

*The Triumph of Grace: God with Us*  
 Isaiah 7:1-17, Matthew 1:18-25  
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This Advent season we are going to look at the prophecies of Jesus' advent from the book of Isaiah. The purpose of Advent is for Christians to remember with anticipation and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah who would save His people from their sin. The prophecies in Isaiah help us anticipate Christ's birth but they also had meaning for the people who first received them. We will examine the original prophecies and their meaning and then fast forward to Jesus Christ's fulfillment of those prophecies.

This morning we will be studying Isaiah 7:1-17. Let me set this text up for us because we have six chapters of Isaiah that precede Isaiah 7. Here is how Isaiah begins: Isaiah 1-5 is about judgment. Isaiah 6 is Isaiah's call and commission to preach. In Isaiah 7:1-17, Isaiah begins his prophetic ministry and he begins his ministry by calling King Ahaz and the whole nation to listen to Yahweh's words and place their faith in Him or be judged. What we will learn is that King Ahaz chose poorly.

When we get to Isaiah 7 we learn Isaiah has been transformed. He is not the same man he was in Isaiah 1-5. Something has transformed Isaiah from a run of the mill court counselor to the prince of prophets who speaks for the Living God. What changed Isaiah?

In Isaiah 6, we learn that Isaiah was transformed by a vision of the glory of God. Isaiah was cleansed of his sin and commissioned to speak for Christ to the kings of Judah and the nation of Judah.

What happened to Isaiah was not that his faith in God was some heroic rejection of sin or some triumphant self-control over his flesh or some kind of counter-rebellion toward the culture of his day. No, what happened to Isaiah was that he had an encounter with the glory of Christ and it transformed him. So, when God needed to send someone to preach, Isaiah said, "*Here am I! Send me.*" Isaiah now had true faith in God.

The fact is what often passes for *true faith* and *true Christianity* in the Midwest is living according to Jesus' example, you know, "*WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) kind of Christianity.*" Add to this formula the fear of divine punishment and you have cultural Christianity. But, cultural Christianity is not true faith nor is it true Christianity. This kind of cultural Christianity is really a false Christianity.

Listen, following Jesus' example is good and a healthy fear of hell is good too, but if this is all you have then this is not true faith nor is it true Christianity. True faith in Christ is when a person has been swallowed up by a vision of the glory of Christ to the degree that the heart's desire is to follow Jesus because that is where true life is found. True faith in Christ wants to follow Jesus' example and has a healthy fear of hell but really wants to obey Christ because he is in love with Jesus. He has been transformed by the glory of the Holy One of God who saved him or her. He understands what he was saved from and loves what he has been saved to. According to St. Augustine *true faith is the capacity to act fully, joyfully, and enthusiastically because our hearts have been filled with the life of Christ.*<sup>1</sup>

So, here is the question: when the Law of God, the threats of the judgment of God and the promises of God do not motivate us to obey God, what can? The answer is found in Isaiah 6—the glory of Christ. In Isaiah 7:1-17, we find a man who was consumed with the glory of Christ and he was going to put before King Ahaz a similar vision of the glory of God he had encountered. All Ahaz had to do was listen to the message and have faith in Yahweh.

Here is the setting. Isaiah had been called into the ministry in the year King Uzziah died, which was about 740 BC. When we get to Isaiah 7, it is about 735 BC and there is a worldwide crisis. The kingdom of Assyria is flexing its muscle. They have gradually conquered one kingdom after another and they are moving toward Palestine. The little kingdoms of Syria, Israel, and Judah are no match for Assyria. So, Syria and Israel decided to join forces and they wanted Judah to join with them in hopes that their alliance will be able to withstand Assyria.

The fact is that it would not withstand Assyria. King Ahaz knew that and so he would not join their little coalition. This made the kings of Syria and Israel angry so they decide to force Judah to join by attacking Judah and defeating it. Then they would replace King Ahaz with their puppet king.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Ortlund, *Preaching the Word: Isaiah*, 86; this is a secondary citation from Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 365-375.

God uses this crisis to give King Ahaz a vision of God's glory by showing him that God keeps His covenant promise. God sent Isaiah to tell Ahaz to listen to God's word and trust God's promise. Isaiah told him that He would protect Judah from Syrian-Israelite alliance and that the Assyrian threat would vanish because God was with His people.

This is the setting. This was the crisis of Ahaz's generation: Would the King and his people fear God and have faith in God's promise to save them or would they cave and trust in their own abilities?

This may have been the setting of Ahaz's generation but it is also the setting of our generation. Eventually we are all brought into a crisis and the most important question is—will I put my trust in God to save me or will I lean on my own understanding, my own plans, and my own strategies? Will God really work all things together for my good or will He abandon me? Can I trust God to do what is best even when it hurts? Even as a church it is a question for us. As our culture and politics grow more and more hostile toward Christianity and conservative Bible believing churches, will we, by faith alone, stand on God's word alone and lean into God's grace alone for the glory of Christ alone?

There are two ways to answer this question. We can either sit around and anxiously wring our hands and make our own plans OR our answer to God will be—yes!

The good news is that God's grace has the last word. What we see as we study Isaiah's prophecies in our Advent series is *the triumph of grace over our unbelief*. Now that is good news.

I. The call from unbelief to faith (Is. 7:1-9)

*"In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. <sup>2</sup> When the house of David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim [another name for Israel]," the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."*

Assyria was the beast from the east. They had been moving west and southwest gobbling up nation after nation. Furthermore, it was not enough for them to simply conquer a nation, Assyria was brutal. The Assyrians actually invented crucifixion. They perfected crucifying people on crosses. After they defeated a nation, they would crucify soldiers and people by placing them along the road. Sometimes, instead of crucifying soldiers, they would impale or decapitate them. They wanted to terrorize the nations of the world and it worked. Like cable news and social media, people were talking and they were frightened of Assyrian torture and brutality.

So, in order to get ready for the Assyrian invasion, ten years earlier Israel and Syria made an alliance. Yet, they realized that their little pact was not strong enough. They needed a larger army. That was when Rezin, the King of Syria and Pekah, the King of Israel approached Ahaz, the King of Judah and asked him to join their alliance against Assyria.

Ahaz knew the alliance was futile. There was no way to defend against Assyria much less defeat Assyria. Ahaz believed that if he did not join the alliance the King of Assyria might look favorably on Judah and not invade them. That was when Israel and Syria decided to attack Judah to force them to join their alliance.

Verse 2 is the report of King Ahaz's spies. They told him that Syria and Israel were in alliance together but that was not new information. Syria and Israel had been in an alliance for ten years. What he learned was that they were going to attack Judah and they had amassed an army on their borders.

Notice Ahaz's reaction to Syria and Israel's plan in v. 2, *"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."* The phrase *"in league with"* means *"to rest upon"* or *"swarm like locusts."* The picture is that there are so many soldiers in Israel they are like a swarm of locust. It was like a scene in Lord of the Rings when it showed the armies of Orcs that were before the gate of Minas Tirith or some scene in WW II scene where thousands of soldiers were marching through the streets of Berlin and ready for battle. The spies report struck fear in the heart Ahaz and the hearts of them people. Their hearts melted within them.

In v. 3, God called Isaiah and his son, *Shear-jashub*, to go to Ahaz and preach him a sermon. After all, when you are frightened to death a sermon is what you really need—right? Isaiah was like the coach talking to the team before the big game. You are 0-10 and they are 10-0 and you know there is no way to win unless something or someone does something beyond their ability. This is the setting.

Verses 3-6 is Isaiah's first point: a call to faith in God: A sermon was not the thing Ahaz wanted at the moment but it was what he needed. We're are just like Ahaz. Often times when crisis comes into our lives, reading God's word, going to church, being with God's people, and listening to a sermon is not the thing we want to do but it is exactly what we need. Listen to Isaiah's sermon in vv. 3-6:

*“And the LORD said to Isaiah, “Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field. <sup>4</sup> And say to him, ‘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. <sup>5</sup> Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, <sup>6</sup> “Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it.”*

Often, we want to do what Ahaz was doing. He was not at the *upper pool on the highway by the Washer’s Field* because he wanted to be alone and pray. No . . . he was out inspecting the water supply to make sure if they were attacked they would have enough water. There is nothing wrong with gathering information but he was not out there to strengthen his faith in God. He was not out there in solitude delighting in God. He was out there devising his own plan and strategy.

Often, that is what we do. When we are distressed instead of delighting in God, we begin devising our own plans without God and without any godly counsel. When what we really need to do is to listen to God by reading His word and delight in God by worshiping with God’s people.

I want you to notice something here. God sent Isaiah and his son to preach to Ahaz. Isaiah’s son, *Shear-jashub*, was the sermon illustration. Here is clear biblical evidence that it is okay to use your kids as sermon illustrations.

There should be a footnote in your Bible that lets you know that *shear-jashub* means *a remnant shall return*. *Shear-jashub (a remnant shall return)* along with Isaiah’s message for Ahaz to, *“Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of the two kings”* was the Ahaz’s call to faith. This was to be the vision of God’s glory for Ahaz. Ahaz was to remain calm and quiet his soul and in faith wait on the Yahweh and see the glory of God revealed because if he did a remnant of God’s people would be saved.

Bottom line: Ahaz was called to faith in God and not only that he was to lead God’s people to have faith in God. This is what a leader should do—call people to trust God, trust the promises of God’s word, shepherd the people of God through crisis, and point people to Jesus Christ with everything that is in his being. May this be who we are as a church in our city. May we lead like that but beware for it will not be easy.

The enemy had other plans. In vv. 5-6, the enemy’s whole goal was to put fear in Ahaz’s heart and conquer the people. However, this was not a problem for God as it was an opportunity to see God take care of his people because while the enemy wanted to strike terror in the hearts of the people God was not frightened but instead called Ahaz and his people to simply trust God. God called the enemy little smoldering twigs that can easily be stepped on and extinguished. They were like wooden matches that had been blown out. They were nothing to Yahweh.

Then in vv. 7-9, God shows off His poetry skills and mixes poetry and prophecy together.

*“Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass.*

*8 For 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.*

*9 And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.*

*If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”*

In these verses, Yahweh mocks the kings of *Syria* and *Israel*. Then at the end of v. 9 He called Ahaz to place *true faith* in Him when He said, *“If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”*

When I say *true faith*, what I mean is genuine faith as opposed to simply going through the religious motions kind of faith. Ahaz and the people of Judah were notorious for being religious but not having any genuine faith that reflected a genuine relationship with God. They honored God with their lips but in their hearts, they devised their own plans and only used the name of God as a tag line. There is a lot of God-talk but there is no true relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Commentators tell us that v. 9 is a play on words. It is difficult to capture in the English but it is something like this: *“You will live by faith or you won’t live at all.”* The good news is that God loves to help weak people who honestly admit they are weak and need help but he is turned off to self-reliant people who walk in pride. So, God was saying to Ahaz and He is saying to us if you want my support all you have to do is lean on Me because you are never strong.

What is true faith? True faith has three components and can be defined like this: True faith is the *knowledge* of God that persuades us to *agree* with God and thus motivates us to *embrace* God for all that He is for us in Christ. True faith is the God-awakened ability to respond completely to the Lord Jesus Christ for what He has done for us in the gospel. *If this is faith then unbelief is the fragmentation and breakdown of our intellect, emotions, and will.* Here is how this plays out in our lives. True faith

means we know that *God is ultimate reality* and thus more real than earthly things therefore we make decisions based on reality according to His word. True faith means we find His word and a relationship with Him to be more desirable than any worldly attraction. True faith means we believe with our whole heart that He is faithful. True faith means we live our lives out of what is promised in His word and specifically in the person and work of Jesus Christ. True faith means that although the whole world is shaking and falling apart we live with knowing that God will take care of us.

However, to live “*not firm in our faith*” or in “*unbelief*” is to be ripped up inside. It is to be double-minded, unsure, filled with anxiety, and constantly looking over our shoulders. It is to be filled with doubt. It is to build our lives on shifting sand and thus how can anything go right? Everything we do moves away from Christ instead of toward Him as ultimate reality.

Verses 9 is saying: *Lean on Me, and you will stand firm but to not listen to Me is to reject Me and if you reject Me you will fall.* The question is *on who or what are you leaning when the crises of life come up in your life?* On who are what are you leaning the weight of your life? Here is the question: in the crises of life, when it counts, what makes you believe you are going to make it? What make you feel like everything is going to be okay? What makes you believe everything is stable and firm? How you answer those questions reveal where your faith really lies. Are you firm in your faith in Jesus or not? If you do not have *true faith* in Christ, then what needs to happen? Well, let’s consider vv. 10-17?

## II. The warning of unbelief (Is. 7:10-17)

There is actually a warning and a promise in this text. First, we will cover the warning. In vv. 10-11, the Yahweh speaks to Ahaz through Isaiah. Yahweh encouraged Ahaz to ask Him to give him a sign that His promise of covenant protection was good.

God basically gave him a blank check that said the sky is the limit. *Ask anything of Me Ahaz and I will show you how good My promise is.* But in v. 12, we learn that Ahaz was arrogant. He used pious language and said he would not put Yahweh to the test. He talked like he was humble but he was really self-righteous and arrogant. In reality, it was not that he would not *test* the LORD but that he will not *trust* the LORD. He basically was saying I will not put my *trust* Yahweh. Finally, v. 13, we see that Yahweh’s patience had run out.

Yahweh is a patient God. The Psalms remind us over and over that He is compassionate and long suffering but God’s patience will reach an end and it had come to an end with Ahaz. Isaiah told Ahaz that he had wearied God but in spite of his *unbelief* Yahweh was going to keep His covenant with His people.

In vv. 14-15 we hear the promise of overcoming grace to save God’s people in spite of Ahaz’s sin and the sins of the people, *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.”*

This prophecy is difficult to understand. The problem is that we know this prophecy as the promise of the birth of Jesus Christ that was fulfilled centuries later. However, it was also a promise and a sign for the people in Isaiah’s day. It predicted the failure of the Syrian-Ephraimite or Syrian-Israelite alliance. The promise was first fulfilled in the birth of Isaiah’s second son, *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* (Isaiah 8:3-4). *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* means *“The spoil speeds, the prey hastens.”* In other words, Assyria was coming and it would crush Syria and Israel and carry them off into captivity. *So, Isaiah’s second son was also a sermon illustration. Maher-shalal-hash-baz’s* name meant the destruction of Israel but the salvation of Judah. It meant *Immanuel: God is with us.* It meant and means God keeps His promises.

Here is what we learn: Ahaz’s unbelief was costly. Look what happened to those who maintained their unbelief in v. 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!”* Assyria’s destruction of Israel was going to be hell on earth for Syria and Israel, two nations who refused to trust Yahweh. Unbelief is always costly.

Although God stood by His promise to Ahaz in spite of Ahaz’s unbelief, *make no mistake; Ahaz’s unbelief was costly.* His unbelief set in motion a series of faithlessness in many Kings of Judah and its people for hundreds of years. The only way the problem of faithless kings would be resolved was when the Ultimate King would come and be born in a manger in Bethlehem and this is the promise of the *Ultimate Immanuel—the Lord Jesus Christ.* This leads us to the promise in our text—the triumph of grace over unbelief.

## III. The triumph of grace over our unbelief (Is. 7:14; Matt. 1:18-25)

Ultimately what we find in the sign of Immanuel is the triumph of grace over our unbelief. This is glorious good news for us today. Matthew, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, understood that Isaiah 7:14 was ultimately about Jesus. The virgin did have a child and His name was Immanuel because He was and is God with us. Jesus was the promise of God with us in the flesh.

But like Isaiah’s day, there is a crisis and God has given us a promise and warning in the name Immanuel. Just like the name *Immanuel* points to a greater salvation so also the warning points to a greater destruction if we fail to not listen to God and remain

in our unbelief. We are faced with eternity in hell itself if we remain in our unbelief. Hell is a place where the pain never dies and the fires never cease to torture those who go there.

We are faced with the choice of Ahaz—will we have faith in Christ or will we go our own way and trust in our own ability, ingenuity, intelligence, and righteousness? The good news is that God has sent *Immanuel* and the promise has been fulfilled in Christ. All we have to do is by faith in Jesus Christ turn from living life according to our own way and turn to Jesus and God will be with us. Here is a beautiful promise: God never lets faith in Christ go unmet. If we place our faith in Christ, *God will be with us* but to reject Jesus is to have God against us.

This morning we celebrate the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is our celebration of Christ coming to this earth living a perfect life and never once sinned. He lived the life we should have lived and then died our death on the cross for our sin. On the third day he rose from the dead and is now alive in Heaven. He saves all who call on His name. The promise is still good and it is still being fulfilled today.

This morning we remember and renew our promise with God and to one another in the Lord's Supper. We celebrate Immanuel—God with us in this meal.

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ we encourage you to call on Him today as your Lord and Savior. You may read what the Lord's Supper is about in the service guide. I will be here after the service and will talk with you about what it means to trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior. If you have visiting with us today and have been baptized by immersion and are in good standing in the church in which you fellowship you are welcome to take this meal with us.