

In whom will we trust? (Isaiah 36-37)

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The battle for the hearts and minds

In Vietnam, back in 1967, the American military set up a unit under General William Westmoreland that was given the task of winning the hearts and minds of the people of South Vietnam. They pulled together the resources of the Army and the CIA and the State Department and the Agency for International Development, and they launched a series of 'psychological operations' designed to pacify the Vietnamese population and win their trust and loyalty. They used carrots like aid and development money, and they also used the stick of quite brutal intimidation, but of course history records that their efforts ended up as a dismal failure.

However powerful the American army was militarily, they ended up losing the war because they could not win the battle for the hearts and minds. And many would say that history is repeating itself in Iraq today.

Two thousand years ago in the middle east, the Assyrian army found themselves fighting a similar battle. They had flattened the countryside of the kingdom of Judah, and they had surrounded the capital city, Jerusalem, and they were slowly starving the people into submission.

And in the mean time, they started to launch their psychological operations; they started their efforts to work on the hearts and the minds of the people in Jerusalem and the leaders, to persuade them out of a long and drawn out siege, and the talk them into surrender.

And here in the middle of the book of Isaiah, in this hinge section of chapters 36-39, between the first half dominated by the Assyrian invasion and the second half dominated by the Babylonian exile - here in Isaiah 36 and 37 we have recorded for us that battle for the hearts and minds of the people of Jerusalem.

If you're a student of history it's interesting from that vantage point. I think it's kind of fascinating to read a bit of military propaganda from two thousand seven hundred years ago. But it's not in the Bible merely for the sake of providing something interesting for the history buffs.

It's about something much more important than that. It's about the way the whole book of Isaiah is to do with a battle for the hearts and minds of the people of Israel - about who they will trust in and who they will listen to. And it's about the way the whole Bible poses the same question to you and me. Again and again and again, in each new season of life, in each new challenge that we come up against, we find ourselves working through the same question; we hear the world preaching to us, reaching out to win over our hearts and minds; and we have to ask ourselves once again: in whom will we trust?

So here in Isaiah 36 and 37, as we follow this tug of war for the hearts and minds of the people of Jerusalem, I want us to remember that this is not really something that is all that distant or remote from us; it's a lot like the tug of war for our own hearts and minds, and the arguments and the answers are pretty similar, really.

Enemy propaganda (36:1-22)

The section begins with an account of the propaganda campaign that the Assyrian army launched

against the people of Jerusalem to try and induce them to surrender. So the king of Assyria, sends his field commander, and the officials of the city go out to meet him - Eliakim the palace administrator and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the recorder. And he talks to them. He delivers a message from his boss, the king of Assyria. He speaks to them in their own language, in Hebrew, and eventually, verse 11, they say to him: "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it. Don't speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall." And he says in reply: "Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things, and not to the men sitting on the wall < who, like you, will have to eat their own filth and drink their own urine?"

And so for the rest of the message, from verse 13 onward, he continues in Hebrew and he speaks in an even louder voice, to make sure that everyone up on the walls behind can hear as well. And there are three main strands to his propaganda.

Intimidation (vv. 4-6, 8-9, 12)

The first is intimidation. He is the commander of a very large army, and he is besieging a city that is very small really - the capital of an obscure little province with no great strength. So he takes every opportunity to intimidate them and to make them feel the weakness of their position.

He says to them, verse 4: "This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? 5 You say you have strategy and military strength < but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? 6 Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man's hand and wounds him if he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him."

And then, verse 8 and 9 - and I think he's taunting them: "Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses < if you can put riders on them! 9 How then can you repulse one officer of the least of my master's officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen?". He's saying, even if we gave you the horses to fight us with you wouldn't be able to put riders on them.

And he paints a graphic picture, verse 12, of the what it will be like when the siege wears on and it gets to the point where the people will be forced to eat their own filth and drink their own urine.

We face a similar kind of intimidation as Christians, of course. Not necessarily the filth and urine, but the feeling of being very small and outnumbered and insignificant. There's a voice that whispers in our ears and says: Forget about all the reasons and the arguments and so on to do with believing in God and trusting in Jesus - forget about those for a moment and just ask yourself, "Does it really feel plausible to believe these things when you're so much in the minority? Hardly anyone believes these things anymore." It can feel very lonely to hold onto what you believe about Jesus when you're the only one at work or the only person in your tutorial at Uni or the only member of your family who believes in these things. It's intimidating.

Seduction (vv. 16-17)

But the really powerful propaganda campaigns are never just about intimidation; they're about seduction as well. They're about carrots as well as sticks.

So here in Isaiah 36, the field commander of the Assyrians lifts up his voice and he speaks in Hebrew to the men sitting on the wall, and he says - verse 13: "Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! 14 This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you! 15 Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, 'The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'

16 "Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern, 17 until I come and take you to a land like your own < a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards."

It was a lie, of course. The Assyrians intended nothing of the sort. They were a particularly brutal and nasty kind of imperial power; their aim was really genocide - there was no 'land of grain and new wine and bread and vineyards' that they were going to take the people away to. The Germans had a similar story when they first started sending the trainloads of Jewish people off to the Eastern front, to the concentration camps.

And Satan does something similar to us as well. He promises an alternative promised land - "a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards." He promises an alternative heaven - one you can have here and now, one that doesn't cost you anything, except your soul. And there's always a morsel of truth that's there to bait the hook. It is hard to keep living as a Christian, consistently and sacrificially, year after year, to keep on putting Christ first. There are days when you look at your non-Christian friends and you think: "Gee, life would be a whole lot easier if I was living like they were."

And there's truth in that. And so you start to believe that the fantasy promises of heaven without God really are true and worth believing in.

There is a seductiveness about it all that can be very powerful.

Theology (vv. 7, 10, 18-20)

And underneath all of the intimidation and the seduction there is a theology. Because Satan is a theologian. The first theological argument in the Bible is the one constructed by the serpent in the garden of Eden. The world has its theology - it has its theories about God, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, and it preaches them to us all the time.

And the same thing happens here in Isaiah 36. The field commander knows nothing about the God of Israel, but he still has arguments and assumptions about God that underlie his propaganda.

So he says, verse 7: 'And if you say to me, "We are depending on the LORD our God" < isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar"?' The reality, of course, is that the high places and altars that

Hezekiah removed were ones where the worship of God was all mingled in with the Canaanite fertility cults, and he removed the high places in obedience to God. But there were superstitions and attachments and religious traditions that he would have offended when he did it; there were toes he would have he trodden on, and there would have been some of the people up on the wall who would have found the argument quite convincing.

And then, verse 10, there's another kind of half-truth, when the field commander says: "Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the LORD? The LORD himself told me to march against this country and destroy it." He'd obviously picked up on the fact that prophets like Isaiah had warned about the fact that God was going to bring the Assyrians to chasten Israel and punish them, and so he works with that and he says: "if that is the case then you might as well join me."

And then finally, verses 18-20, there's the more conventional theological argument - the one that is really the bottom line of what he really believes himself. Verse 18: "Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? 19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? 20 Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"

The other arguments about the high places and the LORD telling him to invade - I suspect those things are just propaganda devices. This is what he really believes. What he really believes is that the God of Israel is no different from all the other gods of the nations, and that he is more powerful than all of them. And so in verse 20 he concludes his speech, and the people sit there in miserable silence, and Eliakim and Shebna and Joah go off to take the message to Hezekiah the king.

Hezekiah's response (37:1-7)

Hezekiah's response is recorded for us in chapter 37. It's a twofold response, and it shows us pretty clearly that Hezekiah is unusual among the kings of Judah, because he is a godly king. He is really one of the shining exceptions in that whole line of kings - not perfect, as you see if you read chapter 38 and 39 - not perfect, but still at the end of the day a king who stands out as a godly man in the way that he responds.

Sackcloth (v. 1)

In the first place, verse 1, he responds by tearing his clothes and putting on sackcloth. He feels the weight of the situation, and he grieves over it, and he takes it seriously, and he comes with a humble and a penitent heart to God. Jesus was the one who said, "Blessed are those who mourn." Not those who indulge and entertain and distract and divert themselves all the time, with TV and career and food and wine and real estate and clothes - not those who manage to somehow keep fooling themselves that everything is fine and try not to think about the sin in their hearts and in the world. No - Jesus said, blessed are those who mourn. And Hezekiah mourns. He tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth.

The prophet (vv. 2-7)

And he goes to the temple and sends his officials to Isaiah the prophet. He looks for God, and he turns to the one who is speaking the word of God - in the same way that we would go to the Bible - he looks for God and he listens to what he has to say. Verse 2: He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. 3 They told him, "This is what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them. 4 It may be that the LORD your God will hear the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the LORD your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives." 5 When King Hezekiah's officials came to Isaiah, 6 Isaiah said to them, "Tell your master, 'This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard < those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. 7 Listen! I am going to put a spirit in him so that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword.'"

It seems kind of simple, doesn't it. He sends his messengers to the prophet, and he says, "Please pray." And they bring him back a message, a word from God.

Prayer and the word of God. The temptation for us is to think that those things are just Christian cliches - the standard answer, the pious tradition. "Pray and read the Bible". It's actually a whole lot more than just pious tradition. It's a spiritual battle, and it's the way we stay alive as Christians. We pray, and we read the Bible. It's that simple, but there's so much that hangs on it.

Enemy propaganda (37:8-13)

Well in verses 8 to 13 there's a second round of enemy propaganda. The content is much the same as the last time, so we won't dwell on it, except to make the obvious point that Satan loves to repeat himself. He can come back at us with the same temptation, the same accusation, the same argument, again and again and again and again, like waves beating against the shore, and the fight to keep standing as a Christian often involves continually defending the same ground.

Just because you fought the battle against materialism when you were a penniless student doesn't mean it won't come back again to bite you when you're married with kids a decade later.

Just because you resolved all the intellectual doubts in your twenties doesn't mean they won't all come back in new shapes and forms in your thirties and forties and fifties. Satan loves to repeat himself, and sometimes we just need to repeat ourselves back to him.

Hezekiah's response (37:14-20)

Prayer

So in verses 14-20, Hezekiah responds in a similar way to his response at the start of the chapter. He goes to God and he prays. He goes to the temple and he spreads the letter before God.

Theology

And the content of the prayer that he prays reveals the theology that undergirds him in the crisis.

He resists the intimidation and the seduction and the warped theology of the Assyrian propaganda because he himself is grounded in the truth, and he relies on that truth as he prays.

And so he prays, verse 16: "O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the

cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. 17 Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God. 18 "It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. 19 They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. 20 Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God."

It's good theology, isn't it. Theology matters. And it matters that our theology is not just theory that we like to talk about but something we hold onto when it is put to the test.

Promise and fulfilment (37:21-38)

The rest of the chapter we won't read now. What it's about is a promise that God gives to Hezekiah through the prophet, through Isaiah. God listens to Hezekiah's prayer and he answers him and he promises him that Jerusalem will not be defeated. Despite the might of the Assyrian army, despite the tiny, fragile defenses of Jerusalem, the Assyrians end up retreating and going home, and the city survives.

And the historians have actually recovered Sennacherib's account of the siege, and his boasting about how he had the king of Judah locked up in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage, and then he just glosses quickly over the fact that he never actually conquered the city, and he ended up going back to Assyria with Jerusalem still unconquered.

The battle for your heart and mind

God can be trusted. The God who gave his son to die for you will not suddenly turn against you or stop loving you. The God who raised Jesus from the dead will not be overpowered by the world, or by your sin, or by the devil. God can be trusted. And we need to keep fighting that daily battle to believe that and to live on the basis of it.

We need to remind ourselves of it. As Martin Lloyd-Jones said in one of his sermons, we need to talk to ourselves instead of just allowing ourselves to talk to us. We need to remind ourselves of these things, and when we're put to the test we need to resolve that we're going to live by them.