. We live by faith. We don't live by sight. The promises of God are true. The promises of God are reliable. But they don't necessarily tell us how He is going to work out His promises.

And that's why we need to pray and pray with faith. So the first thing then is an urgent plea. It is followed secondly by a powerful prayer, verses 14 to 19.

[10:34] Sennacherib sends a letter to Hezekiah, and in many ways verses 14 to 19 are the very heart of the chapter. Hezekiah received the letter, went up to the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.

Now this is a symbolic action, but it's important. I think we mustn't see it simply as almost a kind of ritual.

It's not. If you've ever received such a letter, then you need to spread it before the Lord, and sometimes literally spread it. Say, Lord, I can't answer this letter.

Lord, I can't handle this situation. I'm putting it in your hands. That's what Hezekiah does here. Now remember, there is the great fact of the Assyrians.

This problem is not just going to be wished away. This huge army, flushed from its conquest of the province of Judah already, probably had already sent the Egyptians, the Ethiopians, scuttling back to their own land.

[11:38] How is Tainajudah? Tainajudah? Let me get this. I was going to say, Tainajudah. My tongue often goes ahead of my brain.

Anyway, how is tiny Judah going to stand up to this great juggernaut? So the first fact, the second fact, is not just the Assyrian menace, there is the helplessness of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah is totally unable to deal with this. And this is where all genuine prayer begins, doesn't it? After all, prayer is an admission of helplessness, is it not?

When we feel confident, then the temptation is not to pray. When we can see a way out of the difficulty, the temptation is not to spread the letter before the Lord.

And notice what Hezekiah does. Hezekiah speaks great truths about God. And this leads to greater assurance about God.

[12:40] It's very important often, actually, to speak and to speak aloud these great truths about God. Because by speaking them, by making them our own, then we are growing in our assurance.

So in His helplessness, facing this juggernaut, facing this monstrous oppressor, what does He do? He doesn't do what His Father does. His Father cosies up to Him and much good it did Him.

First thing, He makes certain facts, makes certain facts plain about Yahweh, about the God of Israel. And the first thing is that He is on the throne, O Lord, the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim.

Now the cherubim, the guardians at the gates of Eden, of the tree of life, the guardians of the throne of God, they were in the temple above the Ark of the Covenant as a symbol of God's glory.

And when Isaiah has his great vision, in the year that King Uzziah died, this is what, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne. That's where He begins. The throne of the universe is occupied, and it's not occupied by Sennacherib.

[13:51] Exactly the same thing happens in the book of Revelation. When John looks out on the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperor, calling himself a God, what does he see?

He sees a throne in heaven, and on it sits the Creator Himself. The earth is filled with His glory. That's what our prayers need to begin, that God is on the throne. Too often I find my prayers are little more than giving God advice about how to handle the situation.

Now, of course, I don't put it as crudely as that, but I'm sure many of us have done that. You know, almost, Lord, if I were in your position, I would do this. Like the Emperor Frederick of Prussia who once said, if I had been present on the day of creation, I would have given some very useful advice. And sometimes, sometimes our prayers are like that. This prayer is making great assertions, great truths about God, that He is on the throne.

And since He is on the throne, there is no power greater than Him. That's the point. Secondly, He is the Creator. You are God who made heaven and earth. That's the very heart of Israel's faith.

[14:59] My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. That's not just a statement of theology. It means there is nothing in heaven and earth which is greater than Him.

There is no power in heaven and earth which He cannot withstand. There is no circumstance in heaven and earth which He cannot control. But also, He is the only God.

That all the kings of the earth, verse 19, may know that you, O Lord, are God alone. You see, Sennacherib had mocked the gods.

Very easy to mock the gods because they are not gods at all. They are not. They are not the makers of heaven and earth. They are human creations. And notice what he prays at verse 19. That all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Yahweh, are God alone. I suspect if I had been Hezekiah, I would probably have prayed rather differently.

[16:00] Haven't I done rather well, Lord? After all, I had a rotten example from my dad. I got rid of the idolatry. I have obeyed your word. I have stood up to the Assyrians.

Don't I deserve a little bit of credit for that? That is not how he prays, though. That all the kings of the earth may know that you, O Yahweh, are God alone.

I wonder if that's why some of our prayers don't seem to be answered. Because we are praying from wrong motives. We're not praying for the Lord's glory.

We are praying rather in a kind of bargaining way. Remember that in prayer, more than almost anywhere else, we are totally dependent on grace.

We've nothing, we've no bargaining counters there. We've nothing to bring into the heavenly throne room and say, look, Lord, I've done this. Will you do that?

[16:58] It's not. It's, Lord, you are king. And I want the world to know that you are king. As Wesley sang, O that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace.

The universal nature of Israel's faith that all the kings of the earth may know. So we have a plea followed by a prayer and then thirdly we have an authoritative prophecy in verses 20 to 37.

The plea and the prayer are followed by a prophecy. Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah saying, notice the contrast of verse 10.

Sennacherib says, thus you shall speak to Hezekiah king of Judah. Do not let your God deceive you. Isaiah in verse 20, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, your prayer I have heard.

You see the contrast there. This is a flashback to chapter 18 verse 20 where the rabshake Sennacherib's ambassador said, do you think you can fight a war with mere words?

[18:10] Well, of course that's true but these are different words. These are the words of the living God. This is the voice that said, let there be light and there was light.

This is the voice that speaks from heaven. And notice how back in chapter 18 again, verse 36, the people were silent, answered him not a word.

The king's command was, do not answer him. Luke of Ecclesiastes says, there is a time to speak and a time to keep silent. The time to keep silent had happened. This was the time to speak.

These are the words of God. So what has God got to say then in this situation? There is first of all a devastating rebuke to Sennacherib. Verse 21, this is the word that the Lord has spoken concerning. She despises you, she scorns you, the virgin daughter of Zion. She wags her head, the daughter of Jerusalem. Why is Zion able to despise Sennacherib?

[19:11] It's because he who sits in the heavens laughs. As we sang in the words of Sam to he who sits in the heavens laughs.

See, Sennacherib had laughed and ridiculed. His was the ridicule and laughter of the fool. The Proverbs says the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns on a pot.

But the laughter of Yahweh is the laughter of control. And there are two particular things in this devastating rebuke to Sennacherib. First of all, he is rebuked for imagining that he's a god.

Verses 22 to 24. Verse, Whom have you mocked and reviled? Once again, the word mocking. In 23, you have mocked, Yahweh.

And these words in 23 and 24, it is very interesting since the Assyrian records were deciphered. These are almost the exact words used by many of the Assyrian kings.

[20:14] Got up the heights of the mountains, fell the cedars of Lebanon. The Assyrians are great at telling you the difficulties they had overcome. Dried up the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt.

This is poetry, of course, meaning they had totally humiliated and defeated Egypt. Now, Sennacherib never actually defeated Egypt, though his son, Esser, hadn't mentioned at the end,

did.

But you see, the point is, Sennacherib, you claim that you're a god. You claim you can do everything. You are unstoppable. You see, it's the arrogance of contemporary thinking, isn't it? We've mastered everything. But, as we've noticed the terrible winter and now this ash cloud from the volcano, just shows how helpless we are.

The 19th century, the poet Swinburne wrote, glory to man in the highest, for man is the measure of all things. And sometimes in our contemporary world, we are so conceited about what we can do.

[21 : 13] Now, of course, the Bible never despises that. I mean, if you read the wisdom books like Job 28, the book of Ecclesiastes, these things are not despised, but they are seen as gifts of God. They don't make us into gods, and we are totally vulnerable.

So Sennacherib thinks he is a god. There is nothing on earth that can stop me. Climb the mountains, dried up the streams, and so on.

Exactly what the Lord himself is said to do. And in a later generation, the prophet Nahum uses exactly these words about the Lord himself, who dries up the streams of water, causes the hills to quake, and so on.

So he's claiming to be a god. But in verses 25 to 26, Isaiah says, you're not a god, you are simply an instrument in the hands of the true God. True God says, I determined it long ago.

I planned from days of old what I now bring to pass. This is developed in great detail in Isaiah 40 and following, the Lord is the God of history.

[22 : 22] And he is going to treat Sennacherib the way he treats others. You behave like a god, so you're going to be humiliated. You're not a god, you're simply an instrument.

Now, we are not Sennacherib, of which we may be very thankful, but sometimes the spirit of Sennacherib does enter us, enters us as Christians as well as non-Christians, doesn't it?

When we become conceited and say my own hand has done this, sometimes in the work of God, we can become very conceited when we think we're doing rather well. But we must realise that everything we do is only a gift of God.

Without me, you can do nothing. Now, we imagine we can do lots of things without the Lord, and we can do lots of things, but nothing of lasting substance, nothing that will endure into eternity.

A devastating rebuke to Sennacherib, then. You think you're a god? You're not. You're simply an instrument. You're not the Lord of history. You're simply part of history. Secondly, in the prophecy, there's an encouraging answer to Hezekiah, verses 29 to 31.

[23 : 38] Now, these verses are not altogether easy to interpret, but what I want to suggest is this. Like all God's answers, they go beyond the immediate and the specific.

As William Cooper says in Hezekiah, you are coming to a king. Large petitions with you bring, since his grace and power are such.

We can never ask too much. As we heard Isaac Shaw this morning, remember what he was saying, have a vision that is in some ways so absurd that can only be done with God's help.

Don't ask God for a fiver if you need a million pounds. Now, I'm not saying, of course, and please don't misunderstand me, if you ask God for a million pounds, you're going to get it. If God thinks we need a million pounds, of course, he'll give it to us, and we know that.

The point is we are terrified to ask God, because we are afraid he's not going to answer, and then we're going to be humiliated. What God is saying here is the devastation of the land is going to be reversed.

[24 : 47] After all, the Assyrian occupation of the land had caused complete, not just destruction of cities, but destruction of harvest, and so on. That's the point, it seems to be in verse 29.

You shall eat what grows of itself, second year what springs of the same, and then by the third year you'll be able to sow and reap again. All the activities will begin. And why is that? Because God is not only Lord of history, he's Lord of nature, he's Lord of creation.

From out of Jerusalem, there'll go a remnant. And this is one of the great themes of Isaiah, the remnant will return. The zeal of the Lord will do this.

The very words are used in Isaiah 9, to us a child is born, to us a son is given, the zeal of the Lord, the hosts will accomplish this. God is totally committed to this.

So you see the encouraging answer to Hezekiah, oh I'll deal with Sennacherib, yes, I'll deal with a specific problem, but the answer goes far, far beyond that.

[25 : 51] His love has no limit, his power no measure, his power no boundary, known unto men, for out of his infinite riches in Jesus, he gives us and gives us and gives us again.

That's God. So there's a rebuke to Sennacherib, there's an encouragement to Hezekiah, and thirdly, there is a complete rescue for Jerusalem.

Verses 32 and following. Ignominious retreat followed by death. Now notice two things here. First of all, this is the word of the Lord.

Thus says the Lord, verse 32, verse 33 declares the Lord, this is the covenant God, notice, I will defend this city for my own sake. Well that's great, but notice, for the sake of my servant David. That is absolutely wonderful. He will not go back on his word. David of the past and indeed the David of the present are going to be saved.

[26 : 56] And the angel, as at the Exodus, the angel of Yahweh destroys the Assyrian army. Let's get back to our spin doctors. The Sennacherib, as I say, or his scribes, or his spin doctors, records on the Taylor Prism, the account of this campaign.

Now what's particularly fascinating is that he describes coming and threatening Jerusalem. He describes the fall of Lachish.

Indeed, if you go to that room in the British Museum called the Lachish Room, you'll find wall carvings that are taken from Sennacherib's principal palace in Nineveh, showing the destruction of a city by the Assyrians, this was the principal room in Sennacherib's palace.

Why should the king of Assyria decorate the main room in his palace, the room where all his power and pomp was on display, with the depictions of the overthrowing of an insignificant mountain town in Pharaoh and Judah?

There's only one reason, surely. Sennacherib had failed. He had not taken Jerusalem as he had hoped to do. He doesn't go on to say, and I destroyed Jerusalem, Hezekiah would not submit it to my yoke, I kill, I humiliated and killed.

[28 : 26] There is a thundering silence. The record simply, the Assyrians will never tell you failed. They're perfectly happy to tell you about the obstacles they faced and how they overcame them. They're certainly not going to talk about defeats.

It's rather like an election, you know, we really won although we lost, you know, that sort of thing. I mean, this is, so the Assyrian record's silence shows us that something must have happened. Some centuries later, the Greek historian Herodotus describing this incident says the army was destroyed by a bubonic plague, which is perfectly probable given the incendiary conditions of ancient warfare.

But whatever the method that was used, the Bible is in no doubt at all, this was the work of God. The angel of the Lord destroyed Sennacherib's army.

Byron says the angel of death spread his wings on the blast. He breathed in the face of the foe as he passed. This is the word of the Lord.

[29 : 33] What about these last two verses, verse 36 and 37? The ineffectiveness of the gods. Now we know from historical records that Sennacherib lived another 20 years, went back to Nineveh, lived another 20 years, but in the big story, in the big picture, he's already history.

There's no further place for him. And surely the point of verse 37 is Sennacherib's God was totally powerless to defend him.

Hezekiah's God saved him. Sennacherib's God couldn't defend him. And indeed, he was killed by his own sons and escaped into the land of Ararat.

Now you see, as the chapter ends, these mysterious Assyrian names, as it were, fade into the distance. We're not going to hear anything about them again.

Esser Haddon is mentioned briefly in the book of Ezra, but he's not a big player in God's story at all. But if you look later on at Psalm 48, Psalm 48 ends this way, Walk about Zion.

[30 : 51] Consider her ramparts, that you may tell it to the generation following. Why is that? Because Zion is still there. Sennacherib has failed to destroy Zion.

The Zion Psalm, Psalm 48, the beautiful versituation, the joy of the whole earth, probably springs from this episode, and probably as well Psalm 46 that we read from earlier in the service.

The Lord will help her at break of day. And this phrase, Be still and know that I am God. Nothing to do with contemplative prayer. Phrase be still means throw down your weapons because the Lord is king, the Lord is conqueror.

The final impression of this story is the Lord defends his people and the Lord is enthroned in Zion. And that is a gospel which we can hang on to in tough times. Let's pray. Walk about Zion. Go around her number her towers that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God, forever and ever.

[32 : 06] Father, we thank you that you are not just Hezekiah's God long, long centuries ago, but you are our God and will be the God of our children as long as your people are on earth.

We praise you for this great story and for his great hero who is none other than the Lord himself. And we give you our thanks in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our King.

Amen.