

"Stand or Stumble"
Isaiah 7:1-8:22
Dennis Watson

THE PROMISE STATED:

"A virgin will conceive and she will bear a son, and she will call his name Emmanuel."

USUAL PERCEPTION OF THE PROMISE:

Here in Isaiah 7 is this wonderful promise that we have seen in countless Christmas pageants put on by the cherubic primary grade students. This is the subject of heartwarming Peanuts Christmas Specials. This is the encouragement of literally millions of beautiful, shining Christmas season greeting cards. Then, here in this lesson we find out what was happening when this prophecy was given, and if you were like me, it made me shake my head. You had to be just a little bit unsettled at the circumstances surrounding the giving of this prophecy, and maybe a bit disturbed by the manner in which God gave us the incredible prophecy of the birth of the Messiah.

This wonderful promise and prophecy was given in a manner that made it seem more like a punishment to Ahaz than a promise of salvation. How did that occur?

THE STORY STARTS:

Like a lot of good stories this one starts with an evil king. The king's name was Ahaz. He was the twelfth king in a succession of twenty kings of Judah beginning from the time that Israel split after Solomon. He had a great family lineage: a direct descendant of King David, BUT HE HAD NO REGARD FOR GOD. Like many people, even today, Ahaz had something that looked like faith. He believed in, or had confidence in something, but it was not God. He believed in power, in compromise and in negotiation. But in all of that he had no regard for God. As a result, God gave him over to his beliefs.

TROUBLE BREWING:

And then in his kingship, probably within the first couple of years or so, trouble came to the nation of Judah; trouble in the form of a working and operating alliance between Syria and the Northern Tribes of Israel, formed for the sole purpose of attacking and destroying Judah. At this time, it was king Ahaz who was just beginning to lead the nation.

POLITICAL INTRIGUE:

Only nine years earlier, when Ahaz's granddad Uzziah was king, Judah and Northern Israel and Syria had been a part of an alliance that had opposed Assyria and Tiglath Pileser. Now, under Ahaz, Judah was beginning to lean pro-Assyria. This ticked off Syria and Northern Israel. A new enemy was forming to the south. They could not have that. They were not powerful enough to attack Assyria, so they decided to attack Judah and put an anti-Assyrian ruler in Ahaz's place. Then perhaps they could withstand Assyria. They began to attack Judah and things were going well. Syria was already having success against Judah and now there was an alliance with the Northern tribes and the news came that Syria was on its way. Abject fear gripped the land of Judah. I don't mean concern. I don't mean something that keeps you up a few hours at night. I mean a paralyzing, hand-wringing, knee-knocking, body shaking fear that down deep was made worse because everyone in the nation knew the fear they had was deserved. They knew it because the entire nation had not been listing to, or worshipping God. They had abandoned God. Further, they knew from history that their God was a holy God and that in time, His wrath was inevitable. God was like that; He would send judgment. They knew He would do something like that, and it looked like He was doing it now.

And so, what did Ahaz do when potentially nation-ending trouble showed itself on the horizon? He relied on his gods of power, compromise and negotiation. He turned to the strongest power on the world at that time, that of the nation of Assyria, under whose influence and control was all the land from the southern parts of Egypt to what we would call Iraq, Iran and Turkey today. Pretty much the whole known world at that time.

Ahaz essentially bought help from the Assyrian King, Tiglath Pileser. Ahaz was negotiating, making political compromises...but at what cost? Ahaz took silver and gold from the Temple building and from the treasuries. Since he had no regard for God, he certainly has no regard for the worship of God.

Trouble was coming, but perhaps they were getting what they deserved. But God, who is rich in mercy, loved His chosen people. God would give them another chance. I think that is the whole purpose of difficult times. Such times are designed to get us to put our faith in God.

ISAIAH CALLED TO THE SCENE:

It was at this time when Isaiah was told by God to go have a meeting with Ahaz.

One of the things I try to do as I meditate on Scripture, especially where historical events are set forth, is to try to put it together like a screen play or movie. And if you are going to do that, you have to have a cast of characters. Who would you

want to play the character of Isaiah? Not a Ross Perot type. Ahaz would not stand for that. Maybe a combination of Billy Graham and Jesse Ventura. I think Isaiah was a man's man. In chapter 8:3 it says, "So I approached the prophetess and she conceived." All he had to do was APPROACH his wife and she conceived. Now that is a man.

God would use this prophet Isaiah to take a message to Ahaz. God told Isaiah to take his son named "Shear-jashub" (which means "a remnant shall return") and the both of them were to go meet Ahaz, and give the young, fearful king a message from God.

"Take care, be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted...this attack you are frightened of...it's not going to happen." Your enemy: the Northern tribes of Israel are only going to last another 65 years. God says to Ahaz: I know it is hard for you to believe in me, but you must believe in me because that is the only way you will survive. I want you to believe in me because if you don't, you simple won't last!

That's not how Isaiah really said it. The phrase is a Hebraic idiom, a play on words that really has its greatest impact when it was stated in Hebrew. It is a cumbersome statement in English. Here is how it might sound if the same idea (not the same words) were stated in English by an angry prophet who is talking to a king who is refusing to accept the message:

Without your belief there will be no relief!
Let God be your boast or this country is toast!
Believe the good news or you will lose!
If you fail to respond to God's call, then you will fall!
If the rock of your faith starts to crumble, then you will stumble!
If you don't put your hand in His hand, then you will not stand!

GOD TRY'S TO GROW THE FAITH OF AHAZ:

And then through Isaiah, God attempts to increase the faith of Ahaz and says: "Ask for a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

Wow! God wants to increase the faith of Ahaz and He offers Ahaz the opportunity to any sign from God. Any sign! This is incredible. This has not happened before in Scripture. Why did God do this? So that Ahaz would put his faith in God and thus avoid the tragedy that Ahaz himself would otherwise bring to his family, his nation, and brother nations.

BUT Ahaz says, "I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord." (Deut. 6:16 You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.)

Can you imagine the response of Isaiah? He is beyond angry. He is incredulous. This offer is inconceivable. Isaiah knew this was an unbelievable opportunity for the faith of Ahaz to grow. Incredibly to Isaiah, Ahaz was throwing away the challenge. "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too sight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?"

WHY WOULD AHAZ NOT TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE?

I suspect that Ahaz realized that if God proved Himself, Ahaz would have to live that kind of life...where you can't have any fun. Where you have to wear clothes that are somewhat dull; where you can't use the words you really want to use when you slam your toe into a door jamb; where you can't just be yourself and do what you want to do. As a result, Ahaz will not even allow God to prove His faithfulness. What a tragedy! What a lost opportunity! What a fool Ahaz was! Isn't Ahaz...just like us?

If you are a believer, then God always wants to increase your faith. How do you respond? How do you respond when you hear that still, small voice of God, who is always desiring to increase your faith say, "Go teach a Sunday school class." Do you say, "I don't have the time or talent." But God says, "I'll be with you, I'll give you the time, I will tell you what to say, let me increase your faith!" and you say no, you don't say no out loud. You just choose not to think about it anymore and soon God stops asking.

Or did that still, small voice of God say, "The prison ministry has a trip soon. This would be a good place for you to go and share your faith." "Oh no. I'm too busy for that. Convicts aren't worth it. I have important things to do, my family should not be made to suffer for a whole weekend. After all, God, you gave me my family." And soon you just choose not to think about it anymore and soon, its too late and God stops asking.

Or did that voice say, "Go do something nice for your neighbor. Go do it, I will be with you. I will help you do that and it will give you a chance to share your faith with them and in the process your faith will grow." "Oh no. I don't like those people." And soon you just choose not to think about it anymore and soon God stops asking.

Or did that still, small voice talk to you about a missions trip: "Go, I want you to go, I will be with you, it will strengthen your faith." "Oh no. Too much time, too much money, there are people in this country that need to be saved you know. Of course, I'm not doing anything about that either." And soon you just choose not to think about it anymore and soon, its too late and God stops asking.

Do you have a difficult relationship at home you are dealing with – a spouse, a child, an in-law? How would God want you to increase your faith in that situation? Will

you let God increase your faith? Will you say, "God, this is the miracle I want to see!" and then pray for it? God wants to increase your faith.

GOD GIVES HIS OWN SIGN:

Then Isaiah said to Ahaz, and this was probably said in anger, "Listen now O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: BEHOLD, A VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE AND BEAR A SON, AND SHE WILL CALL HIS NAME EMMANUEL.

What kind of promise is this for Ahaz? He needs warriors, he needs armament, he needs a defense strategy! What kind of sign is this. This doesn't help. We know now that this event will not occur for over 700 years.

You see, this prophecy, which brings us hope, comfort and peace, doesn't seem to be a statement of hope, comfort and peace here. I have ruined all Christmas pageants in the future for you. I have ruined all Peanuts Christmas specials on TV. Now when you think of this prophecy, your mind will go back to the unsettling account of this watershed event in the life of king Ahaz. When God wants to increase your faith, and you don't let Him do it, you don't know what God is going to do next.

A PROPHECY, A PROMISE, A CHALLENGE, THE LESSON:

1. GOD WANTS TO INCREASE YOUR FAITH.
2. FAITH IS INCREASED BY TRIALS, CHALLENGES AND TRIBULATIONS.
3. WHEN GOD WANTS TO INCREASE YOUR FAITH, LET HIM DO IT.
4. WHEN GOD WANTS TO INCREASE YOUR FAITH, THERE IS A REASON HE WANTS TO DO IT.

When you find yourself in the middle of trials or challenges, or when you find yourself making a decision that may stretch your faith, there is a promise that runs current with the growth of your faith. Do you know what that promise is?

It is found in the name Mary gave to her child. It is found in EMMANUEL. In every trial you endure, in every challenge you face in every situation where you wish you were someplace else, there is a promise that God gives. That promise is "God With Us."

As an attribute of God, we know it as God's omnipresence. But this is even a special circumstance of that. When God is growing our faith, He is near us. He is with us.

Are you having financial circumstances? Let God grow your faith.

Hebrews 13:5,6: "Let your way of life be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," so that we confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me? (from Psalm 118:6)

Why does God want to grow our faith? Well, if the whole purpose of the Bible is missions, winning the lost, our faith should grow so we can be better missionaries, better ambassadors for Him. Does that seem like a non sequitur?

Psalm 73:25-28: Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Behold, those who are far from Thee will perish. Thou hast destroyed all those who are unfaithful to Thee. But, as for me, the nearness of God is my good. I have made the Lord my refuge, that I may tell of all Thy works.

Consider these words of Jesus. Remember Him? He was the Son who was born of a virgin. He was the one whose name was "God With Us." Remember His last words to us before He was taken up in the clouds?

Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

There is a prophecy of futility for the people of the Northern tribes and Syria and even Assyria; a message to all enemies of God:

Isaiah 8:9,10: "Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered; and give ear all remote places of the earth. Gird yourselves yet be shattered! Gird yourselves yet be shattered! Devise a plan but it will be thwarted; state a proposal, but it will not stand, for GOD IS WITH US."

Next week we will deal with the rest of the story. We will see that this was a watershed event in the life of Ahaz and thus for the nation of Judah, Israel, Syria and even Assyria.

2 Kings 16:3-4 and 2 Chronicles 28:19-17 tells us that Ahaz had brought a lack of restraint in Judah, and that he was very unfaithful to God. He constructed high places in every city in Judah so that they could burn incense to other gods. Ahaz cut up the utensils used in the Temple and spread them around to those places of idolatrous worship. He even closed the doors of the Temple.

He himself had engaged in the abominable practice of infant sacrifice of his own sons and offered incense when other has so participated. THIS WAS AN EVIL KING!

