

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 18,

6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to This Explainer. Today, we're diving straight into what is essentially an ancient historical thriller right out of the book of Isaiah. Drawing on the incredible insights of Dr. John Oswalt, we're going to explore a story that asks the ultimate foundational question: when absolutely everything is on the line, where do we actually place our faith? To really get this, I want you to picture this scene.

Transport yourself back to 701 BC Jerusalem. The stakes literally could not be higher. King Hezekiah and the people of Judah are staring down an absolute nightmare.

They're up against an unstoppable global superpower, and they're forced to decide right then and there: where do you put your trust when the world's most terrifying army is practically knocking at your gates? So what's actually driving this crisis? Well, it's all about geography. The massive undefeated Assyrian war machine is pushing its way down the Mediterranean coast. Their big prize? Egypt.

But they've got a massive strategic problem. They absolutely cannot just leave Judah intact behind them. If they do, the Judean army could swoop down and cut off their supply lines.

So to protect their rear, Assyria has no choice but to completely crush Judah. And the tally from this campaign is just grim. Sennacherib's empire has systematically swallowed up the entire nation.

We're talking 46 heavily fortified Judean cities gone. The massive, crucial city of Lachish, currently under a brutal, devastating siege, and that leaves exactly one target left standing, Jerusalem. The claustrophobia they must've felt is just unimaginable.

That brings us to section one, psychological warfare and the Rabshakeh's arrival. Look, military sieges were insanely expensive back then. You had to feed an entire army year-round.

So the Assyrian king tries to get a cheap surrender first. He sends his top field commander known as the Rabshakeh to break the city using pure psychological warfare. And this guy is brilliant at it.

He systematically dismantles everything the people might be hoping in. He mocks their reliance on an Egyptian alliance, calling Egypt a splintered reed that's just going to pierce the hand of anyone foolish enough to lean on it. He laughs at their puny military, basically joking that he'd give them 2,000 horses if they could even find riders for them.

And finally, he goes right for the jugular, their faith. But here's where Assyrian intelligence totally drops the ball. The Rabshakeh claims that Yahweh must be furious with King Hezekiah because, quote, he tore down all Yahweh's local churches.

Now, in reality, Hezekiah was actually obeying biblical law. He was centralizing worship in Jerusalem and tearing down all those illegal pagan-style high places. The Assyrians definitely did their homework, but they foolishly assumed that the God of Israel operated by the exact same logic as all their pagan gods.

You can imagine how terrified the Judean officials are right now. They're begging the Assyrian commander to negotiate in Aramaic, which was kind of the standard polite diplomatic language of the day, just so the regular civilians listening on the city wall won't understand what's happening. But the Rabshakeh? No way.

He brutally refuses. Instead, he turns and shouts directly to those doomed citizens in perfectly fluent Hebrew. It is such a cruel, calculated psychological tactic.

He graphically, and I mean graphically, paints the unbearable, disgusting realities of a starvation siege. He wants to make absolutely sure that every single civilian on that wall knows exactly the horrors coming for them if they don't surrender immediately. Then he finishes with this ultimate chilling theological attack.

He basically asks, hey, look at all the nations we've already wiped out. Did their God save them? Nope. So what makes you think Yahweh is going to deliver Jerusalem? The Assyrians are essentially claiming that Yahweh is just as lifeless and helpless as all the conquered idol gods of Samaria.

It's human arrogance directly challenging the creator of the universe. Moving on to section two, Hezekiah's crisis. A king brought to his knees.

So we pivot from this wildly arrogant empire to a king who has been brought to his absolute breaking point. Hezekiah is completely out of human solutions. But look at his formula for handling ultimate distress.

He doesn't call a military strategy session. Instead, he humbles himself. He literally tears his royal robes, puts on rough sackcloth, walks straight into the presence of God in the temple, and sends for the prophet Isaiah.

It's a complete, hundred percent surrender of his royal pride. But you know, the pressure doesn't just vanish. After a brief distraction, King Sennacherib of Assyria actually escalates things.

He sends a written letter directly to Hezekiah, warning him again, point blank: do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you. So now the mockery isn't just a speech; it's in writing. And what Hezekiah does next is, in my opinion, one of the most powerful physical acts of surrender in ancient history.

He takes this arrogant, blasphemous piece of hate mail, walks right back up to the temple, and literally spreads it out before the Lord. He takes the enemy's ultimate mockery and just places it directly into God's hands. While he's praying, Hezekiah hits on this profound truth.

He acknowledges, yeah, okay. The Assyrians did destroy the gods of all those other nations, but he clarifies, they cast their gods into the fire. Why? Because there are no gods.

They're just the work of men's hands. He totally contrasts these lifeless manmade statues with the living, active creator that he is praying to right now. And this is the real breakthrough in his prayer.

Hezekiah doesn't say God save us because we deserve it or because Judah is so great. He prays for deliverance so that all the kingdoms of the earth will know that Yahweh alone is God. He realizes, Hey, this is not about us, Lord.

This is about you and your glory. Which brings us to section three, the divine climax, the creator response. That selfless prayer changes the entire trajectory of the story.

We hit this explosive turning point where God actually answers, and his response to Isaiah is fierce and poetic. God flips the script entirely. The Assyrians came to mock and intimidate.

But God says that the virgin daughter of Zion, this seemingly helpless, tiny besieged city is now the one shaking her head and mocking the massive monster that tried to eat her alive. Talk about brilliant, poetic justice. The Assyrians were historically notorious for brutally dragging their captives off into exile with fish hooks in their noses and bridles in their mouths.

It was horrifying. But God says to Sennacherib, because of your raging against me, I'm going to put a hook in your nose, and I'll turn you back on the exact same road you came in on. Then comes the resolution.

And wow, it is shocking and sudden. After all this massive buildup in a single night, the angel of the Lord strikes down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers right in their camp. Just like that, the siege is over.

This completely impossible world-ending threat is dismantled overnight by the living God. The historical irony of all this is just incredible. If you look at Sennacherib's official historical annals, he brags for pages about taking all those other Judean fortresses, but when he gets to Jerusalem, he just says, as for Hezekiah, I shut him up like a bird in a cage.

Notice anything missing? He conveniently leaves out the sudden devastating loss of his entire massive army that forced him to run away without even firing a single arrow at the city. And the epilogue here traces the final, honestly humiliating years of Sennacherib's life. After his retreat in 701 BC, he never campaigned in the West again.

He completely abandoned his ultimate goal of conquering Egypt. And then 19 years later in 681 BC, the man who boldly mocked the living God was assassinated by his own sons. And where did it happen? While he was worshiping inside the temple of his own lifeless man-made God.

So what is the big takeaway from this ancient narrative? We are all going to face moments with impossible odds. Times when the psychological warfare of fear and anxiety is screaming at us. When you hit those moments, you have to ask yourself, are you leaning on your own clever strategies, putting your trust in splintered reeds that are ultimately going to fail you? Or are you like Hezekiah, taking that terrifying reality and spreading it all out before the living God?

It's a remarkable challenge from history, isn't it? Makes you really stop and think about who or what is holding you up right now.