

A Sign, A Son, Immanuel

This chapter of holy scripture shines amongst the brightest portions of Old Testament prophecy for one key verse. Isaiah tells Ahaz, king of Judah, ‘the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel’. Here the Lord God unfolds a most explicit prophecy concerning the coming Messiah and His purpose of salvation, redemption and grace.

A single message

As we have seen, these revelations were for the hearing and obedience of faith. God’s prophets informed the Lord’s elect concerning His covenant promises. These revelations confirmed the church in believing, and reassured God’s people in times of trouble and danger. God provided the prophets with a progressively unfolding message of sovereign grace. Isaiah tells us who would come, Micah tells us where, Zechariah tells us how, Daniel tells us when, and Jonah tells us why.

The background

There is a lot of history behind this chapter. 2 Kings 15 and 16 and 2 Chronicles 28 give details of the events leading up to this meeting between Ahaz and Isaiah. Syria and the separated kingdom of Israel, also called the ten tribes, entered into an alliance together to harry and distress Judah. Ahaz was afraid, and all the nation of Judah with him. This seems to have been a protracted war and Judah was already depleted of men and wealth. The country knew it could not withstand another battering.

Despair reaches a peak

Isaiah was instructed of the Lord to go and meet Ahaz and his courtiers outside of the city of Jerusalem and take with him his young son Shear-Jashub. The boy’s name is significant as it means ‘the remnant shall return’. His presence with Isaiah this day was itself symbolic of God’s mercy and augmented Isaiah’s message. Ahaz was a corrupt and idolatrous man. He was intent on appealing to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, for help against Rezin, king of Damascus, and Pekah, king of Israel, who now threatened to overwhelm Judah.

The hard heart of Ahaz

Isaiah’s message to Ahaz was bold, authoritative and full of comfort to all who trusted in the Lord, but Ahaz was not such a man. He could not and would not be dissuaded from seeking help from Assyria, nor would he believe Isaiah’s prophecy that the Syria-Israel confederacy would fail though God Himself had said so. Now Isaiah brings a word of condemnation: failure to believe proves the king is unstable and faithless. His throne will not be established. In addition, Ahaz’s determination to save himself by allying with Assyria will bring disaster upon himself and his people.

Ask a sign for proof

That there be no doubt concerning God’s patience with Judah the Lord again speaks to Ahaz by Isaiah and invites him to ask for a sign. How forbearing God was to this wicked and presumptuous king. Despite Ahaz rudely turning away from God’s prophet Isaiah boldly insists that God’s way is the right way. Let Ahaz ask a sign to prove and substantiate God’s promise. Let Ahaz ask anything, be it in the earth below or in the heavens above.

‘I will not ask’

Yet, Ahaz would not. This shows how hardened Ahaz was against God. His false humility on pretence of not tempting God merely aggravated his crime. The request to ask a sign was neither an offer, nor a suggestion, it was a command to be obeyed by which both God’s word concerning Syria and the covenant promises of the Messiah would be affirmed. Ahaz refused and with him the house of David refused. They would rather place their trust in the army of a heathen king than the arm of the Holy Lord God.

Yet a sign shall be given

But God will have His way and a sign shall be given. ‘Behold’ invokes a statement to startle and astound. There shall be a birth of immense importance. A virgin shall conceive and her son will be as the presence of God with men to secure

the deliverance Isaiah had foretold. That Ahaz would not see this child was not important, his unbelief had already determined his fall and failure. Isaiah beheld by faith. The Lord's elect beheld by faith. People of faith in ages to come would lay hold on this prophecy and trust God's promise of salvation, despite their impending trials and the persecution of the church.

Judah will rue this day

Isaiah is not finished with the king yet. Assyria, the human power to whom Ahaz looked for help would become his scourge and conqueror. God would hiss and bring Egypt and Assyria down upon Judah in judgment like so many flies and bees to distress and destroy the nation. Yet, even as Isaiah uttered this judgment his son Shear-Jashub stood by his side. A remnant shall return from exile, faith would be preserved among the elect, and God's covenant promise will be fulfilled. Behold! A Son shall be given who is Immanuel, and He shall save His people from their sins.

Amen

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