



# 3

## THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### **Isaiah 7:1-17**

Do we trust the Lord, or do we trust in ourselves? Do leaders believe that God is real and trust His Word, or do leaders lean solely on financial reports, political alliances, and organizational policies? More importantly, how do we speak God's Word to ungodly leaders, especially when they reject God's clear direction?

Those questions are part of the focus of Isaiah 7. Many Christians know the Isaiah 7:14 prophecy, *the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel*. Announced in 734 B.C., the prophecy was fulfilled seven hundred and thirty years later with the virgin birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18, 23; Luke 1:27-31). But the prophecy also spoke directly to a wicked ruler, Judah's King Ahaz, with the challenge that God is with us, and we can depend on Him.

### **Historical and Literary Context**

Isaiah 7 contains descriptive and conversational language between Isaiah and Judah's King Ahaz.<sup>37</sup> 2 Kings 16:1-20 and 2 Chronicles 28:1-27 describe his ungodly reign. Since Ahaz became king when he was twenty years old, it is likely that Isaiah, who began prophesying in 742, was only a few years older. Ahaz died when he was thirty-six years old.

Ahaz was described as a Judean ruler who "did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God . . . but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel." He is further described "in the time of his distress King Ahaz

became increasingly unfaithful to the Lord. This is that King Ahaz. For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus, which had defeated him, saying, 'Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me.' But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel" (2 King 16:2, 3, 2 Chronicles 28:22, 23).<sup>38</sup>

It is the early years of Ahaz's reign (734-732 B.C.) that are the background to Isaiah 7, 2 Kings 16, and 2 Chronicles 28. Under Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.), the Assyrian Empire had grown. With its capital in Nineveh, the empire stretched from modern northern Iraq westward into southeast Turkey, northern Syria, and into northern Egypt, ultimately bringing Damascus and the twelve tribes of Israel and Judah under its control.<sup>39</sup>

The godlessness of Ahaz, and the disdain and frustration it caused Isaiah in Isaiah 7:13, are described in both 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28. 2 Kings reveals the dramatic apostasy of Ahaz in building an altar in Solomon's Temple like the altar of Tiglath-pileser III found in Damascus, Syria. That the priests in Jerusalem accommodated this apostate demand of Ahaz shows the magnitude of spiritual collapse in the priesthood. Furthermore, Ahaz moved the bronze altar from its established position and used it as an idol by which he would inquire of pagan gods for direction (2 Kings 16:15). This is particularly telling in that Ahaz's grandfather, Uzziah, had attempted to worship the Lord in his own way and was struck with leprosy (2 Chronicles 26). In the instance of Uzziah, divine judgment came upon one man and not the nation. But in Ahaz, judgment came upon the nation because of his utter godlessness.<sup>40</sup>

2 Chronicles 28 gives greater detail to the geo-political problems faced by Ahaz as Assyria threatened the entire area. In that chapter, a military campaign is described where Judah was soundly defeated by Damascus and then brutally defeated by the Israelite king Pekah. In a massive battle, Pekah killed 120,000 Judean soldiers, including key members of Ahaz's government and household. Another 200,000 Judean women and children were taken captive to Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom.

The slaughter in that battle was so violent that a Northern Kingdom prophet named Obed rebuked Pekah for his outrageous violence in the campaign. Obed's message was heeded by Israelite leaders, and the captives were returned to Judah.

Syria (called Damascus in these biblical texts) and the Northern Kingdom of Israel conspired to resist the encroaching Assyrian dominion. They wanted Ahaz and Judah to join their resistance confederacy. To Ahaz's credit, he chose not to join them. But instead of trusting in the Lord, as he was advised to do by Isaiah, Ahaz chose to trust in Tiglath-pileser III, the Assyrians.

All of this is the backdrop to Isaiah 7. It is a backdrop of international intrigue, threats, political alliances, military conquests and defeats, political humiliation, and a desperate game of political alliances and religious accommodation.

## FROM TEXT . . .

**Isaiah 7:1, 2** - The narrative begins with the historical statement that the king of Syria, Rezin, and the king of Israel, Pekah, are in alliance against Jerusalem.<sup>41</sup> This invasion probably occurred in 734 B.C.

It is possible that the military defeat described in 2 Chronicles 28 occurred during this campaign, though the combined armies of Syria and Israel “could not prevail against it” (Isaiah 7:1). This means that they failed in their effort to force Ahaz to join their rebellion against Assyria.

It also means that Isaiah 7:1 describes another joint effort of Syria and Israel to force Judean compliance. The statement in verse 2 reveals the serious threat facing Judah. When news came that “Syria’s forces are deployed in Ephraim,” it meant that Judah was again confronted with two enemies.<sup>42</sup>

The prophetic disdain Isaiah had towards Ahaz is revealed in 7:2 where the prophet does not even call the king by his own name. Isaiah honors the prophetic promise to the “house of David,” something he repeated in 7:13 in the direct confrontation with Ahaz. Ahaz and “his people” were filled with fear. Their hearts were shaking like tree limbs in a strong wind. This metaphor describes an inability for stability and trust in the Lord.

**Isaiah 7:3-6** - The Lord gave Isaiah specific instructions on what he should do and say to Ahaz. As a court prophet, Isaiah was keenly aware of the threat, the fearful atmosphere in the city, and what Ahaz was doing.

The king was inspecting the aqueduct to make sure that Jerusalem's water supply was secure if a siege occurred. The likely location of this encounter was in the southeast corner of Jerusalem. The Fuller's Field was a location where clothes were washed, and wool was prepared for use as clothing.

Isaiah took his son Shear-Jashub with him on this encounter. The son's name was prophetic, "a remnant shall return." This was not a situation where Mrs. Isaiah said, "I need a few minutes alone. Please take this child with you so I can get some peace and quiet!" This was an intentional act by Isaiah whereby the son was an object lesson to an ungodly ruler. The word *Jashub* is a noun from the Hebrew שׁוּב (*shub* with a soft b) and means *return*. It is used extensively in the Old Testament, often translated *repent*. The presence of Isaiah's son was a warning to a rebellious king to repent and return to the ways of the Lord. The name also meant that judgment was going to come upon the nation, and only a remnant would return.

You should also observe that the idea of a *remnant* and *return* is found in Isaiah's call in 6:10, 13. Isaiah's temple call occurred about 740 B.C., and the call included the dire warning that his messages would not be heeded. That is exactly what occurred in the Isaiah 7 encounter with Ahaz.

The word of the Lord through Isaiah to Ahaz was specific: *Take heed, and be quiet; do not fear or be fainthearted for these two stubs of smoking fire-brands, for the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria, and the son of Remaliah.* The son of Remaliah is Pekah of the Northern Kingdom, whom Isaiah refused to call by name. A series of imperatives to Ahaz dominate the prophetic word. To *take heed* means to pay attention. To *be quiet* means to stop listening to other voices and trying to talk yourself into an action or attitude contrary to God's voice and heart. For the first time in the passage, the word *fear* appears, though the response in 7:2 reveals that fear was the dominating emotional response to the crisis.

The Syrian and Israelite leaders thought of themselves as flaming torches about to consume Judah. They were boisterous, making themselves appear more than they were. Ahaz viewed them as a fire that would consume Judah. Isaiah viewed them from God's perspective: they were already burned out and were nothing more than whiffs of smoke from a stub.

These stubs of smoke were nothing more than hot air. Their announced goal in this invasion was to remove Ahaz and set up another king in Judah

who would cooperate with their rebellion against Assyria. The alternative king was only identified as being “the son of Tabel” (7:6).<sup>43</sup>

**Isaiah 7:7-9** - Isaiah continued speaking the prophetic Word of the Lord to Ahaz. Verse 7 contains two Hebrew negatives: “*not stand and not become*” (literally). Reinforcing the smoldering firebrand image of 7:4, Isaiah prophesied that within sixty-five years, both Syria (Damascus) and Ephraim (Israel) would fall (7:8). Within two years of this prophecy, Assyria conquered Syria (732 B.C.). The judgment upon the Northern Kingdom, Israel/Ephraim, was even more marked: “it will not be a people” (7:8). That occurred in 722 when the Northern Kingdom of ten tribes was scattered and remain so to this day.

The conclusion of 7:9 stands out and forms the basis for Isaiah’s challenge to Ahaz in the following verses. Another dual use of Hebrew negatives occurred in the phrase, “*If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established.*” Isaiah called Ahaz to believe the prophetic word that both Syria and Ephraim would not last. The prophet’s use of the negative, “*if you will not believe . . .*” implies Isaiah’s lack of confidence in Ahaz’s ability to discern the promise of God. The words *believe* and *established* are from the same Hebrew word, אָמַן (*aman*).<sup>44</sup> To fail to *believe* God’s word is to fail to be *established* or made firm in relation to that word.

**Isaiah 7:10-12** - Merciful and patient as He is, God reached out to Ahaz again and encouraged the king to “*ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above.*” God patiently invited Ahaz to appeal to Himself for a confirming sign in the heavens or in the depths of the earth or sea.

But Ahaz replied with his own double negative in 7:12, “*not ask, not test the Lord.*”

**Isaiah 7:13-17** - One can literally hear Isaiah’s frustration in his response to Ahaz. Isaiah still refused to call the king by his name or title and referred to him as the “*house of David.*” Isaiah, as God’s prophet, was treated with unbelieving contempt by Ahaz in his refusal to believe the Word of the Lord. Isaiah said that he himself was weary of dealing with the unbelieving king. That was one thing, but to “*weary my God also*” was far more damaging to Ahaz and the nation (7:13). This was another way of saying to Ahaz, “I’m tired of dealing with you, and God is too!”

It is here that the prophecy of the Virgin Birth enters the mind of Isaiah. Ahaz had the opportunity to ask God for a confirming sign in the realm of nature, a realm that the king could verify. But Ahaz refused to do so. Therefore, God Himself, weary of unbelieving leaders, determined to give a miraculous sign so great that only God Himself could perform it: “*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel*” (7:14).

The connection to the account of the virgin Mary in Matthew 1 and Luke 1, 2 is obvious. But as shall be developed in the next section, attention needs to be paid to the Son who is mentioned. Walter Brueggemann rightly points out the contrast between the first son mentioned in the text, Isaiah’s son named “a remnant shall return,” and this second Son named “God is with us.”<sup>45</sup> The emphasis lies upon the Son, who, by the time he is old enough to eat “curds and honey” and to know the difference between good and evil, both Syria and Ephraim will have been destroyed by Assyria (7:15, 16).

The section closed with the divine warning of impending judgment upon Judah through the instrument of Assyria, and that judgment will be as decisive as when Ephraim (Israel) separated from Judah under Jeroboam (1 Kings 12-14, 2 Chronicles 10, 11). Just as that division in 922 B.C., nearly two hundred years earlier, could not be healed, so the tragedy coming upon the Northern Kingdom would also be of a similarly permanent nature in history.

## . . . TO SERMON

As we review Isaiah 7, our thoughts turn to the Virgin Birth of Jesus. His birth is truly Immanuel, *God with us*.<sup>46</sup> We know from Matthew and Luke that the Child conceived by the Holy Spirit would be named *Jesus*, a Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*. While *Jesus* was His given name, He fulfilled the Isaiah prophecy as *God with us*; God incarnated as a fully human, yet sinless, person.

Martin Luther wrote about the name Immanuel: “This describes what kind of person it will be. This is not a proper name. He is indeed the Son of a virgin, and yet He is ‘God with us,’ therefore God and man.”<sup>47</sup> John

Wesley expressed the same thought as Luther: “God dwelling among us, in our nature (John 1:14). God and man meeting in one person, being a mediator between God and men. For the design of these words . . . describe His nature and office.”<sup>48</sup>

Rev. Noel Brooks, a significant theologian of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, wrote, “Why was the Virgin Birth necessary? Because the Incarnation of God in human nature was a unique event, and Christ was a unique Person; therefore, His entrance into our world must be unique. Also, there must be no transmission of the taint and power of sin. An ordinary birth would have entailed a sinful nature. Through the Virgin Birth, involving a specially sanctified and prepared person, sin was excluded, and a perfect, sinless child was conceived.”<sup>49</sup>

The Apostles’ Creed, one of the earliest Christian confessions, includes this phrase, “I believe . . . in Jesus Christ, (God’s) only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit; Born of the Virgin Mary.” The Virgin Birth signifies that the eternal, sinless Son of God became fully human to make atonement for Adam’s sin and, through His shed blood, remedy the sin-bought separation between humanity and God.

Here are other ways to approach Isaiah 7 as a pastor addressing the needs of one’s flock.

1. The contrast between Isaiah and Ahaz is startling. One is a person of faith who believes in the power of God. The other, Ahaz, is a person who looks at possibilities through the lens of human understanding and power. 2 Corinthians 5:7 addresses these two types of people, “*For we walk by faith, not by sight.*” Connected to this thought is the use of *aman* in Isaiah 7:9. I refer you to 2 Chronicles 20:20, where a different Judean king, Jehoshaphat, does believe the Word of the Lord (20:14-17) and exhorts the people to believe and be established! Note that in 2 Chronicles, the negatives of Isaiah 7:9 were not used. Both Ahaz and Jehoshaphat faced overwhelming enemies and obstacles. One refused to trust God and trusted only in himself; the other did trust God and gained the victory. Proverbs 5:6 and 7 come to mind as we consider what it means to trust the Lord and lean upon Him.
2. Further development related to Ahaz is possible in light of his obstinate refusal to trust the Lord. You can develop this in terms of Ahaz

looking for “his best option” in Assyria. In the natural, his strategy makes sense. But it is not the way of faith for the people of God. Psalm 20:7 captures this difference: “*Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; But we will remember the name of the Lord our God.*” This verse is an excellent segue to the power of the “name of the Lord” as the One with us.

3. Another preaching approach from Isaiah 7 relates to the question of signs. In the Isaiah 7 passage, God offered Ahaz an opportunity for a confirming sign. In what appears to be a response of false humility in Isaiah 7:12, Ahaz rejects the divine offer. I suggest you tackle the issue of “signs” carefully, as Jesus warns about a generation that seeks signs but does not seek Him (Matthew 12:39). Yet the Gospel of John refers to the “signs” that Jesus did that revealed His glory (John 2:11, 4:54). In the Bible, genuine signs are meant to draw us to the saving power of God. That was God’s intention in the invitation to the apostate Ahaz.
4. Brueggemann’s insight about the two sons mentioned in Isaiah 7 is interesting. Isaiah’s son, “a remnant shall return,” is rightly named considering divine judgment. But the last word of the gospel is not judgment; it is salvation because there is a promised Son whose name means “God is with us.” Several years ago, I heard teacher Leonard Sweet remark that “*with* is God’s middle name.” There is much you can develop under the idea of God being “with us”: Jesus *with* the disciples on the stormy sea (Mark 6:45-52); Jesus *with* the hungry masses and feeding them (Mark 6:30-44); Jesus stopping to be *with* a woman who reached out to touch Him (Mark 5:21-34).
5. Another area of consideration in the Isaiah 7 passage is the power of divine patience and longsuffering. Ahaz is a wicked man, yet God did not give up on him. In the end, it is Ahaz who gave up on God. The Christmas message is truly good news for people alienated from God. The Lord, our God, has not given up on us and continually reaches out to us to trust in His saving word. Ahaz’s excuses amount to nothing in light of the great mercy that God wanted to show through him. Faith from Ahaz would have saved the nation. The faith of a sinner opens the door for transformation and change for a host of family members and friends