

Isaiah 8: 1-22 The Dangerous Presence of a Holy God

Unintended consequences are a pain in the neck aren't they! CFCs worked brilliantly in fridges, keeping our food fresh, and had a whole host of other wonderful applications, but they put a hole in the ozone layer. We wanted a better standard of living for all with cheap products that could be turned out in their millions, but now our oceans and landfills are full of plastic. Unintended consequences are everywhere, in every decision we make, every path we choose. And they were there in spades for King Ahaz and the people of Judah.

As we saw last week, King Ahaz and the people of Judah were facing a serious threat from their neighbours, when onto the stage stepped Isaiah with an astonishing offer from God. God would rescue his people in a mighty way, but Ahaz had to trust him entirely. When Ahaz wasn't convinced, God offered to provide a sign to show that He was totally trustworthy. But Ahaz again said no. He would trust in his own efforts and in the alliance he had made with the Assyrians.

But God cannot be pushed aside that easily. He would be who he promised: Immanuel, God with them. Ahaz had already been told what that would mean, but chapter 8 begins with Isaiah having a message for the people concerning the unintended consequences of their collective decision to rely on Assyria rather than on the Lord. And, as in chapter 7, it centres around the birth of a child.

In chapter 7 the child would be called Immanuel, which means God is with us, and he was to be both a sign of hope for God's people then and also a signpost to the coming of Jesus who would be God with us in human flesh. As I said last week, there are a number of questions about how this prophecy was fulfilled at the time of Isaiah, and one of them is that the 'Immanuel' child is also the one referred to here in chapter 8. Now I don't know whether that is right but it does make sense on some levels. It certainly isn't unusual in the Bible for people to have different names, but what is clear is that the name of this child is absolutely significant.

Now let's be honest it's a strange name. As a teacher I once came across a child named Koi because his father liked the fish, but I never came across a child named Maher-Shalal--Hash-Baz, a name which means '*quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil*'. But when Isaiah announces this name of his yet even unconceived son, which he does by writing on a large scroll in ordinary writing so everyone can see it, he is announcing the consequences of rejecting God's offer of salvation. '*Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil*' speaks of a nation coming in to overrun its enemies without even much of a fight. So overpowering would the Assyrian army be that the independently-minded kingdoms of Samaria and Damascus would fall without so much as a whimper. What's more, that would happen even before this child was old enough to speak.

And just in case King Ahaz and the people of Judah thought that they were getting away with it, Isaiah speaks to them again in verses 6 to 8 and lays out the future for them. Since they wanted the king of Assyria, that's who they would get.

That choice is explained here in verse 8 as a choice between two rivers: Shiloah or the Euphrates. Shiloah was the name of the gentle spring which fed its water along the aqueduct into Jerusalem. It didn't look much, but, like the Lord Almighty, it was all God's people needed. In contrast the river Euphrates is a picture of the King of Assyria in all his pomp: a mighty, roaring river, strong, powerful, and destructive when in full flow. Perhaps that's why at the end of verse 6 they are rejoicing over the fact that their king's treaty with Assyria would mean an end to their enemies. But, as we noted last week, the unintended consequence would be that the mighty Assyrian army would sweep down like a river in flood into Judah also, "*passing through it and reaching up to the neck.*" It's a threatening scene, and to stress the point

Isaiah changes his metaphor in verse 8, speaking of Judah as helpless as a rabbit under the gaze of a mighty bird of prey.

How can tiny Judah possibly escape? How can they survive? It seems impossible? They can survive because God hasn't finished with his people yet. They can survive because Immanuel, God is with them.

Isaiah gives reasons to hope in verses 8 to 10. First of all, in verse 8, he says that although the mighty floodwaters of the king of Assyria will sweep on into Judah, Judah will not entirely be swept away. God has set the limit for the Assyrian army so their waters will reach up to the neck of his people and no more. The head, Jerusalem, will still be above water. The people will be weakened, the nation overrun, but it will not be totally defeated.

And in verses 9 and 10 Isaiah lifts his voice in confident declaration to the nations who are plotting Judah's downfall: thus far and no further! Why? Because God is with his people. The nations may gather for war. They may devise detailed plans and clever strategies. They may charge headlong into battle with a bloodcurdling war cry, but they will not succeed for God himself is with his people and he is in absolute control. Judah would be disciplined for their lack of faith and there would be painful consequences for ignoring God, but God is sovereign and he would be with his people, and after the raging flood had passed they would still be standing.

You see God is a God who brings light out of darkness, who snatches victory from the jaws of defeat and who breathes life into the dead and makes them live again. As the Assyrian army swept down over Judah it looked like the end, but it wasn't because God was in control. And of course, we see the same story with Jesus, don't we? As he breathed his last breath on the cross, as he was laid in that stone-cold tomb, it seemed as if God's plans had come to nothing, except that wasn't the end. Jesus rose from the dead because God is sovereign over his world and His will is always done.

And the same hope holds true for us today in the church in the UK. We are the people of God and so God will be with us always, as he promised, until Jesus comes again. But whether God is with us to bless and protect or to discipline and rebuke depends on how we respond to him.

Today the church in our land faces enemies within and without. We find ourselves under attack from outside, with the media lining up to deride and ridicule Bible believing Christians, and we are under attack from inside the church, as people with no stomach for the fight, no care for the truth, and no faith in God's Word do their best to bring the values of the world into the church. And if we give in, if we fail to stand on the truth of the scriptures and keep our eyes on the Lord then he will be with us to discipline us rather than bless.

But however low the church sinks, however disobedient, weak and worldly the church becomes, the encouragement here and across the scriptures is that there will always be a faithful remnant left behind to witness to Jesus, because God is sovereign and his will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. God will have a people for himself, and though the waters of the world may come up to our necks we will not entirely be swept away.

So what have we seen so far? We've learned that Immanuel, God will be with his people always but that the way we respond to God and his Word determines whether he will be with us to bless or discipline. But we've also seen that however weak God's people are and however fierce the opposition seems, God will have a people for himself. There will always be a faithful remnant of God's people left behind.

The question is then, as part of that faithful remnant, how should we live?

Verses 11 to 22 help us to see two ways. We are to Fear God and Trust God.

The days of Isaiah, like today, was a time of rumours, threats and conspiracy theories, and it's very easy to get caught up in them, isn't it, and to be robbed of our peace? How many of us, when we turn on the news and hear of another van driving into pedestrians, don't start to fear walking the streets of London? How many of us I wonder have lost sleep over Brexit or the nerve agent attack in Salisbury or global warming or Russian interference in elections around the world or the tweets of Donald Trump? Rumours, threats, conspiracy theories abound and it's very easy, even as a Christian, to get caught up in them and it seems that it took the strong hand of the Lord on Isaiah for him not to get swept away too. And whilst the antidote to fear may seem surprising, it is exactly what we need. Instead of fearing what the people fear, the uncertainties of life, the Assyrian army or whatever, Isaiah, and us, are to fear the Lord.

We don't hear much about the fear of the Lord today. In a "feel-good" age we want to hear that God loves us no matter what we do and that he will never leave us or forsake us. Now of course both of those things are wonderfully true, but they do not mean that how we behave is irrelevant to God. We may come to God as we are, but he does not leave us as we are. The call for Christians is to grow in holiness and likeness to Jesus in the way we live and speak and think because God is holy. And so we should not expect God to be pleased with us when we deliberately disobey his commands, ignore his promises and walk in sin. Yes, we can still be sure of God's presence. If we are truly born-again then he will never leave us. But like Judah, and like the church, how we experience God will depend very much on our attitude to him.

Now you can think of this like a child with a parent can't you. As a child grows in wisdom, grace and goodness, so the parent gets to enjoy the child's company and vice versa, and time together is a joy. But when a child is disobedient, rude and disrespectful, then although the parent and child will still spend time together it won't always be pleasant experience because the role of the parent becomes one of rebuke and discipline as they seek to steer the child into the right way path.

Isaiah uses a different image in verse 14. The Lord Almighty, he says, is a rock and a stone. To those who trust and obey him, God will be a place of safety and blessing, a secure rock in the midst of a mighty flood. But to those who dismiss God he will be stone over which they will stumble and fall and by which they will ultimately be crushed. This is God's world, this is God's church. And so we will either rest and rely on him or be tripped up trying to get out of his way. But we cannot avoid him or live life totally without him however hard we try.

So as God's faithful people we need to fear God. That means we need to respond to him in the right way, remembering that although he showers his love and mercy upon us, and he is also holy and righteous and mighty. We must never treat God as anything but God. We need to revere him, worship him, respect him, obey him: that is we are to fear him, in the right sense the word.

I read this week of a business owner whose firm almost when bankrupt because he refused to pay a bribe because he feared God more than the consequences of a failed business. Would you do have done that? In the last election campaign, the LibDem leader, Tim Farron, came under huge pressure from the press to change his view that homosexual sex is sinful, because it seems you can't hold public office these days unless you adopt the world's values in that area. He crumbled under pressure, but has since spoken of his deep regret that he did, but I wonder if we would have done any better? Fearing God means standing up and staying true to God and his gospel whatever the cost.

So friends do you fear God, in the right sense of that phrase? Is your God mighty and Holy, clothed in unapproachable light, all powerful, all-knowing, eternal, unchanging and ruling over this world? Or have

you shrunk God down to a size which fits neatly in your pocket, where you can take him out or leave him on the shelf depending on your mood? If we are to stand firm against the flood, if we are going to stand firm against our enemies and stand firm in a culture that rejects Jesus and all he taught, then we must see God as he is and we must fear God above all.

Secondly, we need to trust God.

Christian trust is active trust, it means seeking to understand God's will and putting it into practice. It means living a life of humble obedience.

It also means knowing where to go with our questions and making sure we turn to him and nowhere else for our answers. Now I know that's hard to do today. The world constantly tells us that we can't trust the Scriptures, that they are outdated, irrelevant or just plain wrong. Even within the church there is intense pressure to change doctrine or water down the gospel, and to look elsewhere for our hope and answers.

But it was exactly the same for Isaiah! The Lord told him to bind up this testimony of warning in verse 16 and to seal up God's instructions amongst the faithful, because the rest of the world wasn't listening. It was a call for Isaiah to keep teaching God's Word to those who would listen so that there would be a there was a remnant, a body of believers who would pass those truths onto the next generation. That's why it's so important that we encourage one another to stand firm in the truth. It's why it's so important for us to point our children to Jesus and to teach our children and our grandchildren the truths of the gospel, so that they are then equipped to tell the next generation of the mercies of God. If we want to know the truth about God, if we want to know the right way to live in his world, if we want answers to our big questions, if we want a sure ground for our faith and our hope the only place we can turn, the only place we must turn is to the Scriptures and to the one who gave them.

But of course, those outside the church and those outside of Christ have other ideas. But when we reject God and his Word we don't stop believing in everything, we start believing in anything. People who would not for a moment consider looking at the Scriptures for real wisdom will study their horoscopes or visit mediums or go to spiritualist churches or take part in pagan earth-mother rituals to try and find the hope and the truth and the light that only God can provide.

The way that Isaiah speaks about mediums and spiritists here is incredibly blunt isn't it. Why on earth would you consult the dead on behalf of the living? Why would you walk into the darkness to receive light? Why would you approach evil spirits to find good news? It's sheer madness, let alone sinful and dangerous and we must not get involved with such things. There is such a thing as false hope and that's the only thing these evil forces offer. It may calm our souls for a while, it may give us some answers that our itching ears are eager to hear, but they will be lies and deceit.

Instead, if we have questions, if we have doubts, if we seek wisdom, *"should not people enquire of their God?"* And friends, God is ready to speak to us through his Word! We may not have all the answers to all the questions we would like to ask, but we have all the answers to all the questions we need to ask. And we have all the information we need to trust God for the rest.

And we can show that we truly trust God in our language too. The phrase 'touch wood' might have Christian origins but today it's seen as a way of making sure nothing bad happens. "It's not going to rain, touch wood. The operation will go well, touch wood." How about changing that phrase to "God willing"? Because that implies a trust in a personal and powerful God whose will does determine the course of

events and who has promised that all things, good and bad, work together for the good of those who love him.

Will you do that? Will you trust him for today and for tomorrow? When you have questions and doubts will you bring them to the Lord in prayer and open up his Word and ask him to speak to you? Will you ground your hope and your faith firmly in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ? If not, you are destined to roam, distressed and hungry, unrooted, chasing after mirages of hope only to find yourself in deepening darkness and distress. That is the alternative to trusting in God. But as children of the light that should not be our path.

The Jesus-trusting, Bible-believing population of Stevenage today won't be any more than 2% or 3%, and that makes us a tiny remnant. To stand firm against the onrushing tide of unbelief and secularism we need to fear God above all and we need to trust God above all. But the God who delivered Judah, who brought his people out of exile in Babylon, who raised Jesus from the dead and whose kingdom will never end is awesome in power and faithful to his promises. Will we be a faithful remnant, holding onto the truth and passing it on to the next generation? Will we stand for him? I pray that we will. Amen.