

Our God Saves: Turn

A Savior for the Exiled

Isaiah 36-39

Mark Vroegop

When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, "Say to your master, 'Thus says the LORD: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the young men of the king of Assyria have reviled me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.'" The Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah, for he had heard that the king had left Lachish. Now the king heard concerning Tirhakah king of Cush, "He has set out to fight against you." And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah king of Judah: 'Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? 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?'" Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD. 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" (Isa. 37:5–20, ESV).

The book of Isaiah is a masterpiece of biblical literature.

It's a book filled with theology, prophesy, warnings, judgment, hope, grace, and mercy. This Old Testament book combines various genres, including narrative, poetry, and apocalyptic material. As you make your way through the book, it's amazing how what you see and what you read changes—almost in an instant.

Last weekend, I took my wife away for a special birthday trip to the Sierra Nevada mountains. And we decided to try a fourteen-mile mountain bike trip. The experience was incredible. It had a little bit of everything. We climbed one thousand feet over four miles which meant we were exhausted. The views from eight thousand feet were amazing. The trail was narrow and frightening at times. And around

every corner, there was another amazing, and potentially deadly, view. The experience was incredible because of the mix of emotions. Excitement and exhaustion. Amazement and fear. Curiosity and caution. Riding the trail, it was hard to know when to look up or when to keep our eyes on the path in front of us.

The mountain bike trek reminds me of the book of Isaiah. The views are incredible and frightening. At times, we've been flying at eight thousand feet, moving quickly. At other times, we've needed to pull off and consider what we're reading. Every few chapters, the scene changes.

Today, we're concluding our first of three sections in Isaiah. The theme for the book is "Our God Saves," and I've divided the book into three subsections: Turn, Believe, and Live. We're going to start the next section, chapters 40-55, in November after we take a few weeks to focus on unreached peoples.

This first section, Turn, has been an invitation for God's people to turn to God for their help. As they face the threat of an Assyrian invasion and as they feel increasingly isolated, the question is where will they turn and trust?

Chapters 36-39 feature three scenarios in the life of King Hezekiah where his trust was tested. Hezekiah's response when he felt the isolation and pressure can be instructive to us. Hezekiah is wrestling with feeling vulnerable and being an exile. Let's see what we can learn about the three challenges Hezekiah faced: fear, control, and affirmation.

As we look at each of these, I encourage you to ask yourself a few questions:

1. Where do I experience fear, control, or affirmation?
2. What is my typical response?
3. How does the gospel (trusting in Christ) change my approach?

In other words, what does it look like practically in your life to trust in God when you feel vulnerable and isolated?

Fear

The first scenario connects us to a national crisis. The northern kingdom has already fallen to the global superpower Assyria. The people of Israel in the north were removed from their country (2 Kings 17). So, when we read 36:1, we need to feel the weight of this moment. The king of Assyria invades Judah, and every fortified city falls. Historians believe this was forty-six cities.¹

From a city about thirty miles away (Lachish), the king of Assyria sends a high-ranking military officer (Rabshakeh). Think of him like the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It's interesting that the location of the meeting is mentioned: "the conduit of the upper pool" (36:2). That might sound familiar because

¹ J. Alec Motyer, [*Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 248–249.

it's the same place where Isaiah confronted Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, and called him to believe. But he refused. History is repeating itself.

Envoys from Hezekiah meet the Assyrian military commander. He engages in a bit of psychological warfare as he mocks the people's trust in Hezekiah by:

- Rebuking the people for thinking that their words are more powerful than the armies of Assyria (36:4-5)
- Diminishing the power of Egypt to help them (36:6)
- Ridiculing their trust in God and attempting to add to a religious controversy (36:7)
- Suggesting that the Assyrian invasion is commanded by God (36:10)

And when the Jewish leaders ask the commander to not speak in Hebrew, he doubles down with a loud rebuke calling into question Hezekiah's trust in God:

Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah: "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. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, "The LORD will deliver us." Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?"' (Isa. 36:13–20).

Consider what a major concern this must have been. Assyria had been successful in conquering other nations, and the commander is playing into the fears and frustrations of the people.

Hezekiah's response is commendable. It seems that Isaiah offers it as an example of someone who did turn to God when facing fear. Notice his response:

- 37:1 – Hezekiah's immediate response is humility and dependency. He humbles himself and seeks the Lord.
- 37:3-4 – He sends word to Isaiah, and we get a sense of the depth of his humility. Hezekiah's fear is leading him to brokenness.

God not only hears his prayer but makes a promise to Hezekiah that the invasion will not be successful (37:5-7). And when he receives a threatening letter from Assyria, Hezekiah's response is to turn to God again. We're seeing a great pattern here.

He goes up to the house of the Lord and spreads out the letter before the Lord. Here's what he prays. It's brief but loaded with faith in the living God:

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 (Isa. 37:17–20).

Where are you facing fear right now? What situations in your life create an overwhelming sense of dread, pessimism, or anxiety? What are your typical responses to fear? Knowing the gospel—the promises of God's love, care, and protection in Christ—how does that affect your prayer life? What do you need to “spread out” before the Lord? What should you be praying about that you're not?

In the case of this threat, the Lord directly intervenes. God saves the city of Jerusalem by striking down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in the camp and through a coup orchestrated by Sennacherib's sons.

Turning to God isn't meant to be merely theological or theoretical. It's meant to be applied in the moments when we're scared, sick to our stomachs, and very worried. God invites us to turn to him when we're afraid.

Control

The second challenge that Hezekiah faces isn't from an army; it's from an illness. After a mighty victory and a powerful display of faith, Hezekiah's faith begins to falter. This section in Isaiah doesn't end with a heroic portrayal of the king. Instead, we find an honest recording of an imperfect ruler.

One of the reasons I love the Bible and believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God is because of material like this. The Scriptures are full of hope with the promise of redemption through Jesus Christ. But they are also brutally candid about the failures of God's people—at every level. The Bible shows us that faith is often a fight. Often, we don't win the battle. Or, if we do, it's a subpar victory. That should give us pause.

Now, you need to know that these two challenges in Hezekiah's life and his faltering faith move us into the next section of Isaiah as we move from Turn to Believe. The next section is going to show us why we should believe and why we should trust in God and pursue constant spiritual renewal. In other words, we can't trust in our previous faith steps. We need to consider how to apply faith right now.

In chapter 38, Hezekiah becomes deathly ill. Isaiah visits Hezekiah and delivers devastating news: “Set your house in order for you shall die, you shall not recover” (38:1). It must have been a severe blow, and Hezekiah turns to prayer. According to verse 2, he turns his face toward the wall and prays to the Lord. Now, that's good.

But his prayer provides hints that all is not well. He says:

Please, O LORD, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight (Isa. 38:3).

This is an interesting prayer because, at one level, it's true. Hezekiah is a good king, especially in light of his father. But it's intriguing that he prays like this. It's not a good sign. In fact, 2 Chronicles 32:24-25 provides this assessment:

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death, and he prayed to the LORD, and he answered him and gave him a sign. But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem (2 Chron. 32:24–25).

Despite his faith in God when facing an invading army, Hezekiah tries to control God with a bargain in his next trial. Hezekiah acts as if he doesn't deserve this sickness: He's been faithful. God should be gracious to him.

Remarkably, God answers Hezekiah's prayer (38:5). Aren't you thankful that God still answers our prayers despite our ulterior motives and our desire to manipulate or control God? Hezekiah receives the grace of God because of God. Take note of the reference to "the God of David your father" in verse 5. There are divine promises in play here.

Additionally, God offers Hezekiah a sign. The shadow of the sun will move backwards. But 2 Kings 20:8-11 tells us that Isaiah gave Hezekiah a choice as to whether he wanted the sign to be the sun moving backward or forward. According to 2 Kings, Hezekiah chose "backward" because it was a hard sign. Interesting. Something's not quite right.

Isaiah 38:9-20 records the reflections of Hezekiah, and much of it is excellent. But something appears again in verses 21-22. God promises to heal him. God provides a sign. But when Isaiah suggests a simple remedy, Hezekiah resists. He asks for another sign.

Hezekiah's father refused to ask for a sign because of brazen unbelief. Now we find Hezekiah asking for a sign because of his double-minded unbelief. Ahaz didn't want to admit his need. Hezekiah wants to be sure God is going to make good on his promise. Ahaz was a rebel. Hezekiah wants control.

Christian, do you see a picture here of yourself? It's remarkable how in one situation we can be full of faith and confidence in God. Maybe you can think back to a season in your life where your faith was alive. You were bold in your belief. But I would guess that you can also think of scenarios where your faith faltered. Each of us have areas of our lives where it's hard to relinquish control. Maybe it's because of previous pain—"I can't go through that again." Maybe it's because you think you learned the lessons of the past. Or maybe it's because some issue is striking at the core of your sense of identity or worth.

Where are you most likely to be a double-minded person? What are the issues where you struggle with control? What is your typical response to wanting control? Anger, anxiety, blame-shifting, judgment?

Consider what it looks like for you to stop bargaining with God. Realize that God is still being gracious to you as you try to grab the reins of your life.

Fear and needing control—these are two of the faith challenges Hezekiah faced. We do too. And there's one more.

Affirmation

Hezekiah's reign and this section of Isaiah end with a "facepalm" moment. This is the last that we hear about this relatively good king in this book. We find him falling for flattery. Hezekiah's self-importance causes him to act unwisely and dangerously. And in the end, his final words are all about himself.

Chapter 39 records that, after Hezekiah's healing (from the Lord by the way), he receives a group of envoys from Babylon. At the time, Babylon is a vassal state of Assyria. But they are looking for allies as the Assyrian empire is starting to show signs of weakness.

The king of Babylon sends these envoys with "letters and a present to Hezekiah" (39:1). And the text tells us that Hezekiah welcomes them gladly (v. 2). Before we see what happens next, it's important to see what is going on here. Ray Ortlund says:

"Hezekiah feels flattered, and flattery is hard to resist. His sense of self-importance is clouding his sense of God's importance. 'These envoys have come such a long way, from such an important country, to gush over me!' . . . His insecure need for worldly recognition is ruining him. He throws open the doors and draws back the curtains and unlocks his vaults and brags to the Babylonians about what a big deal he is. Poor, naive Hezekiah! He wants to be 'a player' in international politics. He wants to be up in the big leagues, even if God isn't there."²

Are you familiar with this strategy of the devil? Sometimes he seeks to ruin God's people by direct opposition. But, more often, he tries to pervert our faith with our own craving for the approval of others. We want people to think well of us. We want to be loved. We want to be respected. We want to be in the halls of power. It can be a seductress.

Hezekiah takes the envoys on a tour! According to verse 2, Isaiah shows them everything in the palace. When Isaiah appears (v. 3), he asks Hezekiah about their visit. After Hezekiah tells Isaiah that he showed them everything, the prophet offers a strong rebuke:

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" (Isa. 39:5–7).

² Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 226.

It's a stern warning to Hezekiah of the mistake he's just made. But notice Hezekiah's response! His need for affirmation is now revealed for what lies underneath: insecure self-concern. Look at what he says in reply to Isaiah:

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good." For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my days" (Isa. 39:8).

Do you hear the tone deafness of the king? He only cares that the future judgment of the Lord will not happen in his lifetime. His self-focus and his faltering faith when affirmation is in the air is staggering. And yet God still loves him and spares him.

Where do you melt the wrong way with affirmation? When was the last time that you found yourself living for the approval or praise of others—even going along with something that you knew was unwise or not right? Do you see the warning here from the life of Hezekiah?

Fear, control, and affirmation are all opportunities for faith to shine or for us to falter.

Applications

In light of what we find in this text and the power of the gospel, allow me to make three closing applications.

1. **Our God saves sinners.** Our only hope in life is that a loving, kind, and mercy God extends grace to people who would destroy their lives on their own. Like Adam and Eve, we create our own exile. And God sent his Son to rescue us from us!
2. **Our God keeps sinners.** After salvation, our only hope of making it to the end is God's ability to keep us faithful. Even though we are "spring loaded" to fall away from God³, there's a divine tether to our lives. Every Sunday is a reminder that God is working to help dig our roots deep.
3. **Our God restores sinners.** The Christian life is filled with highs and lows. One moment, we can be full of faith. The next week, we are full of doubt. And yet the offer of God is for people to humble themselves, seek afresh the mercy of God, and turn to him.

Turn to him. When you are afraid. When you crave control. And when you are affirmed. Turn to him. Because...

Our God saves!

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop.

© College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com

³ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [Isaiah: God Saves Sinners](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 228.