

Faith or Fear

The Gospel According to Isaiah

By Dr. Liam Goligher

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Isaiah 7

Preached on: Sunday, January 26, 2014

Tenth Presbyterian Church

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Please take your Bible and turn with me to Isaiah 7. If you don't have faith in a crisis then it's likely you don't have faith at all. It's when conflict or chaos comes to cause confusion in our lives and raise questions that the real character, the real nature of a person's faith emerges. If you can't trust God when the world is crashing in, then maybe you can't trust him at all.

Let me ask you a couple of questions I think that clarify this for us as individuals. When there is a crisis, where do you look? Do you expend nervous energy and wild panic, blame shifting, frenetic activity, clutching at every straw you can to find a way out of the problem or do you trust in God and keep your nerve? When everything is being shaken in your life, do you look around for a human solution or do you trust in God to act first? Is our faith merely the affirmation of our creed or is it a deep personal trust in the one we affirm to be God? What do we really mean when we say, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty"? These are questions for every one of us. The questions take us to the very heart of the lesson we're taught in this encounter between Isaiah, the prophet, and the King Ahaz. The punchline is in verse 9, "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all."

In this chapter, Isaiah is putting the issue of faith right up front and center for the next section of his book and in this chapter, in this section we've read together, we find him placing the issue, addressing the issue and naming the issue. He begins by placing the issue in its context in those opening words, "In the days of Ahaz." That's important. That's important for all biblical writers. It's important because to Jews and Christians, God is not simply a theoretical principle; he is not an abstract ideal; he is not a mystical power. He is a sovereign who is active: in history, in the affairs, in the lives of men and women to achieve his purposes. He is a very personal God. The revelations of God occur at specific points of time, you notice "In the days of Ahaz." They are placed in a definite historical context. If somehow or other you were to subtract the historical context from Christian or Jewish truth, it would cease to be truth. It is rooted in history. The resurrection had to happen or there would be no Christianity. Similarly, these events are the foundation of what we're being taught.

So what is the background? It's the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, the king of Judah. We're being taken back to the beginning of the previous chapter. You remember, "In the year that Uzziah died, I saw the Lord," and in that chapter the prophet Isaiah has reminded us that there is, beginning in the temple in Jerusalem, as it were, a movement upwards and outwards until it embraces the universe because the king that reigns in Zion is not simply the human king who happens to reign in Jerusalem at any specific moment of time, the King who reigns in Jerusalem, reigns in the universe. "I saw the Lord," says Isaiah, "and I saw the Lord high and lifted up." It was only the hem of his garment that filled the temple. This God reigns over all. That's the context for this passage we're looking at today.

It's been about five years or so from Isaiah's vision in chapter 6. Now in the year 735, the crisis for the nation is deepening. The two northern kingdoms of Syria, a pagan kingdom, and Israel, otherwise known as Ephraim after its most famous tribe, the ten tribes of the north. Israel and Syria have come together in an alliance that is seeking to overrun little Judah to the south. The reason for their alliance is that they want to create a Triumvirate, they want a united front that will resist the growing power of Assyria to the north and east and Egypt to the south and west. But Judah is not playing the game and so Syria and Israel have already invaded, they have already pushed down into the outskirts of Judah and have already inflicted a lot of damage. About 120,000 Judean men were killed, about a quarter of a million people were displaced as the forces of Syria and Israel came down further into the territory.

That was the immediate crisis. The background to the crisis, however, is in fact Judah's apostasy. That's why Judah is at risk. Ahaz, this Ahaz, has already made molten images for worship. He is already encouraging the revering of the gods of Damascus; he's already shut the temple doors and put out the lamps and stopped all the sacrifices. Now with his back against the wall, the king, this little king Ahaz of Judah, has been making arrangements with the growing power of Assyria, way to the north and east and is seeking the king of Assyria's help. That's the placing of the issue; it's against that issue of socio-political and military movements in the region that we find Ahaz exposed as he is here.

Secondly, we find the issue being addressed: news arrives in Jerusalem about this new danger that has arisen. These northern two, this pair from the north, have come and made an incursion and they're being stopped. They're stopped, if you like, in the hinterland of Judah but now they are in each other's lap, as it were, to use the original word there in the Hebrew, the idea of resting upon each other. They're in each other's lap, they're supporting each other, now they are plotting how they can come down again and this time actually take Jerusalem itself. And so we're told that when the house of David was told that Syria is in league or is at rest with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

Now, there is something disturbing about what's going on here. Here is the king of Judah and he is shaking in his shoes; he is trembling in his shoes. Here are the people of Judah and they're trembling at this threat that has suddenly come out of nowhere again and

they're feeling threatened by it. But the real disturbing thing is actually in the way in which Ahaz is described, do you notice, in that verse, in verse 2. Rather than say kind Ahaz was disturbed or even that all Jerusalem was disturbed, we are told it was the house of David that was disturbed and, of course, the background to this is: this is the one house, this is the one royal family who should not have been shaken by anything that was going on in the greater political scene of that time. The house of David was the house of David, David to whom God had made great promises. David with whom Yahweh had made a solemn covenant in making him king. What Isaiah is doing by describing it as the house of David is this: he is making a theological point; he is raising a theological issue with us and he's saying, "I want you to notice who it is that is shaking like the trees of the forest shake before the wind. It is the house of David." Remember David; remember David's relationship with God; remember how it was to David that God came in 2 Samuel 7 and God says to David, "I'm giving you rest from all your enemies. Moreover," says the Lord, "I'm going to make you a house and when your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you who shall come from your body and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a Father and he shall be to me a son. And when he commits iniquity, I'll discipline him with a rod of men and with the stripes of the son of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."

Now, let's get this right: in that promise of God to David, God identified that there was going to be a succession after him, that some in that succession would need to be rebuked by God and disciplined by God and that God would not hesitate to do that, but built into that promise there is another promise, there is a promise that one will come who will be given an everlasting kingdom. One will come whose kingdom will last eternally and we know from our perspective and Isaiah knows from our perspective since our perspective is informed by what Isaiah is going to unfold in these next few chapters that it is from this house of David that the Messiah will come. So when you see this man shaking with fear, you must understand that he is shaking with fear because he does not believe in the Messiah. Eusebius, one of our early church fathers said this, "Unbelievers do not comprehend the prophecies concerning the Messiah because they do not have faith," commenting on this very verse. Ahaz does not comprehend the promises of the Messiah, therefore, he is shaking with fear.

This promise that God made to David was an unconditional, long-term promise of support and security. It was, "I will never leave you or forsake you." It called for faith. It called for trust. It called for rest in Yahweh's character and promise making, covenant keeping character. The way of the future for all the sons of David was to rest in, rely on the steadfast covenant love of God for Israel, for his people. There was no other reason for the existence of a Davidic king like Ahaz than his part in Yahweh's plan and purpose for the world as well as for his people. So when Ahaz is reminded that he is the house of David, it's meant to alert him and us to the promises God made to Abraham.

So here is the house of David in Ahaz's time, on Ahaz's watch, the king, the son of David and the people, the people of David, are shaking in their shoes; they're shaking like the

trees of the forest shake in the wind. Instead of standing, they're shaking. Can you believe it? Can you imagine it? This is unbelief. This is distrust. When we're in any danger, we might become agitated and alarmed, John Calvin says, but when we're agitated and alarmed, what should we do? We should take ourselves to God. We should take ourselves to God. Now it's into that context that God calls Isaiah. Verse 3, "And the LORD said to Isaiah, 'Go out to meet Ahaz.'" Here is Isaiah, he's not a man to be frightened by even a great king. I think of John Knox who felt the morning after they had heard news of the massacre of Huguenots in France and Queen Mary of Scotland had held a party, a dance in her palace there in Edinburgh that went into the wee hours of the morning. Knox the next day goes up to the palace door and he's knocking on the door and he says, "I want to see the Queen. You took an oath to support the Protestant religion and last night you were partying in celebration of the massacre of Huguenots, of Protestants, in France." He wasn't afraid of a queen with her army and here is Isaiah and he's not afraid of a king with his army.

He goes to the king, God sends him there and he goes into the presence of the king and his very presence in the presence of the king is a signal to the king. Right throughout these chapters that we're going to be looking at, this little section that begins here in chapter 7 through to about 13, names are very important to understand the unfolding drama and Isaiah's name is important. His name means "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh is the Rescuer," so whenever Isaiah is introduced to Ahaz in Hebrew it's, "Your Majesty, here is Yahweh is Savior. Your Majesty, Yahweh is Rescuer." What's going on even as he's being introduced to the king and the king says, "Oh, hello, Yahweh is Rescuer. Nice to have you here this morning. What do you take in your coffee?" I mean, when the king's greeting Isaiah, he's actually being reminded that Yahweh, the Lord, is the Rescuer, he is the Deliverer and when Isaiah introduces his boy, here is Shear-jashub, what does that mean? It means "a remnant shall be left." He's saying to the king, "Look, this is the message that you've been hearing me preach about and people talking about and reporting to you. This is what I've been talking about in my sermons on the streets of Jerusalem, a remnant will be left." There's an ambiguity in that phrase, by the way, in Shear-jashub's name. The ambiguity is this: it could be read or understood as "only a remnant will be left" or "but a remnant will be left" and I think the ambiguity is a message even for Ahaz; there is going to be absolute devastation and only a remnant will be left but also in spite of devastation, God will continue to keep his promise to his people because a remnant will be left. You flip the coin, you take it positively or you take it negatively depending on your perspective of faith. Do you believe? Do you believe God? Do you believe God?

So Isaiah is sent to the king and do you see what he is sent to say? He said to him, do you notice where he is, by the way, when he said to him? He's at the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. What's he doing? The king is outside the city; he's checking on the supply of water. He knows there will be a siege. He's worried that they will not be able to sustain a siege. They need fresh water and he's anxious and so he's there at the very weakest point of his defenses and it's to that point that God sends Isaiah. Why? Because God is being gracious to this man. God is addressing this man at that point of his weakness, at that point where he's feeling the weakness. God is gracious. He

sends word to this man at the very weakest point in the city's defenses at that point of time and he says to him, using language that had been spoken before to Joshua. Do you remember? He uses similar language, "Be careful. Be quiet. Do not fear and don't let your heart faint."

You know, what was going on in the heart of this man, Ahaz, we know from 2 Kings 16:7. Not only was his heart fearful, not only was his heart faint but already he was trying to manage the crisis, already he was looking for ways in which he could deal with this new threat. Where was he looking? Was he looking to God? Was he on his knees before God? Was he broken before God? No, we know that already he had sent a message to this new power that was emerging there on the north and to the east, Assyria, which as yet was too focused on the eastern part of its empire that it was building, it hadn't yet turned to look downwards to these little statelets in Palestine and beyond them to Egypt, the other power in the region. And so this man Ahaz has sent a little message to the king of Assyria, we read about it in 2 Kings 16, "So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser," I supposed his mother liked that name, "king of Assyria, saying, 'I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.'" Do you notice this language? Do you remember what I just read to you from that word that God gave to David back in 2 Samuel 7? God says to David, "You'll be my son. You'll be my servant. Your successor will be a son and a servant to me." Here is this man who is of the house of David and he's saying to a pagan king, "I am your servant. I am your son. Come and rescue me." Here is a man who is in the line of David and who should be believing in the promises of God and in a crisis, where is he looking? He is looking everywhere else but to God.

It's a moment to make our flesh creep at the unbelief and distrust and Isaiah comes to him, comes to him where he is in his weakness. God comes graciously to him; God comes with a word to him and God's word to him is, "Be careful. Be quiet. Be still. Be calm. Don't fear. Stand firm on the promises of God. Don't denounce your sonship and your servanthood. Realize that the Lord has chosen you and stand firm on the promises of God." In fact, he says, "These two upstarts up north, ah, forget their names." Isaiah is a real player, by the way, he can really act things out. He's being ironic here; he is communicating by the mere irony of his words. "The son of Remeliah and the other son, you can forget their names, these two guys who are coming with their armies. They are like smoldering stumps. All smoke, no fire. They've already run out of steam. Their end is certain." You see, he is derisory about the plans of men and he is definite about the plans of God. He says to the king, "Ephraim, northern Israel is going to disappear. It's going to vanish in 65 years time," he says there. Do you notice he even specifies the period? "In 65 years time not only will it be destroyed, not only will Assyria be gone, not only will people be deported but in 65 years time there will such a massacre and movement and shift in the population that there will be nobody from which you could rebuild a nation at all. It will be done with." This attack shall not stand. Here's God's word to this man. This is God's word from God's prophet, "It will not stand. It will not come to pass. The very thing you're fearing will not happen. It won't happen so what are you going to do, give way to fear? Or are you going to look in faith to God?"

You notice one of the ways in which he describes this, he puts it like this, talking about the “the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people.” What he leaves unsaid is who is the head of Jerusalem. Who is the head of Jerusalem? Those of us who are following the way in which Isaiah has very carefully crafted the putting in of these stories know very well who the head of Jerusalem is. It's not even Ahaz, the king, it is the King of kings, it is the Lord of lords, it is the one who is high and exalted, the Lord God of hosts, Yahweh of hosts. The holy, holy, holy one, that's you is the head of Judah and Jerusalem. Are you trusting in him?

Thirdly, we find Isaiah naming the problem. The real issue here was faith not politics. If the king would keep his head, stay out of compromising foreign alliances and trust in God alone to keep his promises, then God would deal with his enemies. This is a very New Testament issue in many ways. Will he look for salvation, that is rescue, by works, from works, his own works, his own efforts, the foreign alliances? Or will he find rescue in simply trusting in God's promise? There is a sense in which those two distinctive things are always the way, isn't it? We're either looking for salvation, for rescue, that we can achieve for ourselves or we're trusting God for our rescue. That's what he's saying. Look at verse 9, “If you're not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” There is a root Hebrew word there that means both firmness and faith, it comes from the same root. If you do not make firm, you cannot be firm. Notice the “if.” It's a condition here. God's promise to raise up somebody from David's line who will have an everlasting kingdom is absolutely sure and certain but there is an “if” on the life of this man Ahaz. Will you be part of that story? Will you be part of that story or not? Will you be part of that bigger picture or not? Will you make frantic decisions and act out of panic or will you trust the Lord?

So Isaiah speaks of faith, of trust, of reliance and that was quite central to the theology in the Scripture of the house of David. In 2 Samuel 7, “Your house, your kingdom shall be made sure, firm forever before me.” In Psalm 89, people celebrate this, “My faithfulness, my steadfast love shall be with him,” that is, the son of David, “and I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness.” God has made promises. Would they believe these promises? The very promises were invitations to trust, to rely, to rest on God himself. This takes us to the very heart of biblical faith. It's common in theology to speak of faith as having three parts, just breaking it down so we understand it: notitia, assensus and fiducia to use the Latin. The first has to do with knowledge; it has to do with the knowledge that God has revealed himself generally in the world but specifically in the Scripture and in Christ. This knowledge is knowledge about God; it's knowledge about God's character. What does history show us about the character of God? What does the Bible show us about the character of God? Knowledge of God's acts, that is, his actions in history: the resurrection of Jesus; the passage through the Red Sea. These things that God is and God has done. Ahaz knew this, he had knowledge. He had knowledge of the past. He knew how it was that David with his sling and five stones had felled Goliath with the first stone. He knew that. He knew how it was that God at times when the nation had been under attack that God had gone out, the angels had killed the

people and they didn't even have to fight the battle. He knew that. That was part of their record of God's action. There was knowledge.

Secondly, faith involves affirming and declaring that belief like when we recite the Apostle's Creed: I believe in God, the Father Almighty. Now this is important. This aspect of faith, of assent, of affirming and declaring what we believe is an absolutely vital element of faith. There are some people who think it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you have faith. There are other people that say that it doesn't matter what you believe in your head so long as in your heart you love Jesus. There are other people who just talk vaguely about having a faith. Very often celebrities will say things like this; they'll say, "You know, I don't know what we'd do in life if we didn't have a faith." They never specify what the faith is in, of course, so long as you have a faith in general terms. But in the Bible, there is no such thing as having faith as a stand-alone entity. We all have faith. You have faith that it will not happen to you this morning what happened in a church I was once preaching in in the middle of my sermon when the pew gave way and the people landed on the floor. You don't want that to happen to you. You have faith that at Tenth we make sure there's no woodworm. I have faith in that as well.

So faith is something that's general. But faith in the Bible is always faith in. We affirm what we believe. When we say with our lips, "Jesus is Lord," we believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead. When the writer to the Hebrews says, "Without faith it is impossible to please him, whoever will draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Knowledge and assent are important but they are not sufficient. Knowledge and assent are something even the demons have; they believe and they tremble. There has to be this third component, fiducia, which means "trust." It involves resting in and entrusting ourselves to the truth that we affirm for time and for eternity. In other words, there's a personal element in faith in the Bible. Not just believing that this is true, believing in, personally, believing in. The call to the believer is never simply to believe, per se, it is to believe in the one who made the promises, in the one who bore our sins, in the one God raised from the dead.

And you can see there's a movement in faith because Isaiah the prophet says, "If you're not firm in faith, then you're not firm at all." Paul refers to this kind of thing in Ephesians 6 where he's talking about spiritual conflict. We are locked in spiritual conflict, brothers and sisters. We are locked in spiritual conflict. It's invisible to our eyes and so therefore very often in churches what we do is we hit out at the people we can see and we ignore the invisible war that's going on around us all the time. Paul reminds us of that invisible warfare in Ephesians 6 and he says, "having done all, stand." What is he talking about? He's talking about the same as Isaiah: be firm in your faith; stand. And this kind of faith, you see, is not the matter of the last resort, it is in fact the matter of first resort. You know how some people sometimes say, "When all else fails, trust." No, no, trust first.

Faith in the Bible always has an element of risk. Somebody once said, "Faith is a four letter word spelled r-i-s-k." There is always an element of risk even where there is some evidence, the resurrection for example, the passage over the Red Sea. Nonetheless, faith to be faith involves an element of risk; it is a step into the unknown. We walk by faith,

not by sight. To take a step of faith with no risk attached is not faith. It's not faith. We are to trust and trust in God means trusting when our own resources are inadequate, when our usual comforts are withdrawn, when the normal supports of our life disappear. What does it mean to trust? It means to give over my security and safety and whole future to the attention of God as if to say to God, "I know who holds the future and I know who holds my hand." Trusting in him. And so I need to ask myself, you need to ask yourself: do I believe in God? Do I believe in God's knowledge of and interest in and control of this matter, my life, these circumstances? Is his almighty hand adequate for me? Is it enough for me? True trust in God truly affirming and relying on God the Father Almighty makes panic and worry and fear or that desperate hyperactivity borne out of unbelief totally unnecessary. In fact, unthinkable. True trust rests upon that figure in our story who never fails, who never leaves us, never forsakes us, whose resources are always adequate for the hour, whose promises are always sure. They are yes and amen in Christ. In the words of Walter Brueggeman, "Faith is to place one's self into the reliable care of another."

You see this exhortation in verse 9 is the positive side of those imperatives back in verse 4, "Take heed. Be quiet. Don't fear." The prophet is talking about faith not fear. Now here John Calvin helpfully has a pastoral comment to make, he says, "We must distinguish here what we mean by fear. There is a fear," Calvin says, "that rises from the feeling of human nature." In other words, there is a fear that's normal: a fear of heights; a fear of failure; a fear of death; a fear of injury; a fear of pain or whatever. If you're being hurt or being disappointed or whatever, that's a normal fear. John Calvin says, "It is natural and normal for us to respond in fear. It's whether we stop there that's the issue. You may feel fear," says Calvin, "but have faith to overcome the fear." Where do you look when you're afraid? Do you look around for an answer around you? Or do you look up? What Isaiah says to this man is, "You don't need to bury your head in the sand. These powers want to do you damage but God has said it will not happen. It will not happen. It will not happen. But even if it was going to happen, look to God. Look to God. Trust in God."

Do we believe in God? Do we believe in him? Do we believe in God in Christ? The church is built on faith in Christ, trusting in Christ. In biblical terms, all three of these elements that we discussed earlier are part of it: knowing, affirming, trusting and it's a great tragedy when those who loudly trumpet their belief that our God reigns act, in fact, as if he doesn't. Faith shows itself where there is risk and in the crises of life, I am talking here to believing people, to covenant people, in the crises of life if our first resort is to manage the problem, to find the solution, to look for a human way out, we have failed in faith and we'll only be disappointed. Our first resort has to be going to God.

We were talking about this last evening at the young people's program and we're going through the book of Daniel and in Daniel 9, Daniel is reading the Bible and as he reads the Bible he discovers that when he compares the Bible to what's going on in his life, there's a bit of a conflict, there's a bit of a tension. As he reads the Bible, specifically the prophet Jeremiah, he sees that this exile in Babylon was to last for 70 years and here he is now at the end of the 70 years, he's perhaps been there more than 70 years and there is no resolution yet. Why is this? What does Daniel do? Daniel takes what he reads and he goes to God and he lays it before God in prayer. He brings it to God in prayer and what

he discovers as he reads on is that that is precisely why God hasn't brought an end yet, it's because he said, "The end of that time when my people call to me, when they cry to me, then I will hear and then you'll be delivered." Daniel becomes the man who gets the message and he goes to God and he prays because he believes, he trusts.

Isaiah uses a military metaphor here and the Apostle Paul does the same in Romans 8. As Isaiah makes it clear, God is going to prevail over all his enemies. Paul says this, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure," notice, I am firm about this, "that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor power, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." I trust him. I rest in him. Charles Spurgeon at the height of one of the great controversies that marred his ministry in London said, "I'm happy to have my name trodden on for a generation but I know that in the end God will vindicate me." God will vindicate me. What's he doing? He's illustrating to his congregation that he trusts in God to deliver him, to rescue him. Martin Luther grasps this in what has been called the greatest hymn by the greatest man of his era. He uses the military metaphor too,

"A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing."

And he warns us in the hymn, he warns us again false alliances and false reliances. He says,

"Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing."

Then he points us in the right direction, he points us to the house of David. He points us to great David's greater son, the promises that are all encapsulate in him. What's important, he says, is this:

"That the right man be on our side,
The man of God's own choosing,
Dost ask who this may be?
Christ Jesus it is he,
Lord Sabaoth is his name,
From age to age the same,
And he must win the battle."

So when you're faced under fire, lift your eyes to that vision Isaiah had of the Lord on his throne high and exalted and keep your gaze there. Keep your gaze there. Do you remember Peter looking at the waves? He should have kept his gaze there.

Let's pray together.

Father, we pray that this morning as your finger is placed upon our unbelief and our distrust that you would also use the sheer wonder of your word to open our eyes again to this principle by which we are saved, not only our eternal salvation, saved by faith in Christ alone and not by our works, but a principle that lasts throughout the whole of the Christian life, that we live by the same kind of faith that looks away from ourselves and looks to you, looks to you and looks to Christ. Help us to gaze upon him today we pray in his strong name. Amen.