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The speech of the Rabshakeh. The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 36. In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. And the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakei from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem with a great army.

And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field. And they came out to him Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph the recorder. And the Rabshakei said to them, Say to Hezekiah, Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, On what do you rest this trust of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? Behold, you are trusting in Egypt, that broken reed of Astaph, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it, such as Pharaoh king of Egypt, to all who trust in him.

But if you say to me, We trust in the Lord our God, is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, You shall worship before this altar? Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria. I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. How then can

you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? Moreover, is it without the Lord that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it.

Then Eliakim, Shebna and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it. Do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall. But the Rabshakeh said, Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and drink their own urine? 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.

Thus says the king, Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us. This city will not be given into the hand of 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 of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, 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. 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? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sephorveim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, Do not answer him. Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh. In Isaiah chapter 36 and following we have the narrative of the Assyrian crisis in 701 BC.

Earlier in the reign of Hezekiah, in 722 BC, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II had defeated Hoshea the king of Israel and in the process had put an end to the kingdom of Israel altogether. The natural question at this point was whether Judah would suffer the same fate. The text of Isaiah chapter 36-39 is largely identical to that of 2 Kings chapters 18-20.

The stories here are not arranged in chronological order. The events of chapters 38 and 39 largely precede those of chapters 36 and 37. Meredak Baladan for instance was not king of Babylon in 701 BC.

He had already been removed. Structurally, within the book of Isaiah we can observe a

juxtaposition of the story of Ahaz and the crisis of the Syro-Ethermite war and the Assyrian crisis in 701 BC. Certain details in both of the narratives would bear out this association.

For instance, in chapter 7 verse 3, Isaiah was sent with his son to meet Ahaz at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field, the same location as mentioned in chapter 36. This might invite us to compare and contrast the faith and the unbelief of King Hezekiah and King Ahaz respectively. Such a comparison and contrast would underline one of the primary themes of the book of Isaiah which concerns trusting the Lord over the nations.

The signs don't look good for Judah. Sennacherib successfully captures all of the fortified cities of Judah, 46 of them, and Hezekiah has to ask for mercy for him. He sends messengers to Sennacherib in Lachish.

Lachish was a heavily fortified city that was the second city of Judah to Jerusalem at this point. It might seem that Sennacherib was well underway to completely overrunning the nation. We have archaeological evidence of a vast Assyrian siege ramp that was set up against the city of Lachish.

Taking stones from a nearby quarry, they had erected this at one of the weakest points of the wall and had clearly succeeded in taking down the city. This feat of great manpower and ingenuity was evidence of the unstoppable might and brilliance of the Assyrian war machine. Hezekiah and Judah hoped to be offered mercy in exchange for a grand tribute.

Hezekiah's payment of a tribute is recorded in Syrian annals from the time. Several of Hezekiah's predecessors as king of Judah had raided the treasuries of the house of the Lord to pay tribute to a foreign king. Rehoboam had done it for Shishak, king of Egypt.

Asa had given money to Benhadad of Syria to get him on his side against Beasha. Jehoash had given money to Haziel of Syria. During Amaziah's reign, Jehoash of Israel had broken down the walls of Jerusalem and taken away much of the treasure of the temple.

Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, had also raided the treasuries of the temple to give money to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria. Hezekiah attempted the same thing with Sennacherib, giving the silver of the house of the Lord and all of the gold from the doorposts. Not only is Judah now standing in the very greatest jeopardy, but Hezekiah's action in response could be seen to be a troubling one.

He's taken tribute that has been given to the Lord and is handing it over to a foreign invader. The hearer of the text might wonder whether he is actually placing his hope in the king of Assyria and in making terms with him rather than in the Lord his God. The

king of Assyria sends the Rabshakeh from Lachish, the second city of Judah, that has been conquered by the king of Assyria.

The Rabshakeh functions as the mouthpiece of his master. He is a high official with the ability to speak in the Judean tongue, which is helpful in this particular situation. He also seems to have some insight into the state of Judah and the nature of its religious belief, among other things.

From what we learn from Assyrian annals, a great number of soldiers from Judah had either surrendered or defected at this point. The Assyrians could have gained a lot of intelligence about the internal affairs of the nation of Judah from such persons. The Rabshakeh's speech is perfectly designed to demoralize the people, speaking to Eliakim who is over the household, who has taken the office that was formerly occupied by Shebna, who accompanies him along with Joah, the recorder.

The Rabshakeh presents them with the big question, in whom do you trust? Given Hezekiah's actions in Philistia, it may seem that he is trusting in Egypt. Yet Egypt is far from powerful enough to act as an effective ally, even if it were reliable and kept its promises. Lessons should have been learned from its failure to act on behalf of Ashdod.

Leaning on Egypt would actually hurt Judah rather than helping them. The Lord has earlier warned Judah against such an alliance. As the Assyrians have conquered cities throughout Judah, they probably noticed signs of a recent revolution in the religious life of the nation.

They have seen the ruins of former shrines, seen pillars that have been torn down. They have recognized something significant has occurred and probably gained intelligence from Judean defectors, discovering that Hezekiah has broken down all of the high places in the pillars. This presents the Rabshakeh with a very effective demoralizing argument that he can present to the people in Judah.

They have clearly offended their God the Lord and he has now turned upon them. The Rabshakeh mocks them for their inability to assemble an effective military force. Even if you were to give them two thousand horses, they would not be able to put riders upon them.

Why then would they look to Egypt for horses and chariots when they lack the men and the skills to use them? The Rabshakeh goes even further in his argument. Not only has the Lord abandoned his people Judah, turning against them because they have abandoned his proper worship, the king of Assyria has been commissioned by the Lord himself against them. It is by the Lord's word that he has gone up to attack Jerusalem.

The officials of Hezekiah are naturally greatly dismayed by these words, even more so because they are spoken in the hearing of the regular soldiers on the wall in a language

that they can understand. The speech of the Rabshakeh is not meant merely for Hezekiah and his officials. It is also for the more general population.

It is designed to demoralize them. The Rabshakeh moves on to develop further arguments that they should not trust in Hezekiah nor trust in the Lord, allowing Hezekiah to persuade them that the Lord would deliver them. Neither Hezekiah nor the Lord would deliver them from the hand of the king of Assyria.

Along with this demoralizing message, the Rabshakeh gives a different piece of propaganda. The message that there is hope, if they would only surrender to the king of Assyria. If they would only surrender, each one of them would eat of his own vine and eat of his own fig tree.

Each one of them would drink the water of his own cistern. This language is usually associated with the very positive visions of the Lord giving rest to his people in the so that they all enjoy their own property and have untroubled relations with their own wives. Here however, in an almost satanic fashion, the Rabshakeh takes up the words of the Lord, presenting the promise, but twisting it significantly.

He presents them with the promise of bringing them into a new land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. The message here is that the king of Assyria is the one that they should look to, not the Lord. Indeed the gods of other nations have not helped them, why should the God of Judah help it? Once again there is a parody here of the words of the Lord.

Who among all of the gods of the land have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? This mirrors the language of places like Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 34. Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation by deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? In such a manner the Rabshakeh is sowing doubt and fear and demoralization. Judah can't trust its king.

Judah can't trust its god. The God of Judah is either on the side of Assyria or a helpless bystander, unable to intervene to save his people from the hand of the king of Assyria. On the other hand, if the people do surrender, the king of Assyria will bring them into a glorious land.

He will be their saviour and deliverer. They will look to him for aid. The king had commanded the people not to answer.

They must hold their nerve. They must resist the temptation. And they all obey him.

They are silent in response. But Eliakim, Shebna and Joah go to the king, and they have their clothes torn as they deliver the message to Hezekiah. A question to consider.

Can you see any differences between the account of Isaiah chapter 36 and that of 2 Kings chapter 18? Luke chapter 6 verses 1-19 On a Sabbath while he was going through the grain fields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath? And Jesus answered them, Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him? And he said to them, The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered.

And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, Come and stand here. And he rose and stood there.

And Jesus said to them, I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it? And after looking around at them all, he said to him, Stretch out your hand. And he did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles, Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John and Philip and Bartholomew, and Matthew and Thomas, and James the son of Alpheus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples, and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases.

And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all. Luke chapter 6 begins with a couple of controversies concerning the Sabbath.

The disciples were permitted by the law to eat of the grain as they passed through a field. This was a form of gleaning, so they weren't stealing. The issue however was that they were doing so on the Sabbath, and that what they were doing counted to some of the Pharisees as work.

Jesus' disciples are challenged by the Pharisees for their behaviour, and Jesus gives a response. In his response, Jesus focuses upon the example of David. In 1 Samuel chapter 21, verses 1 to 6, David and his hungry men were permitted to eat of the showbread, which was usually restricted to the priests.

Ahimelech the priest, rather than strictly applying the law, recognised that this was an exceptional case, and it was legitimate to give the bread to David. In that instance, the hunger of David and his men took precedence. Jesus of course is a greater David.

He has the prerogative to determine in this instance. His men are like David's men, they're on a mission for God. As those committed to a divine ministry, it takes priority, and it is not a violation of the Sabbath.

This is something that Jesus fleshes out more in the parallel passage in Matthew chapter 12. The work of the priests is not counted as Sabbath-breaking work, because it is in service of the temple. But, as Jesus argues, there is something greater than the temple here, Jesus himself.

The Sabbath was meant to give rest to man, not to subject man to bondage, and the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the one who gives the true rest that the Sabbath bears witness to. In Jesus' response to the challenge to the actions of the disciples in the grain fields, he makes an analogy with David and his followers.

On one level, this might be seen as an example of hunger taking priority over the law of the temple, but it seems to be something more than that. He's aligning himself with David. David's eating of the showbread in 1 Samuel chapter 21 does not seem to have been an instance of great hunger, and needing bread as an emergency is not described in that way.

Rather, there seems to be something about David himself and the mission that he's on that gives some warrant for the exception. And Jesus, it seems to me, is making a similar claim about himself and his disciples. This, I believe, becomes more apparent in Jesus' final claim.

The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath. He presents himself as the eschatological Son of Man again, as the Lord of the Sabbath as such. As the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is the one bringing in the Great Sabbath.

His whole ministry began with a statement concerning the Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favour. He's the one who's bringing rest and deliverance and all these other things that belong to the reality of the Sabbath. His entire movement is a Sabbath bringing movement, and so it is not inappropriate for his servants and followers to enjoy exceptional prerogatives on the Sabbath day.

We should also here recall that this comes after Jesus' teaching concerning the old wineskins and the new wine. Jesus' ministry exceeds the old structures as it fulfills them. Jesus then heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath.

It's on another Sabbath. This is a different day, but it's connecting the two stories together so that we recognise there's a Sabbath theme going through this part of the

chapter. Although the man isn't in urgent need, Jesus gives rest on the Sabbath which fulfills the intent and the commandment of the Sabbath, and he poses a question to the people who would challenge him in a very stark way.

To do good or to do harm. Now it would seem that this man does not urgently need to be healed. He could hang around for a few days and then be healed later on.

Jesus is presenting such healing not just as permissible, but as something that is part of the meaning and the purpose of the Sabbath itself. Sabbath keeping is about giving life and healing. It's not designed just to be a means of laying heavy burdens upon people.

Perhaps in this story we're also supposed to see something of the healing and restoration of Jeroboam's hand in 1st Kings chapter 13 being alluded to. The account of the choice of the twelve that follows begins with Jesus going up on the mountain and praying all night. Luke is the only gospel that recalls the prayer of Jesus prior to the choice of the disciples, and perhaps in the situation on the mountain we should recall some of the events of Exodus.

Not just the choice of the elders, but also the way there were different groups of people that had different degrees of access to the mountain. The choice of twelve seems to be naturally connected with the patriarchs in Israel. They aren't just the number twelve by accident.

Indeed, they are commonly called the twelve from that point onwards, and when Judas betrayed Christ and was dropped from their number, they had to choose a replacement to keep the number. The twelve are listed beginning with Simon and Andrew and James and John. And Simon and Andrew, brothers, James and John are brothers, but Simon, James and John are three core disciples.

Elsewhere we often see these disciples listed in their order of priority, so Simon, James and John, and then Andrew comes next because of his association with Simon. But here his association with Simon as his brother leads him to be second in the list. Simon, in each of these lists, is the first.

He is the primary disciple. He's the one who speaks for the others, he's the one who leads the others, he's the one who represents the others. Here we're told that he was named Peter by Jesus, and just a chapter earlier when he was called, he's called Simon Peter for the first time after he responds with a sense of fear and awe to the manifestation of the authority of Jesus' word in the miraculous catch of fish.

This, I would suggest, is an important signal that Luke is giving his readers that at this point Peter is assuming something of his new identity that Jesus is going to give him as the first of the apostles. The order of the disciples is fairly consistent across the Gospels with some variations. The ordering of Andrew or the ordering of Judas, who's also called

Thaddeus, that varies, but everything else is pretty much the same.

Each list begins with Simon Peter and ends with Judas Iscariot. The twelve will function as a sort of band of brothers with Jesus. They can perhaps be compared with David's mighty men.

Jesus is the divinic king and the man of action and he's surrounded by his mighty men. Like David, he has a larger group of mighty men and a core group of three, and we see that in 2 Samuel 23 verses 8 to 12. Although Jesus had a great many female followers, including many prominent ones, some who were more prominent in the narrative than certain members of the twelve, the twelve are all male.

They're like a military company and they're prepared for doing battle against the demons, for scoping out the land, for proclaiming the message of the kingdom, and later on for being the foundation and the leaders of the church. Having chosen the twelve, Jesus then goes down the mountain with them and he's surrounded by a great company of his disciples and then a larger multitude. We see these different groups at various points in the gospel.

There are various degrees of proximity to Jesus. There is perhaps in the furthest circle the whole nation of Israel, then there's the multitude that listen to him, and then in the circle within that there are his disciples who follow him around. Of those disciples, some are closer than others.

You can think of people like Mary Magdalene, characters like Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Then there are the twelve, and the twelve are not merely following him around wherever he goes, but they have closer proximity to him. Of the twelve, there are three who are particularly close, Peter, James and John.

Of those three, Peter is especially close in terms of the mission, whereas the disciple that Jesus loves, who we might presume is John, is closer in other ways. Jesus gathers people around him in this way for a number of reasons, but one of these is that he wants to form a new people, and if you're forming a new people, just dealing with individuals one by one is not enough. You need to form a sort of leadership structure in which your teaching can be disseminated by others and spread throughout a larger multitude.

You need to be able to delegate certain parts of your mission to others as well, so that they can assist you in your task, and the twelve will certainly be performing this role in the rest of Luke's work. A question to consider. Jesus has referred to the scriptures on a number of occasions in his ministry so far.

What are those particular occasions, and what can we learn from them about the way that Jesus relates to the scriptures?