

JUDGMENT OF THE NATIONS
Or
Trusting During Trials

Isaiah 34

The story is told of Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, *"I murdered my grandmother this morning."* The guests responded with phrases like, *"Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir."* It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Nonplussed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, *"I'm sure she had it coming."*

Why is it that people so often will try to give the impression they are listening to what is being said, but their mind is miles away? The people of Judah were no less guilty. God spoke to them often, in many ways, clearly and distinctly as well as in symbolic ways. But hardly anyone ever listened and paid attention to His message. How sad. Today's section in Isaiah opens with a plea to listen to God. It shows us how the people were faced with a choice: listen to God and follow His directions, or listen to the king of Assyria. Which are they going to choose?

Please remember, as always, that these passages from the Old Testament apply as much to us today as they did when Isaiah wrote them around 700 B.C. Please don't think they were only meant for the Jews 2,700 years ago.

Let's begin by looking at Isaiah 34:1, NAS:

Draw near, O nations, to hear; and listen, O peoples! Let the earth and all it contains hear, and the world and all that springs from it.

Could God's call to listen be any more obvious? He is not only speaking to the Jewish people, but also to all the earth, to any nation or people that will hear Him. God's grace and love call us to listen to Him.

Under **King Ahaz**, Judah had become a vassal (a servant state) to Assyria, paying tribute and doing in effect whatever Assyria demanded. Dependence upon Assyria had become necessary because Judah was once again vulnerable to the Edomites and the Philistines. Although Isaiah knows that invasions by foreign nations are part of God's plan for

punishing Judah, he is also aware that these nations are acting from their own selfish and evil motivations, and that God will ultimately bring about their destruction as well. Therefore Isaiah pronounces God's judgment against several nations at this and later times.

The sinful world will be judged

Israel's ancient enemy Edom is singled out in verses 5 and 6, **but this judgment of God will come upon the whole world**, not just Edom. Edom is only one example of God's judgment on the unbelieving nations because of what they've done to Israel. "*For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion*" (Isaiah 34:8). We find that this passage is also talking about the end times. Nations that have mistreated Israel and attempted to take her land (Joel 3:1-17) will be repaid by God for their actions. "*Zion's cause*" may not get much support among the nations today, but God is going to come to their defense and make their cause succeed. I would suggest the United States be very careful in suggesting to Israel that they turn over any of their territory to foreign nations as part of a peace process.

Isaiah 34:1-4 NAS:

1 Draw near, O nations, to hear; and listen, O peoples! Let the earth and all it contains hear, and the world and all that springs from it.

*2 For **the Lord's indignation is against all the nations**, And His wrath against all **their armies**; **He has utterly destroyed them**, He has given them over to slaughter.*

3 So their slain will be thrown out, And their corpses will give off their stench, And the mountains will be drenched with their blood.

*4 And all **the host of heaven** will wear away, And the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; All their hosts will also wither away As a leaf withers from the vine, Or as one withers from the fig tree.*

Isaiah begins with a *military* picture of the armies on the earth and in heaven (v. 4). The enemy armies on earth will be slaughtered, the land will be drenched with blood, and the bodies of the slain will be left unburied to rot and to smell. This is a vivid description of the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 19:11-21), the humiliating defeat and destruction of the armies of the world that dare to attack the Son of God. The **hosts of heaven** will also be affected by vast cosmic disturbances (Matthew 24:29; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15; Revelation 6:13-14). What a day that will be!¹

Isaiah 34:5-8 NAS:

*5 For **My sword** is satiated² in heaven, Behold it shall descend for judgment upon **Edom** And upon the people whom I have devoted to*

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1992. *Be comforted. An Old Testament study*. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.

² A custom to soak one's sword in a solution to harden it and brighten it so it would glitter.

destruction.

*6 The sword of the Lord is filled with blood, It is sated with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, With the fat of the kidneys of rams. For **the Lord has a sacrifice³ in Bozrah** And a great slaughter in the land of Edom.*

*7 Wild oxen will also fall with them and young bulls with strong ones; Thus their land will be **soaked with blood**, And their dust become greasy with fat.*

*8 For the Lord has **a day of vengeance**, A year of recompense for the **cause of Zion**.*

God's slaughter of **Edom** by His sword is pictured as a great *sacrifice in Bozrah* (Isaiah 63:1), which today is called **Buseirah** and lies about 25 miles southeast of the Dead Sea. Edom here is simply **representative of all the nations** who come against Israel. God's reason for judging Edom is that He must **uphold Zion's cause** on the **day of vengeance**. Having promised to bless His Chosen People, God must fulfill His promises. Therefore when they are attacked He goes to their aid.⁴ At the end of the Tribulation, Jesus will appear in the sky as the nations of the world look on.

*9 Its streams will be turned into **pitch**, And its loose earth into **brimstone**, And its land will become burning **pitch**.⁵*

10 It will not be quenched night or day; Its smoke will go up forever.⁶ From generation to generation it will be desolate; None will pass through it forever and ever.⁷

11 But pelican and hedgehog will possess it, And owl and raven will dwell in it; And He will stretch over it the line of desolation And the plumb line of emptiness.

12 Its nobles—there is no one there Whom they may proclaim king— And all its princes will be nothing.

13 Thorns will come up in its fortified towers, Nettles and thistles in its fortified cities; It will also be a haunt of jackals And an abode of ostriches.

14 The desert creatures will meet with the wolves, The hairy goat also will cry to its kind; Yes, the night monster will settle there And will find herself a resting place.⁸

15 The tree snake will make its nest and lay eggs there, And it will hatch and gather them under its protection. Yes, the hawks will be gathered

³ God's sword will spare no one.

⁴ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. 1983-c1985. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* . Victor Books: Wheaton, IL

⁵ Refers here to Edom and to the world during the end times.

⁶ Edom's destruction is final and forever.

⁷ This is also a reference to Hell and eternal damnation, not just a single military defeat. The fire of eternal Hell will never be quenched. The book of Revelation predicts this destiny for the final end-time world empire.

⁸ Leviticus 17:7. Jewish legend told of a night monster who was reported to fasten on to anyone sleeping in a room alone, and steal new-born infants from their beds at night.

there, Every one with its kind.

16 Seek from the book of the Lord, and read: Not one of these will be missing; None will lack its mate. For His mouth has commanded, And His Spirit has gathered them.

17 He has cast the lot for them, And His hand has divided it to them by line. They shall possess it forever; From generation to generation they will dwell in it.⁹

As a result of God's sword of judgment on Edom, her land will seem to be ablaze with **sulfur** and burning **pitch**, a tar-like substance that is unable to be extinguished. The land **will lie desolate** for many generations. God's judgment is to reduce the nations to nothing more than volcanic ashes. **Edom's** cities and territories will be inhabited by wild birds and animals, which do not normally inhabit populated villages and towns. These animals will thrive because there won't be any people living there. Edom's defenses will be overgrown with thorn bushes. The prophecies of God will be fulfilled with 100% accuracy just as they were regarding Christ's first coming. God has set Edom aside just as He once did Canaan (Numbers 26:55,56; Joshua 18:4-6) and given it to the wild animals.

While all this seems pretty bleak and depressing, we once again find in verses 16 and 17 an invitation and a glimpse of the character of God. We hear the invitation to look into God's Book and see that God always keeps His promises. God is faithful. God has promised this land to the children of Israel and verse 17 assures them that they will one day "*possess it forever*" and "*dwell in it.*" This is the transition into the promises of chapter 35, promises of the Millennial Kingdom.

ISAIAH 35

Millennial Blessing

We are about to see what this world is going to be like after Satan is bound and Jesus becomes the reigning king over all the world. Even creation itself will share in the blessings that come with Christ's reign.

1 The wilderness and the desert will be glad, And the Arabah¹⁰ will rejoice and blossom; Like the crocus (rose).¹¹

2 It will blossom profusely And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The

⁹ Edom and all nations like it will be gone forever and ever.

¹⁰ It denotes the hollow depression through which the Jordan flows from the Lake of Galilee to the Dead Sea. It is now called by the Arabs el-Ghor. But the Ghor is sometimes spoken of as extending 10 miles south of the Dead Sea, and thence to the Gulf of Akabah on the Red Sea is called the Wady el-Arabah.

¹¹ Parentheses added.

*glory of **Lebanon** will be given to it, The majesty of **Carmel** and **Sharon**.
They will see the glory of the Lord, The majesty of our God.*

3 Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble.

4 Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you."

5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah.

*7 **The scorched land will become a pool** And the thirsty ground springs of water; In the haunt of jackals, its resting place, Grass becomes reeds and rushes.*

*8 A highway will be there, a roadway, And it will be called **the Highway of Holiness**. The unclean will not travel on it, But it will be for him who walks that way, And fools will not wander on it.*

*9 No lion will be there, Nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But **the redeemed will walk there**,*

10 And the ransomed of the Lord will return And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away.

What a description! Kind of makes you want to be there right now, doesn't it? There will be dramatic changes made to the landscape of the earth when Christ returns to set up His kingdom. **Lebanon**, **Carmel**, and **Sharon** were areas near the coast noted for their good soil. The whole world is going to be like that during Christ's reign, even the desert will blossom, and people will recognize this as a gift from God.

Isaiah uses the promise of the coming kingdom to strengthen those in his day who were weak and afraid. In the kingdom, there will be no more blind or deaf, lame or dumb; for all will be made whole to enjoy a glorious new world. Jesus referred to these verses when he sent a word of encouragement to John the Baptist (Luke 7:18–23). The King was on earth and sharing with needy people the blessings of the coming kingdom.

When Christ returns at the end of the Tribulation, all who have been redeemed throughout history will return with Him and rule with Him from Jerusalem. Nothing will ever be able to harm them or cause them unhappiness again. The highway could also represent a way of life during Christ's reign on earth.

Isaiah 35:8 expresses one of Isaiah's favorite themes: **the highway** (Isaiah 11:16; 19:23; 40:3; 62:10). During the Assyrian invasion, the highways were not safe (Isaiah 33:8), but during the Kingdom Age it will be safe to travel. There will be one special highway:

“The Highway of Holiness.” In ancient cities, there were often special roads that only kings and priests could use; but when Messiah reigns, *all of His people* will be invited to use this highway. Isaiah pictures God’s redeemed, ransomed, and rejoicing Jewish families going up to the yearly feasts in Jerusalem, to praise their Lord.

When Isaiah spoke and wrote these words, it is likely that the Assyrians had ravaged the land, destroyed the crops, and made the highways unsafe for travel. The people were cooped up in Jerusalem, wondering what would happen next. The remnant were trusting God’s promises and praying for God’s help, and God answered their prayers. If God kept His promises to His people centuries ago and delivered them, will He not keep His promises in the future and establish His glorious kingdom for His chosen people? You bet He will!

The future is glorious when Jesus Christ is your Savior and Lord.¹² We, in this day and age, can also be uplifted if we stop and remember verse 17. It is directed to God’s people so when we are feeling sorrow and sighing we can take heart to know that gladness and everlasting joy await God’s people one day.

Isaiah 36

God Save the King!

The former U.S. Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger, once told the *New York Times*, *“There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full.”*

Crises come, whether schedules permit it or not; and sometimes crises seem to pile up. How do we handle them? What life does to us depends on what life finds *in* us. A crisis does not make a person; it shows what a person is made of.

King **Hezekiah of Judah** faced three crises in a short time: an international crisis (the invasion of the Assyrian army), a personal crisis (sickness and near death), and a national crisis (the visit of the Babylonian envoys). He came through the first two victoriously, but the third one tripped him up. Hezekiah was a great and godly man, but he was still a man; and that meant he had all the frailties of human flesh. However, before we find fault with him, we had better examine our own lives to see how successfully we have handled our own tests.

The Invasion Crisis: Isaiah 36:1–37:38; 2 Kings 18–19; 2 Chronicles 32

We’ll focus only on the passages in Isaiah. The other references are for your personal

¹² Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1992. *Be Comforted. An Old Testament Study*. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.

study.

Isaiah 36:1-22

*1 Now in the fourteenth year of **King Hezekiah**, Sennacherib king of **Assyria** came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them.*

2 And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem to King Hezekiah with a large army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller's field.

3 Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came out to him.

*4 **Then Rabshakeh said to them**, "Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, "**What is this confidence that you have?***

*5 "I say, 'Your counsel and strength for the war are only empty words.' **Now on whom do you rely**, that you have rebelled against me?*

6 "Behold, you rely on the staff of this crushed reed, even on Egypt, on which if a man leans, it will go into his hand and pierce it. So is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him.

7 "But if you say to me, 'We trust in the Lord our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar'?

*8 "Now therefore, **come make a bargain with my master the king of Assyria**, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them.*

9 "How then can you repulse one official of the least of my master's servants and rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?"¹³

*10 "Have I now come up without the Lord's approval against this land to destroy it? **The Lord said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.'***

*11 Then **Eliakim** and **Shebna** and **Joah** said to **Rabshakeh**, "Speak now to your servants **in Aramaic**, for we understand it; and do not speak with us in Judean in the hearing of the people who are on the wall."*

12 But Rabshakeh said, "Has my master sent me only to your master and to you to speak these words, and not to the men who sit on the wall, doomed to eat their own dung and drink their own urine with you?"

*13 Then **Rabshakeh** stood and cried with a loud voice in Judean and said, "Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria.*

14 "Thus says the king, 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you;

15 nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord, saying, "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,' for thus says the king of Assyria, 'Make your peace with me and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree and drink each of the waters of his own cistern,

¹³ See Deuteronomy 17:15,16.

17 until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.

18 'Beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you, saying, "The Lord will deliver us." Has any one of the gods of the nations 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? And when have they delivered Samaria from my hand?

20 'Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the Lord would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?' "

21 But they were silent and answered him not a word; for the king's commandment was, "Do not answer him."

22 Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn and told him the words of Rabshakeh.

Crises often come when things seem to be going well. Hezekiah had led the nation in a great reformation, and the people were united in the fear of the Lord. They had put away their idols, restored the temple services, and sought the blessing of God. But instead of receiving *blessing*, they found themselves facing *battles!* After all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah (2 Chronicles 32:1).

Had God ignored all that Hezekiah and his people had done? No. The Assyrian invasion was a part of God's discipline to teach His people to trust Him alone. Even Hezekiah had at first put his trust in treaties and treasures (2 Kings 18:13-16), only to learn that the enemy will keep the wealth but not keep their word. Judah had negotiated to get help from Egypt, which reflected **their lack of trust in God** and Isaiah severely criticized them for that (Isaiah. 30:1-7; 31:1-3). God wants us to be faithful so that He can change us and then reflect His glory through us to the rest of the world. Hezekiah and his people needed to learn that faith means living without making secret plans behind God's back (which of course is impossible).

You also have to keep in mind that this was not just an earthly skirmish. It was also a spiritual battle. Whenever a person begins to make changes in their life and tries to live in obedience to God, tests and attacks come along. Satan does not like to see people turning their lives around and walking God's way. So as soon as they do, he moves in to tempt them, to mock them, to persecute them in any way he can. Here he was trying to say that God is not powerful and He is not able to deliver His people from Assyria's mighty army. Satan, through the Assyrian army captains, was telling the people not to listen to Hezekiah's encouragement to trust God. And what is the best way to deal with such verbal attacks? Look at verse 21. Silence is often the weapon of choice. Yes, there are times to speak out, but in this case the enemy's hearts were hardened. Any verbal response would only have given them fuel to jeer even more loudly. So the wise move here was not to say a word, just as Christ did not say a word when He stood before the tribunal that was mocking Him (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:61). We will see in chapter 37 that God Himself had the last word regarding the Assyrian army.

The Assyrians had overrun Judah and were now at Lachish, about thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem. According to 2 Kings 18:17, Sennacherib sent three of his most important officers to arrange for Hezekiah's surrender of the city: **Tartan** ("Supreme Commander"), **Rabsaris** ("Chief Officer"), and **Rabshakeh** ("Field Commander"). These are military titles, not personal names. The three men were met by three of Judah's leading officials: **Eliakim**, **Shebna** (see Isaiah. 22:15–25), and **Joah**.

Where they met is important, for it's the very place where Isaiah confronted **Ahaz**, Hezekiah's father, some thirty years before (Isaiah 7:3). Ahaz had refused to trust the Lord but had instead made a treaty with Assyria (2 Kings 16:5–9), and now the Assyrians were ready to take Jerusalem. Isaiah had warned Ahaz about what Assyria would do (Isaiah 7:17–25), and his words were now about to come true.

Rabshakeh's speech is one of the most arrogant, profane, and sacrilegious found anywhere in Scripture, for he ridiculed the God of Israel. He emphasized the "*greatness*" of the king of Assyria because **he knew the common people were listening and he wanted to frighten them**. The field commander's speech is a brilliant piece of psychological warfare in which he discredits everything that the Jews held dear. The key word is *trust*, used seven times in verses 4–7, 9, 15). "*What is it that you place your confidence in?*" asked the field commander. "You can't have any confidence, for all the things you've trusted in have failed."

He began with their **strategy**. They had turned to Egypt for help, but Egypt was only a broken reed. (Isaiah had said the same thing. See 30:1–7 and 31:1–3). As for trusting the Lord, he told them that was sure to fail. He thought that Hezekiah had incurred the Lord's displeasure by removing the high places and altars and requiring everybody to worship at Jerusalem. So, according to the field commander, Judah had no help *on earth* (Egypt) or *in heaven* (the Lord). They were already as good as defeated.

What about their **military resources**? Hezekiah had fortified Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 32:2–8), but the field commander laughed at Judah's military might. Judah had neither the men, the horses, nor the chariots to attack the Assyrians. Even if Assyria provided the equipment, the Jewish soldiers were too weak to defeat the least of the enemy's officers. All the chariots and horsemen of Egypt could never defeat Sennacherib's great army. (Isaiah would agree with him again; see Isaiah 30:15–17). Kind of reminds you of Humpty Dumpty, doesn't it? "*All the kings horses and all the kings men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again.*"

The field commander's *coup de grace* (death blow) was that everything Assyria had done was according to the will of the Lord (Isaiah 36:10). How could Judah fight against its own God? In one sense, this statement was true; for God is in charge of the nations of the world. But no nation can do what it pleases and use God for the excuse, as Sennacherib and his army would soon find out.

According to the field commander, Judah could not trust in its strategy, its military

resources, or in its God. Nor could its people trust in their king. The king of Assyria was a “*great king*,” but Hezekiah was a nobody who was deceiving the people. Instead of trusting Hezekiah’s promise of help from the Lord, **the commander said that** the people should trust Sennacherib’s promise of a comfortable home in Assyria. The people knew that their farms, orchards, and vineyards had been ruined by the Assyrian army, and that Judah was facing a bleak future. If they stayed in Jerusalem, they might starve to death. Perhaps they should surrender and keep themselves and their families alive.

Hezekiah and Isaiah had told the people to trust the Lord, but the field commander reminded the people that the gods of the other nations had not succeeded in protecting or delivering them. Even Samaria, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was defeated, and they worshiped the same God as Judah. To the field commander, Jehovah was just another god; and Sennacherib did not need to worry about Him.

God summons us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians. 5:7). To those Jews in Jerusalem who were living in unbelief, the field commander’s arguments must have seemed reasonable, and his evidence compelling. But God had promised to deliver His people from the Assyrian army, and His Promise would be kept.¹⁴

The test for God’s people was then, and is now, are you going to truly listen to God, to hear His Word and trust it? Are we as God’s people going to be obedient? Paul Tillich, an existential theologian, has said, “The first duty of love is to listen.” Whether or not we can agree with all of Tillich’s theology, we can certainly agree with that statement. Christ put it this way:

John 14:15, NAS

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

John 15:10, NAS

"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love.

We cannot keep the commandments of God unless we have first listened to them and know what they are. So how strong is your love of God today? Strong enough to trust Him in whatever He allows into your life? Let’s pray and ask God to give us that strength through the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1992. Be comforted. An Old Testament study. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.