



God's Plan for Peace

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About the Story

In the story that we read this week from Isaiah 36 and 37, Assyria continued to be a threat. The northern kingdom of Israel is no more. It has already been conquered and the people carried off into exile. This story probably took place around the year 701 BCE and Judah (the southern kingdom) is now under attack from Assyria as well. The Assyrians have been gaining strength and have come to conquer Jerusalem. The people were stuck inside the city, wondering how long they can hold out against the attacking army.

The Point:

God's promises for goodness and peace still stand in the face of challenges. King Hezekiah could have let the fear overtake him, but instead, he turned to the prophet Isaiah and asked for God's guidance. When we face challenges in our lives, God promises to be with us, no matter what.

The king of Assyria (King Sennacherib) was waging war, using not just his army and weapons but with psychological warfare. He sent one of his highest officials, a Rabshakeh, to go and to talk to King Hezekiah's representatives. But he intentionally had his official speak loudly in the common language so that the people in the streets of Jerusalem could overhear their conversation. The king of Assyria wanted the people to doubt that God would save them. He offered them a deal for their surrender. When they did not take them up on his offer, he taunted them saying that all the other nations and kingdoms could not be saved by their gods, why would Judah be any different?

King Hezekiah was afraid. But he also knew that God was not made of wood or stone like the gods of other nations. He called the prophet Isaiah and asked him to pray on their behalf. Isaiah did and God provided deliverance! Assyria did not conquer Jerusalem.

Isaiah's words gave hope to King Hezekiah and to the people of Jerusalem at a time when their situation seemed hopeless. Surrounded by enemies on every side, their only hope was God's intervention. We too are surrounded by enemies. War, poverty, hunger, sickness, death, these are enemies that stalk close to us. But there is good news for us. There is a day coming when all these enemies will be scattered. There is a time to come when God's people will dwell in safety and peace.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, Assyria threatened the northern kingdom, and Micah warned the people to return to God's ways. This week, Assyria has already invaded the northern kingdom and is now at the southern kingdom, surrounding the walls of Jerusalem. Even still, Hezekiah puts his faith in God. Next week, Jeremiah reminds the people to continue to put their trust in God.

Opening Prayer

God of hope, you promised that in the future the mountain of your house shall be established as the highest of the mountains. Help us to trust in your promise and work for the day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation," remembering that all things are possible through you. We pray all of this through your name. Amen.

Into the Story

Go around the group and share your "highs" and "lows"—good and not-so-good things that have happened in your life over the past week. You are free to pass if you would prefer. After everyone has had a chance, take a moment to discuss how it felt to share with this group. Provide words of encouragement for the lows and provide words of thanksgiving for the highs.

Learning the Story

Whose word do you trust? When the situation is bleak, can God be counted on? Or is it better to make friends with the rulers of this world? That is the situation Hezekiah faced. He and his people were at their wit's end, but God provided.

Read Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20 – Assyria's Warning

- ❓ There are a lot of characters and places mentioned in the first few verses. Take a moment to sort out who is who—who is on the side of the Assyrians, who is on the side of the Israelites? Which names do you think you can ignore for now? Additionally, try to situate the "when, where, and what" of this story, skimming through the chapter before or the rest of this chapter if needed.
- ❓ The Rabshakeh tries to get the people to doubt their king. What are examples from history or current events where this strategy has been used? Did it work?
- ❓ Imagine you were living in Jerusalem during this time, a prisoner in your own city because it was surrounded by enemies. How would you feel? How long would it take you to begin to have doubts in your ruler's leadership?

Bible Connections

- ✚ Micah provides a promise of peace (Micah 4:1-4).
- ✚ Another telling of King Hezekiah's story is found in 2 Kings 18–20.
- ✚ The psalmist speaks of God's peace (Psalm 29).

Read Isaiah 37:1-7 – Hezekiah Calls on Isaiah

- ☞ Have you ever been so overwhelmed with bad news that you just wanted to go and sit in a church or hospital chapel? Did that location help provide comfort?
- ☞ Read 37:5-7 again, putting yourself in King Hezekiah's place. How does it make you feel?
- ☞ Before reading the rest of the story, how do you think the situation will be resolved?
- ☞ If you have time, take a moment to read the rest of Isaiah 37, which tells the fate of the Assyrian king. Did Isaiah deliver on his promise? How was the situation resolved?

Bible Nuts & Bolts: The World to Come

The Hebrew phrase *Olam Ha-Ba* (the World to Come) referred to a future age of global peace. Originally, the ancient Israelites had no concept of eternal life. People who lead good lives and received the Lord's favor would live long lives and be blessed with descendants. As such, most of the references to the world to come in the Hebrew Bible saw God's eternal kingdom inaugurated here on earth, in what is known as the messianic age.

Read Isaiah 2:1-4 – A Message of Hope

- ☞ Why do you think the team who put together the Narrative Lectionary included this section from chapter 2, and why did they put it out of order?
- ☞ We do not use swords, pruning hooks, or plowshares much these days. What words might you use to convey the same powerful message in the language of our modern world?
- ☞ Popular culture and even some religious circles tend to picture violent end times full of war, strife, and devastating natural disasters. How does Isaiah's vision for the future differ from this?

Down by the Riverside

Verse 1:

Gonna lay down my burden,
Down by the riverside
Gonna lay down my burden,
Down by the riverside.

Chorus:

I ain't gonna study war no more,
study war no more,
ain't gonna study war no more.

Verse 2:

Gonna lay down my sword and shield,
Down by the riverside...

Living the Story: Service

Spend time researching local community food pantries. Alternatively, if your church already has a food pantry or supports a local food pantry, feel free to use that. Check the list of most needed items, particularly as the winter months are approaching. Encourage group members to find an unexpired item on the list that they can bring with them next week when this service project continues.

Closing Prayer

The African-American spiritual "Down by the Riverside" is based on Isaiah 2. Find and play a recording of the song, encouraging your group to sing along. Alternatively, you can read the words together as the closing prayer.

At Home

- ✚ The phrase “swords into plowshares” appears two other times in the Bible, in Joel 3:10 and Micah 4:3. Look up the other two references. How are they different, or the same, from Isaiah’s vision?
- ✚ If you have the means, consider making a donation to a charity that helps provide relief for war-torn countries, such as Doctors Without Borders, the Red Cross, or Amnesty International. Many Christian denominations also have charities that help support relief efforts.
- ✚ Remember to bring your canned or boxed item to small group next week!

Daily Readings

Sunday—Read Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7; 2:1-4

Hezekiah turns to Isaiah for relief in the midst of conflict, and Isaiah conveys God’s promise of hope and peace. Pray for world peace, listing specific countries that are at war, that they can find peaceful resolution to their conflict.

Monday—Read Isaiah 38:1-8

Hezekiah is on his deathbed, but God promises healing. Pray for someone in need of healing.

Tuesday—Read 2 Kings 21:1-16

Hezekiah dies and his son Manasseh becomes king, but he disobeys God. When have you disobeyed your parents that led to you making a mistake that could have been avoided had you listened to them? Why did you disobey?

Wednesday—Read 2 Kings 22:1-13

Manasseh’s grandson, Josiah is now king. Meanwhile, the high priest finds a book containing God’s law. Have you ever lost something important to you, only to find it when least expected? How did this make you feel?

Thursday—Read 2 Kings 22:14-20

The high priest under Josiah brings the book to the king and the prophetess Huldah says God will reward their humility and faithfulness. Often the female religious leaders in the Bible are overlooked, but today’s story contains the example of the prophetess Huldah. Spend some time today looking up some of the other female religious leaders (such as Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Ruth, Esther, etc.) and reading their stories.

Friday—Read 2 Kings 23:1-14

Josiah creates religious reform, returning the people to God. Say a prayer, thanking God for God’s steadfast love even when you mess up or stray from the right path.

Saturday—Read 2 Kings 23:21-30

The commemoration and celebration of the Passover is restored. What are some religious traditions your church or family has that have fallen away? Are they worth bringing back, or did they end for good reasons?