

INTRO: Please turn with me in your Bibles to Isaiah 7. Our text this morning prophesies the birth of Jesus. Isa 7:14 indicates that a *virgin will conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*. We'll see this morning that Isaiah 7 bears testimony to Jesus. But we'll also see that it bears testimony to Prov 14:12 – ***“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death”*** (Prov 14:12; 16:25). The point of Isaiah 7 is that **trusting in man tempts our souls, tries God's patience, and triggers our demise**. But first we need to get our historical bearings, so let's turn first to 2Kings 16.

ORIENTATION

The events of Isa 7 happen during the reign of Ahaz, King of Judah. **2Kings 16** bears testimony that Ahaz committed treason against God. 2Kgs 16:2 says *...he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel*. **2Kings 16:5** testifies that Rezin and Pekah *“came up to wage war on Jerusalem, and they besieged Ahaz but could not conquer him.”* And when Israel and Syria come and attack Ahaz, he sends to *Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son* (becoming a vassal to Assyria, as Israel was only supposed to be a vassal to the Lord). *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.’ Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king's house and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria listened to him. The king of Assyria marched up against Damascus and took it, carrying its people captive to Kir, and he killed Rezin.”*

So in the short-term, Ahaz looked like a political genius. He got the Assyrian war machine to work for him. They whipped Israel and Syria on Judah's behalf. Ahaz appears to be a hero. But at what cost? For Ahaz to call himself Tiglath-pileser's servant and son is to become his vassal, to become a servant-king beholden to a greater king. But Ahaz was already God's vassal. Ahaz committed treason against God. And later in 2Kgs 16, Ahaz changes the layout of the temple. He replaces the original altar of the temple with an altar modeled on an Assyrian altar to their god Hadad, which Ahaz had seen in Damascus, the capitol of Syria, after the Assyrian army had defeated Syria and taken the capitol city. Ahaz makes other changes to the layout of the temple, which was modeled on the pattern which God had shown Moses; and in 2Kgs 16:18 Ahaz does all this specifically *“because of the king of Assyria.”*¹ But what about the long term? For that, let's turn to 2Chron 28:19-25.

2Chron 28:19ff. *“For the Lord humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to the Lord. So Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him. For Ahaz took a portion from the house of the lord and the house of the king and of the princes, and gave tribute to the king of Assyria, but it did not help him....”*

In the long term, Assyria turned against him, and so did God Himself. Ahaz committed treason against God, trusting man instead of God, and it came back on his head; but it's not hard to put a positive spin on Ahaz' motives. He's doing whatever it takes to protect God's people. This is how the world does business, so Ahaz does business (*realpolitik*) – diplomacy based on power, practical outcomes, and material factors. If the superpower is coming after you, then get on their good side. The problem is that to get on the world's good side, you have to play by the world's rules, let the world assimilate you somehow. “Ahaz just fashions a religion that will please the Assyrians” (J. Ellul, 128). He retained the worship of the true God, but he ignored God's commands for how to worship. The true God “will be worshiped and served in another way. In reality, however, he will be made to serve our way” (J. Ellul, 130). For Ahaz, God became a chip in the big game: **tempting**. So with that as the context, let's read Isa 7:1-25.

¹ **2Chron 28:5** *“Therefore the Lord his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who struck him with great force (Pekah son of Remaliah).”* These are, I assume, two separate attacks that do not involve collusion between Syria and Israel, as God prevented in Isa 7 (so also Oswalt, 1:198, but contra Gary V. Smith, 199-200).

1. TRUSTING IN MAN TEMPTS OUR SOULS (ISA 7:1-9)

7:1 Rezin and Pekah want to force Judah into a protective alliance against Assyria. Assyria is in expansion mode. So Rezin and Pekah want to annex Judah's land and army to combine forces for a military resistance against Assyria. And they're willing to do it either with or without Ahaz, because they've got their own man, Tabeel, waiting in the wings to serve as a puppet king in Judah if Ahaz won't cooperate. That plan didn't compute for Ahaz, but not just because it might not include him. He couldn't imagine it was good politics to resist the Assyrian machine. He thought the way to wisdom was to snuggle up to Assyria, get on their good side. Now, Rezin and Pekah had attacked Judah before. **2Kgs 15:37** "*In those days the Lord began to send Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah against Judah.*" It was normal for Israel and Syria to attack Judah; but this was probably their first joint strike, and probably the first time they'd hatched a plan to get rid of Ahaz. So in 7:2 when "*When the house of David was told, 'Syria is in league with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind....'*" Judah would be no contest for a joint strike.

What still scares the church today is when cultural forces are colluding together against the church; maybe not to destroy the church, but to manipulate her, to marginalize her, or to co-opt her for someone else's agenda. And part of the problem today is that many who call themselves God's people now play the role of the northern kingdom, trying to convince faithful churches to join them and make a deal with the world. Adapt or die. And when everyone seems to be "in league" with someone else, so that everyone seems to be growing in power and security except the church, it's tempting for the church to want to be in league with the world to make her feel more secure, to give her power, or at least to prop her up against today's intolerant brand of tolerance. It's certainly not wrong to be an evangelical instead of a fundamentalist; but there is a danger to being an evangelical, because if we're not careful, the commitment to cultural engagement rather than isolation can lead us to want influence more than fidelity. We're all too quick to trust in horizontal alliances, rather than trusting in God's power to grow and protect the church by the preaching of His word and the practice of His ordinances.

The Assyrian threat illustrates the threat of the world to **assimilate** the church into its pagan culture, to dislocate the church from its heritage, to eviscerate the church of her distinctiveness, and to domesticate the church's supernatural power (so also Ellul). Ahaz folded under the pressure. Instead of resting in God, he tried to curry Assyria's favor. And isn't that a great temptation for the church today? We're tempted to trust the world to save the church. But that only plays into the world's hands, because the world will just assimilate us so that we lose our distinctiveness. "Israel and the church have never been effective except to the degree that the world has been unable to assimilate them" (J. Ellul, 141).

"*The heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.*" Does your heart ever feel like that, friend? The issue is trusting God more than we fear man; and trusting God is not merely propositional; it is intensely practical. It means relying on God when you are at risk (Brueggemann, 1:67), when your security feels jeopardized, and when the very one who was supposed to be your ally – the northern kingdom – gets co-opted by the world and becomes your enemy. When the forces of the world come out for war against the church, the church has to have a view of God's sovereignty that is bigger than the world and stands over the world in judgment. But if the leader's heart fails to trust God, so will the hearts of his people. **Panic cannot drive policy in the church** (Brueggemann, 65). Trust in God drives policy in the church.

In 7:3 God tells Isaiah to take his son Shear-jashub with him to talk to Ahaz "*at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field.*" The conduit of the upper pool is an aqueduct, a water supply for Jerusalem. Ahaz is getting ready for a siege against Jerusalem. He's ensuring that the water supply won't be cut off from outside the city if Israel and Syria come after Jerusalem. And he may have been doing that by overseeing a digging project designed to put the aqueduct underground. He's there because he's scared.... Shear-jashub means "a remnant shall return or repent." In the context of preparing for a siege, talk of a remnant

would be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it'd be encouraging that Judah will not be totally annihilated, but all the same, only a remnant will be left (Oswalt 1:200, cf. 36:2). So in 7:4 God's message to Ahaz is "*Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint.*" Don't resist with Israel and Syria. Don't recant by trying to please Assyria. Repent of your fear of man. Rest in God. Remember God's perspective: "*these two smoldering stumps of firebrands.*" What looms threatening to us is harmless to God. When the world is flexing its muscle, whether it be through legislation or new cultural trends or wars, the church is **tempted** to panic, and ironically, we're tempted to trust in ourselves or other men to save us. Here, Ahaz is trusting his own ingenuity.

Yet in 7:5-9 God reminds Ahaz that the word and plan of man are always contingent on the word and plan of God. God is sovereign over the nations and their plans. What the world says is not ultimate. What God says is ultimate. God contradicts the stated intention of the nations. *It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass.* To be against God's people, to want to conquer and control them for self-serving ends, draws down God's righteous anger. There are people who would treat the church as their own fiefdom, a place where they can be a big fish in a little pond. Others are **tempted** to think that their own worldly wisdom knows what's best for the church, how to protect and grow the church, how to make the church safe or prosperous. That's what Rezin and Pekah are doing. They are trying to coerce Judah into a three-way alliance to protect themselves against Assyria. They think they know better than God. They think they have to do all the heavy lifting. The church has to resist that kind of thinking and rely on God.

The world wants to co-opt the church for its own political and social ends. Syria and Israel want to depose Ahaz and install a puppet king, this son of Tabeel, instead. That would mean the interruption of the Davidic line of kings. What is at stake here is God's promise to David in 2Sam 7 that he would always have a descendant on the throne. The world wants to infiltrate and control the church from the inside. If the world can set up a leader or group of leaders in the church who will do things in a worldly way, and trust in worldly alliances and methods, then the world wins. He's undermined the primacy of trust in God's power, presence, and promises.

In vv8-9, God is warning Judah using Israel's experience. Ephraim is another name for Israel, the northern part of the divided kingdom. Ephraim made a pact with the world, with Syria. Look at where it will lead them. They look to the world for security, but in 65 years, they'll be a scattered people with no land. All they can trust in is their leaders. But Judah can still trust in God. That's why Isaiah is talking about the heads of the nations. The head of Damascus is King Rezin, the head of Samaria is King Remaliah. And who is King in Judah? Not Ahaz. God (see Motyer, 82). So who do you want to trust? Who is really in the position of strength here, Rezin and Pekah, or Ahaz, son of David, son of God? But Ahaz won't listen.²

7:9 "*If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.*" This is the great issue. When we fear man, the temptation is to trust man – fight fire with fire. You have that alliance? I'll make this alliance. But you have to look at this-worldly threats through the eyes of faith. And this faith is not positive thinking, or self-confidence, or some ambiguous, baseless wish that everything will turn out OK. This faith is specifically faith in God's sovereign power and His rock-solid reliability. You have to remember Isaiah 6 when you're in the middle of Isa 7. God is still sitting on his throne, high and lifted up, no matter what the nations do. The heart of Ahaz was shaking like a tree in the forest shakes in the wind. God wanted his heart to be firm – stable, reliable, steady, rooted. What keeps our hearts from shaking is firmness of faith. And what keeps our faith firm is a renewable vision of God's sovereign, holy majesty. Look at His throne. Look at His altar. Look at the sacrifice He has provided. That's why doctrinal, expositional preaching is so foundational. Christ-centered exposition is what roots your faith securely in the rock-solid word of God. The wind will blow. You will go through seasons when it howls, and it feels like you're holding on for dear life. And when that happens, the roots need to be there already. You have to grow your roots before the wind comes. Noah built the ark before the rain. The storm is

² "If the sixty-five years is the period 735-670BC, then the reference is to the fact that in 671 Esarhaddon imported foreign settlers into the area of the former northern kingdom (cf 2Kgs 17:24, 2Ch 33:11; Ezr 4:2). At that point those deported after the fall of Samaria (722BC) were bereft of a land to return to and at that point ceased to be a sovereign people" (Motyer, 82,83).

coming. Feed your roots now, so that when the storm comes, your heart doesn't shake like a tree in the wind.

2. TRUSTING IN MAN TRIES GOD'S PATIENCE (ISA 7:10-16)

In verse 10, God basically asks Ahaz to test the promise in vv.7-9. "Ask a sign of the Lord your God." It's a command. Ask. Make the sign whatever you want it to be, even a miracle, and I'll make it happen to prove that you can trust me and that I can and will protect you through even this. Now, knowing what we know of Ahaz, this is an amazingly gracious offer for God to make to such a wicked king. But in v.12, Ahaz turns him down. "But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.'" Knowing what we now know about Ahaz from 2Kgs 16 and 2Chron 28, this answer is totally disingenuous. Ahaz is making a career out of putting the Lord to the test by worshiping other gods!

But his answer is more than disingenuous. It's **pragmatism masquerading as piety**. He's referring to Dt 6:16 "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. Well what happened at Massah? That was where Israel argued with Moses and tested the Lord by saying "Is the Lord with us or not?" (Ex 17:7). The command not to test God is a command not to complain against his goodness or question His presence. The sin of testing God "says 'I will only trust God if God proves Himself trustworthy....I refuse to believe God unless God gives me the evidence that I think demands a verdict from me (paraphrasing Motyer, 83). That's clearly wrong. But when God commands you through a prophet to ask for a sign – when He offers to prove Himself – it's a whole different ballgame, and to not test him would be unbelief. In Malachi 3:10 God outright says, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need." That's a whole different kind of test, and if you don't take him up on that offer, He may well not give you another chance. It's not Dt 6:16 that applies to Ahaz. It's Mal 3:10!

The reason Ahaz doesn't want to test the Lord is not because he wants to be godly. It's because he wants to be thought to be godly, while he still believes in Assyria more than he believes in God. Ahaz doesn't even want the evidence that Isaiah is offering, because his mind is already made up to as Assyria for help, rather than asking God (Oswalt, 1:205-206). Ah, now it becomes clear. Ahaz appeals to Dt 6:16 to justify his unbelieving pragmatism. "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." Oh, how pious! What a godly king, Ahaz! My, how sensitive you are to God's law! Really? Is it that you don't want to test God, or is it that you don't want God to test your faith in Him? And don't we often use Scripture in just the same way that Ahaz did, to justify our own cowardly pragmatism, and to glaze it over with a veneer of piety? Christian, think about your own case. **Is your piety anything more than pragmatism in disguise?**

It's all so backwards, isn't it? Ahaz was so turned around theologically that he called evil good and good evil, just like we saw in 5:20. The very sentence that he uttered – "I will not put the Lord to the test" – is actually what did put the Lord to the test! He had lost any biblical wisdom that he had. That's what happens when you let your heart be courted by **worldliness**. Your moral compass loses its magnetism, and you get turned around. Everything becomes relative, and the skill of distinguishing between good and evil, or between truth and error, gets dull from neglect; so that when God comes to us, inviting us to prove his trustworthiness for ourselves, we no longer know how to respond. So instead of taking God up on His offer, Ahaz offends God's goodness and alienates himself from God. Ahaz made God tired of talking with him (*contra* 1Kgs 3:5). And notice how Isaiah puts it. In v.11, the question to Ahaz was "Ask a sign of the Lord your God." But in v.13, after Ahaz voices his pious unbelief, Isaiah says "It is too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?" After Ahaz refuses, Isaiah doesn't even think that Yahweh is Ahaz' God anymore. God will either be everything to you, or he will prefer to be nothing to you and even against you. You can be God's vassal, or the world's vassal, but you can't be both. Either put all your eggs in His basket, or else He Himself will take away both your eggs and your basket. Notice how much our decisions matter to God. God is sovereign; and because He is sovereign, the most important thing about you is what God thinks about whether or not you trust His sovereignty.

Ahaz refused to trust God's sovereignty. And so even though God reveals the sign of Immanuel to him, Ahaz will have no part in it because of his unbelief. We get a clearer picture of who this Immanuel will be in chapter 9. He will be the wise and faithful king that Ahaz failed to be. Ahaz will be replaced, but not with Tabeel. Ahaz will not deliver Judah by his alliance with Assyria, and Tabeel will not deliver Judah by his alliance with Rezin and Pekah. Immanuel will deliver God's people, and God will be with the remnant that repents, not with Ahaz and those who trust in Assyria.³ This prophecy probably had a double fulfillment, one in the days of Ahaz and one in the Messiah. We have no good idea who the prophecy referred to in the days of Ahaz. But we do know that Matthew quotes v.14 in Matt 1:23 to explain Jesus' birth. "*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*" All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.*"

What Ahaz is refusing, ultimately, is the promise of a better king than himself. That is why God will not be his God. Ahaz committed the unpardonable sin – the sin of unbelief. And he did it in the worst possible way – under the guise of piety – "*far be it from me to test the Lord.*" You have to believe in Immanuel for God to be your God – otherwise Christmas has a different meaning for you. Christmas will come to mean for you that year after year, tree after tree, gift after gift, you trusted and loved the gifts rather than the Giver, the creation rather than the Creator. You treated Jesus as a quaint story of a cute baby in a rustic stable, but not as Sovereign King or Sufficient Savior. God has given you a sign, friend: Immanuel, God with us, in human form; Jesus in the manger. Have you taken God up on his offer to forgive your sins if you repent and believe in Jesus? Or is your refusal to believe in Jesus testing God's patience even now, on Christmas morning?

3. TRUSTING IN MAN TRIGGERS OUR DEMISE (ISA 7:17-25)

The transition between vv.16 and 17 is seamless. The boy Immanuel will be a sign not only of blessing in v.16, but of judgment in v.17. It's the same thing in Isa 7. The blessing in v.16 is that by the time he can tell the difference between right and wrong, Israel and Syria will no longer even be nations, much less threats. That applied to the short-term Immanuel born in the days of Ahaz. The cursing is that by that same time, God will bring on Judah and Ahaz their greatest fear – the king of Assyria, Tiglath-Pileser III and his war machine. And all of that is true of Jesus as well. It makes you think of Luke 1:34 where Simeon says to Mary "*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel.*" Jesus, as the ultimate Immanuel, is a sign for the fall and rising of many. He is a sign of deliverance for some, but of damnation for those who will not trust in Him.

The message to Ahaz is that trusting in man to save us has an unintended consequence – it invites God's judgment. God will do worse than what Judah feared. The attack will not come from Israel and Syria. It will come from the superpower itself, Assyria. And God is saying that Judah will be swept into exile not ultimately by tides of international politics, but by the tide of God's sovereign judgment – *The Lord will bring upon you...the king of Assyria.*" God is not a localized deity. He is not the product of western thinking or eastern mysticism. He is trans-regional, transnational, and transcendent. And according to v.17, he will bring "*...such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah.*" When the north split off from Judah during Rehoboam's reign in 1Kings 12, the royal line of David stayed in the south. But they lost their rule over the other 11 tribes. The only thing that could be worse than that would be losing Judah itself. That's precisely what God was about to do – Judah would now lose sovereignty over herself, by God's doing (Motyer, 87).

Now look at how God will call Assyria. In v.18, *the Lord will whistle*" – an image of God's total control. And God refers to the greatest nations of the earth as insects: flies and bees. They're small to God, and He commands so many of them that they will overwhelm Judah. The description in v.19 is an infestation, a plague of flies and bees. The idea is that the invasion will be permeating and inescapable. The whole land will be

³ "If the young woman is Zion (1:8), then her son is the faithful remnant who will emerge from her sufferings. That is why he is given the name Immanuel, God with us. God will be with the faithful remnant who gather round Isaiah (cf. 8:16), not with the unbelieving Ahaz and the rebellious nation as a whole. This is the implication of the ominous shift from 'your God' in v.11 to my God in v.13" (B. Webb, *BST*, 63).

blanketed with Assyrians – nowhere to hide (cf. Ex 8:21ff ; Jer 46:20; Dt 1:44; Ps 118:12). The metaphor changes in v.20, where Assyria is no more than a razor in God’s expert hand. It’s obvious here that shaving is a metaphor of judgment. But there’s a little background to it. In Numbers 6, letting your hair grow was part of making a Nazirite vow, and shaving was the sign of ending a that vow and returning to a common mode of life. God would make Israel common, take away her specialness for a time. In Judges 16, shaving Samson’s head sheared him of his strength as well. Shaving even parts of your beard was prohibited by law in Lev 21:5 “*They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards*” (cf. 19:5). In 2Sam 10:4 shaving half the beard was part of shaming a defeated enemy (so also G.V. Smith 218 f.n.285). In Job 1:20 and Jer 48:37 shaving the head was a symbol of mourning and lament. Here in Isa 7, the Lord will do the shaving, and his razor will be Assyria. And the shaving will not stop at the head. It will include the feet. But feet here doesn’t mean feet. It’s a euphemism for a man’s private parts. This shaving is a shaming. And again, God’s razor will be Assyria – the very nation Ahaz wanted to trust, instead of trusting in God.

“Alternative salvations neither save nor allow escape” (Motyer, 89, on v.20). “Whatever we trust in place of God will eventually turn on us and destroy us” (Oswalt, 1:194). There are lots of false dichotomies to avoid in the Christian life, but this is a true dichotomy. You either trust in God’s wise power in Jesus and you’re saved, or you trust in something other than God, that other something destroys you. There are only two ways to live.

This is what’s happened with the modern idolization of science. Science is good. We shouldn’t be against science. But we should be against science that has an agenda to either kill or muzzle God. We idolize science when we try to use it to negate God’s existence so that the only authority left is man. But when we do this, our science turns on us, because it proves the meaninglessness of the world when it’s cut loose of its Creator. It leaves us to our own devices, which is what we thought we wanted; yet instead of gaining the freedom we thought autonomous science would give us, it leaves us ruled by the modern trinity of relativism, nihilism, and the will to power. The God of the Bible is a better Trinity than that.

In vv.21-22 the demise will leave little left over. Abundance is ending. Scarcity and subsistence living will begin. Here will be the result of trusting in man: a cow and two sheep will be all that the common man will have. Yet in God’s merciful providence, it will be all they need. Curds and honey are the food of nomads. Curds can be produced by mobile cows, and honey is produced naturally. No farming. No agri-business. Judah loses its home and becomes an exile, a wanderer. That’s what trusting in man did for Ahaz and Judah. It had the unintended consequence of breeding their own demise, dominated by the very nation they trusted.

In vv.23-25 God’s judgment is an act of de-creation. Valuable vineyards will become overgrown with weeds (v.23). It will not be safe to walk there for fear of wild animals, so you’ll need some hunting gear like a bow and arrow in v.24. Instead of a cultivated vineyard it will become a wilderness (v.25). Three times in these last three verses we read the phrase “*briers and thorns.*” That’s a reference back to the disappointing vineyard of Isa 5:6, where God had said “*I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up.*” Isaiah 7 is how the vision of the vineyard in Isa 5 will come to pass (and it’s a repeat of the Fall, Gen 3).

CONCLUSION

Trusting in man tempts our souls, tries God’s patience, and triggers our demise. Christmas is the perfect occasion to examine yourself. Who are you trusting – man, or Immanuel? Let’s pray.

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