

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 36

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Isaiah 36 narrates the Assyrian military campaign against Jerusalem under King Hezekiah. The Assyrian king Sennacherib has already swept through the fortified cities of Judah and now sends his field commander, the Rabshakeh, with a massive army to Jerusalem. The Rabshakeh delivers a calculated political and theological speech designed to break Judean resistance. He argues three lines of attack: that Judah's military alliances (Egypt) are worthless, that Judah's religious reform under Hezekiah has actually undermined their relationship with their own god, and — most pointedly — that the LORD Himself has commissioned Assyria to destroy Jerusalem. He then pivots to a direct address to the population in Hebrew, urging immediate surrender with promises of temporary prosperity before resettlement. The chapter ends with the envoys and the people in stunned silence, the city's officials tearing their clothes, and word being sent to Hezekiah.

Broader Unit

Isaiah 36 is part of the historical hinge section of the book (Isaiah 36–39), which bridges the oracles of judgment (Isaiah 1–35) and the oracles of comfort (Isaiah 40–66). These chapters are closely parallel to 2 Kings 18–20 and serve a canonical function: they dramatize in lived history the theological claims Isaiah has been making. The Assyrian threat, which has loomed throughout the early chapters, now arrives at the gate. Isaiah 36 specifically functions as the crisis that demands the theological verdict Isaiah 37 will provide. It cannot be fully separated from Isaiah 37, and analysts should note that the two chapters form one dramatic movement (the crisis and its resolution), though Isaiah 36 has its own complete literary integrity as the scene-setting first act.

This Text — Intent

God is confronting His people with the full force of a world without Him — not to destroy their faith, but to reveal whether it is real. The Rabshakeh's speech is not merely a historical record of Assyrian diplomacy; it is a carefully crafted spiritual ordeal. Every argument he advances is designed to sever the people's trust in the LORD. The intent of the passage is to force a moment of reckoning: when the most powerful empire on earth stands at your walls and mocks your God with theologically sophisticated arguments, what do you believe? The chapter ends in silence — the people's silence — which is itself a theological act. The text drives the reader to ask: on what do you stand when everything you counted on is stripped away?

Subject Sentence: The Assyrian siege — a world-empire demanding surrender and mocking the LORD’s sufficiency.

Primary Claim: When the powers of this world systematically dismantle every human ground of confidence, God is driving His people to the one thing that cannot be taken — trust in Him alone. The Rabshakeh’s case is designed, under divine providence, to be unanswerable by anything except the LORD Himself.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Rabshakeh’s Claim That the LORD Sent Him (v. 10)

One of the sharpest interpretive questions in the chapter is whether the Rabshakeh’s claim — “the LORD said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it” — is pure propaganda or contains a grain of theological truth. Some interpreters treat it as straightforward deception, dismissing it as a pagan king’s manipulation. Others, particularly in the Reformed tradition, note that Isaiah himself has already said something very like this: “Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger” (Isaiah 10:5). The Reformed reading is more nuanced than simple dismissal. The Rabshakeh may be invoking a genuine prophetic tradition (perhaps through diplomatic intelligence) and weaponizing it. The irony — that he is partly correct — makes the speech more dangerous, not less. This is not a pitfall to dismiss but a theological edge that must be preached: God can use even the enemy’s partial truth-telling as an instrument of testing.

Hezekiah’s Reform as Weakness (vv. 7–8)

The Rabshakeh’s argument that Hezekiah’s removal of the high places and altars has weakened Judah’s religious standing is particularly perverse. From a Yahwistic standpoint, removing the high places was covenant faithfulness, not sacrilege. The Assyrian misreads Judean theology entirely — interpreting reform as reduction. Dispensational interpreters sometimes read this as reflecting genuine ambiguity about Hezekiah’s reform; Wesleyan interpreters occasionally emphasize the people’s confusion as a crisis of incomplete sanctification. The Reformed reading is clear: the Rabshakeh’s logic is precisely backwards — Hezekiah’s reform brought Judah *closer* to covenant fidelity, not further. The propaganda’s sophistication lies in its ability to invert reality. Preachers should not soften this inversion: the enemy often presents faithfulness as folly.

The Silence of the People (v. 21)

The people’s silence in verse 21 — “But they were silent and answered him not a word” — is read in multiple ways. Some interpreters read it as faithful obedience to Hezekiah’s command (v. 21 explicitly says the king commanded silence). Others read it as shock, or as the silence of spiritual paralysis. Lutherans tend toward the latter, seeing the Law’s

crushing weight leaving no human response. The Reformed reading holds both together: the silence is obedience to the king’s wisdom, but it is also the silence of people who have nothing of their own to say. The chapter has methodically stripped every human answer. The only remaining word belongs to God — and it comes in chapter 37.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 10:5–7** — “Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger” — establishes that Assyria is under divine superintendence even while it intends something entirely different; this gives the Rabshakeh’s claim in v. 10 its terrible irony.
 - **Psalms 46:1–7** — “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble... nations rage, kingdoms totter” — provides the theological counterpoint to the Rabshakeh’s entire speech; the claim the enemy is trying to demolish is the claim Psalm 46 has already established.
 - **Exodus 14:13–14** — Moses commanding Israel to “stand firm and see the salvation of the LORD” before the Red Sea — paradigmatic parallel: when human options are exhausted and the enemy presses in, the pattern is divine deliverance, not human resourcefulness.
 - **2 Chronicles 32:1–8** — Hezekiah’s response to the Assyrian advance, encouraging the people that “with him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God” — the theological claim that chapter 36 drives the reader toward, even before chapter 37 delivers it.
 - **Revelation 13:5–7** — The beast’s speech, making war on the saints and prevailing in appearance — canonical echo of the Rabshakeh’s pattern: world-power making comprehensive claims against the people of God with apparent invincibility; the ultimate eschatological frame for what Isaiah 36 shows in miniature.
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Aim: To show that the Rabshakeh’s speech — in its sophistication, its partial truth, and its relentless stripping of human confidence — is precisely the kind of pressure God uses to expose and purify genuine faith.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Sennacherib invades Judah, captures fortified cities	Sets historical and military context; Jerusalem isolated
2	Sennacherib sends the	Lachish is significant —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem with a great army	siege archaeology confirms this campaign
3	Hezekiah's officials go out to meet him: Eliakim, Shebna, Joah	Three senior officials — the delegation signals gravity of the moment
4–5	Rabshakeh's first argument: on what do you base your confidence? Egypt is a broken reed	Classic ancient Near Eastern negotiation; the reed image dismisses Egypt with contempt
6	Egypt — if you lean on it, it pierces your hand	The reed-staff image: what you rely on for support will wound you
7	Second argument: "If you say we trust the LORD" — but Hezekiah removed His altars	Deliberate theological inversion; Hezekiah's reform presented as sacrilege
8–9	Third argument: military inadequacy — you cannot field even 2,000 cavalry	Mocking Judah's military capacity; if Assyria gives horses, Judah can't man them
10	Fourth argument: "The LORD told me to come up against this land"	The most dangerous argument — partial theological truth weaponized
11	Hezekiah's officials ask the Rabshakeh to speak in Aramaic, not Hebrew	Diplomatic protocol; they recognize the crowd-manipulation attempt
12	The Rabshakeh refuses — his audience is the people, not the officials	He intends to bypass leadership and address the populace directly
13–15	Second speech: direct address to the people — do not let Hezekiah deceive you	Now speaking Hebrew to the people; "Hezekiah cannot deliver you"
16–17	Promise of surrender terms: eat your own vine, make peace, then resettlement in a good land	The seductive alternative to resistance: temporary prosperity offered
18–20	Fifth argument: no other god has delivered its people from Assyria; the LORD is no	The theological climax of the Rabshakeh's case — the LORD equated with

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
21	different The people are silent; the king had commanded: do not answer him	defeated gods Silence as obedience and as the end of human resources
22	Officials return to Hezekiah with clothes torn, report the words	Torn clothes signal mourning/crisis; the word goes back to the king

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Army at the Gate: Sennacherib’s Campaign Reaches Jerusalem
2	3–10	The First Speech: Demolishing Every Human Ground of Confidence
3	11–20	The Second Speech: Bypassing Leadership, Addressing the People
4	21–22	The Response: Silence, Torn Clothes, and the Word Brought to the King

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The Assyrian siege — a world-empire demanding surrender and mocking the LORD’s sufficiency.

Primary Claim: When the powers of this world systematically dismantle every human ground of confidence, God is driving His people to the one thing that cannot be taken — trust in Him alone. The Rabshakeh’s case is designed, under divine providence, to be unanswerable by anything except the LORD Himself.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize the Rabshakeh’s Logic When You Hear It (*Mind/Belief*)

The Rabshakeh does not simply threaten — he argues. He dismantles confidence in alliances, in past religious decisions, in military capacity, and finally in God Himself. His method is theologically sophisticated: he uses partial truths, inverts the meaning of faithfulness, and ends by equating the LORD with defeated gods. This logic recurs in every generation. When secular culture, intellectual opposition, or personal crisis argues that your faith is inadequate, naive, or historically disproven, learn to recognize the Rabshakeh's pattern. The goal is not information transfer but trust demolition. Name it. Understanding the structure of the attack is the first step toward meeting it rightly.

2. Stop Leaning on the Egyptian Reed (*Affections/Worship*)

The Rabshakeh correctly identifies that Judah is leaning on Egypt — and that Egypt is a broken reed. The question his speech drives home is: what are you treating as your real source of security? Career stability, financial reserves, institutional reputation, political alliance, medical options — these are not sinful in themselves, but the moment they become load-bearing walls in your life, they become Egyptian reeds. They will not hold. The passage is designed to expose the difference between trusting the LORD and trusting the LORD *plus* Egypt. Genuine faith does not supplement God with backup options. Let the Rabshakeh's speech do what it is designed to do: expose where your confidence actually lives.

3. Do Not Let the Enemy's Theological Sophistication Silence You (*Mind/Belief*)

The officials in verse 11 ask the Rabshakeh to speak in Aramaic rather than Hebrew because they can see what he is doing — he is making a theological case directly to the people. Their instinct to protect the people from the speech is understandable, but it reflects a broader problem: when the challenge to faith comes in sophisticated form, the temptation is to manage it rather than engage it. The chapter ends in silence — the people's silence — but silence in the face of an unanswerable argument is not faith, it is paralysis. The answer is not to silence the Rabshakeh; the answer is to bring his argument to the LORD, which is exactly what Hezekiah does in chapter 37. Do not manage the crisis — bring it to God.

4. Let the Stripping of Human Options Drive You to Prayer, Not Despair (*Will/Behavior*)

The movement of the chapter is deliberate: every human option is methodically eliminated. Egypt is useless. Hezekiah's reform is inverted. Military capacity is mocked. The LORD's own willingness to help is questioned. By verse 21, there is nothing left to say. This is not accidental — the text is showing what genuine prayer looks like before it becomes necessary. When your human options are exhausted, the Rabshakeh has done you a service: he has cleared the field. The question is whether you turn the cleared field into despair or into prayer. Isaiah 37:1 shows Hezekiah going to the house of the LORD. The application is concrete: when the options are gone, that is when prayer becomes what it was always meant to be, not supplemental but foundational.

5. Stand Silent Before What Only God Can Answer (*Affections/Worship*)

The king commanded: do not answer him. There is a kind of holy silence that is not defeat but wisdom — the recognition that some arguments are not ours to win, some powers are not ours to defeat, and some moments require not our cleverness but our submission. The people's silence in verse 21 is, at its best, the silence of faith acknowledging its own limits. There are arguments against the faith that you cannot win in debate. There are circumstances that you cannot fix with competence. There are powers arrayed against you that you cannot outrun. The answer is not a better argument or a more efficient strategy. The answer is the silence that says: this belongs to God. Learn to distinguish the silence of faith from the silence of paralysis — faith's silence turns toward God; paralysis's silence turns inward.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Isaiah 36 teaches that God exercises sovereign providence even through the instruments of His enemies. The Rabshakeh's military power, rhetorical sophistication, and partial theological insight are all under the LORD's governance — Assyria is His rod, whether Assyria knows it or not. The passage also teaches the nature and purpose of spiritual testing: God does not protect His people from encounters with world-power that seem unanswerable; He uses such encounters to clarify where faith actually lives. The Rabshakeh's speech functions, in providential terms, not as pure opposition to God's purposes but as the precise pressure needed to expose and purify genuine trust. This is not a comfortable doctrine, but it is a deeply pastoral one: the hardest moments of pressure are not outside God's governance — they are inside it.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage displays the Reformed doctrine of divine sovereignty over history in sharp relief. Assyria is not a competitor to the LORD's plans but an instrument of them — yet Assyria acts freely, from its own motives, with its own ambitions. The Rabshakeh's speech is both genuine Assyrian propaganda and, unknowingly, a divinely orchestrated test. This is the Reformed understanding of providence: God works through secondary causes without thereby excusing them or endorsing them. The passage also grounds the Reformed emphasis on the sufficiency of God alone — *solus Deus* — not as abstract doctrine but as lived crisis. Every human ground of confidence is methodically removed so that the one remaining ground — the LORD Himself — can be seen for what it is: not the last option, but the only one that was ever real. Reformed preaching of this passage should resist any resolution that smuggles human resources back in; the text will not permit it.

Main Takeaway

The Rabshakeh is right about one thing: Egypt cannot save you, your own religious performance cannot save you, and your military capacity cannot save you. Where he is catastrophically wrong is in thinking the LORD belongs on that list. God is dismantling your confidence in everything else — not to leave you empty, but to leave you with the only thing that holds. Stop defending what he is right to attack. Bring what remains to the LORD.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the Rabshakeh as simply a villain to be dismissed.** The sophistication of his speech is not incidental — it is the point. He makes genuinely strong arguments. Preachers who move too quickly to “but he was wrong, and God would defeat him” rob the text of its force. The congregation needs to feel the weight of his case before they can understand the significance of the silence and the significance of what chapter 37 provides. Spend time in the speech. Let it land.
- **Preaching the passage morally rather than theologically.** The temptation is to turn Isaiah 36 into a lesson about courage under pressure, or about the importance of not listening to the enemy’s lies. Both applications are not wrong, but they are thin. The passage is not ultimately about the quality of Judah’s response — it is about the sufficiency of the LORD who is being mocked. Keep God at the center of the crisis, not Judah’s psychology.
- **Detaching Isaiah 36 from Isaiah 37 too completely.** The chapter ends in unresolved crisis. Preachers who attempt a self-contained sermon on Isaiah 36 without any forward reference to chapter 37 may inadvertently leave the congregation in the Rabshakeh’s world — with no resolution. The passage is designed to create urgency and incompleteness. Name this: the answer is coming, but it has not yet arrived. Preach the tension honestly while pointing toward the resolution.
- **Missing the partial truth in the Rabshakeh’s theological claim (v. 10).** Verse 10’s assertion that the LORD sent Assyria is the most dangerous argument in the speech — because it is partially correct. Preachers who dismiss it as pure fabrication miss the theological edge the passage is pressing. Isaiah 10 has already established that Assyria is God’s instrument. The right reading is not “this is a lie” but “this partial truth is being weaponized.” Preach the complexity.
- **Applying the silence of verse 21 too simply.** The people’s silence in obedience to the king’s command can be preached as faithful restraint — but it can also be preached as the end of human resources, which is what the chapter’s entire movement has been building toward. Collapsing the silence into simple obedience

misses the theological weight of the moment: there is nothing left to say. Both dimensions — the obedience and the exhaustion — should be honored.

- **Failing to account for the chapter's eschatological resonance.** The Rabshakeh's speech — a world-empire standing before the people of God, making comprehensive theological arguments for surrender, claiming no god has ever resisted Assyrian power — is not merely ancient history. It is a pattern that recurs and will recur. Revelation's imagery of the beast making war on the saints and appearing to prevail is the eschatological intensification of exactly this scene. Preachers should not artificially force the eschatological connection, but where the congregation can hear it, the connection is genuinely in the canonical grain of the text.