

Faith for Dummies

Isaiah 7

In days past I have told you portions of the amazing story of Helmut Thielicke, a Lutheran pastor in Germany during W.W. II who was faithful to the gospel in spite of immense pressure from the Nazi party. As his country was being bombed into submission, as the government was collapsing, the army in ruins, and even as his own congregation suffered enormously, Helmut preached Sunday after Sunday to his flock gathered in the ruins of their building in Stuttgart. He preached a series of sermons from the Lord's prayer, and said to the remnant gathered one Sunday, "In, with, and under the world's anguish and distress, in, with, and under the hail of bombs and mass murders, God is building his kingdom."

This chapter is set in a context of war. The northern kingdom of Israel was getting close to annihilation. The southern kingdom of Judah was threatened from all sides. The king was a jerk! The people were terrified, and yet, God, in the midst of all this fear, chaos, rumors and war, declares a promise through his prophet that reveals that no matter what the distress may be, he is building his kingdom. But how does God go about building his kingdom? He builds it through people who trust in him, which is theme, not only of this chapter, but is the running theme from chapter 7 to chapter 39. Who are you going to trust? Will it be God, or the powers of this world? Are you going to trust your military, your economy, your strategy, and your efforts or are you going to trust God? When you trust God, you learn a new military strategy: strength is weakness and weakness is strength. You learn a new economic policy: give away in order to gain. You learn a new strategy: lose, in order to win, die in order to live. And in our text this morning, we come across one of the most famous prophecies of the birth of Christ. 700 years before he was born, this promise is not only given, but the setting of the promise reveals much of the confusion about Christ.

There are times when you look at this present darkness or this present distress and wonder how any of this is going to work out. (International tensions – Mideast, Economic catastrophe, here at home the pool of leaders looks like the kiddy one instead of the deep end. What is going to happen?)

Read Text:

When you have seen The King, you have no fear of little kings. Isaiah is not only a voice of reason, hope and confidence, but we can already see how Isaiah himself points to Christ. In chapter 6, God commissions Isaiah to go and declare his word to his people. But God warns him that the more he preaches, the more rebellious they will become. Isaiah's natural tendency would be to think that perhaps they do not understand what I am saying, and that I need to make it really simple and clear. But no, that is not the problem. The problem is, they do understand what you are saying and they are rejecting it. When John wrote his gospel, he references that passage and applies it to Christ. Christ taught plainly. Christ made it very clear who he was and what he had come to do. As a result, Christ was hated. So, instead of adding to their condemnation by his clear

explanations, Christ began to teach in parables. He began to hide the truth from those who had rejected it, until they got to the point, where their hearts were so hard, they could no longer tell the difference between right and wrong. They, were so steeped in their unbelief, and so convinced by their arrogance, that they conspired to kill their only Savior. They rejected their only hope and were proud of it. They were fist-pounding and chest-bumping over the fact that they had managed to crucify the Son of God. As a result, these representatives of the children of Israel had just signed the extermination order for the country. That battle between the fools called the Pharisees and Christ is previewed in this chapter. Ahaz is a fool who refused to humble himself and admit his need of God. As a result, he added to the condemnation of his people. He was a fool. He was a rich fool. He was a powerful fool. The Pharisees were religious fools. Anything that you trust instead of God makes you a fool. Now, here is the sermon in one sentence. You will either trust God, or you will be destroyed by what you trust in.

Let's set the scene. 2 Chronicles 28 gives us a great deal of political and military background that helps us understand what is going on. The Assyrian empire is on the rise. Syria and Israel are already under oppression and are looking for a way to stop an Assyrian advance, but they are not strong enough on their own. They try to form an alliance to stop the Assyrian juggernaut. Meanwhile, Judah, under Uzziah had become powerful. So, Israel and Syria invite (demand under threat) that Judah joins them in their attempt to stand against Assyria.

Ahaz is hesitant to do this, because any king who stands against Assyria is subjected to some of the most painful form of punishment, humiliation and execution ever practiced in the world, and Ahaz is not real excited to go through this and he refuses to join. So, Syria and Israel combine their forces and they invade Judah. The result is devastating to Judah. In a single battle, Judah loses 120,000 men and 200,000 women and children are taken captive, although they are eventually returned. Edom smelled blood in the water and attacked from the east, while the Philistines attacked from the west. Isaiah 7 opens with a description of this alliance between Israel and Syria and the fact that they were poised to make an attack upon Jerusalem.

1. **Houston, we've got a problem (opportunity)! 1-2**

This problem is designed by God to either bring about or to increase your trust in him. In Ahaz's case, the problems were designed to bring about Ahaz's repentance. 2 Chronicles 28 tells us that Ahaz was a relentless idolater. He went so far as worshipping Molech, one of the worst gods in the Caananite religion. Molech was worshiped through the offering up of children who were burned alive to appease this angry god. Molech wasn't the only god that Ahaz worshiped and led the people of Judah to worship as well. Ahaz was not picky. He would worship anything, meaning, Ahaz was committed to trusting in anything but God!

Instead of wiping out Judah, God brought the pressure down. And now, facing what they thought was annihilation, wholesale panic hit the palace and the streets. This is literally a royal panic attack! (Sorry couldn't resist – in honor of Jerry) So, what does God do? He

sends a prophet with an opportunity to repent. This problem, and it is a big one, is designed by God to point the hearts of the people to him. Stop trusting in the idols. Stop trusting in your self. As we will see, stop trusting in other nations and other people. Repent of those things and trust God! Look, you are freaking out about the conspiracy theories. You are wasting so much energy on what factions are influencing the decision makers. You are worried about who is a spy, or who is being paid by another government to push that government's agenda and you are missing the whole point. God is behind it all. Man's agendas only serve God's ultimate agenda. The problem is not military, or strategy or diplomacy. The problem is, you have rejected God and he loves his glory too much to let you get away with that for too long. Ahaz was worried about rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic (know what I mean?). Getting the chair lined up is meaningless if the hull of your ship has a gaping hole in it. Until you address the ultimate issue with God, you can work on all of the other issues of life, but they won't matter.

2. **Repent! and Trust God!** (3-9)

A. **God has a people – all the time.** (3a)

Everything in the Bible is by design. Here is a great example of that. God tells Isaiah to go meet Ahaz and take your son, Shear-jashub with you. The names of Isaiah's children are important because God is the one who tells Isaiah what to name them. Their names are reminders of the message of God. Even Isaiah's children proclaim God's word every time their names are called. This is a great example of how all-consuming the call of God was upon Isaiah. His ministry as a prophet involved every part of his being. Shear-jashub means, "*a remnant shall return*". Here is how this should be read. Take your son, a remnant shall return, and go and speak to the king. Do you see the point? Greetings king! "*Me and a remnant shall return (from exile) have come to you with a word from the Lord.*" What is implied? Things aren't going to well around here, but God is still going have a people.

B. **God knows where you are – all the time.** (3b)

What is the Washer's Field? It is the field where you do the wash. Of course that means that there is water and apparently the water source was connected back into the city through a conduit of sorts. Now, if you are about to be attacked, why do you think that the king would be at this place? He would be inspecting the defenses of this area, because if a city does not have water, that city will not survive, no matter how strong the walls are. Ahaz is looking at his vulnerabilities and God is about to offer him something sure.

C. **God knows what you are thinking – all the time.** (4a)

What does fear do? It takes a problem and magnifies way beyond reality. Now, the truth is, the pending invasion was not an imaginary problem. Humanly speaking, Ahaz had reason to be afraid and this response of God is nothing but gracious. But, as we have just seen from chapter 6, the problem for Ahaz is not that he is afraid, it is that he is not afraid

enough. He is not in fear of the right thing. Ahaz fears these kings because he does not fear THE KING. God knows that and offers to help him.

D. God knows what the problem is – all the time. (4b-6)

Notice how God describes these two kings who are causing Ahaz and the people to freak out. He calls them “*two smoldering stumps of firebrands.*” They are burn-outs! (How’s that for an old phrase from the past?) They are wasted. They are all smoke and no fire! They ain’t got nothing! It reminds of that line from the Princess Bride (one of the greatest all time movies ever made), “I know something that you don’t know.” God knows that Ahaz is worrying about a problem that is not going to happen instead of worrying about a problem that is going to happen. These kings are full of trash talk. They have already published the name of the person that they will put on Judah’s throne after they have taken control of Judah by force. But, it never happened. The outcome was not up to them, but up to God. Ahaz! Your biggest problem is your rebellion against God.

E. God knows what is going to happen – all the time. (7-9)

These verses are like a little song, or poem that Isaiah sang or repeated to help his audience face their fears. And the language seems to ask – what are you afraid of? The head of Syria is Rezin. He’s just a man! And the head of Israel is the son of Remaliah. In fact, the nation of Israel is not even going to exist in a few years. So, it all comes down to this. If there is no one who sits on the throne of the universe, then you have every reason to be afraid of the kings of this earth. In fact, you have every reason to be afraid all of the time. Who knows what little virus can find its way into your body at any moment and begin shutting down your organs? Who knows what unhealthy cells, even now are lurking in your body, getting together as a cancer and start destroying you from the inside out? Who knows what crazed person is in a fight with his family, who in the next few days will go on a random rampage and kill someone you love? If there is no God, then you have reason to be terrified of everything all of the time, and since you cannot control any of that, then why not get as stinking drunk as you can! But, since there is THE KING who sits high and lifted up, these men do not matter.

3. So, what are you going to do? (10-17)

A. Belief is the essence of pleasing God. (10-11)

Up to this point, Ahaz has demonstrated no evidences of grace at all. For the most immature, or spiritually unresponsive, God has been known to provide signs if necessary. Here is what seems to be a blank check from God! Ask a sign of the LORD your God. As deep as hell or as high as heaven – go for it! God is priming the pump. Like Gideon, if he can get him to see a little miracle then perhaps Ahaz will trust God instead of trusting in his own advisors, or schemes and plots. This invitation to test God is really a test of Ahaz. Without faith it is impossible to please God. But, God does not make it difficult. You have to be very creative (pardon the pun) to find reasons NOT to believe in the Creator! Look at the stars, the orbits of the planets, the phases of the moon and then say,

“well it just happened.” No one says that about a computer. We look at an Apple computer and we say that Steve Jobs was a genius. Why would you say that about a little computer, but then look at this world and say, “it just happened.” Of course you have to take God by faith! But, he does not make it tough. Fact is, we could give the Bible a subtitle: Faith for dummies! God challenges Ahaz to ask for a sign because the very act of asking for a sign would indicate that Ahaz was exercising at least a slight act of faith in God. It would at least be a step. And you would think that at this point Ahaz would be willing to accept any help that he could get.

B. Unbelief is the essence of offending God. (12)

Ahaz it seems has crossed the point of no return. His condescending response reveals how spiritually bankrupt he really is. The truth is, he had already made up his mind. Instead of trusting in this God of grace, Ahaz puts his faith in Assyria. He sends envoys to Assyria with an enormous gift in order to pay Tiglath-Pileaser to come after Syria and Israel. When you make arrangements and concessions like this, you formally recognize not only the superiority of that king and kingdom, but also the superiority of their gods! Think of how idiotic the whole thing is! The reason that Syria and Israel got together in the first place is because Assyria was on the attack. Now, Ahaz pays Assyria and promises servitude to Assyria so Assyria will do what Assyria was doing anyway. Not only does Ahaz lose an enormous amount of money, but he places his kingdom under the authority of the Assyrians, demonstrating his own weakness and demonstrating to the world that the gods of the Assyrians are in fact superior to the God of Judah. Tiglath-pileaser is not impressed with Ahaz. He does not respect him. Judah is now his servant. Ahaz has just signed his people over to Assyria; a problem that his son, Hezekiah will be faced with, as we will see later in the book. The rest of the OT account of Ahaz is so sad. Ahaz follows about every god he can instead of the one true God. It is so obvious that he does not know what he believes, but he knows what he doesn't believe. His religion is the ABG religion: Anyone but God! Look at this and learn! Anything or anyone you trust instead of God will destroy you and will not care! You can give your life to materialism, to addictions, to sex, to toys, to your work and career. You can worship your house and cars, cabins and vacations, and in the end they will not save your soul, but after taking everything from you, will cast you aside like a used up cigarette and wait for the next victim. But, if you hate God, somehow it makes sense to you to trust and pursue your worst enemy. Sin causes brain damage. But,

C. God's plan is not dependent upon your belief. (13-17)

You don't want a sign? God is going to give you one anyway! “*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*” And (my paraphrase) by the time he is old enough to know right from wrong, these two countries will be deserted.

How are we to understand this prophecy? Matthew 1.23 makes it clear that this is ultimately fulfilled in the birth of Christ about 700 years later. How does a miraculous event 700 years from then have any bearing upon Ahaz? I take this sign to have an immediate fulfillment that points to an ultimate fulfillment in Christ. In other words, God

speaks then of a woman, who was of marriageable age, but who was not married and was in fact a virgin, but who was (presumably) going to get married, and become pregnant and have a son. And before this boy is a man, these two countries that you are so worried about will not even be in existence. It is not until 700 years later, that we see that all of this pointed to and was ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

What is Judah's need? She needs to be rescued. She needs a savior. She also needs a king who would lead them by trusting in God, no matter what. And I believe based on the way God addresses Ahaz ("O house of David") and based upon the contrast in this section between the plural and singular pronouns, that even though God is speaking directly to Ahaz, that he clearly has a much wider audience in mind. The big idea is this: You cannot treat me as being irrelevant, without you becoming irrelevant. This response of God was more of a response of judgment. What does "Immanuel" mean to a person who is trying to run from God? The last thing you want is God with you. And as we will see in the next point, Ahaz's response is inviting a response from God that promises some very dark days. But, yet, this promise has a ray of hope to it. If you won't man up and be the king that my people need, then I am going to send a king.

4. **Who you trust has enormous consequences.** (18-25)

There are 4 statements in this section that begin with "in that day". Each of them describes hardship for the people of God because they have gone their own way and have trusted in other gods. Some OT scholars believe that this response of Ahaz sealed the fate of the Davidic dynasty. There would be a couple of kings who would be "good" but they could only postpone the inevitable. Your decisions affect you and they affect those who come after you. This text presents to you two ways to live. You can live by faith in the THE King who lives for ever, or you can put your hope in the dying kings of this world. You can follow THE KING who gave his life for you, or you can follow the decaying kings of this world who will take your life from you. You can follow THE KING who demands your all because he is worth it, or follow the lies of the decrepit kings who lie to you because they are nothing but imposters.

Before you are two ways. The KING calls you to die now in order to live forever. Die to trusting in yourself so that you will live trusting the KING. Or, live for yourself now, pursue your gods, your pleasures, your rules, your toys, and all of the empty promises of this world and then die, lost, empty, alone, and hopeless – forever.

The King is building his kingdom with or without you. Bombs may drop, economies may implode, but he is building his kingdom. Either get on the bus or get run over by it.