

“Stand or Stumble”
Isaiah 7:1-8:22
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It is so precious to watch a toddler learn to walk. We get so excited when they let go of the furniture and teeter as they stand, with their hands out to their side for balance, and accidentally take that first step! Everyone cheers and applauds because they have learned to stand.

As we grow older, it seems we lose that hard won balance, and so easily stumble! I was visiting my older brother Gary in Pasco Washington in 2016 when I misjudged the steps down to his basement apartment and broke my ankle. Since then, I have been very cautious to watch where I step so I don't stumble, again. But occasionally I still do!

However, it's not just in our physical walk that we might stumble. Isaiah 7:9 reminds us that we need caution to keep from stumbling in the spiritual world also. “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

In Isaiah chapters 7 and 8 God has preserved the example of His prophecies about King Ahaz of Judah to teach us that we need to stand, and not stumble. We will examine:

1. The Predicaments of Ahaz (Isaiah 7:1-9)
2. The Predictions of God (Isaiah 7:10-25; 8:1-10)
3. The Priorities of Isaiah (Isaiah 8:11-22)

First let us look at the predicaments of Ahaz. 2 Kings chapter 16 gives the history of King Ahaz. Ahaz became the king of the Southern kingdom of Israel, then called Judah, in 735 B.C.

“Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites.” [2 Kings 16:2-3]

Although Ahaz was in the line of kings descending from King David, he did not follow Jehovah as David had done, or believe as his father Jotham had believed. He was lured into idol worship and put his faith in his wealth, power and his own wisdom, rather than in God. He even had sacrificed one of his sons to Baal.

But although Ahaz had turned his back on God, God never abandoned him. God sent Isaiah to confront his unbelief and challenge him to turn back to God.

Ahaz was facing a conspiracy against Judah. Pekah, the current king of Israel, and Rezin, the current king of Aram, had joined forces to attack Jerusalem, but couldn't overpower it. Nevertheless, Ahaz and his people were shaken with fear at the prospect of another attack from their enemies.

Already, according to 2 Chronicles 28:8, “The men of Israel took captive from their fellow Israelites who were from Judah two hundred thousand wives, sons and daughters. They also took a great deal of plunder, which they carried back to Samaria.” [2 Chronicles 28:8]

Fearing that they couldn't stand against this doubled force much longer, Ahaz checked the fortifications of Jerusalem, including their aqueduct and pool system, so their water supply would be adequate for the people

to withstand the siege. One of these armies would have been a tough battle. But as they doubled up on Ahaz to spoil and pillage Judah, the odds were certainly not in Judah's favor! What should he do?

Ahaz had very few options left to him. He could try to negotiate a peace, giving up the land this enemy had already overrun, or he might look to make a treaty with another nation to try to counter-balance the numbers of soldiers. However, Ahaz didn't even consider turning to God as his source of help.

At this most critical point of the war, God sent Isaiah and his son, Shear-Jashub, whose name means "A remnant shall return," to deliver a prediction that could turn Ahaz's heart toward hope instead of despair. The message he brought was a very encouraging one.

First, "Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood ..." [Isaiah 7:4a] even though they want to tear Judah apart, divide it among themselves and make the son of Tabeel king over it.

Second, "the Sovereign Lord says: 'It will not take place, it will not happen . . . (verse 7) Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people (verse 8b). . . If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.'" (verse 9b) [Isaiah 7:7,8,9b]

But Ahaz quaked in his sandals at the vicious battle Israel had already endured. His eyes had not been on God. His eyes had wandered toward the gods of his enemies. His eyes had been on soldiers and armor and weapons. In the eyes of Ahaz, the battle was already lost!

However, God had already mobilized His army of two. As the army of Northern Israel brought 200,000 captives back to Samaria, God stirred one of His prophets, Oded, who lived there, to stop the procession outside of their capital. He hurried out of the city and said to the generals, "Because the Lord, the God of your ancestors, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand. But you have slaughtered them in a rage that reaches to heaven. And now you intend to make the men and women of Judah and Jerusalem your slaves. But aren't you also guilty of sins against the Lord your God? Now listen to me! Send back your fellow Israelites you have taken as prisoners, for the Lord's fierce anger rests on you." [2 Chronicles 28:9-11] So, the generals fed and clothed their prisoners, and sent them back to Judah.

God had reversed the great loss of people through His prophet Oded. Now, God moved His prophet Isaiah to give this prediction to Ahaz of future deliverance from this war. However, that deliverance would not happen for 65 more years! (v.8)

God answered the cries of the people of Judah. But His answer would require King Ahaz to trust in God. He had been taught to trust God in his youth. But in his adult life, he had forsaken that faith, and replaced it with faith in gods of power and success, known as the Baals.

Isaiah challenged Ahaz to "stand firm in your faith..." And Isaiah warned him that if he "didn't stand with God, he would not stand at all." It's hard to stand firm in our faith when we are facing the armies of this world telling us, "There is no help coming. God doesn't see or care about your trouble!" "Prayer doesn't do anything." But at the same time, the world is screaming for us to "Do something now!"

What would you do? Trouble is sometimes so overwhelming that it is hard for me to resist the compulsion to "do something now!" in a crisis. But just like Ahaz was faced with this challenge to stand in his faith, we also are challenged to do so.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians described how we do battle against our spiritual enemies. "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." [Ephesians 6:10,11]

We are not fighting against an evil neighboring nation as Ahaz was, but the challenge to our faith is every bit as strong. So, Paul again urged believers: “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” [Ephesians 6:13]

In Israel’s history, God commanded His people to fight against the evil nations. But occasionally, He commanded them not to fight. For example, when King Jehoshaphat faced the vast army from Edom, the Lord said, through his prophet Zechariah, “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the Lord says to you: ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.’ ‘You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you.’” [2 Chronicles 20:15, 17]

How difficult it is to trust God in our emergencies. Our instincts are to do something. Yet there are instances, such as this one that Ahaz faced, where the Lord wants to demonstrate His power and His sovereignty. In those instances, we are to stand, ready for battle, believing the Lord will accomplish His will in this dire time.

If we feel like we just don’t have enough faith to stop all of the striving and worry and running in circles; exhausting or paralyzing ourselves with our anxiety, it can be halted with one brief prayer: “help me overcome my unbelief!” With this very prayer, the father of a demon-possessed boy saw Jesus deliver his son from a deaf-mute spirit. (Mark 9:24) The Lord Jesus delighted in the challenge to help build this father’s faith. Today, He delights to build our faith too.

God offered help similarly to Ahaz. “Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ‘Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.’” [Isaiah 7:10,11]

Now, the history of the people of Israel held diverse examples of “testing the Lord God.” In Exodus 17, the people of Israel, freshly delivered from slavery in Egypt, began to argue with Moses: “So they quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses replied, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?’” [Exodus 17:2] God gave the people water to quench their thirst, but they continued to grumble and doubt that God cared for them, rather than put their faith in God’s provision. They all perished in the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness because of their lack of faith.

When the next generation arrived in the land of Israel, they were constantly fighting to rid the land of the evil tribes around them. At one point God called a man named Gideon to lead Israel to fight the Midianites. Gideon believed God, but didn’t think God could really use him to fight this battle. But God answered Gideon’s desire for reassurance by answering his request for a sign. God used a wool fleece to give a sign to encourage Gideon that God Himself would use him to win a decisive battle that freed Israel from the armies of the Midianites. (Judges 6:36-40)

A test asked of the Lord in faith can build what little faith we have, to be strong enough to trust in the Lord to save us. A test asked of the Lord in disbelief could lead to our loss, compounding our error of disbelief, to our own destruction.

Ahaz had been living in disbelief. His hardened heart couldn’t believe God would bring relief from these marauding nations - 65 years to his future! Yet all of the efforts of King Ahaz had proven ineffective against these armies. His lack of faith put his mind in a cycle of indecision.

So, God made the choice for him. “Then Isaiah said, ‘Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel....for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.’” [Isaiah 7:13,14, 16]

This “test” offered Ahaz a “hook” to hang his small amount of faith upon. Scholars believe there had been, or soon was to be a wedding among Ahaz’s family. A young virgin was soon to be married, and would conceive a son that would serve as a timer, showing Ahaz, within three years that the Lord’s work against his enemies would be evident. This would be a nearer fulfillment than that of waiting 65 years to see his enemies erased.

How would God cause this amazing turn-around? Verse 17 indicated just how God would do this. “The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah – he will bring the king of Assyria.” [Isaiah 7:17]

At the time the Northern tribes of Israel broke away from Judah and their allegiance to the Kings of David, Judah experienced a time of isolation. Instead of 12 tribes pulling together, to enjoy the full extent of a United Kingdom, established by King David and expanded by Solomon, they drew a line south of Ephraim’s land and divided the kingdom in two. The Northern kingdom abandoned the yearly feasts at the temple in Jerusalem and holy days, to allow their worship to slip away into idolatry.

Now, God would use the growing strength of the king of Assyria to pound the Northern kingdom and of Aram. God would accomplish what Ahaz had been unable to do. Judah would be left alone. But they would again be isolated from their Northern brothers, later to face Assyria alone.

First, the kingdom of Assyria would bring a slave-like domination over Ahaz’s kingdom, while destroying their enemies. It seems, from 2 Kings 16, that King Ahaz couldn’t just stand and let his faith rest on the Lord, as the Lord had commanded him. Instead, he took matters into his own hand. “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.’” [2 Kings 16:7]

In order to get the help from Tiglath-Pileser, Ahaz tried a bribe. “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 king of Assyria.” So, Tiglath-Pileser did attack Damascus and captured it. (2 Kings 16:9)

But the “help” Assyria offered was just as much against Judah as it was against Israel. Ahaz took the bribe to Tiglath-Pileser in Damascus and was impressed with the style of altar he saw there. He decided that Judah should have an altar like it, so he sent the description and measurements to Uriah the priest and commanded that a duplicate altar should be built in front of the temple in Jerusalem, to match this pagan one. (2 Kings 16:10-16)

In 2 Chronicles 28 it is recorded: “In his time of trouble King Ahaz became even more unfaithful to the Lord. He offered sacrifices to the gods of Damascus who had defeated him; for he thought, ‘Since the gods of the kings of Aram have helped them, I will sacrifice to them so they will help me.’ But they were his downfall and the downfall of all Israel.” [2 Chronicles 28:22,23]

Although Ahaz tried to flatter Tiglath-Pileser by worshiping on a copy of his altar, the Assyrian king didn’t see Ahaz as an ally, but as a vassal. Isaiah revealed God’s prediction of this attitude in his first prophecy found in Isaiah 7:18-25. Assyria would: settle in all the deep ravines and crevices of Judah. (v.18,19) They would take Judah captive, shaving them as they would slaves. (v.20) they would take so much of Judah’s produce that the people would have to subsist with barely enough food. (v.21) And their lush lands would be overrun by briars and thorn bushes (v.23-25)

Before things had gone this far, God sent a second prophecy through Isaiah. This time, the sign of confirmation God sent to Isaiah about this next prophecy would be that Isaiah and his wife, “the prophetess,”

would have a son they would name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. The meaning of this name was translated: “Speed-plunder-haste-spoil.”

God revealed that, “For before the boy knows how to say ‘My father’ or ‘My mother,’ the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria.” [Isaiah 8:4] God had Isaiah write this prophecy down and asked Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah, to be witnesses of it. Uriah was loyal to Ahaz and Zechariah was loyal to God, and so together they could testify to the truth that the birth of this son was recorded before he was born.

In verse 5 we read about a third prediction God gave to Isaiah. The surety of Assyria’s attacks against Rezin and Pekah was confirmed. God described this attack as being like a terrible flood. But, although Ahaz thought he had control over Assyria’s attacks, this flood would also threaten him! Not only would Assyria’s army flood over Northern Israel and Aram, “It will overflow all its channels and run over all its banks and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck.” [Isaiah 8:7,8]

This “alliance” with Assyria would not be contained or controlled. No amount of bribes or flattery would give Ahaz the control he desired. It was the Lord God Who moved these armies, not the men who refused to obey Him. Ahaz and his enemies would plot and plan, but God said, “Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us.”

God had made a promise to King David, the revered ancestor of Ahaz. God promised that the scepter would never leave the hand of David’s descendants. God would keep that promise, even though many of Judah’s kings were unfaithful. So, the cry, “Immanuel!” would be on the lips of the faithful at that time and, in future decades, people would experience “God with us,” in the presence of the promised king, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

God’s third prophecy was to encourage those faithful believers, including Isaiah himself. In the midst of the chaos of war, tenuous alliances and a deep dive into idol worship there in Judah, God assured Isaiah, “Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.” [Isaiah 8:12,13]

In a time of unrest and threats of war it’s very hard to repel the conspiracies of doom and fearful predictions of everyone around us. We are a nation filled with anxiety and depression even now, when peace is declared all around us. How are we to keep from falling into the pit of despair?

Proverbs 18:10 reminds us, “The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.” Can you imagine working out in the fields, far from your house, when you hear the terrible cries as the enemy attacks all around you? You may not be able to make it to your home, but the fortified tower of your King is within your reach. You can run into the presence of the Lord and be safe.

God told Isaiah this very fact as the worry and distress of his day threatened to overwhelm him. “He will be a holy place; for both Israel and Judah he will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.” [Isaiah 8:14]

How great is our God? Even as the people of Jerusalem heard the cries of battle all around them; even as they worried over the decisions of their king; even as they were dejected by the increased idol worship that was replacing the very worship of the One True God in their land – The Lord God Almighty took time to encourage those whose faith remained in Him.

Paul in Romans 9:32 related Isaiah’s prophecy about the stone that would make Israel stumble to be about the Messiah. Jesus Christ was that Rock that would make unbelieving Israel fall. He was the predicted

Child that would be born of a virgin. The entire reason Judah now faced war and destruction was so that this nation, hand-picked by God could be purified from their idol worship. Then the way would be prepared for the coming Son of David to bring salvation to the world.

God's predictions were important on a cosmic scale. They must be preserved, even among a non-believing nation until God's time had arrived. Therefore, God instructed Isaiah, "Bind up this testimony of warning and seal up God's instruction among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him." [Isaiah 8:16,17]

There were those who chose not to believe the Lord, such as Ahaz. He would rather turn to mediums and spiritists to find reassurances among the advice of the dead for his decisions, even though the Living God had offered to reassure him personally. God challenged Ahaz through Isaiah, "Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God's instructions and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn." [Isaiah 8:19,20]

God offered light to Ahaz and a worried nation. But Ahaz stubbornly refused that light. Isaiah, to the contrary chose to obey the Lord God and prioritize how he would lead his family into the light God offered. "Here am I, and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion." [Isaiah 8:18]

In their names alone we see a message of faith as their priority.

Isaiah: means God is my Salvation

Shear-Jashub: means A Remnant shall Return

Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz: means Speed-plunder-haste-spoil

Because Israel and Judah as nations had rejected God and chosen to worship idols, God would give them over to attacks from evil nations such as Aram and Assyria. They would be plundered and spoiled and taken as slaves. But God had His hand on His prophets. They would continue up to the very day of exile to warn Israel that they must turn away from their disbelief and put their trust in Jehovah, so one day that believing remnant would return to the land.

Isaiah and his family made it their top priority to serve the Living God. They knew God would protect those who believed in Him and let them return someday from their captivity as a remnant who would rebuild Israel in preparation for Messiah, the true Son of David, Who would set up His kingdom in righteousness.

But above all else, Isaiah and his family put their trust in the Lord God to be their salvation. God saves: from anxiety and worry; from strong enemies we can't fight on our own; from our own unbelief. God saves us from all our sins and impure motives because He wants us to live with Him forever. And God saves us, in our weakness, to stand firm in our belief through His strength. His righteous right-hand guides us so that we will not stumble, just like He guided His people during Isaiah's time.

So: The Predicaments of Ahaz - the onslaught of war and untrustworthy alliances

The Predictions of God – the defeat of enemies and light for the

future

The Priorities of Isaiah – the message of deliverance and total

trust in God

Let us make our faith in God the highest priority in our lives, so we also will stand and not stumble.