

And They Will Call Him Immanuel

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from Isaiah chapter 7, which can be found on page 692. Isaiah chapter 7, verses 1 to 17.

When Ahaz, son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, king Rezan of Aram and Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel, marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

Now the house of David was told, Aram has allied itself with Ephraim. So the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

Then the Lord said to Isaiah, go out, you and your sons here, Zashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the upper pool on the road to the launderer's field.

Say to him, be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood, because of the fierce anger of Rezan and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.

[1 : 20] Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, let us invade Judah, let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king over it.

Yet this is what the sovereign Lord says, it will not take place, it will not happen. For the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezan.

Within 65 years, Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.

If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all. Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or the highest heights.

But Ahaz said, I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said, Hear now, you house of David. Is it not enough to try the patience of humans?

[2 : 25] Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel.

He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. For before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah.

He will bring the king of Assyria. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Esther.

So if you could keep your Bibles open at Isaiah 7, that would be really helpful as we look at that together. We're looking at a long section today, longer than Esther read, right through to chapter 8, verse 10.

[3 : 37] And if you find it helpful, there's an outline inside the notice sheet so you can see where we're going as we look at that together. But let's pray. Let's ask that as we hear the word of God and spend time in it, the spirit of God gives us an encounter with God, that we meet him in his word.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we heard last week that the people in Isaiah's day heard the word, but had ears that were closed, eyes that were blinded, hearts that were hard.

Father, we ask for your mercy that this morning you would give us ears to hear, eyes to see you, and hearts that are willing to change and follow you.

For we ask in the name of your Son, the Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. So it's a long passage, but the big idea is actually very simple, and it comes in verse 9 of chapter 7, at the end there of verse 9.

Have a look. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all. It's the challenge given to one of Israel's kings, King Ahaz, but in a sense it's a challenge of the whole Bible, the whole of Isaiah, the whole of the Bible.

[4 : 52] God has made incredible promises to us in Jesus Christ. He's promised us in Romans chapter 8 that in Christ nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Not trouble, not hardship, not danger, not persecution, not satanic power, nothing. He's promised us no condemnation if we're in Christ, all our sins forgiven.

He's promised never will I leave you, never will I forsake you. And he's made promises for the church through the ages. As Jesus told his parable, a kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that starts as the smallest of all seeds, but the tree, the kingdom of heaven, will be the largest of any.

In other words, that ultimately every other kingdom will fall, and the people of God, the church, will be a great multitude from every tribe and tongue and nation. But at times our faith in those promises of God gets tested.

And when we're in difficult times, when we're challenged, when we're in a crisis, our faith either gets refined and strengthened, or it wavers. And what gets revealed in us is that our faith isn't so strong, and the danger is we just drift away.

[6 : 11] And we might feel that we live in challenging times in Scotland at the moment to be a Christian. When we look at our schools and how secular they've become.

At school assemblies, which I get to go to now with children, where, you know, Christian songs would have been sung in Scottish schools, maybe a generation ago, a couple of generations ago, as Christians started the schools long further back.

And yet now the children sing, Katy Perry's raw, you know, I am a champion and you're going to hear me raw. And we think, where's the gospel? How are we going to reach these people with the gospel?

Or maybe you look at your workplace, and you feel that you're under pressure to keep quiet about being a Christian. People don't mind you having a faith as long as you don't tell anyone. Or maybe we just think globally about what's going on spiritually in the world, and we think about Islam, and how much it's growing in some countries in the world, and think, why has God allowed that, Islam, to get so big?

But God's word to us in challenge is, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all. Now we're in a series in Isaiah at St. Silas.

[7 : 29] He was a prophet, so he was a messenger from God to his people in the 8th century BC. So we're after Moses, we're after Joshua, we're after King David.

God's people are living in and around Jerusalem in the nation of Judah. And in chapter 7 and 8 of Isaiah, the king of Judah, Ahaz, is in a crisis.

If you look down at verse 2 of chapter 7, it says, Now the house of David, so that's the king, King Ahaz, the king in the line of David, was told Aram has allied itself with Ephraim.

So the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. Now Aram is basically Syria, and Ephraim is another name for Israel.

It's actually where the state Israel is today. Under King David, Israel and Judah were one people, the people of God united in the promised land.

[8 : 29] But within a couple of generations, there was this split, and most of the tribes of Israel broke away from loyalty to the king in David's line and became Ephraim, or Israel, that northern kingdom.

And on the map we've got there, it's the green nation there. That's the northern kingdom Israel, that's called Ephraim. And so Judah, that red nation on the map, is all that's left of the people of God living around Jerusalem.

And Syria, you can see on the map there, is just to the north of Israel, the green nation. And what we're hearing is that Syria and Ephraim have formed an alliance militarily against Judah, God's people.

And King Ahaz and the people of Judah are shaking like jelly. Now it's in that crisis that God sends a word to his king, a word of reassurance, and a challenge to trust him and not to be afraid.

So our first point is about Ahaz. It's the son of David refuses a sign of deliverance. The background to Israel and Aram ganging up on Judah like that is that the whole region is under threat from a war machine that's being built to the north, Assyria.

[9 : 45] It was a huge empire in the 8th century BC. And you can see it on the map up there with its capital Nineveh. And the emperor there, Tiglath-Pileser, went on a huge drive to build his empire,

conquering nations in the region.

So Israel and Syria, Israel and Aram, were feeling threatened by the Assyrian empire. And they asked the king of Judah and the people of Judah to join them, to join forces with them against the Assyrian empire to defend themselves.

And Ahaz refused to do that. So they decide to attack Judah and put a puppet king in charge so that they can get their way. So in verse 3, we find Ahaz inspecting an aqueduct.

And that's probably because they're preparing to be under siege as Syria and Israel come down into Judah and besiege key cities. And it's at that moment that God sends Isaiah, his prophet, with his son, Sheajashub.

And the word of God is one of reassurance. So if you look at verse 4, he says, be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid. Then he refers to the two enemy kings as, he says, do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stumps of firewood.

[11:03] They look scary. They're just like smoldering stumps. They've made their plans to strike Judah, but the assurance of verse 7, if you have a look at verse 7, from God through Isaiah, it will not take place.

It will not happen. And then that challenge, verse 9, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all. So King Ahaz faces a choice now.

Is he going to trust what he sees, which is very frightening? The kings and their armies bearing down on him? Or is he going to trust the word of God, the promise of God?

And in God's patience, he gives Ahaz the opportunity to have a sign so that he can trust God. Look at verse 11. Isaiah says, ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.

It's a remarkable offer, isn't it? But then the devastating response of Ahaz in verse 12, he says, I will not ask.

[12:08] I will not put the Lord to the test. Now that sounds pious, doesn't it? It sounds genuine. Oh, I'm not going to ask God to prove himself to me. But the truth is that Ahaz says that because he's already made up his mind, he's not going to trust God.

He won't trust him. And we know that because of the response from God in verse 13. He says, Here now, you house of David, is it not enough to try the patience of humans?

Will you try the patience of my God also? And we know from another book in the Bible, Two Kings, that gives the history what was happening. So Ahaz, instead of trusting the Lord, had turned to the Assyrian Empire.

I think one of our congregation members, Ron, is just not well. So that's why people have gone over.

Let me just pray as people are looking over. Let's pray for him and then we'll continue. There's a few medics over there, so we'll pray. Heavenly Father, thanks so much for our church family in all its diversity.

[13:13] We thank you for Ron and Paddy. Thank you that they were able to be with us this morning. But we do pray for Ron just now. We pray, Heavenly Father, that you'd strengthen him, that he'll be safe and well.

We pray for those who are looking after him just now. And we pray you'd help us to engage with you in your word. Amen. So we're going to, we're back in Isaiah 7.

We're looking at Ahaz and what he's done is he has decided instead of trusting God, he's going to trust the emperor of Assyria. He thinks rather than go to Syria and Israel, for my protection and join forces with them, I'll go straight to the top guy they're afraid of and I'll form an alliance with the king of Assyria and ask him for help to protect me.

And just in case we're in any doubt about what that meant for his faith, we read in 2 Kings that what he did was he took the silver and gold from the temple in Jerusalem and he sent it to the Assyrian Empire.

Say, I'm not, I'm not trusting God anymore. I want you, Assyria, to help me get out of this danger. So he doesn't want a sign from the living God because he's made his mind up.

[14:23] He's got a new God now, the military might of Assyria. And if we were in Ahaz's shoes, we might well have done exactly the same thing. Isaiah turns up at the aqueduct, he's got the word of God, a promise, but it seems so distant, so hard to trust.

And none of the neighboring kings trusts God, trusts Isaiah's God. And on the other hand, Assyria looks so powerful. Putting your eggs in the basket of the Assyrian Empire seems so prudent, so sensible.

And as we get under the skin of that dilemma for Ahaz, we can think about the times we might feel under pressure like that. When the promises of God might seem very distant to us.

And other things around us seem more powerful and seem more trustworthy. But God says to us, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

Now our fears might be quite different to the ones that Ahaz faces. It's worth asking as you look at the text, as you think about this dilemma Ahaz had, what are the things that you fear? Are you someone who fears missing out on what's going on around you in the world, in the non-Christian world?

[15:39] The promises of God maybe seem abstract to you. And the world around us looks attractive and it looks powerful. It's hard to trust Jesus when he says, I've come that you might have life and have it to the full.

When we see people around us who are not Christians and we think, their life looks like life to the full to me. So maybe we put our trust in other things. We put our trust in money and we pin our hopes and dreams on our careers, our investments and we get challenged to put our trust in God and we feel threatened by that.

Or maybe we put our trust in a relationship, in a boyfriend or a girlfriend or in a friendship group and then we feel resentful of the time that being a Christian takes up in our lives because when the rubber hits the road, we'd sooner leave Jesus behind than losing what the relationships we've got seem to offer.

And the reassurances come to Ahaz. Verse 4, no matter what you see around you, be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Verse 9, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all. But Ahaz takes the silver and gold from the temple and he gives it to Assyria because he doesn't trust God. He fails. So we go to our second point.

[17:01] Our second point is this, the son of Isaiah is an unwanted sign of judgment. Ahaz refuses a sign that he's offered and so he gets a sign in verse 14.

Isaiah says to him, therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.

Now, our footnotes tell us what Emmanuel means. It means God with us. And within a short time after this baby is born, we read in verse 16, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. So Syria and Israel that you're afraid of will be laid waste, just as God had said. But because Ahaz didn't trust God, the sign of the baby being born is now a sign to him of impending judgment on him. So in verse 17, he says, the Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah.

[18:05] He will bring the king of Assyria. In other words, Ahaz has got his strategy horrendously wrong. One writer compares it with if you imagine a mouse under attack from two rats, being threatened by two rats.

And so the mouse decides to squeak out for a big cat to come and rescue it from the two rats. So the cat comes, sees off the two rats, but decides it wants the mouse for dessert.

The king of Assyria will gladly come and get rid of Syria and Israel. Syria was conquered in 732 BC, Israel in 722 BC.

But then in 701 BC, he came back for Judah and caused devastation in the land. Now Assyria's motivation in that was greed and empire building.

But what we're seeing here in Isaiah 7 is the Lord was using Assyria as an instrument of judgment on his king who rejected him and on the people because they've rejected God.

[19:10] And here's the key thing. It's that God's people have no future when they stop trusting the word of God. That's the key point. So who is this son who's going to be born in verse 14?

Well, in chapter 8, verse 1, we hear of a baby being born. And then look at verse 3 of chapter 8. Isaiah says, Then I made love to the prophetess and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the Lord said to me, Name him Meher Shalal Hashbaz. Poor him. It's a strange sounding name.

It's a bit of a mouthful. But it's worse in Hebrew, the language, because Isaiah is calling his son quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil. Because the people of God have rejected the word of God,

judgment is coming.

Who is it who's going to be quick to the plunder and swift to the spoil? The Assyrian Empire as they come in. So verse 6 makes it clear it's not just Ahaz who's at fault, it's the people who've turned away from God and his word.

[20 : 20] So you can imagine Isaiah with his wife in the hospital natal ward, postnatal ward, and the grandparents arrive and there are the gifts that they bring in and there are photographs, lots of cooing over the new baby and big brother Shia Jashub gets a new Lego set to keep him happy and then Isaiah says, by the way, we've settled on a name, we're going to call him quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.

What? That's a bit of a mouthful, Isaiah. Oh well, we've thought of a nickname. Our nickname for our new baby boy is Judgment is Coming. That's what we're going to call him.

You can picture the boy growing up and on Radio 2 one afternoon they invite people to phone in who were given crazy names. They get a guy on the phone whose parents actually called him Robin Banks.

Apparently someone did that once, I was looking this week. Robin Banks. He's followed on the phone by Kingfisher and then it's Minivan on the line, Minivan. And then Junior Isaiah calls up. He says, I got called quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil. What were your parents thinking? Well, they gave me a nickname, Judgment is Coming. That's the sign to God's people and it's coming because of his other name, Emmanuel, God with us.

[21 : 40] These were God's people and he's going to come and be with them but because they've rejected God, his coming to be with them is something terrifying.

And in verse 7 of chapter 8, he calls it, he likens it to a flood. Verse 7, Therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates, the king of Assyria with all his pomp. It will overflow all his channels, run over all its banks. So we've seen pictures of flooding this week, haven't we? We've seen that in Sheffield, in Derby, we've seen Venice overwhelmed with water, flooding is a horrible thing and it's the picture here of the Assyrian Empire judging God's faithless people.

It's a picture of judgment. Verse 8, they'll sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck. You maybe picture a scene in a film you've seen where people are in a room and it's filling with water and there's just a little bit of air left and they're gasping for breath. That's the picture of God's judgment. Emmanuel is not something to look forward to if you've rejected God. Emmanuel is bad news.

[22 : 56] God coming to be with you if you've rejected him is bad news. Now why is that? It's because, as we saw last week in chapter 6, God is holy. If you were here last week, Isaiah 6, as Isaiah sees God, there's smoke, there's an earthquake, there are terrifying angels because he's astonishingly great and morally perfect and blazingly pure and when Isaiah sees him, when he sees the Lord, he says, I'm ruined and judgment here is being warned of and it came in 701 BC.

So it's written as a warning for us today that unless God's people trust his word, we don't have a future. It's a warning we need to heed personally each of us is going to stand one day before God like Isaiah did.

We will experience Emmanuel, God with us and we can do that either trusting his promises because if we do that then we are clean and we're forgiven and he'll rejoice over us when we see him and we'll be united with our saviour and Emmanuel will be wonderful or we can see Emmanuel and we've not trusted his promise and it will be something to fear seeing God.

But as well as thinking about that for us personally, let's think of what that sign to Ahaz shows for God's people as a whole today, the professing church in our times.

In Scotland, when we think about the church, if you think about the big denominations, what we basically see the church doing today in Scotland is managing decline.

[24 : 33] When we see the census results every 10 years, we see the number of people who say they're Christians declining and declining and we see church buildings all around us not being used as churches anymore.

They're being used as bars or theatres or flats. Maybe we could ask the question, how much of that is because the professing church in Scotland and in the UK and in the Western world, in Western Europe, has stopped trusting the word of God and we've fallen under judgment.

And we were praying about this earlier, weren't we? We as a church have taken a decision to leave our denomination and hopefully in two weeks' time that will be our first day out of our denomination under different oversight that the Anglican communion has offered us to stay faithful to God's word. Now as we leave a denomination, we can feel vulnerable. We're leaving a denomination that has lots of assets and we're leaving a network and we're leaving perhaps a denomination that society might speak well of because of some of its values.

So we lose security. But it's right to be reminded in Isaiah 7 that unless the people of God trust the word of God, they've got no future. And so we as the people of God have to stand on the word of God and have our faith and our confidence in it to have a future with God.

[26 : 00] Otherwise, we've got no future. So that's our second point. The son of Isaiah is an unwanted sign of judgment. But within the doom of the passage, we get a hint of something much better.

So our third point this morning, the son of a maiden brings the dawn of indestructible hope. There is hope running through the passage. The first glimmer of hope comes in the name of Isaiah's first son.

He went, Isaiah, to the aqueduct to see King Ahaz. He brought his first son with him. And if you look at verse 3 of chapter 7, the name of his first son is Sheajashub.

And when we look in the footnote, we can see what it means. It means a remnant will return. The word return is a word that we might translate repent. A group, a remnant within the people will turn back to God.

So that's the first sign of hope, that not everyone's going to go the same way as Ahaz. Some of them will trust God's promises. And we've seen in chapter 8 that Emmanuel, God with us, is bad news if you've rejected God.

[27 : 07] But at the very end of our passage, verses 9 and 10, Emmanuel is good news if you're trusting God. So we get these verses 9 and 10 for the people who will trust God, the remnant, raise the war cry, you nations, and be shattered.

Listen, all you distant lands, prepare for battle and be shattered, prepare for battle and be shattered. Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted. Propose your plan, but it will not stand for Emmanuel.

For God is with us. If you're part of the remnant who trust God's word, God with us is good news. It means victory over your enemies. Now when we get to chapter 9, next week in Isaiah, we then get a prophecy about another son being born.

To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be God and man, light in the darkness, a new king. Now what's going on there is that often with the Old Testament, when we have a prophecy, there are different fulfillments.

There's an immediate fulfillment in the time of the prophet, but it points forward to a bigger, fuller, perfect fulfillment later. And I think that's what's going on with this promise of the Emmanuel child here in chapter 7, verse 14.

[28 : 28] The verse in chapter 7, verse 14, very famous verse for Christians, because we have it read at Christmas, is, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.

Now the word virgin could be translated maiden, and I think in the first instance, it's the promise of the child in chapter 8, Isaiah's child, Maher-shal al-Hash-baz, who's a sign of judgment.

But that promise of a child is also connected to the child coming in chapter 9, born to a virgin, who'll be a saving king. So let's turn together to Matthew chapter 1, the first book of the New Testament, page 965.

If we go on to page 966 in the church Bibles. Matthew chapter 1, it's on the screen as well.

If we start in verse 18, Matthew says this, this is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

[29 : 44] So here is a supernatural virgin birth, and in verse 22, Matthew says this, verse 22, all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

That's the ultimate fulfillment of the Isaiah 7 prophecy. But we've seen from Ahaz, Emmanuel, God with us, can either be good news or it can be bad news.

If we're there standing in our sin before God, it's a problem. So is the birth of this Emmanuel, the ultimate Emmanuel, also going to bring judgment like it did in Isaiah's time?

Well, that's why his other name is such good news. Verse 21, the angel says to Joseph, you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

When the Emmanuel child is Jesus, he's come not to judge us and condemn us, but to save us because he will take the judgment on himself. So the question for us is, now that God has given us that sign of a miraculous virgin birth, Emmanuel, God with us, can we fix our eyes on him and because of him trust God's word and stand firm in our faith?

[31 : 14] Maybe you're here and you're not yet a Christian. Could I ask, what do you make of this? Are you at all stirred by the extraordinary way that the Bible fits together? That this word of prophecy from 700 BC could promise a sign of God's favor that comes in Jesus being born?

For lots of us, we're already Christians, but like Ahaz, the pressure is on us every day. It'll be on us every day this week just to live by what we see and trust other things instead.

To put our trust in our Assyrian empires, the things that seem to us so real, so powerful, so concrete, the things other people are trusting. And when we trust those things, our faith gets sidelined by what we see in the world, the opportunities to be popular, to be successful.

So then the danger for us as Christians is that what dominates our lives is the things we're trusting that are not God rather than being driven in our lives by our trusting obedience of God's Word.

So if you're here and you feel that you're feeling half-hearted as a Christian, you're feeling fearful, God says, don't be afraid. Be calm. Put your trust in Jesus Christ.

[32 : 38] Take Him at His Word. Nothing else can save you, but you can trust Him and He will. Let's pray together.

Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank You for the sobering warning that without faith in Your Word, we have no future as Your people. Thank You that Your sign of Emmanuel to us, the child-born Emmanuel, was given the name Jesus because He came to save us from our sins.

Help us to learn day by day not to let our faith be drawn away from You towards what looks powerful, what looks real, help us instead to see that Jesus is real, to learn to rely on Him, to listen to Him, to take You at Your Word.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.