

Immanuel: God's Sign  
Isaiah 7:1- 8:22  
Key Verse: 7:14

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

It is Christmastime 2010! This year we have decided to celebrate Jesus' birth with the theme, "Immanuel." This is one of the names of Jesus which means "God with us." In the coming weeks, we plan to study passages from Isaiah and Matthew which develop the revelation of Immanuel in Scripture. Although the concept of "God with us" is pervasive throughout the Bible, the word "Immanuel" appears only three times. Two of the three--including the first--are in this passage. This is where it originated, as a sign given to the people of Judah in very difficult times. It was a sign that inspired hope and faith in God, and gave clear spiritual direction. Yet it had to be received with faith. As we consider what "Immanuel" means to us today, I pray that we may respond to the Lord with faith.

#### I. The Lord gives the sign of Immanuel to Ahaz, who rejects it (7:1-25)

During the time period of this passage, King Ahaz ruled Judah. In contrast to his father Jotham, and his son, Hezekiah, Ahaz was an evil king. He worshiped idols, as northern Israel's kings had done. He even offered his own sons in the fire to false gods. This evil influence spread throughout the nation of Judah. Precisely because of this idol worship, the Lord punished Judah by letting the king of Aram defeat her in battle (2 Chr 28:5). A stinging defeat should have led Ahaz to seek the Lord with all his heart, repenting his sins. However, he did not. Then Ephraim, that is northern Israel, allied with Aram. When King Ahaz heard this, his heart was shaken like trees of the forest are shaken by the wind (2). All of Judah became shaky with him. Fear inundated the land. People imagined defeat, devastation and enslavement. They were totally defeated before fighting. This is the fruit of idolatry. When people turn from God to idols they become fearful. Fearful people become irrational and helpless. However, at this time, God came to the people of Judah. God was with them when they were too fearful to come to God. Let's see how the Lord helped them.

First, the Lord's promise in a crisis (1-12). One day, Ahaz went out to the aqueduct of the Upper Pool (1). Perhaps he was inspecting Jerusalem's water supply, counting the days until people would die of thirst. Ahaz had made no attempt to meet the Lord. The Lord took the initiative and went to Ahaz. It was nothing but God's grace. The Lord spoke through Isaiah, giving a message of comfort: "Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid." The Lord spoke kindly and tenderly to assuage his fear. The Lord called his enemies "two smoldering stubs of firewood." Though they were fierce and mighty in Ahaz's eyes, they were small in the sight of God. Their power was nearly extinguished. Their great boasts were nothing but empty words.

Then the Lord made a promise. Look at verses 7-9a. "Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'It will not take place, it will not happen, for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin...The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.'" Despite their boasts, Rezin and Pekah were mere ungodly men. Rezin was an idol worshiper from Aram. Pekah was merely Remaliah's son. His father had taken the throne in a bloody coup; he was like any worldly ruler.

In contrast, the Lord is the Sovereign Ruler of nations. The Lord raises human rulers and deposes them. The Lord had revealed this clearly in Israel's history. Verses 2,13 refer to the "house of David." The Lord had raised David as a shepherd king of his people to be a model for all future kings. Those who shared David's faith were blessed by God. The Lord had promised David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever and reign in justice and righteousness (2 Sam 7:12-13). This was part of God's world salvation plan. The Lord is in control of history; not Rezin and Pekah. The Lord would not allow Judah to disappear. God is faithful. God keeps his promises. God is Almighty. God rules heaven and earth by his power and wisdom. God would carry out his plan of salvation without fail. God had allowed Judah to become weak, for he was punishing Ahaz's idol worship. But he would preserve the nation and the line of David for his own salvation purpose. Though Ahaz had sinned greatly, the Lord wanted him to repent and live by faith and experience God's victory.

It is very important to keep our faith in God Almighty. We should see nations of the world through the lens of God's sovereign rule. The Sovereign Lord established America through our forefathers' Bible-believing faith to be "a city on a hill," "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." When we examine some historical documents, we can find that

early Americans covenanted with God in establishing their governments, beginning with the Mayflower Compact. American forefathers invited God to dwell with them and rule over them. The Lord used America as a missionary sending nation. We have a history of God's blessing. However, in recent decades, America has turned to other gods of money, pleasure, sex, military power, and so on. Consequently, many people are fearful, anticipating national economic collapse, sudden terrorist attacks, Islamic invasion, more broken families, and random acts of violence, among other things. In many ways, our Lord has been disciplining us. We should not see our problems from a human point of view. We should see the Lord, the Sovereign Ruler, who wants to bring us back to him. He promised us that when we humble ourselves and pray and turn from our wicked ways, he will hear our prayers and heal our land. The Sovereign Lord can help us. We must have faith in God and stand by faith in times of trial. The Lord gave a wonderful message of comfort and encouragement to Ahaz. All Ahaz needed to do was accept it with faith. But there is no record of a response from Ahaz. In fact, he ignored the Lord. Whenever kings ignored God's prophets, it brought about tragedy (1 Sam 15:26; 16:14). However, the Lord was patient. Verse 10 says, "Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz." This time the Lord invited Ahaz to ask for a sign to confirm the promise. He could ask anything, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights. The Lord humbled himself to make this offer. However, using biblical language, Ahaz rejected God's offer. It was foolish.

As Isaiah spoke to Ahaz, his son Shear-Jashub was with him as the Lord had directed. The boy was part of the message. "Shear-Jashub" means "a remnant will return." This name reveals a characteristic of God's history. God preserves a remnant of people who are faithful to him, even during times of spiritual and moral decline. Paul said, "So, too, at the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace" (Ro 11:5). We should realize that the Lord has his remnant in our time, too. This remnant reveals that God is working in our times to fulfill his world salvation purpose. There are many remnant people among us, including Adam Kramarczyk, Mike Roth, Tom Guihan, and many others. We can believe that there is a remnant among college students today who will accept God's gracious promise with faith.

Second, the Lord gives a sign (13-25). The Lord did not leave Ahaz alone. The Lord rebuked his unbelief and gave him a sign. Look at verse 14. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." The Lord gave Ahaz a sign despite his refusal. The Lord is Sovereign Ruler. He rules human history, and especially his chosen people, despite all their mistakes, sins, rebellion and unbelief. We cannot dismiss God. God is with his people to the end.

Since the Lord chose his own sign, we should pay careful attention to it. The Lord's sign was the birth of a child to a virgin. The boy would be called "Immanuel," which means, "God with us." What God really wants his people to believe is that he is with us. Like many signs, this one would be fulfilled immediately, and also in the future. In Isaiah's time, it supported God's promise of deliverance from their enemies. The baby boy was like a time piece. When he reached a certain age, Aram and Ephraim would vanish, laid waste by Assyria (15-16). Whenever their enemies made noise, all the people had to do was look at the little baby boy who was growing and playing. This would remind them of God's promise of deliverance. God's sign gave them peace and hope in the midst of troubles.

If the narrative stopped here, it would be good news for Ahaz. But it does not. Ahaz's stubborn unbelief had tried God's patience. So God added to his original prophecy a punishment for Ahaz. In verse 17, the Lord foretold that the king of Assyria would attack Ahaz and Judah. It would be worse than anything Judah had experienced since Ephraim broke away. Isaiah described Judah's shameful and humiliating defeat by comparing it to having an enemy shave one's head and legs and beards (20). The land would be so devastated that only briars and thorns would grow there (23-25). Their economy would be devastated. Their wealth would be lost (23). Due to Ahaz's idol worship, unbelief and rebellion, Judah was nearly devastated.

What was Ahaz's problem? Ahaz rejected the Lord's help because he wanted to get help from Assyria (2 Chr 28:16-21). Ahaz was so eager to do this that he gave temple furnishings, which had been dedicated to the holy God, to the king of Assyria as presents. Practically speaking, he worshiped the king of Assyria. He could not trust in God because he trusted in Assyria. What happened? 2 Chronicles 28:20 says: "Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came to him, but he gave him trouble instead of help." The Lord had warned him, "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (9b). The only way to salvation is to trust in the Lord, who alone can save us from all our trials and troubles. If we trust in anything else--be it money, science, technology, or military power, we will be defeated and humiliated, perhaps by the very thing we trusted in. When Ahaz did not receive the sign of Immanuel with faith, it became a message of impending judgment.

## II. The sign of Immanuel given to Isaiah, who accepted it with faith (8:1-22)

Isaiah makes a contrast to Ahaz, for he accepted the sign of Immanuel with faith. Let's see how it affected him, his family, and his people.

First, the Lord blessed and used Isaiah's family (1-4;18). Verses 1-4 tell us that the promised sign was immediately fulfilled through Isaiah and his family. They, in turn, would be signs to Judah (18). Look at verse 1. Isaiah wrote the name "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz" on a large scroll. He had it notarized by credible witnesses. Their signatures and the date would testify that God had given Isaiah his prophecy in advance of the fact. This would ultimately teach the people of Judah to trust God's word more than powerful nations around them. For the next step in fulfilling the sign, a virgin needed to bear a child. Apparently, Isaiah perceived that he needed to fulfill this prophecy personally. So he went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. This prophetess must have been a virgin. Scholars speculate that Isaiah's first wife, the mother of "Shear-Jashub," had died and Isaiah married a second time. So the virgin conceived and bore a child. This child was not conceived by the Holy Spirit, but by a human father, Isaiah. Still, the virgin gave birth to a child. The Lord gave him the name "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz." His name means "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil." The Lord promised that before this boy could say, "Daddy," or "Mommy," the nations which were threatening Judah would be plundered by Assyria.

Here we should appreciate the Lord being with Isaiah's family. The Lord was deeply involved in their most intimate relationships. The Lord himself named their children. When Isaiah called out: "Shear-Jashub," "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz," it proclaimed that God was with his people, either to bless or to punish. This kind of intimacy was possible when the family members accepted the Lord's sovereign rule and obeyed his directions by faith. The true meaning of "Immanuel" challenges us. It means that the Lord wants to invade our most intimate privacy. The Lord wants to participate in every aspect of our personal and family lives, and to dwell together with us. When the Lord is with us, it is not so that we may use him for our purpose. It is so that he may use us for his purpose.

I thank the Lord who has been with my family to dwell with us in the past year. The Lord helped me to study the Bible faithfully and to prepare Sunday messages without fail. The Holy Spirit revealed himself in new ways to my wife and gave her victory over a physical limitation. The Lord blessed and used my children in various ways. Once, I was at KFC for lunch with my three youngest boys. It was filled with Muslims. When our food arrived, I had to call my active boys to sit down to eat. I shouted out, "John, Daniel, Joshua, come and eat." At that moment all the shrouded heads turned to look at me with wide eyes. Then I realized that the Lord used my children's names to reveal the God of the Bible in a Muslim setting. During this Christmas season, let's consider the spiritual condition of our families. Let's thank the Lord for dwelling with us for the past year, in spite of our sins and mistakes. Let's invite him to dwell with us intimately in the year to come. Families ruled by the Lord in love are the best testimony to his presence in a broken world.

Second, the Lord was Isaiah's sanctuary (5-15). In verses 5-8, the Lord speaks to Isaiah regarding the coming Assyrian invasion. Some of the prophecy is a repetition. But the revelation is more detailed and contains a special message of good news for Isaiah and those who believe. The Lord would bring against Aram and Ephraim the king of Assyria, who is compared to the mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates. Assyria would completely overpower them and swirl into Judah, reaching up to the neck. This foretold that only Jerusalem would remain. Its fall seemed imminent.

However, verse 8 ends with the word, "Immanuel." The Lord would be with Jerusalem in that darkest moment. He would send one of his angels to defeat the Assyrian army. The Lord delivered them from their enemies. Isaiah trusted the Lord who was with his people (9-10). He boldly invited the enemies to raise war cries and prepare for battle; he was sure that they would be thwarted. He was sure that Jerusalem would stand. It was because God was with them. When God is for us, no one can stand against us.

Though Isaiah seemed strong in faith, the Lord put his strong hand upon Isaiah to infuse him with even more inner strength. Isaiah literally felt the Mighty God upholding his inner being. It was to enable him to stand against the flooding bad influence of fear and conspiracy theories. While other people were talking about troop movements and political alliances, feeding each other's fears and anxieties, Isaiah should consider the Lord Almighty. Look at verse 13 and 14a. "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. And he will be a sanctuary...." Fear of the Lord is having an awesome respect for the Lord as the Almighty God, the Creator God, and the Holy God. He is so awesome that we can assume nothing before him. When we fear God in this way, our souls delight in his power, goodness, and love. We are sure to be kept safe. The Lord is our sanctuary. Though the world is going crazy due to fear, those who fear the Lord can experience peace, security and safety.

In verses 14b-15 the Lord tells the fate of those who do not fear the Lord or trust him. Whether they are from Judah or Israel does not matter. Those who do not trust the Lord will stumble, fall and be broken to pieces. This speaks to

us. Many people in America identify as God's people because they have grown up in a Christian culture. Yet the time will come for each person to decide to live by faith in the Lord. Those who secretly worship idols in their hearts, while putting a "Jesus Saves" bumper sticker on their cars, will fall and be broken to pieces.

Third, the Lord used Isaiah as a Bible teacher and disciple maker (16-17). Isaiah's conclusion and spiritual direction is in verses 16-17. He said, "Bind up the testimony of warning and seal up God's instructions 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 knew that not many people would believe the word of the Lord. Still, Isaiah believed that God's word would surely be fulfilled. God would save the remnant of his people who put their trust in him. God would accomplish his world salvation plan through his people without fail. Isaiah held on to God's promise of deliverance and trusted in God alone. He also taught his disciples to do the same. They became a source of hope to future generations and the true history makers in God's redemptive work.

We can find spiritual direction here. We can learn that God being with the USA does not necessarily mean that our President, Congress and Supreme Court will be Christians. Or that the vast majority of our people will go to church on Sunday. God being with us means that God will keep his promises without fail. We believe that God has promised to raise a kingdom of priests and a holy nation among us. We believe that he will spread his kingdom in the world through American missionaries. Now American missionaries are not only white skinned people of European descent. Many great missionaries in America are of Korean, Indian, and Hispanic descent. The Bible assures us that the gospel will be preached to the ends of the earth, and then the end will come. That will be a glorious end for all who believe in Jesus. We should study the word of God deeply and hold on to the promises of God. We should raise disciples who believe and obey the word of God. God will work in such people and use them as his remnant.

"Immanuel" was ultimately fulfilled by Jesus. Jesus is in very nature God. But he took on human flesh and was born of a virgin to be with us. He lived among us and raised disciples, like Isaiah. Then he went to the cross and died for our sins. He removed the barrier between God and us. Now the Holy Spirit can come into our hearts and dwell through faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit protects us, guides us, assures of God's love, gives us peace and enables us to serve God boldly without fear. This makes us truly happy. May Jesus be with each of us in this Christmas season.