

Isaiah 7: 1-25 The Folly of Ahaz

Chapter 7 takes place roughly 5 years after Isaiah's grand vision we looked at last week. After the death of King Uzziah his son Jotham took over, but it seems that pretty soon he was replaced by another of Uzziah's sons; Ahaz. Unlike his father, and his brother, the book of 2 Kings says that Ahaz *'did not do right in the eyes of the Lord.'* His father was far from perfect but he did have a heart for God. Ahaz, however, was sadly cut from a very different cloth.

After the death of Uzziah the political situation in the region had grown increasingly threatening. The regional superpower, Assyria, had been flexing its muscles again, threatening to take over smaller states. Two of Judah's neighbours, the kingdoms of Aram and Samaria (which is also sometimes referred to as the kingdom of Israel or here as Ephraim after its largest tribe), thought that the best way to defend themselves was to form an alliance and they strongly encouraged Judah to join with them, but both Uzziah and Ahaz rejected that diplomatic approach. Not to be deterred, verse 1 of chapter 7 tells us that they attacked Jerusalem, seeking to replace Ahaz with a king who would play ball, but their attack failed.

Soon however, they began making plans to attack again. This was the first time that these two countries had united against Judah in armed conflict, and according to verse 2, the King and the people were terrified by the thought.

I wonder what you would have done if you were Judah's king in that situation. Would you have changed your foreign policy and joined them? Would you have sought an alliance with a greater power elsewhere? Would you have sought God – who after all, was the God of Judah whose temple was in Jerusalem?

Sadly, Ahaz was not thinking much about God. Having entered into an agreement with Assyria to buy their military support, Ahaz was now thinking about preparing for a siege and how they might survive long enough for Assyrian help to come. If a city has its own supply of water and enough stores of food, then sieges can be survived for months, even years if necessary. But Jerusalem didn't have a source of freshwater inside the city walls. That's the problem Ahaz is trying to solve in verse 3 when Isaiah is sent to meet him. He is trying to secure the supply of water from the aqueduct into the city. He is relying on his own skills and wisdom, rather than on the Lord.

But God's ways are not the same as our ways. And so Isaiah is sent out with an astonishing offer.

God's offer: trust me...

Verse 4: *"be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of those two smouldering stumps of firewood."* Ahaz is panicking because he believes that the kingdoms of Aram and Samaria have a real chance of conquering Jerusalem. He is worried for his own life, and for his kingdom. But God tells him not to worry, because there is no real threat. Ahaz doesn't need to be preparing for a siege, all Ahaz needs to do is to keep calm, to trust, to take hold of God's hand and to rely on him. The language here is interesting. Ahaz thinks his enemies have the power to set his kingdom alight, God says that the fire in them is no more than that of a discarded fag end. They may still be smouldering, but they will soon go out. The God who knows all tells Ahaz to trust him.

And God also knows where the real power lies. Ahaz was terrified by the kings of these nations, but through Isaiah God reminded him that they were only men. In fact, they are so insignificant that Samaria's King isn't even named. He gets called "Remaliah's son!" As if he is too insignificant to be remembered. In

contrast, the king of Judah is from David's line, a line appointed by God himself. The power of the throne of Judah lies in God not men, and the God of all power tells Ahaz to trust him.

And as a way of encouraging that trust Isaiah takes his son along. He has a strange name, Shear-Jeshub, which means *"a remnant will return."* The son is also a sign to Ahaz that the God who is asking him to trust him is the God who knows the future, whose plans always succeed. 'A remnant will return' is a sign of God's faithfulness to his people however bad things look in the short term.

Trust me, says God, I understand the situation far better than you do. Trust me, says God, I am far stronger than your enemies. Trust me, says God, the future is in my hands.

But verse 9 ends with a warning: *"if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."* Ahaz's rule and the future direction of his kingdom depends on his decision. It is trust or bust! How does Ahaz respond?

Ahaz's 1st answer: uncommitted and unconvinced

To see his answer, we need to read between the lines, because the next thing that happens is that the Lord spoke to Ahaz again! He needs a second chance to respond and to put his trust firmly in God's hands because he obviously failed to do it the first time.

The second chance may have immediately followed the first, while Ahaz was still at the aqueduct, or it might have been days later. We don't know. All we do know is that Ahaz was in need of a second chance, and that God, in a demonstration of long-suffering patience and amazing grace, offered it to him. And what an offer it was!

God's 2nd offer: I'm trustworthy – ask for a sign.

Verse 11 *"ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."* This decision is so crucial that God offers to demonstrate his trustworthiness by a miraculous sign that Ahaz can set for himself. What an astonishing offer! "Choose something, Ahaz! Anything! I will prove to you that you can trust me."

But what does Ahaz do? He rejects God's offer, and what's worse, he cloaks it in a pious but faithless response. It's there in verse 12: *"I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."*

Ahaz's final answer: pious but faithless...

If you know your Bible, you'll know that Jesus said something very similar when facing the temptations of Satan in the desert. It's from Exodus chapter 17 where God's people are told not to put the Lord their God to the test. But the context there is very different. The sin of putting the Lord to the test is refusing to trust him and his past faithfulness unless he proves himself trustworthy all over again. That isn't the case here. The Lord himself is offering to give a sign. God asks Ahaz to test him, and not to hold back but to make the test as hard as he likes. God is not expecting Ahaz to leap into the dark, to trust his own life and the life of his people to a vague, fingers-crossed kind of hope. Despite the fact that God has proved himself through Israel's history time and time again, at this crucial point in Judah's history he is still willing to prove that he is worthy of trust, and that faith in God is totally rational and reasonable. But Ahaz says no. He will not ask for a sign.

Why does he do that? Ray Ortland puts it this way.: *“God hands Ahaz a blank cheque, but he refuses to cash it. Why? He doesn’t want to trust God. Sure, he puts it in pious language, but it’s all quick thinking diplomatic hypocrisy. He knows there are strings attached. If he lets God in, God will take control. And for Ahaz, that would mean using God strategies to get through the crisis and giving God the glory for the outcome. Ahaz proves here that faith can be refused by the will, no matter how strongly evidences. If we don’t want God, we can find a way to make our unbelief sound plausible, even pious.”*

Having brought such a gracious offer, having spoken to Ahaz twice, imploring him to trust God and having been rebuffed both times, the tone of Isaiah’s message now changes. By refusing to trust God, Ahaz and the people would reap the consequences of the king’s faithlessness. In fact, if you look closely you’ll see that whilst in verse 10 Isaiah says that Ahaz is to *“ask the Lord **your** God for a sign”*, in verse 13 Isaiah asks Ahaz *“Will you try the patience of **my** God also?”* Do you see the difference? Ahaz has made his choice. God is out of the equation, irrelevant to his plans. Ahaz is King of Judah and he has decided to prepare for the siege and to stake his kingdom on an alliance with his enemy’s enemy – Assyria.

But God can’t be cut out of the equation that easily. This is his world. History moves to his tune, not ours, and so God’s response is to point out to Ahaz, in clear and frightening terms, not just how badly his choices will work out in the short term, but that God’s plans will ultimately succeed.

God’s response: see my sign and see the result of your folly.

Since Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign God says that he himself will choose one. It’s there in verse 14: *“the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.”*

If you’ve ever been to a service of carols and readings at Christmas you’ll have heard this verse because in his gospel Matthew quotes it as a prophecy that predicts the virgin birth of Jesus. And that’s what this verse does. The words that Isaiah uses here, the use of the definite article, speaking about a specific child, together with the Hebrew words used for a virgin, rather than just a young woman, make it abundantly clear that Isaiah’s words pointed forward to a miraculous birth where God would reveal himself to truly be with his people. That’s what Immanuel means: it means God with us!

But this verse was also an encouragement for God’s people at that time. It’s what theologians call a ‘double fulfilment’ with a promise for the people of the day but a final fulfilment in Jesus. Whether it points to another specific child born, perhaps, to Ahaz or Isaiah or to someone else (and there quite are a number of theories) the prophecy goes on to say that by the time he’s around 12 years of age the two Kingdoms of which Ahaz was so frightened would be no more. Just 12 years! That’s how long Ahaz had to wait to see the end of his enemies for good because “Immanuel,” God was with his people.

What a comforting promise to people whose hearts were shaking like trees in the wind. What a comforting promise to us too because if we are God’s people, then through his Holy Spirit, God is with us too.

But Isaiah’s words didn’t stop there. Ahaz had turned his back on God, and that brought consequences. We will think more about the consequences of rejecting God next week, but versus 18 to 25 give a description of the immediate result. The Assyrians on whom Ahaz had pinned his hopes of rescue would indeed show up defeat and his enemies, but they would then turn and decimate the land of Judah too. Like a mouse appealing to a cat for help when he is attacked by two rats; the rats were eaten, but the mouse ended up as desert!

That was the result of Ahaz's lack of faith, of thinking he could cope without God. He did not stand firm in his faith, and so he did not stand firm at all.

Our challenge: who will we trust?

And that raises a big question for us doesn't it, because the same is true for us: If we do not stand firm in our faith we will not stand at all!

Trust or bust. Stand or stumble. The lesson for us here is that without our feet firmly planted on Jesus, rooted in the gospel, and grounded in God's goodness, power, might, and faithfulness, then when the storms of life hit us we will be swept away.

But don't for a moment imagine that trusting God is passive. It isn't simply humming the tune to Bob Marley's 'every little thing is going to be alright!' Christian trust is active trust. Trusting God involves actively and diligently seeking God's perspective and will through prayer and studying the scriptures, and then actively and diligently walking in His way.

That will mean trusting and obeying God's Word even when it goes against the prevailing culture. It will mean trusting and obeying God even when it goes against what our friends or family or colleagues believe is right. It may call us to radically change the way we live or mean giving up selfish ambitions to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. It may be costly, perhaps even a little scary, but a life lived trusting God will ultimately turn out to be the right way and the blessed way to live.

How do I know? What's the sign that we can trust God and his word? It's Jesus; it's the sign of Immanuel. You see, the Christian faith is rooted in history, in real life, in the life changing experience of Christians across the ages and most importantly of all, it is rooted in the unchallengeable fact of the resurrection of Jesus and the absolute reliability and truth of the Scriptures.

So as I close, let me ask you where your faith and trust is today. Is it ultimately in yourself, your abilities, your goodness or is it in Jesus? Is your faith and trust ultimately in your career, your family, your house, your health, your investments, or is it in Jesus? If our trust is not in God, then we will ultimately trust someone or something else, and when the storms of life come they will fail us.

But friends, if our trust is in Jesus then God is with us always. If we trust in Jesus then we can rely on God's never-failing love, his perfect goodness, his generous provision, his wonderful promises and his undiminished power. This is God's world. This is God's church. If we are in Christ then we are God's people and we do not need to fear the storms or the enemy, and we can stand firm whatever the future holds.