

Know Your Spiritual Enemies: The Assyrians

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

2 Kings 18:9-13, 17, 19, 20, 22-37

⁹ And it came to pass in the fourth year of King Hezekiah,... that Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria and besieged it. ¹⁰ And at the end of three years they captured it. ¹¹ And the king of Assyria carried Israel away captive to Assyria... ¹² because they did not obey the voice of Jehovah their God, but transgressed His covenant and all that Moses the servant of Jehovah had commanded; and they would neither hear nor do them.

¹³ And in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and occupied them. ¹⁷ And the king of Assyria sent the Tartan, the Rabsaris, and the Rabshakeh from Lachish, with a heavy army against Jerusalem, to King Hezekiah. ¹⁹ And the Rabshakeh said to them, "Say now to Hezekiah, "Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: 'What trust is this in which you trust? ²⁰ You speak of having plans and power for war; but they are mere words. And in whom do you trust, that you rebel against me? ²² And if you say to me, "We trust in Jehovah our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away, and said to Judah and Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem'?" ' ²³ Now therefore, I urge you, give a pledge to my master the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses – if you are able on your part to put riders on them! ²⁴ How then will you repel one captain of the least of my master's servants, and put your trust in Egypt for chariots and horsemen? ²⁵ Have I now come up without Jehovah against this place to destroy it? Jehovah said to me, "Go up against this land, and destroy it.' "

²⁶ Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; and do not speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people who are on the wall."

²⁷ But the Rabshakeh said to them, "Has my master sent me to your master and to you to speak these words, and not to the men who sit on the wall, who will eat their own filth and drink their own urine with you?"

²⁸ Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out with a loud voice in Hebrew, and spoke, saying, "Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria! ²⁹ Thus says the king: "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he shall not be able to rescue you from his hand; ³⁰ nor let Hezekiah make you trust in Jehovah, saying, "Rescuing, Jehovah will rescue us; this city shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." ' ³¹ Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the king of Assyria: "Make peace with me by a present and come out to me; and every one of you eat from his own vine and every one from his own fig tree, and every one of you drink the waters of his own cistern; ³² 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, a land of olive groves and honey, that you may live and not die. But do not listen to Hezekiah, lest he persuade you, saying, "Jehovah will rescue us." ³³ Has any of the gods of the

nations at all rescued its land from the hand of the king of Assyria? ³⁴ Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim and Hena and Ivah? Indeed, have they rescued Samaria from my hand? ³⁵ Who among all the gods of the lands have rescued their countries from my hand, that Jehovah should rescue Jerusalem from my hand?' "

³⁶ But the people were silent and answered him not a word; for the king's commandment was, "Do not answer him." ³⁷ Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, Shebna the scribe, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh.

Luke 11:33-36

³³ [Jesus said,] "No one, when he has lit a lamp, puts it in a secret place or under a basket, but on a lampstand, that those who come in may see the light. ³⁴ The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. ³⁵ Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness. ³⁶ If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light."

Secrets of Heaven 1186:1, 6, 7

[I]n the Word,... [Asshur or Assyria] is always taken to mean matters of reason, in both senses – both rational thinking and rationalizations. (Reason and rational thinking, strictly speaking, mean valid mental processes, while rationalizing and rationalizations mean dishonest ones.) Asshur's symbolism as rationalization can be seen in Isaiah:

Doom to *Asshur*, the rod of my anger! He thinks what is not right, and his heart contemplates what is not right. He has said, "In the strength of my hand have I done this, and in my wisdom, because I have understanding." (Isaiah 10:5, 7, 13)

Assyria's other symbolism in the Word... [is] true reason in a member of the church, which allows the person to see truth and goodness clearly.... In Isaiah [we read]:

On that day there will be a path from *Egypt* to *Assyria*, and *Assyria* will come into *Egypt* and *Egypt* into *Assyria*, and the *Egyptians* will serve *Assyria*. On that day *Israel* will be third to *Egypt* and *Assyria*, a blessing in the middle of the earth, whom Jehovah Sabaoth will bless, saying, "A blessing on my people *Egypt* and on the work of my hands, *Assyria*, and on my inheritance, *Israel*!" (Isaiah 19:23-25)

The subject here is the spiritual church, which is Israel. Rationality in this church is Assyria, and the secular knowledge in it is Egypt. These three make up the intellectual abilities of people in the spiritual church, and they come in that order.

Introduction

- Let's start by experiencing just how quick and powerful the Assyrians are.
- I have a silly moral quandary for you.
- You know the refreshments that get put out on the table in the social hall?
 - Let's imagine that, somehow, you managed to sneak out during church and go grab something to eat from the table.
 - Just in your head, explain to me why that was just fine for you to do that.
 - It was probably the right thing for you to do, right?
 - What a clever brain!
 - Now let's imagine that someone else snuck out during church and grabbed something to eat from the table.
 - Just in your head, explain to me why it was very wrong of them to do that.
 - Lots of reasons, right?
- This happens so quickly and easily that we might hardly notice that we're doing it.
 - And we can do it just as quickly and easily with far more important moral quandaries than this.
- The part of you that does that coming up with reasons for things is called your "rational mind" or "rational thinking" or reason and that part of you is represented in the Word by the people from the land of Asshur or the Assyrians.
 - This rational mind of yours, like the Assyrians to the Israelites, can be a powerful ally or a powerful enemy.
 - It can be a tool that we use to think things through rationally and carefully or it can be a tool that we use to justify and rationalize the selfish things that we want to do.
 - It can be something that supports our belief in the Lord or it can be something that tries to tear apart and destroy our belief in the Lord.
 - One passage says, "[I]t is the rational that acknowledges [the Divine] and [it is the rational] that denies the Divine...." (*Apocalypse Explained* 131:14).
- The spiritual enemies that we are talking about today are no minor annoyance.
 - The Assyrians were not some small, local nation for the Israelites to squabble with; the Assyrians were an international superpower, conquering nations as they went, in the midst of a campaign to build an ever-growing empire.
- Other enemies did kill thousands of Israelites but the Assyrians were the only ones to conquer the entire northern kingdom of Israel and then take the people away into captivity never to return.
- And, over the generations of the human race, the spiritual Assyrians – the use of reason and rationalizing – have also captured the minds of many people and led them far away from the land of Israel to a place of rejecting religion and rejecting the Lord.
- But, part of what makes it all so difficult is that spiritual Assyria can also be a tremendous force for good.
 - We need the land of Assyria as part of our spiritual landscape.
 - But, within ourselves it can sometimes be hard to tell whether we are dealing with Assyria our spiritual ally or Assyria our spiritual enemy.
- Let's see what we can learn from the story from our lesson.

Story Recap

- By the time the Assyrian army came to besiege Jerusalem, Assyria had been around for a long time.
 - It's mentioned all the way back in the second chapter of Genesis, as where one of the rivers flowing out from the garden of Eden leads to (Genesis 2:14).
- Assyria had various periods in its long history.
 - At the time of our story, Assyria was near the height of its power as an empire.
- We are picking up the story, after the Assyrians had already conquered the northern kingdom of Israel.
 - They have come to try to conquer Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah.
 - They had already captured some of the cities of Judah, and were now ready to take on the capital city of Jerusalem.
- At first, King Hezekiah had tried to keep the Assyrians happy by paying them a lot of money by taking silver and gold from the temple and from his own treasuries.
 - But then Hezekiah may have been planning to try to fight back against the Assyrians, with help from Egypt and so the King of Assyria sent a heavy army and some of his officials to speak on his behalf to Hezekiah's officials and they accuse him of trying to rebel.
- The main spokesperson is called "the Rabshakeh" and he is full of arrogance and contempt.
 - He says, basically, "What are you trusting in that means you're resisting our attack?"
 - "You have plans and schemes? Those are just a bunch of words."
 - "Egypt is going to help you? If you try to lean on Egypt for support, it will be like leaning on a stick that breaks and stabs you in the hand."
 - "You're trusting in Jehovah? Didn't Hezekiah just get rid of all the high places and altars to Jehovah?"
 - Let's pause here for a second.
 - Hezekiah had been a good king who was trying to follow the Lord and, unlike almost all of the kings that came before him, he actually got rid of altars and high places where people were worshipping other gods.
 - The Rabshakeh somehow knows about this and is twisting to make people second-guess that decision and think that maybe Jehovah wanted those high places there.
 - Then the Rabshakeh says, "Look, we'll even give you 2,000 horses for your army to use. They still will have no chance against our armies."
 - "And, by the way, Jehovah is the one who sent us to destroy you."
 - The Assyrians in our heads have all the intel on us – they know our doubts, our areas of insecurity; they know the same religious ideas that we know and they can use all of those things against us.
- It seems like this conversation was happening just outside the city of Jerusalem, in earshot of the walls of Jerusalem.
 - And Hezekiah's officials are worried about the people on the walls overhearing the conversation and so they say, "Please don't speak to us in Hebrew. Speak to us in a different language that the people on the wall won't be able to understand."

- But that just makes the Rabshakeh turn his attention to the people on the wall.
 - He says, "They're the ones who are going to eat and drink their own waste if we besiege you, so they should hear what I have to say."
 - He calls out in a loud voice to the people on the wall, "Don't believe Hezekiah when he tells you that Jehovah will rescue you."
 - "Make peace with me and you can eat your own food until I take you away to another place which will be just as good as the place you're in right now."
 - "Have the gods of any other nations rescued them from us? They didn't protect Samaria. Why do you think that Jehovah will actually rescue you?"

The Powerful Attack of Assyria

- You can see that these are a pretty powerful set of arguments.
 - Assyria is awfully good at reasoning.
 - Assyria is a direct, in-your-face, confrontational, spiritual enemy.
 - This can show up in a whole bunch of different ways in our lives but one way is in a direct assault on the idea of being religious and following the Lord.
- Spiritual Assyrians might say things like this to you:
 - "You know that religion doesn't make any sense, right?"
 - "You know that so many religious ideas that people have had have been proven to be false by science."
 - "You think that you have facts that support your beliefs? You can't depend on those."
 - "You shouldn't trust the Lord to protect you. Let Reason – the King of Assyria – be in charge of you. That's who has the real power."
 - "You'll have a good life, pretty much identical to the life you have been living – a life that's way better than the suffering you're going to experience if you carry on with a religious life."

What Do We Do?

- So what do we do in the face of attacks like that?

Do Not Answer

- Let's re-read what the people did after the Rabshakeh said all that he had to say.
 - "But the people were silent and answered him not a word; for the king's commandment was, "Do not answer him" (2 Kings 18:36).
- There is a lot of wisdom in this response.
 - Don't answer.
 - It's what the Lord did when people were saying all sorts of false things about Him when He was on trial: "He kept silent and answered nothing" (Mark 14:61; Matthew 27:12-14).
 - And despite this, Pilate could still tell that He was innocent.
- When someone is arguing with us or attacking our beliefs or even when ideas like these are just coming into our own heads, we can feel like we need to argue back, to try to prove them wrong.
 - Often the best approach is to start by not answering.

- Now, if you're in an actual conversation with someone, it might feel quite weird and awkward to just stand there and say nothing so you might need to say something like, "I don't know. I need to think about this some more for myself."

Lay It Out Before the Lord

- In the story the people do not answer the Rabshakeh but the officials do go to King Hezekiah with their clothes torn and, when the king hears what has been said, he too tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth (2 Kings 18:37; 2 Kings 19:1).
 - They tore their clothes as a sign of how upset they were and it also symbolizes grieving the loss of truth (*Secrets of Heaven* 4763).
 - When we are attacked by Assyria it can feel like the very truths that we normally clothe ourselves and our lives in have been torn apart and that's really hard.
 - It's a desperate and hopeless place to be in when it feels like the beliefs that we care about most have been torn apart.
- But King Hezekiah does the right thing: he sends his officials to go tell the prophet Isaiah what the Rabshakeh said and to ask him to pray for them.
 - We too can go to the Lord in His Word.
- And Isaiah sends a message back to the king saying, "Thus says Jehovah: 'Do not be afraid of the words which you have heard...'" (2 Kings 19:6).
 - This is a common message from the Lord – to not be afraid – but it's worth trying to remember that when dealing with the Assyrians.
 - You don't need to be afraid of the arguments that people come up with.
 - They're not new.
 - The Lord has been dealing with arguments like this for thousands of years.
 - He can also deal with whatever the current version is.
- Isaiah also says that the King of Assyria will hear a rumor and go back to his homeland and there be killed.
 - And then we read that when the Rabshakeh went to report to the King, he found that he was off fighting other people.
- The Rabshakeh, therefore, sends another letter to Hezekiah that says, essentially, "Don't trust in your God; don't think that you're not going to be destroyed. You will be destroyed just like all the other nations and their gods that we destroyed."
 - Hezekiah takes that letter and goes up to the house of Jehovah and spreads out the letter before Jehovah and then prays to Him.
 - Hezekiah says, "The Assyrians have destroyed many nations and their gods."
 - And then he says, "Now therefore, O Jehovah our God, I pray, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You are Jehovah God, You alone" (2 Kings 19:19).
- This action of spreading out a letter in front of the Lord is a good thing to do, even at a literal level.
 - If you're really struggling with some ideas, write them down, and then spread them out in front of the Lord and ask Him to guide your thinking on them.

Assyria is Not as Powerful or Unified as It Looks

- In response to Hezekiah's prayer, the Lord gives a prophecy about the king of Assyria, through the prophet Isaiah, that includes these lines:
 - 32 'He shall not come into this city,
Nor shoot an arrow there,
Nor come before it with shield,
Nor build a siege mound against it.
 - 33 By the way that he came,
By the same shall he return;
And he shall not come into this city,'
Says Jehovah.
 - 34 "For I will defend this city, to save it
For My own sake and for My servant David's sake.'" (2 Kings 19:32-34)

- And it comes true.
 - One night one hundred and eighty-five thousand of the Assyrian soldiers are killed and the king of Assyria goes back home after that.
 - And when he's back home, some of his sons assassinate him (2 Kings 19:35-37).

- One thing we can take from this is that the Assyrians are not as united as they might seem.
 - They are fighting with each other and killing each other.
 - When someone is arguing with us against what we believe, they might make it seem like everyone agrees with them and that what they're saying is the only logical conclusion but that is almost never the case.
 - There is plenty of disagreement among atheists, for example.
- Just because someone can make an argument for something doesn't make it true and knowing what's true is far more important than being able to make a clever argument.
- *Divine Providence* 318:8
 - Our ability to justify whatever we please is not intelligence. It is only cleverness, which even the worst of us may have. There are people who are brilliant at justifying things who do not know anything true. They can still justify both truth and falsity. The only people who are intelligent are the people who can tell that a truth is true and who corroborate this by a constant awareness of truths. It is hard to tell the two kinds of person apart because it is hard to tell the difference between the light of rationalization and the light of a genuine sense of truth.

- As the Lord said in Luke, the way we look at the world matters.
 - "The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness" (Luke 11:34,35).

- Isaiah's prophecy also tells us how Assyria should be handled; the Lord says to the king of Assyria,
 - " Therefore I will put My hook in your nose
And My bridle in your lips,
And I will turn you back
By the way which you came." (19:28)
- We should maybe think of our rational mind as a powerful but somewhat ornery horse that needs to be controlled.
 - It's a strong horse that can run fast but it needs to be pointed in the right direction.
 - Our rational mind can be used to come up with all the reasons why following the Lord seems dumb.
 - It also can be used to think through all the ways in which it makes sense to follow the Lord.
- Ask the Lord to put His hook in the nose and His bridle in the lip of your rational mind, so that He can point it in the right direction.
 - The passage we read in our lesson said that, in a positive sense, Assyria can mean "true reason in a member of the church, which allows the person to see truth and goodness clearly."

The Proper Relationship Between Assyria, Israel, and Egypt

- Along these lines, let's read again the beautiful description from Isaiah about Egypt, Assyria, and Israel all working together:
 - ²³ In that day there shall be a highway from Egypt to Assyria; and Assyria shall come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria; and the Egyptians shall serve with the Assyrians. ²⁴ In that day Israel shall be a third, together with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the land, ²⁵ whom Jehovah of Armies shall bless, saying, "Blessed be My people, Egypt; and Assyria, the work of My hands; and Israel, My inheritance!" (Isaiah 19:23-25)
- Egypt, Assyria, and Israel, or knowledge, the rational, and the spiritual, can all work together, if the spiritual is in charge.
 - That's what it means that Israel is the Lord's inheritance.
 - The spiritual in us is the part that rightly will inherit everything from the Lord but knowledge and the rational also have their place.
 - And all three can have plenty of commerce and interaction between each other and be a blessing to everyone.

Conclusion

- Assyria or our ability to think rationally is powerful and can be a powerful force for good in our lives and in the world and the misuse of our rational mind can be a powerful and overwhelming enemy to our spiritual lives.
- When you encounter strong arguments against following the Lord, first do not answer, then go lay it all out in front of the Lord, do not be afraid, ask the Lord to direct your rational mind in a good direction, and trust that the Lord really is the one in charge of everything and everyone.
- *Amen.*