

Whom Will You Trust When Your Faith is Mocked?

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Can I add my word of welcome? My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the Senior Pastor of St Silas Church and it's great that you could join us as we look together at Isaiah chapter 36.

It would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at Isaiah chapter 36 so that we can look at that together. If you don't have a Bible at home, you could find that easily online at Bible Gateway, the website.

But let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer. Gracious and loving Heavenly Father, we ask that you would speak to each of us this morning by your Spirit.

That you'll give us ears to hear your word, heads that can understand what you're saying to us and hearts that are willing to change and follow you. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, the Bible passage we're looking at this morning makes us ask the question, who do you really trust? Or what do you really trust?

[1 : 03] When the chips are down, when the pressure is on, will you really trust the living God? It's hard to do that when people mock you for being a Christian.

When you face ridicule. Maybe you're at high school and you can think of classmates who just pour scorn on you for being a Christian. Or maybe you can think of that from colleagues in the workplace.

Or even from your own home, from a non-Christian spouse or from a parent who doesn't believe. And it's hard when the alternatives around us seem so trustworthy, apparently, when we can't see the God we're living for and putting our faith in.

And it looks to our eyes as though you can put your trust in money or career or comfort or good looks or university qualifications.

And those things seem to work out pretty well. Now, Isaiah chapter 36 is a chapter about the practicalities of faith. And as we get into it, and over the next few weeks, look at this section through to the end of chapter 39.

[2 : 12] It's like the hinge on which the book of Isaiah turns. And I hope that we'll see how relevant it is to our day-to-day lives. God's people at the time were living in the land that God had promised them.

They were under a king in the line of great King David, a royal line of God's chosen kings that ultimately leads to our king, to Jesus Christ.

He's a descendant of Hezekiah, who's the king at this time. And God's people are in a time of great crisis here. It's 701 BC. And there is a massive empire in the region, the Assyrian Empire, well-documented historically.

And their swarming army conquered the nations around them ruthlessly. And their emperor, the tyrant, Sennacherib, has made demands of God's people.

God's people are Judah at the time, living around Jerusalem. And Sennacherib's made demands of them to pay tribute to him. And their king, Hezekiah, has refused that tribute.

[3 : 14] So have a look at verse 1 of chapter 36 to see what happens next. Verse 1. In the 14th year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them.

There is at this moment one other fortified city to go. It's about to fall. And that is the city Lachish. And you can go to the British Museum in London and you can see the Lachish reliefs, which were excavated.

They're from that time. They're stone-sculptured pictures of these events. Lachish on his throne. People being brought to him and slaughtered and tortured.

And a slogan underneath that says, Sennacherib, the mighty king, king of the country of Assyria, sitting on the throne of judgment before the city of Lachish, I give permission for its slaughter. Sennacherib recorded in his own annals that he had conquered over 200 fortified towns and cities. Sorry, he destroyed 46 fortified towns and cities.

[4 : 28] And that he'd taken captive over 200,000 people. It was a terrifying thing. If you were one of God's people at that time, looking out from Jerusalem, what you can see is very powerful and it's very scary.

It's very nasty. What happens next is Sennacherib sends his chief of staff, the Rabshakeh, off to Jerusalem. And the aim for the Rabshakeh is to destroy the faith of God's people.

That's the scene. And the key challenge comes to Hezekiah in verse 5. Have a look with me. You say you have counsel and might for war, but you speak only empty words.

On whom are you depending that you rebel against me? So it's that allegation. What you're trusting in is just empty words. Me words compared to a great army.

The words of God. And then on whom are you depending? In other words, whom do you trust?

We're asked that very same question every day.

[5 : 39] In whom do you now trust? Are you going to trust and serve what looks visible and powerful all around you and build your life on those things? Or will you trust God and His Word, the Bible?

So our first point this morning, know your enemy and the mockery of faith in God, of trust in God. Know your enemy and the mockery of trust in God.

The Rabshakeh there, he's got an agenda and it's to demoralize people so that they stop trusting God and they trust worldly power instead. And we sometimes forget that we have an enemy as well who has that same agenda in our lives.

The New Testament says that our enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion waiting for someone to devour. Satan, the spiritual evil one, he longs to turn you away from trusting God. And as we hear the Rabshakeh's strategy, it is a case study for us in the devil's techniques that he will deploy against you.

[6 : 44] So that you might find that as you see what the Rabshakeh does and says here, you can think of the same kind of strategies being used against you today with some effect to unsettle you from being a Christian.

The first thing the Rabshakeh does that we should notice is that he goes for outright ridicule because it's effective. Outright ridicule. He pours scorn on the people.

It's loaded with clever rhetoric. One example of that, he never refers to Hezekiah as a king.

Whereas when he describes Sennacherib, verse 4, thus says the great king, the king of Assyria.

In verse 8, he says, the king of Assyria could provide you with more horses than you've got riders for them. You know, do you want some horses?

Well, we've got more available than you have cavalry to ride them. Then in verse 7, the leaders of Judah ask the Rabshakeh to start speaking in the customary Aramaic language that the people around won't understand because he's speaking in Hebrew and everyone can hear him.

[7 : 55] And in verse 12, he says this, was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things and not to the people sitting on the wall who, like you, will have to eat their own excrement and drink their own urine?

So he taunts them. Have you ever been taunted for being a Christian? Made to feel stupid? Oh, you're not one of those Bible bashers, are you?

What are you doing tonight? Oh, you're not back with the God squad again, are you? What? You're not a Christian, are you? What, the virgin birth and all that? You believe that stuff? It's painful.

But this chapter reminds us that that is the devil's work. Let's not be fooled by his tricks, destabilized. Let's remember, this is because I'm in a spiritual battle and I'm not going to be fooled by that.

So he ridicules. And then the substance of his argument has two sides to it, really. The first one is to say, your faith in the living God is futile.

[9 : 04] Utterly futile. So he says in verse 7, God won't even help you anyway. Verse 7, 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?

Now what's happened there is Hezekiah rightly reformed the worship of God by God's people so that it was in accordance with the Bible. But the Rabshakeh is using that reform to sow the seeds of doubt.

The God you trust, are you sure you're even right with Him anyway? Just as someone might look at us and say, but there are all these different denominations. How can you be so sure that you're right, that you're made right with God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, that the Bible's got all that?

How can you be so confident in that when there are other people who would say they're Christians, who worship in different ways? Then in verse 10, he says, Your God's on my side.

Verse 10, 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. And we see around us today people who might want to turn us away from being a Christian, but would be saying, But if there is a God, we've got no problem with Him anyway.

[10:37] As long as you're just a good person, and come on, we're all good people. God will forgive us the rest. Then the Rabshaker tries to make faith in the living God look stupid by pointing at other faiths that clearly aren't true.

So have a look at him doing that in verse 18. Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, The Lord will deliver us. Have the gods of any nations ever delivered their lands from the hand of the king of Assyria?

Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? It's a good question, isn't it? Where are they today?

Where are the gods of Sephavim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand?

Who of all the gods of these countries have been able to save their lands from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand? Don't we see that kind of strategy today?

When we see documentaries on the BBC, on Channel 4, about crazy religious superstitions, and then just the implication. This is what religion is like.

[11:45] You Christians, you're in the same boat as them. It's like believing in Thor, being a Christian. It's like the tooth fairy. It's like horoscopes. When, of course, faith in the God of the Bible is in a completely different category to those things.

Those things are man-made. The living God of the Bible, he made everything. But that's the line of argument. Your faith is utterly futile.

And then here's the other side of it. He says, My master will give you what you're really looking for. In verse 16. Do not listen to Hezekiah.

This is what the king of Assyria says. Make peace with me and come out to me. Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern until I come and take you to a land like your own, a land of corn and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.

Well, the genius of this is this is the language of God's promises to His people. And here is the alternative, saying, Come to me and I will give you what you're looking for.

[12:59] Just as we might see today, sin being packaged up for us to look so attractive. You know, if you'll just stop being a Christian, you'll find that you'll have peace.

You can discover your true identity. You can have rest. You can have a glorious future. If you just live for yourself. When God tells us in His Word that peace and rest and security and identity and a glorious future, these are things that only God can truly give us.

So that's the Rabshakeh and His method. But rather than be demoralized by pressure, by times of crisis, they're a chance to stretch our faith.

When we get mocked for being a Christian, it's a chance to stretch our faith in ways we've not done before and say, No, no, no, really, under that pressure, I will stand. I will trust God's Word.

And wonderfully, Hezekiah models that for us here. So that's our second point. Our first was Know Your Enemy. Our second is, See Your King. See Your King and His model of trust in God.

[14:11] How should we respond when our faith is mocked? Well, look with me at verse 1 of chapter 37. When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the Lord.

Now, the sackcloth is a mark of repentance, just as we might come before God in confession, in a confession prayer. The coming into the temple, the temple was like the phone box.

It was the place you went for prayer at the time. Coming into the presence of God in prayer would be our equivalent to this. And Hezekiah at that time, he sends people to Isaiah, the prophet, to pray for him and for the people.

And there's hope in verse 4 of chapter 37. He says, 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. And then he gets a word of encouragement to trust. In fact, he already has a word to trust. Back in chapter 10 of Isaiah, God promised through Isaiah that the Assyrian empire will be destroyed, that it won't overcome Jerusalem and God's people there.

[15:29] They just have to keep trusting. But then he's given this word of encouragement here in verse 6. Isaiah said to them, Tell your master, this is what the Lord says.

And look at this. Do not be afraid of what you have heard. Then verse 7, listen. It's striking, isn't it? When you're feeling destabilized, mocked, spend a bit less time listening to the voices around you. Don't be afraid of them. Listen instead to God and his word. And what Hezekiah does here to express his continued faith in God is remarkably straightforward, isn't it?

It's so profoundly simple. It's reassuring. We're not missing anything here. Faced with mockery, he prays to God and he listens to and trusts the word of God.

It's a great model. And it makes him a great king as well. For what God's people need is a king who will be faithful to God.

[16:37] And because the king is faithful, God will bless and protect the people. And that's great news for us because we have one who, like Hezekiah, was faithful.

Our king, Jesus Christ. When he was mocked, when he was tempted by the devil to renounce his faith in the wilderness and the devil said, if you are the son of God, command these stones to become bread as he was fasting.

And Jesus, our king, responded faithfully with God's words. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And when our king, Jesus, was arrested and then mocked by the soldiers because they didn't think he was a real king. And when he was strung upon a cross and he was scoffed at by the passers-by, he said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

And because he was faithful, God has vindicated him. He rose and he rules and he will return. So that for you and me, do you feel that your faith is being chipped away?

[17:54] That you're weary of being a Christian when Christianity is so looked down upon in our society and talked down by the powers that be?

Well, look at our king, Jesus. Look at the way God vindicated him. The way he was faithful so heroically. And God raised him.

The resurrection is still true. God did raise Jesus from the dead. And when we pray to God like Jesus did, when we trust his word like Jesus did, we can look forward to our vindication.

And back to Hezekiah here. God vindicates him. That begins here. So we've thought, know your enemy. Secondly, see your king. Our third point is, live by faith. The outcome of trusting God.

Have a look with me at verse 7 of chapter 37. Listen, says Isaiah to Hezekiah, listen, when he, that is the Rabshakeh, hears a certain report, I will make him want to return to his own country and there I will have him cut down with the sword.

[19:03] Then verse 8, when the field commander, the Rabshakeh, heard that the king of Assyria had left Lachish, he withdrew and found the king fighting against Libna.

Do you see the irony there? The Rabshakeh all along has been saying, you can't carry on trusting the living God. It's just trusting mere words. But then he's used words to try and pull them away and then when he hears a rumor, just a mere word, the whole army withdraws.

And the events continue next week but already here, Hezekiah's faith in God is being vindicated. After all the bluster of the Rabshakeh and how frightening that would have been, the Lord just makes a short, simple promise and exactly what he says happens.

Just as for us today, for all the bluster you can find online and on TV and in the media and from friends against the God we trust in, God has kept every promise he's ever made.

Jesus was raised, people saw him alive again and for the last 2,000 years God has quietly but steadily and powerfully been building his church.

[20 : 19] So who will you trust when your faith is mocked? Will we build our lives on what we can see as though this world is all there is? Or will we trust the word of God about what we can't see?

I wonder if we could each ask ourselves, when people look at our lives, can they see that my faith is real? that we don't worship the gods around us of money and sex and comfort and popularity.

They can see that in the way I live my life. What does real faith look like? We see what it looked like for Hezekiah. What does it look like for you and me? Could we ask God for help with that?

What step of faith could you take? What could you do in your life to demonstrate to the people around you that God is real? that God is worth trusting?

How could your life and the way you live it be a prophetic statement to this generation that Jesus is worth putting your faith in? Francis and Edith Schaeffer were a husband and wife who pioneered a ministry in Switzerland, Labrie, and Edith Schaeffer says about when they started it that they asked God that their work and their lives would be a demonstration to others that God is there.

[21 : 40] Do you see what she was saying? That what she longed for and wanted God's help with was that by expressing faith in more than just saying the creed on a Sunday, in actually doing more than living for what's in front of us, living as though this life is our only chance of happiness, living as though human power is the only power that counts.

If we do that, then our lives don't speak to other people of a great God. And we don't give God the opportunity, the space to answer our prayers dramatically, to advance his gospel and grow his church and give his people joy and thankfulness.

We don't give God the opportunity to do that if we just live for what we see around us. And rather than doing that, it's when we as Christians step out in daring faith, in risky faith, in the kind of demonstrations that we trust the promises of God.

So we'll make sacrifices for him. We'll live in ways that other people think are crazy. When we do that, we might be mocked, but it's at those moments that we display to the world that we think Jesus is real and we think he's worth trusting.

Know your enemy, see your king, live by faith. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this case study of the ways that faith can be ridiculed and mocked and undermined.

[23 : 15] Father, help us, we pray, when we are under pressure like that, to turn towards you, to trust your word, to pray.

And Father, help us to live by real faith. May we, by our lives, demonstrate that you are real and you are worth trusting. We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, we're going to sing in response to God's word. Let's sing together wherever we are.