THE SIGN OF IMMANUEL

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.”

What makes you feel secure? Is it the people in your life? Your house? Your job? Your possessions? Sometimes life throws things at us that shatter our security completely. So what do we do? We look for new sources, or we think our abilities will get us through. Today’s passage contains a very old story. But its message still resonates. God gives King Ahaz the sign of Immanuel. This sign has become an important part of the Christmas message to all people. Let’s think for a few minutes about the sign of Immanuel and what it means to us.

Look at 7:1. This is a brief summary of the political and military situation of the time. At this time Israel was divided into two nations: first was Northern Israel, also called just Israel, or Ephraim, and second was Judah. Their nearby common neighbor in the north, the small country called Aram, is also mentioned. The king of Judah was a man named Ahaz. His grandfather King Uzziah had just died in the previous chapter (6:1). The king of Aram was Rezin. And the king of Northern Israel was Pekah, the son of Remaliah. Rezin had made a political and military alliance with Pekah. Their common enemy was the king of Assyria, the major world empire in the area at that time. Assyria wanted to take over it all—Northern Israel, Aram and Judah. The smart thing to do was to band together. But up to this point, King Ahaz of Judah would not join Northern Israel and Aram. So the kings of these two nations marched up to Jerusalem to force King Ahaz, but they could not overpower the city.

What happened next? Look at verse 2. Here “the house of David” refers to the king of Judah. This phrase reminds us that God had made promises to David that he would establish the throne of his kingdom forever and through his offspring send the Messiah (2Sa7). God’s promises to send the Messiah became the source of hope for his people. God’s promises were their true security.

But verse 2 says when Ahaz heard that Northern Israel and Aram had marched up against him, his heart was shaken, “as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.” It means his faith was very weak. It also says that when King Ahaz was shaky, his people were shaky, too. Leaders are meant to inspire their people with courage—especially leaders of God’s people. But when his own faith was weak Ahaz could not be a blessing to his people. He really dreaded these two kings, Rezin and Pekah (7:16). To Ahaz, the problem facing him was so big it seemed way bigger than even God himself.

Read verse 3. The meeting place was just outside the city of Jerusalem, where people did their laundry. Jerusalem is in the mountains, and it needs water to be brought to it, so they constructed aqueducts. Now that the city was surrounded by enemies, its water supply was vulnerable, so King Ahaz was out there inspecting the aqueduct to make sure things were still okay. That was where God told Isaiah to go and meet him.

The other important thing here is that God told Isaiah to take his son with him. Isaiah, his wife and sons together are an important part of today’s story (cf. 8:3,18). What is especially important are his sons’ names. His first son’s name was Shear-Jashub. The footnote says this name means “a remnant will return.” It’s a really strange name. But God gave Isaiah prophetic messages and inspired him to name his sons as part of his messages to his people.

A major theme of the book of Isaiah is “remnant people.” They are also called “survivors” and these words are repeated 20 times in this book. God’s message to his people, “a remnant will return,” is especially mentioned in 10:20–22. These “remnant people” would come from both Northern Israel and Judah. 10:22 says, “Though your people be like the sand by the sea, Israel, only a remnant will return. Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous.” So Isaiah’s son’s name, “Shear-Jashub,” was both a comfort and a warning. Isaiah also tells us to pray for these “remnant people” (37:4b). If these remnant people are so important, who are they? They are those who truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel (10:20). This tells us that God’s people are not just physical descendants of Israel—God’s true people are those who have genuine, living faith, regardless of their race or nationality. It’s still true today (Ro9:27). God wanted Isaiah and his son to give this message to Ahaz.

Read verse 4. The important words here are “Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid.” It actually means, “Don’t do anything; just wait quietly.” Wait for what? How could King Ahaz just wait quietly when his city was surrounded by enemy armies? Waiting too long can seem really stupid. But waiting is another important theme in Isaiah. We call it “waiting on the LORD” faith. In 8:17 Isaiah personally confesses, “I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.” An important aspect of waiting faith is quietness. 30:15 says, “This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: ‘In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength…’” 32:17 says, “The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.” Waiting on the LORD faith makes us quiet and confident. King Ahaz, who was shaky in fear, really needed this message.

Read verse 4 again. His two enemies, Rezin and Pekah, were fiercely angry with him for not joining them. Their fierce anger made him scared. But God said they were like two smoldering stubs of firewood—really weak and about to go out. To God these two men were not people to be afraid of. God went on. Read verses 5,6. To Ahaz it was terrible; he felt like his whole world was crumbling. People banding together and plotting to do something can still seem scary. Read verse 7. This emphasizes that God is actually the one in sovereign control of everything and everyone. People *seem* to be in control, but *God* really is. This is the main reason we should quietly wait and put our trust in him.

In verses 8,9 God emphasizes “the head”—the head of Aram and the head of Northern Israel. The head represents the most important part. But in both cases God uses the word “only”—"only Rezin” and “only Remaliah’s son.” It means that to God, the heads of these two enemies, even put together with all their crafty plotting, are no match for God. God is far wiser and far stronger than all people put together. We should never be afraid of smart people, even if they band together against us. Read 8:11–13. This was God’s message to Isaiah, and also the message God wanted King Ahaz to accept.

Now let’s read 7:9b. This is God’s conclusion to King Ahaz. It wasn’t just God’s message for a king, or any other leader. At the most scary time, God wants all of us to stand firm in our faith in him. If we don’t stand firm in faith, the only alternative is to not stand at all—to collapse. Faith is what makes us strong. Faith is what holds us together. In fact, faith is the only thing that makes us God’s people. If we don’t stand firm in faith, we can’t remain as his remnant people.

But how can we stand firm in faith? God’s message to Ahaz shows us how: we need to hold onto the promises of God. God’s promises are the source of our faith. God’s promises may seem like nothing; they’re intangible and seem unlikely, especially in light of the cold realities around us. But God’s promises are the only thing that are really reliable—not seemingly strong people, not the situation, not myself, but God’s promises. Why are his promises so reliable? It’s because of who God is. Hebrews 10:23 says, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” We stand firm in faith when we hold unswervingly to God’s promises, because of who God is. It means we need at least one promise of God to hold onto. So which promise of God are you holding onto right now? If you don’t have one, you might be shaky.

God really wanted to help King Ahaz stand firm in faith. Read verses 10,11. Sometimes asking God for a sign is a bad thing—it reveals a lack of faith. Asking for a sign can be a way of putting God to the test, as Ahaz says in verse 12. But in this case, asking for a sign is a good thing: God wants Ahaz to ask for a sign he can really hold onto. Asking God for a sign can be a way to confirm and strengthen our faith and show us if we’re actually following God’s will instead of our own (Jdg6:36ff.). In verse 11 the phrase “whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights” means that God was willing to move heaven and earth to help Ahaz stand firm in faith. How amazing God is!

How did Ahaz respond? Read verse 12. He sounds so spiritual. But there was another story going on behind the scenes. Ahaz was saying this because he actually didn’t want God’s help. In fact, he’d already made a very clever plan. What was his plan? 2 Kings 16:7,8 tells us: “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 king of Assyria.” So smart! So savvy! With Assyria as his ally, Ahaz thought everything would be okay. With Assyria as his ally he thought he didn’t need even God, so he refused God’s help with a spiritual-sounding excuse.

It tells us a timeless and very important truth: We’re all relying on something or someone, and we can truly rely only on one thing or person at a time. If we’re relying on someone we think is strong, we won’t be relying on God. If we’re relying on material treasures, we won’t be relying on God. If we’re relying on our smart minds, we won’t be relying on God. We have to cut away all our other crutches, all our other securities, all our other means of saving ourselves, to truly rely on God alone. If we don’t, we won’t have real faith.

What did God do with Ahaz? Read verses 13,14. Trying God’s patience doesn’t mean just doing bad things; it means not really listening to him. Ahaz refused to ask for a sign; so God himself gave him a sign. What does it mean? It tells us that nobody can block God from what he plans to do. Even people who refuse to learn faith, God will work around anyway. God’s sign, which could have been a great comfort, would turn out to be a terrible sign of punishment.

What was the sign? It says a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son and would call him Immanuel. A virgin can’t conceive by herself—she needs a man. But this virgin would. It was a miraculous sign of God’s mighty work. This sign turned out to be a prophecy of the coming of Jesus. The virgin Mary would conceive and give birth to him, and people would call him “Immanuel”—which means “God with us” (Mt1:23). Though it looks like God’s people are way too weak and vulnerable and helpless, the Mighty God is always with his people to keep working in and through them, if only they stand firm in faith. At the same time, this sign of Immanuel would turn out to be a sign that God would overthrow Ahaz’s smart plan and severely punish his unbelieving people. This so-called ally Assyria would actually turn out to betray Ahaz and invade Judah. 7:17–8:15 is basically a prophecy of how the king of Assyria would not only defeat Aram and Northern Israel but also invade Judah. As the old saying goes, King Ahaz, in making an alliance with Assyria, had taken a tiger by the tail. His clever plan would badly backfire. Read 8:10. Clever people depend on themselves and fail to inquire of God through prayer or consult his instruction in the Bible (8:19,20).

On the other hand, this message of God with us, Immanuel, is a great blessing to those who stand firm in faith. Christmastime is a time to pause and reflect on where our lives are at now and where we’re going. If we examine our lives closely, we may actually find them in shambles. Our finances can be wrecked, our relationships broken, our souls sick. Despite our efforts to feel better through music, decorations, food and celebrations, Christmas can actually expose how bad our lives really are. This is why so many people during the holidays fall into deep depression. But God still has a message for people who feel helpless and surrounded by enemies within and without. What is it? It’s Immanuel—God with us. No matter how bad things seem, God is still the Sovereign LORD; he’s still in control, still able to turn everything around to help his people, still faithful to his promises; he still wants to redeem and restore us.

How should we respond to God’s sign of Immanuel? Read 8:16–18. We need to hold onto God’s testimony and instruction given through his servants. We need to wait for the LORD and put our trust in him. We need to totally entrust our lives and our children’s lives to him. We need to put our security in the LORD Almighty, the living God.