

If You Are Not Firm in Faith: Isaiah 7-8
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What are you afraid of? When you lie awake in bed at night, or in a quiet moment of the day, what fears tend to grip your heart? You might be afraid of the dark, you might be afraid of having a bad dream. Maybe you fear getting a debilitating disease or you fear some harmful accident that could happen at any time. We're hearing in the news about the Zika virus. Maybe you see headlines like that and you become afraid. Or you hear about the terrors of ISIS, and you fear when and where they might strike next. Or you watch the campaign headlines and you're afraid of who our next president might be.

There's the fear of failure, the fear of financial hardship, maybe a fear of getting pregnant or the fear of not being able to get pregnant, the fear of your children going down the wrong path in life or getting hurt in ways that you can't control, the fear of being hurt emotionally by people who are close to you, the fear of your own sinful nature / temptations that, if given in to, can be so devastating to yourself and others. There's the fear of what others will think of me, the fear of not being able to please the boss, or the parent, or the teacher, or the friends whose opinions seem so important. There are many things in our world that can stir up fear within us. And the things we fear reveal something about us. But there's a more revealing question.

And that is . . . What do you do when you're afraid? What do you turn to? Even more than the first question, this second question reveals something fundamental to who you are. Because this second question reveals where your hope lies. It shows who or what you're trusting in.

When you're afraid of a boss or a bully, do you rely on your own strength / abilities / smarts to make the situation alright? Do you rely on alliances you can form with others (strength in numbers)? Or maybe, when you're not sure how to make the fear go away, you simply seek to deaden that awful feeling with food, or entertainment, maybe drowning it in drunkenness or some other substance abuse, or in sexual immorality. There are worldly pleasures that can distract us from the fear for a time. But it's just that—a distraction.

So this drives us to a deeper solution. Where can we turn when we're afraid? I love our fighter verse for this week. We'll say it all together at the end of the service. And in a moment you'll see how well it fits with our text for this morning from Isaiah. I didn't plan this, but all of Scripture fits together in such

beautiful harmony. The fighter verse is 2 Timothy 1:7, “for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”

God is the One we can turn to in faith and find a strength that is not our own. Isn't it a wonderful paradox of the Christian faith, that the only way to be really and truly strong is by admitting to God your utter weakness? That's a huge part of what faith in God implies. We're saying, I can't do this on my own, I'm not strong enough, I can't conquer my own foes, I can't overcome these fears, I can't wash away these sins, so I cast myself on your mercy and grace. Please help me! It's in that relationship with God through Jesus Christ that we derive strength that can really do something, strength that is more than a façade. Because it's one thing to pretend that you're not afraid. It's quite another thing to actually have a courage and a strength that whatever intimidating enemy stands in my way, God is working all of this together for my good therefore I need not fear.

To be able to say with the Psalmist, **“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?”** (Psalm 56:3-4)

Or to have the attitude of Joshua and Caleb when they and the 10 others spied out the Promised Land. The 10 other spies were saying, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” And they said, “We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (Numbers 13:31, 33)

But Joshua and Caleb trusted the Lord to fight for them. Joshua said, **“The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.”** (Numbers 14:7–9)

Well, what does all this have to do with Isaiah 7-8? What we're going to see in this passage is a king who is very afraid. And, sadly, instead of putting his trust in God, he hopes in lesser powers, things that are like sinking sand. What's amazing is that in this same passage we find a prophecy pointing to the birth of Jesus.

Last week I read a quote from Alec Motyer, and it's helpful again here. He wrote, **“Typically of Isaiah, hope is the unexpected fringe attached to the garment of doom.”**¹ What we're going to see today is a king who is fearful and faithless, and

¹ Alec Motyer, Isaiah, page 79.

because of that doom is coming. But there is an unexpected hope attached to the fringe of these judgment warnings.

Here it's the very famous prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, which says, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." So in the midst of a nation's trial and a king's failure, we find this great promise of a future miracle that will mean everlasting triumph for God's people.

This is stunning in various ways. The setting of the prophecy is unexpected, how it comes in the midst of these warnings to a faithless king. And, of course, the miracle that is being prophesied is nothing short of astounding, if we take the time to be astounded by something that has become so familiar to us.

It's such an amazing thing to see God's sovereign control over history, that He would inspire a prophet to speak a clear word from God that would ultimately be fulfilled more than 700 years later. It's also astounding to see how God chooses to display His power, that He would ordain for the Messiah to be born to a virgin. We serve a powerful God! We serve a God who will not be defined by any box we might try to put Him in. He does as He pleases, and it pleases Him to show off His glory and beauty and might. He shows us that He is the King of the universe. He has put together all the details of the story of redemption so that Christ is magnified, so that a spotlight shines on His gracious plan to save sinners. That's what all of this is about—prophecies hundreds of years beforehand, supernatural signs—it's all about drawing attention to the wonder of the Gospel and the glory of our Savior. It's about highlighting what is supremely valuable in the universe. Many are blind to these precious realities. Many do not have ears to hear this amazing news.

We talked about that last Sunday. In Isaiah's time, and in Jesus' time, and in our day, there are many who are spiritually blind and deaf, spiritually unresponsive, spiritually dead. But for those who have spiritual eyes and ears, let us marvel at what God has done in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And it's my prayer that as we marvel together at these things, that the blind and deaf will be changed. If you're here this morning and you have not seen the beauty of the Gospel, you have not heard in your heart the Good News of Jesus Christ, it's my hope and prayer that God will do a sovereign work in you today and allow you to experience for the first time what life is really all about, what this universe is all about.

Many of you are probably familiar with this prophecy in Isaiah 7, but let's begin this morning by looking at the historical context of the prophecy, which is fascinating, and then the double fulfillment of the prophecy, and finally we'll look at the significance of the prophecy—the theological significance of the

virgin birth, why it's important for our understanding of the Gospel.

Historical Context of the Prophecy

The historical context of this prophecy takes us into some devastating events in the history of Israel and Judah. Remember that after the reign of Solomon, the kingdom divided. There was King Saul, King David, King Solomon, and then after Solomon there was a split. The tribes of Benjamin and Judah formed the Southern kingdom, known as Judah, with Jerusalem as their capital. And the other ten tribes formed the Northern kingdom, known as Israel, or in this passage it's also called Ephraim, and their capital was Samaria. From the time the kingdom divided, we now fast forward about 200 years to about 735 B. C. when Ahaz was the king of Judah and Pekah was king of Israel / Ephraim.

We notice here that there's a new king in Judah. In chapter 6 it was the year that King Uzziah died. Now it's the days of King Ahaz. And if you remember back to Isaiah 1, the book begins by listing the 4 kings who reigned in Judah during the time of Isaiah's ministry. The four kings were Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. But as we move from Isaiah 6 to Isaiah 7, we have already skipped over Jotham. It's now Ahaz, the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, who is king of Judah.

Look at the situation in verses 1-2 (read).

Syria and Israel are joining forces to attack Judah. Syria, which is to the north of Israel, is moving south along with Israel to wage war against Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. And the response in verse 2 is fear and trembling. It says that Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. This is a sign of their unbelief. They are failing to trust in the Lord's provision and protection. They are looking into the face of trials rather than looking to the One who is sovereign over every trial. And therefore they shake with fear.

In verse 3 the Lord instructs Isaiah, the prophet, to go and meet Ahaz, and the Lord tells Isaiah to take along with him his son, Shear-jashub, whose name means "a remnant shall return." God knew exactly where Ahaz was at that moment, and told Isaiah to meet him at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. And here's the message that Isaiah was to deliver to Ahaz, in verse 4, "Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah." God's message here is that Ahaz and the people of Judah must not fear what man fears. Do you think Syria and Ephraim are to be feared? Not with God on your side. God is saying, Trust Me! Trust Me! Don't fear man.

They're just smoldering stumps of firebrands. They may look like fire, they may look intimidating and scary, but they're nothing compared to your God.

Verses 5-6 go on to explain what Syria and Ephraim were up to (read). They wanted to conquer Judah so they could set up the son of Tabeel as king. And this launches us into the wider political scene of the day. Assyria was a growing force in the east, and Syria and Ephraim had formed an alliance in the hope of being able to defend themselves against Assyria. Ahaz, though, had refused to be part of the Syria – Ephraim alliance, and that is most likely the reason for the attack. Syria and Ephraim wanted to get rid of Ahaz and put another king in his place who would cooperate with them in defending themselves against Assyria. Ahaz's strategy was to try to be Assyria's friend. If they're too powerful to withstand, then run to them for help. We read of this in 2 Kings 16. It says that "Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser 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'" (2 Kings 16:7). And it goes on to tell of the silver and gold that Ahaz sent to the king of Assyria. Are you beginning to see Ahaz's heart? He is a picture of unbelief. He will not trust God. Rather, he fears man and runs to man for help.

Our passage continues, and in verses 7-9 God responds to what Syria and Ephraim were desiring to do (read). God says that their evil purpose will not stand. It won't happen. And, in fact, within 65 years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. Of course, it all happened just as God said it would. It was not long after this that Assyria defeated Syria and then defeated Israel, and by the time 65 years had elapsed, so many people had been deported from Israel and foreign settlers had been imported, that Ephraim was effectively shattered from being a people. The statement in verse 9 sums up the call to Ahaz and the people, "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all." Ahaz must trust in the Lord, or everything will fall apart.

Now we come to the section in which the prophecy is found. The Lord does something amazing for Ahaz here. He offers a sign, and He instructs Ahaz to request whatever sign he may desire. Verse 11, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." Ahaz's response is the ultimate cop-out. He tries to sound pious by saying that he will not put the Lord to the test. But what's really going on is that he is refusing to believe. He is so hard-hearted that he won't even consider the possibility that God can save him. His heart is set on pursuing salvation through human strength.

Notice that in verse 10 Isaiah refers to “the Lord *your* God,” as he speaks to Ahaz. But now in verse 13 he says to the whole house of David, “Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary *my* God also?” You see, in verse 10 God is still being patient with Ahaz. He is being extremely patient with him, even offering him a sign. But Ahaz refuses to be firm in faith, so he will not be firm at all. God will not be his support. God has been patient, but He is now becoming weary, and the offer of grace is going to turn into judgment.

Verse 14 says, “the Lord himself will give you a sign.” Ahaz won’t ask for a sign, as the Lord instructed him to, so the Lord will choose the sign for him. And it turns out to be a sign that will signify judgment upon Ahaz and the people of Judah, but it will also point into the distant future to God’s ultimate plan of salvation for His people.

The Double-Fulfillment of the Prophecy

So now let’s look at the double fulfillment of this prophecy in verse 14. “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” This is a famous verse, a very important verse, and it’s also a much-debated verse. And much of the debate centers on the Hebrew word for virgin that is used here. Some think it simply means “young woman,” while others say that it also implies virginity. It is interesting that the translators of the Septuagint, who were translating the Old Testament Hebrew into Greek about 200 years before the birth of Christ, used here the Greek word that specifically means “virgin.” And that’s a strong indication that the Hebrew word clearly implied that, even if it seemed mysterious and vague when the prophecy was first announced. Isaiah’s words pointed to something that even he could not fully comprehend. And we’ll look at that glorious fulfillment in just a moment.

But first we have to see that the prophecy also had an initial and partial fulfillment in the immediate context. Verses 15-17 tell of this child. Verse 16 says, “For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.” This means that before the boy has matured into manhood, both Syria and Israel will be defeated by Assyria. And this is exactly what happened. Within only 3 years Syria fell. And within 13 years Israel also was defeated. This is another word of hope, like verse 4 that said Syria and Israel are just “two smoldering stumps of firebrands,” and verses 7-9 which promise that their plans will not prevail. But this word of hope turns into a word of judgment because of where Ahaz is putting his trust. Remember, Ahaz is not trusting in God, but in the king of Assyria. And because of this, the fact that Syria and Israel will

soon fall is not good news for the kingdom of Judah. It may sound like good news in the short term, but it is bad news in the long term. Verse 17, “The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.” He’s comparing what is about to happen to when the kingdom divided after the reign of Solomon. You haven’t seen anything this bad since then. And it’s the king of Assyria, whom you’re looking to for salvation, who is actually going to bring bad things upon you. This all reinforces the foolishness of unbelief—the foolishness of trusting in human powers rather than God’s power.

Next, we ask who this boy is, who is the immediate, although partial, fulfillment of the prophecy. Again, these matters are debated, but it seems to make the most sense to understand this child to be Maher-shalal-hash-baz, Isaiah’s second son, who is mentioned in 8:1-4. See the similarity between the wording of 8:4 and 7:16. In 8:4, this is referring to when Assyria captured Syria and also significant portions of northern Israel, which happened only a couple of years after the baby would have been born, before the baby would have been speaking clearly (see 2 Kings 15:29).

As with Isaiah’s first son, Shear-Jashub, this son’s name is also important. You’ll see in the notes of your English Bible that Maher-shalal-hash-baz means something like “The spoil speeds, the prey hastens,” which doesn’t sound like an encouraging message. And it’s not. The sign for Ahaz’s generation was a sign of judgment. Assyria was not only going to devour Syria and Israel, but they would also later attack Judah. And although they didn’t defeat Judah, this was all part of Judah’s demise. Because of their unbelief—because they were trusting in Assyria, who was actually their enemy, rather than God, who was offering to be their ally—they would fall apart. Because they were not firm in faith, they would not be firm at all. Chapter 8:5-8 further describe what is going to happen. They will almost be destroyed. But there’s still a word of hope in verses 9-10. The enemies of God’s people will not ultimately triumph.

So this was the sign for Ahaz’s day: a boy born to the prophetess, not named Immanuel, but named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, a sign of Judah’s quickening downfall. But, of course, the end of the kingdom of Judah was not the end of God’s plans for His people. And while this was a sign of judgment upon the contemporary generation, it is also a sign of great hope for those who see its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Immanuel (Matthew 1:18-25)

This is something that should amaze us about God's Word. An immediate and partial fulfillment of this prophecy occurred in Isaiah's own day, but the prophecy pointed far beyond that. As we see in chapter 9, which we'll look at next week, it pointed to a child who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. It pointed to a boy who would be born 700 years later to the virgin Mary. Look at how Matthew 1:18-25 explicitly connects the birth of Jesus with the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.

Notice how Matthew translates Immanuel. He wants to be sure that his readers realize that this child is God with us. God has come down and become one of us. Also notice how Matthew goes out of his way to make clear that Mary was a virgin. Verse 18, "before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." In verse 20 the angel tells Joseph, "that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Then Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14. And in verse 25, Joseph "knew her not until she had given birth to a son."

What a miracle this was! No baby has ever been conceived in this manner, before or since. It was an utterly unique and supernatural work of God, as His way of sending His own Son into the world.

The Significance of the Prophecy

So far we've looked at the historical context of Isaiah's prophecy, and it's double fulfillment. Finally, I want to look at the significance of the prophecy for our understanding of who Jesus Christ is. What is the significance of the virgin birth for how we understand the Gospel?

First of all, as we just read in Matthew 1, **God's Word affirms it**. God's Word clearly teaches that Jesus was born of a virgin. And therefore, to deny the virgin birth is to deny the absolute truthfulness of the Bible. **Millard Erickson writes, "If we do not hold to the virgin birth despite the fact that the Bible asserts it, then we have compromised the authority of the Bible and there is in principle no reason why we should hold to its other teachings. Thus, rejecting the virgin birth has implications reaching far beyond the doctrine itself"** (*Christian Theology*, 771).

We can't pick and choose as we read through the Bible. You may feel inclined to deny something like the virgin birth because it sounds like the stuff of legend and myth. It's something that we've never seen happen, and so we might think that it could never happen. But that's just an anti-supernatural bias. In response to that, we must say that it is not at all unreasonable that

the God of the universe would reveal Himself to His people in supernatural ways. Unbelievers will find various excuses for not believing these things. But when God opens our eyes to see the truth of the Gospel, and the truth of His Word, then we can embrace the truth of every miraculous event recorded in this Book. The virgin birth is important, first of all, because God's Word clearly affirms it.

Secondly, it is significant because it helps us see how **Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human**. This is a fundamental truth of the Christian faith. It is so crucial to the Gospel message. Only the infinite God can atone for sin, and therefore Jesus had to be fully God in order to fully atone for our sin. And we see in the virgin birth that God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, came into the world by divine means. He was not conceived through the union of two human parents, but rather the Holy Spirit worked in a unique way to bring our Savior into the world. Immanuel, *God with us*.

In order to atone for sin, Jesus had to be fully God. And in order to atone for *our* sin, He had to become like us. He had to be, not only fully God, but also fully human. And so He was born of a woman. He has a human body, a human mind, human emotions, and a human will. He is Immanuel, *God with us*. He became like us in every way, except without sin.

And this leads us to a third aspect of Jesus' life that relates to the virgin birth, and that is **Jesus' sinlessness**. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, every human being is born with an inherited guilt. We are all sinners, not only because of our personal sins, but also because of our identification with our forefather Adam. We have inherited his guilt. Jesus Christ is the one exception to this rule. Not only did Jesus remain perfectly sinless in His actions and thoughts and attitudes, but He was also sinless in His nature. And the way in which He was conceived helps to reveal that truth to us. He did not inherit Adam's guilt. He did not descend from Adam in the way the rest of us do. He did have a human mother. But as the angel told Mary in **Luke 1:35**, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.**"

Jesus' sinlessness, along with His full deity and humanity, is another attribute that makes Him the only One able to atone for our sin. He is the sinless Lamb of God. And as Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 5:21**, "**He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**" Jesus, who knew no sin, went to the cross to bear the penalty for our sin, so that by faith we can be united to Him and counted righteous in

Him. Our sin becomes His, and His righteousness becomes ours. This is the Gospel we hold so dear.

This is the Gospel message we cling to when we're afraid. I'll end with the same questions I started with. What are you afraid of? And where do you turn when you're afraid? **Derek Thomas** summarizes the point of this passage, "**When things are at their blackest, God's light still shines for those who wish to see it. Isaiah saw it clearly. God was giving Ahaz an opportunity to see it too. He was not to lose heart and become afraid. He was being urged to become a good shepherd, and trust in God like David did. But he would not.**"² And there lies the lesson for us. May we learn from Ahaz's mistake . . . his faithless and fearful rebellion.

When fear grips your heart, don't turn inward seeking your own solution to the problem. And don't turn to other mere mortals to protect you. Instead, put your hope in this baby, born of a virgin, who came into the world to save sinners. He is the Only One who can save us. He is our only hope. He is Immanuel, God with Us. He is called Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

² Derek Thomas, Isaiah, page 73