

RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah  
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Isaiah 36-39 – The Trustworthiness of God

**Isaiah 36:4,5, 13, 16-18** *And the Rabshakeh said to them, "Say to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this trust of yours?... In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me?... 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!... 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, 17 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. 18 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?"*

**Isaiah 37:14-20** *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. 15 And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: 16 "O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. 17 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. 18 Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, 19 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. 20 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."*

Julie and I are watching the television show "24." We're in season two right now, but we could stop any time. Really.

The show is constrained by its format – 24 hours of television in real time. That means that if you're on episode seven, you know that you have not reached the climax of the story yet. Not even close. To keep you interested, the writers of the show have to construct all sorts of twists and turns, mini-stories and subsets of problems to divert you from the main story line and keep you interested.

One of the themes of the show seems to be trust. Every episode someone turns to the other person and says, "You're going to have to trust me on this." Or another variation on this is: "I'll be there. I'll never leave you." Julie and I roll our eyes, because we know that that seals that the person *won't* be there.

Trust me. I'll be there. That's what God had told Israel through the prophet Isaiah. Through the twists and turns of history, and through the mouth and actions of King Ahaz, Israel had done the opposite. She had trusted in the nations around her for salvation. She had made alliances with their kings and their gods. She had forsaken the only one who could truly help her.

But God had not forgotten. Jack Bauer in 24 never forgets. You can count on him. God is better than Jack Bauer.

Isaiah 36-39 is the climax of the first half of the book. In fact, it is one of the most important events in the Old Testament, validated by the unprecedented three tellings in different passages (2 King 19ff and 2 Chronicles 32ff). Isaiah has been recounting for over a dozen chapters the various nations around Israel and how each of them will not prevail. How each of them is ultimately subservient to Yahweh. It's been a geography/sociology/political policy/theology lesson. But now, it's time to put knowledge to action. What will Hezekiah do when faced with destruction?

Let's look at how Hezekiah got to this point and then see what happens.

### ***Hezekiah's Sickness – Prayer One***

We turn first to chapter 38. The opening words of the chapter put the timeline into fuzziness: *In those days*. We can reconstruct the events to determine that this is before what happens in 36 and 37. Isaiah comes to Hezekiah with these words: *Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.*

Wow. That is intense. Yesterday I ran into a friend of mine who told me of a friend of his who had decided he didn't want to have the next surgery offered to him. He was already 74, and tired and ready to die. He and his wife prayed about it, and the doctors unplugged him from the dialysis machine. He had four days which he spent calling friends and family to tell them goodbye. He died with his family gathered around him.<sup>2</sup>

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2006, website: [www.ouruf.org](http://www.ouruf.org). For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Orland, Oswalt and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller, Fred Harrell and Bryan Chapell, and used notes from RUF campus minister Kevin Twit and seminary professor Dr. Jack Collins. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

<sup>2</sup> In 24, George Mason is exposed to high level radiation, knows he will die within the day, and uses his last day well. But how many 24 references can one message have?

Hezekiah is faced with an intense personal crisis. Our health determines much about our life. Certainly not everything, but someday we will be face to face with our mortality and I wonder how we will react, especially if it feels as if we are dying before “our time,” whatever that means.

But Hezekiah wasn't ready to die. He was 39 years old. In his estimation, he hadn't lived a full life yet, and he also hadn't produced an heir to the throne. (Manasseh came three years after this). By any estimation for a Hebrew man, being cut off childless in midlife was severe judgment from God. What did Hezekiah do? Did he plunge into a deep depression? Did he take his own life? He turned to God. *Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, 3 and said, "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." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.*

Faced with death, Hezekiah went to the Lord in prayer. Let's be honest. It isn't a great prayer. It was short. It was weak. It was general. Hezekiah hadn't done everything right, but he had been faithful to God. It was a true prayer. It was from the heart. And God answered it. God sent Isaiah back to Hezekiah with a different message. This time he said, *Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. 6 I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city.*

God shows his faithfulness to Hezekiah by listening to his child and answering his prayer. He mentions the covenant with David as an indication of his commitments in the past. Unlike the idols of wood and stone that surround Jerusalem, Yahweh hears and sees. He is moved by his people. God knows and intervenes in the lives of his people.

Not only that, but Hezekiah asked for and is given a sign to assure him of God's trustworthiness. His faith was weak, but he was disposed to believe. This is in contrast to Ahaz, who had refused to accept a sign when one was offered in chapter 7. This is the difference between light and darkness, between faith and unbelief. It may not be strong faith all the time, but it is trust, it is belief.

The sign was awesome. God sent the sun backward. You can imagine a weak and sickly Hezekiah looking out his window at the sundial in the courtyard. He wants to believe, but really it is so difficult to see such a miracle taking place. And then, the sun does move backward, and he knows that God is faithful. When God says, “Trust me,” he means it. He had asked for a sign and gotten it.

It's interesting to note that the way the recovery happened was mundane. In Isaiah 38:21, we read: *Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover."* God can show his power both in the receding sun and in a poultice on the boil.

### ***Hezekiah's Kingship – Prayer Two***

Hezekiah survives. He has a son. He continues his program of religious reform. All is well. Except... We go back to Isaiah 36:1 and read: *In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.*

All around him, the nations are falling to Sennacherib. People he knew, his colleagues, the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivvah – wiped out by this Assyrian king. We have good records of all of this. Sennacherib had his conquests written down and reliefs made of his victories. One of them, of his conquering Lachish, mentioned here, you can see in the British Museum in London. This stuff really happened.

And now, on the doorstep of Jerusalem, he has Hezekiah trapped, in his own words, “like a caged bird.” Sennacherib's emissary, Rabshakeh stands at the gates and gives a brutal speech calling the people's policies and theology in question. Of course, all of what he says has truth sprinkled into it. Much, if not most of what he says is true. The nations, the cities, the kings around Jerusalem all had gods too. They all prayed too. They all trusted too. And they have all been carted off, enslaved, destroyed. Why would you think your god would be any different? In fact, these nations were stronger than yours little dinky city is – you should be more afraid, not more confident. Soon you will be eating dung and drinking urine. Gross. Humiliating. Overwhelming.

The gauntlet has been thrown down – God is not the sovereign. Righteousness will not prevail. It is the nations of man with whom all must come to terms.<sup>3</sup> God, whoever you are – *if* you are – human might and human glory will dictate to you the limits of your action or being. Your God sucks. Your God is no good. Your God is impotent. Your God is fooling you. Your God is weak. Your God will fail you. Your God is all talk and no action, just like everyone else. Your God is an illusion. Your God is an imagination, a construction of what you wish to be true. Why would you trust in that? Wake up!

Why should you surrender? Because Sennacherib is stronger than God. We rarely are presented with such a blunt decision, and yet we are faced with this every day. We're tempted to think that God either cannot or will not help us and that we must rely on human strength.

We do this with our bodies. With our studies. With our careers. With our affections. With our finances. With our alliances. With our minds and opinions. God's way? Hah. If God exists, and that's a big if, then he cannot help you here. If God exists, don't you know that he helps those who help themselves? If God exists, he doesn't care about little problems like this one. If God exists, he just doesn't understand what I'm going through. He cannot help me. He doesn't care. He isn't there at all.

Do you feel this way? I sure do sometimes. I don't believe that God is there or that he can help. Hezekiah must have felt that way too – he was faced with tremendous evidence to bolster just this idea.

When you feel like that you should do just what Hezekiah did. Hezekiah sent for Isaiah. You can send for Isaiah too. You can turn to him and read what he said, which was this: Nothing else can be trusted, but God can! Somehow, in the midst of crisis,

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<sup>3</sup> From Oswalt, 634

“Judah lurched awake,” and realized that Isaiah’s words really true. This brought about a reaction of repentance. Hezekiah went to the Lord’s house to admit his nation’s folly and its foolish dependence on Egypt.<sup>4</sup> There was an admission of helplessness, of failure, of fear. But that things must go forward. The weak mother still must bear the child. You can’t put it off. It has to happen. There is no turning back. But help is needed.

So Hezekiah does what he had learned to do when he was sick – he prayed.

*O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. 17 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. 18 Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, 19 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. 20 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.*

Now this is a good prayer. Hezekiah has learned about the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God. He knows that God can come through, so he goes to him for help.

Why does he do this? What is his basis for asking? Hezekiah’s greatest concern is for the honor of God. “He is not first concerned with his or his nation’s survival. He is chiefly concerned that their actions have provided the vehicle whereby God’s name has been brought into contempt. Furthermore, he knows that if God’s glory is made paramount, then the nation will survive. It was the putting of survival first which had brought them to this perilous state.”<sup>5</sup>

As you look at Hezekiah’s prayer, you see that he talks about God, about the Lord. He recounts God’s glory, his holiness, his transcendence, his awesomeness. That is something that Sennacherib and Rabshekah hadn’t counted on – what if Yahweh *wasn’t* bound by this word, but in fact *created* it. That would be different than the other gods, wouldn’t it?

Yet Hezekiah is also specific- he mentions Sennacherib and the situation he’s in. He asks God to save them so that all the kingdoms of the earth might know that he alone is God. This is the God Isaiah has been talking about. Will he answer? Can he be trusted? Will he come through? What will happen?

God tells Hezekiah, “Trust me.” Through Isaiah, he tells him, Sennacherib is my enemy. He is too far gone to change. I will show him my wrath and judgment. He is like an animal with a bridle – I turn him wherever I wish. Do not worry. A remnant will always remain.

Trust me. Ah, but can we?

What happens next is surprising in its stark fact-reporting style. The hard work has been done. Now it is merely to be brought about. Isaiah 37:36-38: *And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. 37 Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. 38 And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.*

God saved Jerusalem through a great deliverance. Sennacherib went home. In his own accounts, he naturally doesn’t mention why he left Jerusalem standing, but he never claims to have conquered it. Years later, his own sons murder him in the temple of his god, just like he had wanted to kill Hezekiah. Terribly ironic.

God saved his people. God answers prayer. God is faithful. God is trustworthy. God is mighty to save. God sees. God hears. God knows. God intervenes. God is like no one else.

Do you believe this?

### ***Hezekiah’s Legacy – A Psalm***

Hezekiah is counted as one of Judah’s great kings. He is greatly esteemed and rightly so. This event saved Jerusalem. When we look back to chapter 38 and how God saved Hezekiah from his illness, we see his psalm of praise. And we know what has already happened in the saving of Jerusalem because of the odd configuration of the time elements of these two narratives. The miraculous healing occurred before the miraculous redemption in time but after in the telling of the story.

Everything is done, and Hezekiah reflects on what the experience has meant to him. “He remembers the numbed shock he felt first, his anger at God, his tearful exhaustion, and his feeble cry for help as he lifted his eyes, at last to heaven. But then, with that upward look, it was as though the knife of his suffering was turned around, and he was able to grasp it by the handle instead of the blade. The fact that it was the Lord who had afflicted him became a cause for gratitude rather than anger. It gave him the opportunity to experience the saving power of God not only in his body, but in his spirit as well. And out of that came a new humility, a deeper appreciation of God’s love, an assurance of forgiveness, and a determination to praise God and tell others about him for as long as he was given the strength to do so. Such lessons are priceless, but often it is only by looking back, as Hezekiah does here, that we can see how suffering has been the means God has used to teach them to us.”<sup>6</sup>

Hezekiah is alive. Jerusalem is safe. But not forever.

“The parallel is being drawn between Hezekiah and Jerusalem (which is effectively all that is left of Judah). Both are in crisis, and both have been given reprieve. But there is more than a hint that, just as Hezekiah’s reprieve was temporary (fifteen

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<sup>4</sup> Oswalt, 643

<sup>5</sup> Oswalt, 646

<sup>6</sup> Webb, 157

years), so will Jerusalem's be. In short, the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC is already beginning to loom up on the horizon of the narrative."<sup>7</sup>

Hezekiah is going to die anyway. This good and righteous king is not the Messiah, not the true one anyway. And he leaves behind someone who plunges Judah into disaster – Manasseh is one of the worst kings, undoing all of his father's reforms.

And not only that, but Hezekiah himself seems to sow the seeds of demise. He lets in the envoys of Babylon, making a pact too easily, too quickly with them, shown in chapter 39. Isaiah 39 foreshadows this fall. Isaiah knew that in the long term Babylon would prove to be an enemy rather than a friend. "Hezekiah's hasty alliance with Babylon was as much symptomatic of that lack of trust as the more blatant sin of idol-worship which increasingly blighted the life of the whole nation."<sup>8</sup>

This is not heaven. This is not the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The new heavens and new earth are yet to come. The Messiah still has not arrived.

In the midst of that realization, in the midst of real life, and yet of pictures of redemption and pictures of the messiah, Hezekiah reflected this way:

*Isaiah 38:10-20 I said, In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. 11 I said, I shall not see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world. 12 My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end; 13 I calmed myself until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end. 14 Like a swallow or a crane I chirp; I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety! 15 What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul. 16 O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh restore me to health and make me live! 17 Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. 18 For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. 19 The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness. 20 The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD.*

God disciplines those whom he loves, for our good and his glory. We need to call out to him to save us, no matter what that means.

My friend Josh Spears told a story about his son, Aiden. Aiden got in trouble in front of a group of people, and as Josh took him to get punished, Aiden turned to the group and yelled to them, "Help!" He needed to ask his father for help – he was appealing to the wrong authorities. But Josh still disciplined him, and he did so to save Aiden from a greater danger – his sin. Sin leads to death, and it's better to be shown that pain earlier rather than later, more closely connected to the even than farther. Josh punished Aiden, he brought pain into his life, to save him from a deeper, longer pain. Aiden's help came, but not as he had expected.

On your blog, in your journal, in your thoughts and prayers, can you say this: *17 Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. 18 For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. 19 The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness. 20 The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD.*

God saved his people for his sake. They were not perfect. They were not righteous. He did not have to do so. It was not excised out of reality. It happened in real time and space. He did so for his glory.

Death and life are before you. Oppression and bitterness are all around you. Evil. Hatred. Pride. Self-sufficiency.

The world and its powers have a good case. They have evidence. To believe in God seems to be foolishness.

Life and peace can be had, but it takes faith. There are certainly signs, but they must be trusted and believed in. There is forgiveness from the father who loves his children. There is salvation in a redeemer.

Do you know him?

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<sup>7</sup> Webb, 155

<sup>8</sup> Webb, 158