

The Promise of Immanuel
Isaiah 7:1-25
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Today is December 25, the day of the year which we call Christmas, the day of the year in which our culture remembers the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We have today centered our worship service on the birth of Jesus. We don't do this on this particular day because God has commanded us to. We wouldn't be disobeying God if we instead focussed our worship today on some teaching of Jesus or on some event in Jesus' earthly ministry or on Jesus' death or on Jesus' resurrection or on any other event or topic found in all of Holy Writ. Yet I have chosen to focus our worship today upon the birth of Jesus, and I have done so for two reasons. First, it is always appropriate and good to meditate upon the birth of Jesus and to give God thanks for this event which was so necessary for our salvation. Such a devotional exercise is always spiritually beneficial regardless of the day. Second, our minds and hearts are already bent in that direction, and so we do well to take advantage of this bent rather than to fight against it and to try to redirect our thoughts.

With that purpose in mind, let me now read for you the beginning verses in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus:

Matthew 1:18-23

- 18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.
- 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.
- 20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.
- 21 "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."
- 22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying:
- 23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

According to these verses from Matthew, Isaiah 7:14 was fulfilled when the Virgin Mary gave birth to the Baby Jesus. We are all familiar with this verse about a Virgin's conceiving and bearing a Son as it relates to the Christmas story. I think we are less familiar with the context in which this prophecy was originally given. That original context is what we will be looking at today. We will look at the original context under three headings: the crisis, the confrontation and the curse.

We'll begin by looking at the historical **crisis** which was the background of Isaiah chapter seven. In our sermon last week,

we looked at the vision through which God called Isaiah to be a prophet to the nation of Judah. God told Isaiah that he would be ministering during a period of judicial hardening, a period when people would hear Isaiah's message but not heed it, a period when the people would hear but not understand and see but not perceive. Our passage for today, Isaiah chapter seven, is about a watershed event when this prophesied spiritual hardening was beginning to dominate the nation.

In Isaiah chapter seven, the king of Judah is King Ahaz. King Ahaz was very different from the four kings who had ruled over Judah during the previous one hundred years. These four earlier kings were Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah and Jotham. The Bible has this to say about each of these four kings: "He did what was right in the sight of the LORD" (2 Kings 12:2; 14:3; 15:3; 15:34). These four kings weren't perfect. They each had their shortcomings and made some mistakes, some more than others. Yet the Bible makes this statement about each one of them: "He did what was right in the sight of the LORD." Then after this one hundred years of relatively righteous rule, Ahaz became king of Judah, and here is what the Bible says about him:

2 Chronicles 28:1-4

- 1 Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and he did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD, as his father David had done.
- 2 For he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made molded images for the Baals.

- 3 He burned incense in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and burned his children in the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel.
- 4 And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, on the hills, and under every green tree.

Because of King Ahaz's moral rebellion against the LORD God, God judged him by bringing against him a hostile coalition consisting of Israel and Syria. Israel was the nation to the north of Judah; its capital was Samaria. Syria was a pagan nation to the north of Israel; its capital was Damascus. This coalition of Israel and Syria attacked Judah. They were not able to conquer the city of Jerusalem, but they killed over 120,000 in one day and took much spoil and many captives. The armies of Israel and Syria then retreated back north, but the Syrian army did not return all the way north to Syria. They stopped in Israel and camped there. This is what caused Ahaz and all of Judah to quake with fear. If the Syrian army had returned all the way to Syria, this might have meant that these two nations were abandoning their war of aggression against Judah. This Syrian encampment within Israel implied that the attack would be renewed, and this prospect filled Ahaz with fear. Our passage says that his heart was moved as the trees of the forest are moved with the wind.

Let me now say a little about the nation Israel, this nation to the north which was attacking Judah. Israel consisted of the ten tribes to the north of Judah which had rejected the rule of the house of David about two hundred years before the time of our

text. During this two hundred years, there had been only one dynasty of kings over Judah, the dynasty of the house of David. In contrast, Israel to the north had had eight dynasties over this period, and would have, before the life of this nation was over, a total of nine. Of these nine dynasties, four of them were one king dynasties. The shortest of these lasted for only seven days, and another lasted only about a month. The two century history of the nation of Israel was filled with conspiracies and coups and assassinations. The king of Israel in Isaiah chapter seven was Pekah. Pekah was one of these one king dynasties. He had conspired against the previous king of Israel and had assassinated him. He ruled Israel for twenty years, and then he would reap what he had sown. Someone would conspire against Pekah and assassinate him.

Basically Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Syria wanted to do to Judah what Pekah had done in Israel. They were conspiring to remove King Ahaz from the throne in Jerusalem, they were conspiring to end the dynasty of the house of David in Judah, they were conspiring to set up their own puppet king over Judah.

We need to consider one other factor in our historical background, and that is the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian Empire was the first of the pagan world empires to threaten to conquer the land of Palestine. Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Syria wanted to put a puppet king on the throne of Judah so that Judah would join them in a three nation coalition to resist the advance of the Assyrian Empire.

That brings us to our passage for today, Isaiah chapter seven. We find King Ahaz examining the water supply system for the city of Jerusalem. He was anticipating a siege by Israel and Syria, and Jerusalem would have to have a reliable water supply to survive a siege. He was also considering where to get help. He probably never seriously even considered going to God for help. He had pretty much already decided that he was going to appeal to the pagan king of the Assyrians, Tiglath-pileser, to protect him against the threat he thought was posed by Israel and Syria. Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Syria wanted Judah to join them against the king of Assyria. So Ahaz thought he would foil their plans by recruiting the king of Assyria to join him in an alliance against these two aggressor nations.

Our first point was the crisis, and our second point is the **confrontation**. God commanded Isaiah the prophet to take his son and to meet Ahaz at the upper pool. The name of Isaiah's son was Shear-Jashub, which means "A Remnant Will Return." This child was a symbol of hope for the people of God. His name indicated that God would not allow the nation of Judah to be completely destroyed. Regardless of what was going to happen, a remnant in Judah would survive. Regardless of what was going to happen, a remnant would return spiritually to the Lord. Regardless of what was going to happen, a remnant would return physically to Jerusalem. There was hope, and all Ahaz needed to do was to believe and to claim the promise God had made to his ancestor King David. Many years earlier God had spoken these words to King David, "You shall not fail to have a man sit before Me on the throne of Israel, only if your sons take heed to their way, that they walk before Me as you

have walked before Me” (1 Kings 8:25). Ahaz was one of these descendants of King David sitting upon the throne of David’s kingdom.

God also blessed King Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah by giving him some sure knowledge about the future. Such knowledge is always valuable, and especially in times of crisis. Isaiah assured King Ahaz that the conspiracy by the kings of Israel and Syria to destroy the Davidic dynasty and to replace King Ahaz with a puppet king would fail. “It shall not stand, nor shall it come to pass” (v. 7). Yes, Israel and Syria had come against Judah as a fire and a flame, and they had done great damage. But, the Lord assured Ahaz, Israel and Syria were but a flash in the pan. Their days were numbered and their peak was already past. These two nations were now two smoking stubs and no real threat at all. In fact, the prophet said that within sixty-five years, the northern nation of Israel would no longer even exist as a people.

Through Isaiah, God commanded King Ahaz not to fear, not to be filled with anxiety and concern. God was not here recommending the mere subjective power of positive thinking based on wishful hoping against hope. When God commands someone not to fear, the reason is that there is in reality nothing to fear. God offers a peace rooted in objective reality and not a mere subjective psychological escape from reality. God commanded Ahaz to believe in God’s promises and God’s power. Further, God commanded Ahaz to request a sign, a miracle, anything at all. God would perform it to confirm and strengthen Ahaz’s faith.

Ahaz refused to obey this direct command from the living and true God. He would not ask for a sign. Feigning a pious concern about offending God, he said that his asking for a sign would be testing God. Yes, there are contexts where demanding a sign would be testing God. Many presumptuously did that during the earthly ministry of Jesus. But it is not testing God to request a sign when God commands one to do this. In fact, in this context, not requesting a sign is testing God and wearying God because in this context not requesting a sign is to disobey God. Ahaz wasn't really concerned about offending God. The real reason Ahaz refused to ask for a sign was because he did not want to trust God. He did not want any confirmation that the word of God was true and to be trusted. By refusing to ask for a sign, he was basically saying, "My mind is already made up; don't confuse me with the facts." King Ahaz at this point had already decided whom he was going to trust with his problems, and it wasn't the LORD God. Sometime after meeting with Isaiah, King Ahaz went to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, and said, "I am your servant and your son. Come up and save me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who rise up against me" (2 Kings 16:7). "I am your servant and your son." When King Ahaz said this to Tiglath-pileser, this was the Old Testament parallel to when the religious leaders of the Jews said to the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15).

We have looked at the crisis and the confrontation. Our third and last point is the **curse**. Through the prophet Isaiah, God responded to this disobedient refusal with a curse. God said that He would summon armies from the south, from the fading

Egyptian Empire, like a multitude of flies to infest the land, and that He would summon armies from the north, from the rising Assyrian Empire, like a swarm of bees to attack Judah. Judah would be caught in the middle as the Egyptians invaded to the north to fight the rising Assyrian power. God would primarily use the Assyrians to begin the work of desolation which their northern successors the Babylonians would finish. God would use these hostile armies to strip the land of Judah as a sharp razor shaves off a beard.

The land would be so devastated that people would no longer be able to depend on agriculture for food. The foods of peace and prosperity in this culture were bread and wine and olive oil. These are products which can be produced only in times of peace and stability. The diet of desolation consists of curds and honey, the natural products of the land which do not require organized agriculture for their production. Isaiah said that is what the people would be eating.

This can be a little confusing. Back when Joshua entered the land, the promised land was called a land flowing with milk and honey, and that was a positive reference. That was a reference to the natural abundance of the land, a reference to the food it would produce without organized agriculture and cultivated fields. In this context, curds and honey refer to the diet of necessity when the carefully cultivated fields on the hills have been abandoned to thorns and briars, symbols of the curse, and when the people are limited to foods which are available apart from organized agriculture. This prophecy would be fulfilled first through the devastation in the land caused by the invading

Assyrians during the reign of King Hezekiah, King Ahaz's son and successor. In the fourteenth year of the reign of King Hezekiah, the Assyrian emissary, the Rabshakeh, would stand in the exact same place where Isaiah confronted King Ahaz. There the Rabshakeh would confront Judah and threaten Judah with the wrath of the Assyrian king. The prophecy about desolation would first be fulfilled through the Assyrian invasion, and then fulfilled even more completely later through the total destruction of Judah by the Babylonians, the next world empire to the north.

God responded to King Ahaz's disobedient refusal to request a sign, with a curse. It is at the beginning of this curse that we find the promise of the coming Seed Redeemer. God's very first promise of the coming Seed Redeemer was in the middle of a curse. In Genesis chapter three, it is in the middle of the curse upon the serpent that God gives the promise of the coming One who would defeat the serpent, who was there an agent of Satan and a symbol of Satan. Here also we find the promise of the coming Seed Redeemer in the midst of a curse.

King Ahaz refused to request a sign as commanded by God. God responded that He would give King Ahaz a sign anyway, not a sign of the king's choosing but a sign of God's choosing. This would be a miraculous sign, a marvel unheard of in all the history of the world. A virgin will conceive and bear a Son, and His name shall be called Immanuel, which means "God with Us." The child will be born without a human father. He will truly be the Seed of Woman in the most radical possible sense. And through Him, God will be with His people in the most

radical possible sense. He will be the divine Word, the second Person of the Godhead, God the Son. The Word will become flesh, the Word will take to Himself a true and complete human nature, the Word will tabernacle on earth in this tent of flesh and blood. He will be Immanuel, God with Us, in the most radical sense possible.

God gave this prophecy about a miraculous birth and then used it as a measure of time. The child would be born far into the future, centuries later, but God told King Ahaz that certain things would happen in his own day in a shorter span of time than it would take for this coming Child, after His conception and birth, to reach the age of discernment, in a shorter span of time than it would take for this coming Child, after His conception and birth, to mature to the point that He understands enough to make moral decisions, rejecting the evil and choosing the good. Certain things would happen in a shorter span of time than it would take for this Child of the future to develop enough to begin eating curds and honey, the food symbolic of this prophesied desolation of the land. In a shorter time than that, in just a few years, the nations of Israel and Syria would both fall and be forsaken by their kings. Ahaz's fear of Israel and Syria and his seeking the help of Assyria against them, will soon prove to be needless and foolish. God was here warning Ahaz that God would bring the King of Assyria, the one from whom Ahaz was planning to seek friendly help, against Judah as an invading enemy and spoiler.

God used the prophecy of the coming miracle Child as a measure of time for certain near events. He also used the

prophecy of the coming miracle Child as a message of hope based upon an event in the then distant future. Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Syria thought that they could destroy the house of David which God had established. They thought that they could disrupt the royal line of the Davidic kings. No, that would not be possible. The throne of David would be cast to the ground during the time of the Babylonian captivity, but the lineage of David would continue until the birth of this miracle Child named Jesus and Immanuel. This Child would both continue and transcend the rule of King David. David ruled from the earthly Jerusalem, but Jesus has been seated on a heavenly throne at the right hand of God the Father. David ruled over Israel, but Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus inherited the throne of David and then lifted it to a higher plane of glory and to a higher level of authority.

Jesus conquered enemies far greater than Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Syria, far greater enemies than the empire kings of Egypt and Assyrian. Jesus conquered the world. Jesus conquered Satan. Jesus conquered sin and death and the grave. He did this by dying upon a cross as an atoning sacrifice for sin.

As we live life in this hostile world and face our crises, God commands us not to worry. God commands us to be a people of faith. God commands us to trust Him and the glorified Christ. God also gives us signs to confirm and strengthen our faith. These signs aren't in our future; they are in the past from our perspective. There is the miracle of the virgin womb. There is the even greater miracle of what we could call the virgin tomb, for Jesus was buried in a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid, and then on the third day He rose from the dead.

As we deal with our problems and our burdens, we mustn't make the mistake of King Ahaz. We must not even consider the immoral secular solutions of this world to our problems, which would be the moral equivalent of our going to the king of Assyria for help. We must trust in the LORD, and keep covenant with Him. And we must accept and rejoice in the signs which He has given us to strengthen and confirm our faith.

Let me close today with those words which the angel spoke to Joseph about Mary, his betrothed, and the inspired commentary which follows by Matthew:

- 21 “And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”
- 22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying:
- 23 “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”