

Homiletics Analysis: 2 Kings 18

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Second Kings 18 opens the Hezekiah narrative, one of the most sustained portraits of covenant faithfulness in the entire historical literature. The chapter moves in two major movements. The first (vv. 1–12) establishes Hezekiah’s identity as a reforming king: he removes the high places, smashes the sacred pillars, cuts down the Asherah poles, and destroys the bronze serpent (Nehushtan) that Israel had turned into an idol. The narrator’s evaluative summary is the most emphatic in Kings — he did what was right, he trusted the LORD, he held fast to the LORD, he kept the commandments. The summary explicitly compares him to David and declares that the LORD was with him. This section closes with a pointed theological contrast: Assyria has exiled the northern kingdom because Israel did not obey the voice of the LORD their God (vv. 9–12). The juxtaposition is deliberate — one king trusted; one nation did not.

The second movement (vv. 13–37) plunges the reader immediately into crisis. Sennacherib of Assyria invades Judah, captures its fortified cities, and threatens Jerusalem. Hezekiah’s first response is capitulation — he strips the temple and palace of silver and gold to pay tribute (vv. 13–16). This is not yet unbelief, but it is not yet faith either. Then Sennacherib dispatches the Rabshakeh with a massive army to Jerusalem’s gates. The Rabshakeh delivers a devastating psychological siege in three arguments: (1) political — Egypt is a broken reed you cannot lean on; (2) theological — even your God cannot save you, since Hezekiah himself removed His high places; (3) comparative — no god of any nation has ever delivered its people from Assyria, and your God will be no different. The speech is rhetorically brilliant and theologically calculated to produce despair. The chapter ends with Hezekiah’s officials in grief and silence, the Rabshakeh’s words hanging unanswered in the air.

This Text — Intent:

God is positioning His people to see the absolute choice between human calculation and divine trust — and to feel the full weight of that choice. The chapter does not resolve into deliverance yet. It holds the reader inside the crisis, bracketed by a portrait of genuine faith (vv. 1–12) and a speech designed to destroy it (vv. 13–37). The intent is not merely to inform about Hezekiah or Sennacherib — it is to force the question: *When every human resource has failed and every argument against God’s reliability has been made, where will you stand?* The reader who has seen what Hezekiah’s trust looks like in vv. 1–8 is now being asked whether that trust will hold when it is most costly to hold it.

Subject Sentence: Hezekiah's unreserved trust in the LORD is tested when Assyrian power and rhetoric assault both Jerusalem and faith itself.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through Hezekiah's portrait and Sennacherib's assault that genuine faith in the LORD will be tested to its breaking point — and that the question of where you place your trust is not academic but existential, demanded at the moment when every human option has collapsed.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nehushtan episode (v. 4): Some interpreters treat Hezekiah's destruction of the bronze serpent as an inconsistency — a king so zealous for reform that he overreaches by destroying what Moses himself made. This reading misses the narrator's point entirely. The text does not criticize the destruction; it praises it. The problem was never the bronze serpent itself — the problem was that Israel had *made it an idol* ("and the children of Israel had been burning incense to it"). Hezekiah's act is not iconoclasm run amok; it is accurate theological triage. An object God once used for salvation had become an object of false worship. The Reformed reading here is clear: no instrument of grace becomes permanently sacred. Objects, institutions, and traditions must always serve the living God, not replace Him. To qualify Hezekiah's action as excessive is to misread the narrator's evaluative stance, which is uniformly positive.

Hezekiah's tribute payment (vv. 13–16): There is interpretive disagreement about whether Hezekiah's stripping of the temple to pay Sennacherib represents a failure of faith or a prudent political act. Some evangelical and Baptist interpreters treat this as straightforwardly faithless — a king who trusted God in reform but defaulted to human calculation when the army arrived. Others argue it was temporary strategic capitulation pending God's intervention. The text is deliberately ambiguous at this point, and the ambiguity is load-bearing: the narrator describes the act without evaluating it explicitly, which is unusual in Kings. The more careful Reformed reading recognizes that the tribute payment and the prayer of chapter 19 are in genuine tension — the chapter 18 Hezekiah and the chapter 19 Hezekiah are the same man, oscillating between calculation and trust, which is precisely the human condition the text exposes. This is not a contradiction but a psychologically and spiritually realistic portrait of faith under pressure.

The Rabshakeh's theological argument (vv. 22, 25): Two interpretive questions arise from the Rabshakeh's speech. First, was he right that Hezekiah had "removed the high places" in a way that offended the LORD? No — he is flatly wrong. The high places Hezekiah removed were syncretistic sites, not legitimate Yahwistic worship. The Rabshakeh's argument depends on a theological misread that the narrator has already corrected in vv. 3–4. Second, the Rabshakeh's claim in v. 25 — "Did I come up without the LORD against this place? The LORD said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it'" —

is historically interesting. Some interpreters, notably critical scholars, take this as evidence of Assyrian political propaganda that had absorbed Yahwistic language. The Reformed reading acknowledges that God does use pagan powers as instruments of judgment (cf. Isaiah 10:5 — “Assyria, the rod of my anger”) but refuses to grant the Rabshakeh theological authority or divine commission here. His claim is a rhetorical weapon, not a prophetic oracle. What is remarkable is that the text lets the claim stand unanswered through the end of chapter 18 — the silence itself is theologically intentional.

Dispensational reading: Some dispensational interpreters treat the Hezekiah-Sennacherib narrative primarily as a prophetic type of Israel’s future deliverance from gentile oppression in the end times. While the typological resonance is real (besieged remnant, divine intervention, vindication of the faithful), treating this as the passage’s *primary* claim distorts it. The text is first historical narrative, making a claim about the relationship between trust and deliverance in Hezekiah’s own generation. The typological dimension belongs in the canonical synthesis, not as the controlling lens.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 17:14–20** — The king of Israel was commanded not to multiply horses, silver, or wives, but to keep the law of God. Hezekiah’s stripping of silver and gold (v. 16) and his earlier trust in God (v. 5) read against this backdrop as a portrait of what Deuteronomy’s king looks like and what the failure mode looks like simultaneously.
- **Numbers 21:4–9** — The original bronze serpent (Nehushtan) was God’s instrument of healing for a complaining, snake-bitten Israel. Its appearance in 2 Kings 18:4 shows that what God once used graciously had been converted into an idol — a pattern the canon traces repeatedly. Grace can be perverted into religion.
- **Isaiah 10:5–15** — Isaiah’s oracle on Assyria as “the rod of God’s anger” illuminates the Rabshakeh’s claim in v. 25 and the theological complexity of Sennacherib’s campaign. God uses pagan power as instrument of judgment, yet the pagan power overreaches and will itself be judged. This canonical context prevents a simplistic “Assyria = pure evil” reading and opens the more searching question: *has Judah been so different from Israel?*
- **Psalms 46** — Almost certainly composed in the shadow of the Assyrian crisis, this psalm addresses the same existential situation: nations rage, kingdoms fall, the earth itself dissolves — but “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” The psalm’s refrain (“The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress”) directly echoes the evaluative summary of Hezekiah in v. 7 (“the LORD was with him”).

- **Romans 4:18–21** — Paul’s portrait of Abraham as the paradigm of faith “against hope believing in hope” — trusting God when every human calculation argues against it — provides the canonical New Testament frame for what the Hezekiah narrative is depicting in historical register. The situation is structurally identical: every visible resource has failed; only the promise remains.

Aim: To bring the reader to see that genuine trust in the LORD is not tested by prosperity but by the moment when every human option has been exhausted and the Rabshakeh’s voice sounds most persuasive — and to press the question of whether their faith is deep enough to survive that moment.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Hezekiah’s accession: age 25, reigns 29 years in Jerusalem; mother Abi daughter of Zechariah	Synchronized with Hoshea of Israel (v. 1) — canonical contrast established immediately
3	Evaluative summary: “he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done”	Highest possible endorsement in Kings; David comparison reserved for exceptional kings
4	Reform inventory: removes high places, smashes pillars, cuts down Asherah poles, destroys Nehushtan	Nehushtan named explicitly — editorial note that Israel had been burning incense to it
5–6	Trust summary: trusted in the LORD, held fast to Him, kept His commandments; LORD was with him	“He trusted in the LORD...so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him” — superlative praise
7a	Theological consequence: “the LORD was with him; wherever he went out, he prospered”	Not prosperity-gospel formula — this is covenant faithfulness producing covenant blessing
7b–8	Military summary: rebelled against Assyria, defeated Philistines	Hezekiah’s trust translates into political and military independence

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
9–11	Flashback: Shalmaneser's siege and Israel's exile (year 4 of Hezekiah's reign through year 6)	Synchronized dates anchor the contrast — Hezekiah's trust vs. Israel's exile
12	Theological verdict on northern exile: "because they did not obey the voice of the LORD their God but transgressed his covenant"	Explicit covenant-faithfulness framework — Israel's fate = the negative of Hezekiah's portrait
13	Transition: year 14 — Sennacherib invades, captures fortified cities of Judah	Historical pivot; dated precisely; Lachish relief in Nineveh confirms this historically
14	Hezekiah's capitulation: sends tribute, acknowledges he has "done wrong," begs Sennacherib to withdraw	Ambiguous — humility? Faithlessness? The text does not editorialize
15–16	Tribute payment: silver from temple, gold stripped from temple doors and doorposts	Hezekiah himself had overlaid the doors with gold — now stripped; irony is sharp
17	Sennacherib sends the Rabshakeh with great army to Jerusalem; they take position at the aqueduct	Military positioning is a psychological siege even before words are spoken
18	Hezekiah's officials come out: Eliakim, Shebna, Joah	Names and offices are significant; Eliakim appears in Isaiah 22 as well
19–21	Rabshakeh's first argument: political — "On whom do you trust? Egypt is a broken reed"	Incisive political analysis; Egypt's weakness was real
22	Rabshakeh's second argument: theological — "Hezekiah removed God's high places"	Theological error: he misidentifies the nature of the reform; the narrator has already corrected this
23–24	Rabshakeh's third argument: military — Assyria can give you 2,000 horses and you can't fill them with	Mocking military helplessness; the military comparison is crushing

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
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25	Rabshakeh's fourth argument: divine commission — "The LORD told me to come up against this land"	The most theologically dangerous claim; echoes Isaiah 10:5 but perverts it
26	Hezekiah's officials request the speech be given in Aramaic, not Hebrew, so the people won't hear	The psychological-siege strategy is working; officials recognize the danger of the message reaching the populace
27	Rabshakeh refuses — the message is deliberately aimed at the people, not just the officials	The siege is explicitly psychological; he wants the population to break
28–35	Rabshakeh's public speech in Hebrew: calls on the people directly; warns against Hezekiah; promises safety if they surrender; lists nations whose gods did not save them from Assyria	Rhetorical climax; the gods of Hamath, Arpad, Sepharvaim, Samaria — none delivered; "who among all the gods has delivered his land?"
36	The people are silent; no one answered — "for the king's command was, 'Do not answer him'"	Silence as obedience and restraint; the faith position is to refuse engagement with the Rabshakeh's frame
37	The officials return to Hezekiah with torn clothes, reporting the Rabshakeh's words	Torn clothes = mourning and crisis; chapter ends in grief and suspension

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–8	The Portrait of a Trusting King
2	9–12	The Contrast: Israel's Exile as Covenant Warning
3	13–16	The First Assault: Military Pressure and the Tribute

Division	Verses	Label
4	17–25	Payment The Second Assault: The Rabshakeh’s Theological Siege
5	26–37	The Siege Goes Public: Silence, Grief, and Unresolved Crisis

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Hezekiah’s unreserved trust in the LORD is tested when Assyrian power and rhetoric assault both Jerusalem and faith itself.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through Hezekiah’s portrait and Sennacherib’s assault that genuine faith in the LORD will be tested to its breaking point — and that the question of where you place your trust is not academic but existential, demanded at the moment when every human option has collapsed.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what you have been burning incense to. (*Mind/belief*) Hezekiah destroyed the Nehushtan — not because it was inherently evil, but because it had been redirected from its original purpose and was now receiving the worship that belonged to God alone. Every believer inherits instruments of grace — spiritual practices, church traditions, theological frameworks, ministry models — that can quietly migrate from “tool God once used” to “object of trust.” The reform Hezekiah performs is not puritan iconoclasm; it is honest theological audit. The question the text presses is: *what in your spiritual life was once a means of grace that you have turned into the thing itself?* This is not a question about obvious idols. It is a question about sanctified idols — the things you cannot imagine God asking you to release.

2. Do not be deceived by arguments that sound theologically sophisticated but require you to misread what God has already said. (*Mind/belief*) The Rabshakeh’s most dangerous argument was not his political analysis of Egypt or his military taunt — it was his theological claim: “Did I come up without the LORD against this place?” He sounds like a prophet. He invokes Yahweh’s name. He offers a theological framework that, if accepted, would make resistance to Assyria equivalent to resistance to God. The text has already answered him: Hezekiah’s reform was righteous (vv. 3–4), and the narrator’s evaluation is authoritative. But the Rabshakeh’s argument still *sounds* compelling. Believers must train themselves to evaluate theological claims not by their rhetorical force but by their fidelity to what God has already said — and to recognize that the most spiritually dangerous

arguments are not the ones that deny God, but the ones that conscript His name for claims He has not made.

3. Feel the full weight of what genuine trust costs before you claim you possess it.

(Affections/worship) The chapter ends in grief and silence — torn clothes, no answer, Hezekiah’s officials reporting devastation. This is what trust in God looks like before the resolution. The text does not fast-forward to chapter 19’s deliverance. It holds the reader inside the grief of chapter 18 and forces the question of whether faith can survive the night before the answer comes. Much Christian piety claims trust in God but has never been tested in the way chapter 18 tests Hezekiah. The invitation is not to manufacture crisis but to stop pretending that your trust is deep until you know what it looks like when every human calculation has failed and the only thing left is God. That is the moment the text is preparing you for.

4. Refuse to argue on the enemy’s terms. *(Will/behavior)* The officials’ request — “speak in Aramaic, not Hebrew” — and the king’s command — “do not answer him” — are not passive responses. They are active choices to refuse the frame the Rabshakeh is imposing. The Rabshakeh wants a debate, because a debate on his terms has already been won. The people’s silence is an act of covenant faithfulness. There are moments in the believer’s life — in the face of cynicism, opposition, spiritual warfare, or cultural pressure — when the faithful response is not to answer but to refuse to accept the question as framed. Discerning when to speak and when to be silent is not avoidance; it is wisdom. Not every attack on your faith deserves the dignity of a counter-argument.

5. Let the pattern of your life’s reform precede and sustain your moments of crisis.

(Will/behavior) Hezekiah’s portrait in vv. 1–8 is not incidental decoration before the real story begins. It is the foundation that makes the story legible. When crisis arrives in v. 13, the reader already knows who Hezekiah is — a man who removed false worship, who trusted rather than calculated, who kept the commandments, who was with God before he needed God. The formation that precedes the crisis is what makes it possible to survive the crisis. The application is concrete and uncomfortable: the time to build the habit of trust, the practice of obedience, and the discipline of removing idols is not when the Assyrian army is at the gate. It is now, in the years before the crisis comes. Who you are in chapter 18’s first twelve verses will determine what resources you have available in chapter 18’s last twenty-five.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Second Kings 18 teaches that the LORD is the only reliable ground of trust — and that the text of covenant history itself demonstrates this by juxtaposing the nation that trusted and the nation that did not. The northern kingdom’s exile (vv. 9–12) is not narrated as mere historical backdrop but as theological verdict: covenant faithlessness produces covenant consequence. Hezekiah’s portrait, by contrast, demonstrates that the LORD responds to genuine trust with presence, blessing, and

military success — not as prosperity-gospel formula, but as covenant faithfulness expressing itself in historical reality. The passage also teaches that God’s instruments of grace are not permanently sacred — objects, traditions, and methods must always serve the living God rather than accumulate worship for themselves. The Nehushtan episode is theologically generative precisely because it refuses to protect a revered object that Moses himself made.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The Reformed tradition’s insistence on *solī Deo gloria* — to God alone be glory — finds its historical illustration in Hezekiah’s reform. The destruction of the Nehushtan is not mere religious housekeeping; it is a concrete act of restoring worship to its proper object. Every instrument of grace — including those with impeccable pedigree — must be subordinated to the living God. The covenantal framework governing the entire Kings narrative is explicitly invoked in v. 12: exile comes to the nation that transgressed His covenant. This is not mechanical retribution but covenant logic — the relationship God established with His people at Sinai carries real consequence in history. The Rabshakeh’s speech, for all its rhetorical power, is ultimately an argument that the LORD is like the other gods — finite, regional, and defeatable. The entire Reformed understanding of God’s sovereignty — His incomparable otherness, His covenant faithfulness, His governance of nations — is what makes Hezekiah’s trust rational. The chapter positions the reader to understand that trust in the sovereign God of the covenant is not naive optimism; it is the only epistemically coherent response to who this God actually is.

Main Takeaway

The question this chapter is asking you is not whether you believe in God — it is whether you trust Him when the army is at the gate, the treasury is empty, and the Rabshakeh’s argument sounds uncomfortably reasonable. Hezekiah’s whole life of reform and obedience was building to this moment. Yours is too. The God who was with Hezekiah before Sennacherib arrived is the God who will be with you when your version of the Rabshakeh speaks — but only if, like Hezekiah, you have already removed the Nehushtans and stopped burning incense to the instruments of grace instead of the God who gave them.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Flattening the narrative arc by preaching chapter 19’s resolution into chapter 18.** The most common homiletical failure with this passage is refusing to let it end

where it ends — in grief, silence, and unresolved crisis. Teachers who reach v. 37 and immediately pivot to “but don’t worry, chapter 19 is coming!” have robbed the text of its most powerful claim. Chapter 18 is designed to hold the reader in the night before the answer. Preach it that way. Let the congregation sit in the torn-clothes silence of v. 37 before telling them what comes next.

- **Treating Hezekiah as a moral hero to imitate rather than a covenant portrait that exposes.** The Clowney anti-moralism warning applies directly here. “Be like Hezekiah, trust God” — preached without gospel grounding — reduces the text to exemplarism. The portrait of Hezekiah is powerful not because it gives us a model to imitate by willpower but because it exposes the gap between the faith it depicts and the faith we actually possess. The Fallen Condition Focus (Chapell) is our inability to sustain trust under this kind of pressure. The gospel answer is not “try harder” but “you have a King greater than Hezekiah whose trust never wavered even on the cross.”
- **Mishandling the Nehushtan episode by either ignoring it or making it the entire sermon.** Many preachers either skip v. 4 because it feels like a historical footnote or dwell on it so long that the passage’s main movement is lost. The Nehushtan is not a curiosity or a sidebar — it is a theologically precise introduction to the chapter’s central question: what are you trusting? But it is one element in a larger movement, and preaching it disproportionately distorts the whole.
- **Accepting the Rabshakeh’s theological framing uncritically.** Some preachers so emphasize the Rabshakeh’s rhetorical skill — rightly noting that his political analysis of Egypt was accurate and his knowledge of Israelite religion was sophisticated — that they inadvertently legitimize his theological claims. His argument in v. 25 (“the LORD told me to come”) and his argument in v. 22 (“Hezekiah removed the LORD’s high places”) are both *wrong*, and the narrator has already told us they are wrong. The Rabshakeh is a gifted rhetorician who makes multiple accurate observations in service of a fundamentally false framework. Do not let rhetorical brilliance be mistaken for theological authority.
- **Preaching Hezekiah’s tribute payment (vv. 15–16) as either pure faithlessness or entirely defensible.** The text is ambiguous, and the ambiguity should be honored. Teachers who use this moment to preach either “even great saints fail” (making it a moralistic cautionary tale) or “this was wise pragmatism” (defending Hezekiah against criticism) are reading into the text what the narrator has deliberately withheld. The tribute payment is presented without evaluation because the reader is supposed to feel its ambiguity — *is this faith or fear? is this humility or capitulation?* Let the congregation sit with that question rather than resolving it artificially.
- **Missing the canonical function of vv. 9–12.** The flashback to the northern exile is not interruption or filler — it is the theological key to the whole chapter. The

juxtaposition of “Hezekiah trusted and the LORD was with him” (vv. 5–7) with “Israel was exiled because they did not obey” (vv. 12) is the narrator’s interpretive frame. Without this contrast, the Hezekiah narrative is a hero story. With it, it is a covenant theology demonstration. Preachers who skip past vv. 9–12 as historical background have missed the text’s own interpretive signal.