

Light Through the Darkness

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. It's great to be with you even though we're separated by distance. We often find that quotes are taken out of context. For example, in my family it's quite common to use the line at the end of the evening, I'm off to bed, to sleep, perchance to dream.

Ignoring the fact that this is a quote from Hamlet where he's speaking about death. Or people will quote Robert Frost's famous poem about the two roads that diverged in a wood as being about the triumph of individualism.

Whereas apparently it was meant to be about the futility of the decisions that we make. Tonight we come to a passage that has one verse in the middle that is well known.

But rarely do we think about where it comes from and the context in which it was written. That verse is verse 14 which says, The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel. Last week Jonathan took us through chapter 6 where we read of Isaiah's vision of the Lord high and lifted up in all his glorious majesty and splendor.

[1 : 26] And then we heard of his commission to Isaiah to go and speak to a people who would not listen to him. And we heard that he was to keep on speaking until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant.

This week we see the beginning of that thankless task. And the beginning of that journey towards destruction. Tonight's passage is one of fear and of failure.

It is probably around 18 years since Isaiah's commissioning.

And Ahaz, grandson of Uzziah, is now king in Judah. By all accounts he was not a good king. You can read all about his life in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28.

To set the scene we need to understand a bit of what's going on in the world. There are two main powers in the region at that time.

[2 : 34] Egypt and Assyria. Egypt to the south had been the major power but is in decline. Assyria to the northeast in modern day Iraq is on the rise to become the regional superpower.

It's a highly cultured but cruel nation. To the north of Judah are two smaller nations, Israel and Aram.

Israel is the northern Jewish kingdom, also known as Ephraim. Their king is Pekah or the son of Ramalia. Aram lies to the north of Israel in modern day Syria.

The king there was risen. It seems that Egypt was trying to coordinate an uprising of these smaller nations to throw off Assyria.

Israel and Aram had agreed to join in but Judah refused. As we will see, Ahaz had other plans. Just a brief disclaimer before we go any further.

[3 : 42] There is a lot in this passage that is difficult to understand. I will not try and answer all the questions you might have. Others much wiser than me have tried and failed.

But there are some things that shine through clearly and we will focus our attention there. For those of you who like headings, we will be looking at the passage under three headings.

Fearing the wrong things. Trusting the wrong things. And a sign that can be trusted. So to start fearing the wrong things.

At the beginning of the passage, we find Ahaz and all the people terrified. The message has come that Aram and Ephraim, that is Israel, have formed an alliance and have invaded and are marching on Jerusalem.

Because Judah wouldn't join in the uprising against Assyria, they have turned on them and planned to divide the land between them and put their own puppet king in place.

[4 : 52] And so we read in verse 2, The hearts of Ahaz and all his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. It was completely natural for them to be afraid.

From their viewpoint, they were doomed. It was surely only a matter of time before Jerusalem fell. And there are many things in this world that cause us to fear.

Illness, death, unemployment, poverty, rejection, failure. I'm sure you could fill in the list with things that cause you to fear.

And some of these fears have been made far more real to us in this last year. Particularly to those of you working in hospitals and other vulnerable situations, who have seen firsthand the ravages of this pandemic.

It's natural to fear. But the real problem here is not that Ahaz fears Israel and Aram, but that he does not fear God.

[5 : 59] He's not just ambivalent towards God, but he's actively engaged in the worship of the gods of all the nations around. He has even offered his own children as sacrifices, and he will ultimately close the doors of the temple and stop the worship there.

In the past, the nations had trembled before the people of Israel because they had heard that the Lord was with them, and they had heard of the wonders that he had done.

But Ahaz thought nothing of this. He believed his best defence was to become as much like his neighbours as possible, to worship their gods, and to not stand out as different.

If these gods had given his enemies victory, surely he should be worshipping them. In the face of our fears, are we tempted to compromise?

Are we tempted to think, I know this isn't really right, but everyone around me is doing it, and it seems to be working out quite well for them.

[7 : 18] But what Ahaz had not reckoned with is the fact that these gods are no gods at all, but that the Lord who he despises is truly God.

He is the one that is in control. None of this is happening without his knowledge, and actually more than this, he is the one that is directing these nations.

In verse 14 we read, the Lord will bring. In verse 19, the Lord will whistle for flies. And in verse 20, the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the Euphrates River.

These powerful nations that Ahaz fears are nothing but pawns. They are just tools in God's hand to bring about his purposes.

In this case, to discipline Judah for their rebellion against him. While it is natural to be afraid of them, it is the God who is directing them that should be feared.

[8 : 24] And Ahaz wants nothing to do with him. But despite that, despite his rejection, God is still faithful.

He is faithful to his promises and his people. However much they fail, however much they reject him, however angry he is with them, he will not ultimately let them be destroyed.

And so he sends Isaiah with a message to Ahaz, whether he wants to hear it or not. And the message is this.

Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of those two smouldering stumps of firewood.

Do not be afraid of these nations. Do not be afraid of these kings for they are only men. And more than that, they are smouldering stumps.

[9 : 29] Yes, they may be fiery hot, but they will soon burn out. Aram would soon be conquered. And in verse 8 we read that Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.

They will be crushed, they will be dispersed, they will be mixed with other peoples and will be lost. They will no longer be a people.

These nations have conspired to destroy Judah, but the Lord says through Isaiah, it will not happen. This does not mean that they will not inflict wounds on Judah.

In fact, from the accounts in Kings and Chronicles, we know that they inflicted heavy casualties. But ultimately, they will not prevail. Jerusalem will stand.

Judah will not be destroyed. Ahaz was fearing the wrong things. He was fearing these nations that ultimately would fall.

[10 : 38] And he was not fearing the God who was in control of it all. But we also see in this passage that he was trusting the wrong things.

Because rather than joining the alliance with Egypt, or trusting in God for protection as he should have done, he decided to take a different route and to look to Assyria, the growing superpower that everyone feared for salvation.

rather than fighting the enemy, he chose a path of appeasement. In 2nd Kings 16, we read, Ahaz sent messengers to say to Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, I am your servant and vassal. Come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Israel who are attacking me. And Ahaz took the silver and gold found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent it as a gift to the kings of Assyria. He humbles himself before this king, Tiglath-Pileser. He is the king of the nation that is meant to represent God to the world.

[11 : 58] He is of the line of David and sits on the throne of David. And he is declaring himself to be a mere servant, a vassal, literally a son of this pagan king.

This is not an alliance, but this is submission as a subject. And he gives tribute to him, not just any old tribute, but as well as the wealth of the palace treasury.

He gives the gold and silver from the temple, the things that were dedicated to the worship of God. And yes, the king of Assyria will come to his begging.

He will come with his armies, but he doesn't care at all about Judah. He is only interested in expanding his own power.

the one thing that Ahaz is unwilling to trust is God. But Isaiah brings the message, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

[13 : 13] The same God who will bring down resin and pekah is the God in whose hands Ahaz is. If he does not turn back to God, he too will fall.

However, knowing Ahaz's lack of faith, God tells him to ask for a sign, any sign that he wants, to show that the message given through Isaiah is reliable and to be trusted.

We often see asking for signs being criticised. For example, Jesus would say a wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign.

Asking for a sign is seen as showing lack of faith. But here we see that God is willing to give a sign to Ahaz precisely because his faith is lacking.

But Ahaz does not want a message or a sign from God. on the face of it, it sounds like piety. In fact, he uses almost the same words that Jesus would later use when tempted by the devil.

[14 : 29] I will not put the Lord to the test. But this is false piety. He does not refuse because of his faith.

He refuses because he has already decided what to do. He believes he has no need for God. And above all, he does not want to be inconvenienced by what God might expect of him.

I wonder if there are times when we don't want to see what God wants to show us because we do not want to hear what he might be telling us.

We don't want to listen to his word, to hear it preached, because we're scared of what we might be expected to do in response.

But despite Ahaz refusing to ask, God gives a sign anyway. And so we come to our final and biggest point, a sign that can be trusted.

[15 : 37] Once again, we see that despite Ahaz, God is faithful. God is not the sign, but it's not the sign, but it's not the sign, but it's not the sign, but it's not the sign.

God is no longer speaking to Ahaz. He is speaking to the nation at large. Ahaz has refused a sign, but he will give a sign to the nation that they might believe.

And it's not the sort of sign that they might have been expecting. It's the birth of a son, a specific son with a specific name.

Actually, there are at least three sons mentioned in this passage, and they all have significant names that communicate a message to the people.

people. In chapter eight, we read of Isaiah fathering a son with the mouthful of a name Maher Shalal Hashbaz.

[16 : 44] This name means something like quick to the plunder. And the prophecy is given that before he can even say mama or dada, the first words that most children speak, Assyria will come in and plunder their enemies.

the nations that they feared so much will fall to the might of Assyria. So has the plan of Ahaz worked out after all?

Assyria will solve all his problems. We need to keep reading because in verse seven of chapter eight, we read, the Lord is about to bring against them, that's against Aram and Israel, the mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates, the king of Assyria with all his pomp.

It will overflow all its channels, run over all its banks, and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it, and reaching up to the neck.

Assyria will come against Aram and Israel. Unlike a river which has burst its banks, it will keep on going into Judah. Tiglath Pileser is not a friend that can be trusted.

[18 : 09] And is that not the same with things we trust in, to save us from the things we fear? Be it our job, our friends, our family, our savings, our pension, even the vaccines that we're pinning our hopes on, they may all be good, they may all help, but ultimately they cannot be fully relied on and may fail us.

At the beginning of chapter 7, another son of Isaiah was mentioned, Shir Yashub. This name means a remnant will return.

Yes, things are bad. Yes, they're going to get worse, but God is still faithful. He has made promises to his people and he will not abandon them.

Because we read the floodwaters will only come up to their neck. They will not ultimately be destroyed. If God was not in control, if God was not restraining these mighty armies, they would have been completely annihilated.

the children of Israel would have been wiped out. God's promises would have failed. And ultimately, the promised Messiah would not come.

[19 : 36] And we would not be here today. Which brings us to the third child, in that well-known verse, verse 14, which is quoted in Matthew 1.

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel.

This sign is promised to a nation fearing annihilation by powerful armies. This sign is promised to a godless king who has led his people astray.

Where they might be looking, for great, powerful deliverance. They are given the sign of a child. But the sign is given to give them hope.

Much of prophecy seems to have multiple fulfilments. It speaks of events near at hand when it was written, and also speaks of things that happen in the future, sometimes the distant future.

[20 : 47] future. And it seems that this is one of these prophecies. The events we are told it will precede, the destruction of their neighbours that they fear, is in the near future.

So it seems that this verse must have had a fulfilment at that time. There are many theories on who this child might be, but that is one of the questions that we're not going to be able to answer today.

But if this verse wasn't quoted in Matthew, referring to the birth of Christ, we would just stop there, think nothing more about it, it would be yet another obscure prophecy to ancient Judah.

But it is. And that brings us to the other difficulty in this verse. What does the word which is translated virgin actually mean?

Many of your Bibles will have the footnote or a young woman. It seems that this word just means a young unmarried woman.

[22 : 02] Virgin is implied but not explicit. This would just be a question for the academics and Hebrew scholars if it wasn't something that is used frequently to attack the credibility of the Christian faith.

People love to point at this and say, see, it doesn't mean virgin. The virgin birth is all made up just like the rest of your faith. Except that argument doesn't work.

the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is quoted in Matthew's Gospel, uses the word parthenos, which is precise in its meaning.

But even if it wasn't, even if this verse in Isaiah never existed, the Gospels make it explicitly clear. In Luke's Gospel, Mary asks, Mary is not stupid.

She knows about the birds and the bees, and therefore she knows that she cannot conceive a child.

In Matthew's Gospel, the angel tells Joseph, what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit, and then explicitly goes on to state, he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son.

[23 : 37] Why am I laboring this point? Because it's important. if Jesus was just another baby conceived in the normal manner, as all of us are, then he is just human.

And if Jesus is just a man, yes, a man somehow specially anointed by God for a special ministry, filled with the Spirit in a special way, then we have a big problem.

Because if Jesus is not fully God, then he has no power to offer forgiveness. He is just a man spouting nice platitudes, a man who is mistaken about his own identity, a man who ultimately died

an unfortunate death.

At best, he is like one of the high priests who had to offer sacrifices for his own sins, before offering the sacrifices on behalf of the people. people.

But also, if God is not fully man, if he was just some sort of avatar, just a pure spirit wearing flesh as a costume, then he cannot represent us.

[24 : 55] He does not understand our weakness. He can't act on our behalf before his Father. Savior. If Jesus is not fully God and fully man, then he cannot be our Savior.

I wonder if the disciples, looking back, re-read this verse, and it struck them. Oh, so that's what it means.

A virgin conceives. we never in our wildest dreams realized it meant that. We assumed it was just poetic. But now we see, now we know what Isaiah was talking about all that time ago.

And so back to the name, Emmanuel, which means God with us. We first see the significance of this name at Isaiah's time.

In the events that were happening, it would be easy for them to think that God had abandoned them. But he wants them to know that even though he is bringing the armies of Assyria against them, he is with them, and he is waiting for them to cry out to him.

[26 : 20] We see the name mentioned again twice in chapter 8, in verses 8 and 10. In verse 8, it seems to be a cry of distress.

Many translations render it as, O Emmanuel. They long to see God with them. In the face of the destruction brought by Assyria, they finally cry out to God.

As the Christmas carol puts it, O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. We see the response to this in verse 10.

All the plans that the nations might make, however powerful their empires, are futile and ultimately doomed.

For Emmanuel, for God is with us. God is fulfilled in a far greater way.

[27 : 25] In the birth of Christ, in the birth of Christ, in Jesus, we see God with us, not just in some abstract way, but instead, as we read in John's gospel, he made his dwelling among us.

He grew up as a human child. He walked about the roads of Galilee and Judea. He was hungry. He was tired.

He wept. He died. As one song puts it, what if God was one of us? Well, he was.

He is the image of the invisible God. God. He fully reveals God to us. That's all very well, but what about today?

Well, Jesus promised, surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. And he promised that he would give us another comforter, one to walk beside us, to dwell within us.

[28 : 40] He is with all people who have put their trust in him, in the person of the Holy Spirit. And so we can sing the words of the song, I know who goes before me.

I know who stands behind. The God of angel armies is always by my side. Whom shall I fear?

And we could just stop there. fear. If we are trusting in the God who is with us, then what have we to fear? The worst that the world can do is nothing if God is with us.

In some ways, we don't have to cry out, O come, O come, Emmanuel. He has come, and he has promised that he is with us, and yet we still groan.

Yes, God is with us, but we can't see him, and we don't always feel him. Yes, we don't have the armies of Assyria coming against us, and yet we know things aren't right.

[30 : 02] We've perhaps felt more than ever in this past year just how broken this world is, and so we cry out for something more, and rightly so, because we have promised, we have been promised something more.

Ever since our first parents were thrown out of the garden, where they had walked with God in the cool of the day, the ultimate goal has been for that day when once more the dwelling of God is with men.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. And so to conclude, we have seen the danger of, like Ahaz, fearing the wrong things, fearing the things that we see around us, terrifying as they may be, and spurning the God who is in control of them.

And we have seen the danger of putting our trust in the wrong things, armies, friends, savings, vaccines, and finding that they cannot deliver everything that we need.

[31 : 39] But failing to trust in the God who can be relied on and will never fail. And we've seen how this was demonstrated in sending a sign that can be trusted, his own son, Emmanuel, God with us, who was fully human, fully God, able to be a mediator, the mediator that we needed between us and God.

And he is the one that has promised to be with us. He is the one that walks beside us through all the fears and storms of life.

And ultimately, he is the one that will bring about that day, when he will be with us in a fuller, a more glorious way, when the fears of this broken world are a distant memory.

And so we can end with the final words of Revelation, the last verses of our Bible. He who testifies to these things says, yes, I am coming soon.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 07] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.