**THE SIGN OF IMMANUEL**

Isaiah 7:1-14 (Key verses 7:14)

*“Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”*

Because of its striking prophesies regarding the Messiah, the book of Isaiah is frequently referred to be the "fifth gospel." One of the most well-known predictions concerning Jesus, Immanuel, is found in Isaiah 7:14. The name itself serves as a powerful reminder of God's favor for us. Through Isaiah, we are drawn closer to the gospel of Jesus. As we read today’s passage, we should remember the dual nature of God’s prophecies which often address both the immediate context of their time and a more distant future. We see a similar trend in God’s sign to king Ahaz, a promise to his time and an ultimate prophecy pointing to the coming Messiah, our reason for the Christmas! Three things I hope we learn from this message about God: God loved us first, God loves us in spite of us, and God loves us continually.

Just to give a brief context; King Ahaz ruled Judah during a period of intense political and spiritual crisis. According to Isaiah 7:1-14, 2 Kings 16, and 2 Chronicles 28, he responded to the military threat from Aram and Israel with fear and unbelief. Rather than trusting God’s assurance delivered through Isaiah, he rejected the invitation to ask for a divine sign and instead turned to Assyria for protection, stripping the temple and palace to pay tribute. Although Assyria intervened, it ultimately weakened rather than strengthened Judah. During these conflicts Judah suffered severe losses, including mass casualties, territorial invasions, and attempted deportations of its people. Ahaz further destabilized the kingdom by importing foreign religious practices, remodeling the temple after Assyrian patterns, and promoting widespread idolatry, even engaging in child sacrifice.

Feeling threatened by Assyria's rise to prominence in the north, Aram and Northern Israel banded forces to put an end to the nation-state. King Ahaz turned down their request for the southern kingdom of Judah to join them. Judah was terrified when they learned about this alliance. Read verse 2b. "So the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind." There was a good cause for this fear. Judah had just experienced terrible loss. The king of Aram captured a large number of people from Judah, as described in 2 Chronicles 28:5-8. In a single day, Israel's king Pekah slaughtered 120,000 men and captured 200,000. Even one of king’s sons was killed. It must have been a terrifying time for King Ahaz, who was only 20 years old when he started ruling. (2 Kings 16:2)

God sent the prophet Isaiah at this time of dread. Read verse 4a. "Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood... God is reassuring and uplifting Ahaz four times in a row. "Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart" We can see that King Ahaz was receiving very exceptional assistance from God. God even let Ahaz to request a sign! We see in this, God who pursues man in order to save him... To this day, this order remains unchanged. Now let's look at King Ahaz. King Uzziah, his grandfather, was regarded as a man of God who was greatly blessed by God. Ahaz’s father, King Jotham, also walked uprightly before God. Also, Ahaz’s son, King Hezekiah, was renowned for his unparalleled devotion to God. Clearly, Ahaz was surrounded by people deeply rooted in faith. So, how did King Ahaz live his life?

Spiritually, Ahaz’s reign is portrayed as one of the darkest in Judah’s history. He abandoned covenant worship, built multiple pagan altars across the land, shut the doors of the temple, and institutionalized idolatry to an unprecedented degree. His refusal to trust God led to the pronouncement of the Immanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, a sign given not because of Ahaz’s faith, but because of his unbelief. Throughout his reign he grew increasingly unfaithful, and the consequences were evident in Judah’s military defeats, economic strain, and religious corruption.

Despite being surrounded by a faithful father and son, his reign was marked by spiritual ruin. What was wrong with Ahaz?! Consider 2 Kings 16:10, “Then King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria. He saw an altar in Damascus and sent to Uriah the priest a sketch of the altar, with detailed plans for its construction.” This demonstrates his intense desire to emulate the pagan nations and his intense jealousy of their might and idolatry. Furthermore, according to Isaiah 8:6, "this people has rejoiced over Rezin and the son of Remaliah and rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah." Ironically, Ahaz took pleasure in the threats posed by Israel and Aram, even as he feared them. This is an example of a divided heart. He suffered because of sin but also found the world to be sweet, and he both dreaded and loved it. This reminds us of Job 20:12 “Though evil is sweet in his mouth, and he hides it under his tongue…” In an attempt to help and save him, God sent Isaiah to instill faith and encourage Ahaz. Read verse 9b, “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.” (Unless your faith is firm, I cannot make you firm. NLT) With all our intense bible studies, and deep testimonies, and messages every Sunday, and sincere fellowship…with all conviction we have, it is all in vain if we cannot put into practice! God will not believe for us, he will not have faith on our behalf. God desired for Ahaz to stand firm in the faith. For this, he urged him to be careful, stay calm, not be afraid, and not lose heart. Moreover, God provided a specific promise: The two kings Ahaz dreaded would be defeated. God said in Verse 7: “This invasion will never happen; it will never take place!” How comforting is it to hear such an assurance from God! Yet, Ahaz remained blind to all this.

To help King Ahaz further, God offered him one more special favor. Isaiah 7:11, “Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or the highest heights.” (Ask the Lord your God for a sign of confirmation, Ahaz. Make it as difficult as you want- as high as heaven or as deep as the place of the dead. NLT) Imagine this…what would you ask God if you had this opportunity? Ahaz would receive any kind of sign, no matter how big or small, to reinforce his faith. This offer is noteworthy since God does not usually urge people to seek signs. But occasionally, when asked with sincere faith, He gives signs. As an illustration, consider King Hezekiah, who requested that the sun recede by 10 degrees as a sign that God had promised to heal him. But Ahaz had a quite different reaction. In verse 12, he says, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.” At first glance, this might sound spiritual and humble, as if Ahaz was showing reverence for God. But in reality, his response revealed a heart of unbelief and defiance. Ahaz didn’t want to trust God. Faith requires a spiritual battle, holding on to God’s words and waiting patiently. Ahaz was unwilling to do it.

He effectively said, "I don't want to involve God in my life, so I won't ask." What role does God have in my life? Those who reject God frequently have this mentality. We see a similar attitude in the story of the demon-possessed man in Luke 8:28. When Jesus went to the region of Gerasenes, a demon-possessed man cried out: “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torture me!” Although he seemed to acknowledge Jesus’ divine authority, his plea was “Leave me alone!” This is the same mindset we witness in Ahaz: a desire to live life on his own terms, apart from God. Ahaz's disobedience is tragic. What should we do if we're battling with unbelief? We can learn from the father of the demon-possessed boy in Mark 9:24. When Jesus confronted his lack of faith, the father exclaimed: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” At the very least, we need this honest confession and humbling reliance on Him for strength. Unfortunately, Ahaz did not follow this course. He'd already decided to rely on worldly power. In 2 Kings 16:7, we see how he dispatched messengers to the king of Assyria, lowering himself as a servant to him and even offered treasures from God's temple as a bribe.

Having lived ‘alone’ for about 17 years in my adulthood, the idea of marriage has been a daunting one. How do I all of a sudden change and live with someone?! So, this year has been an interesting adventure, trying to prepare for marriage. I battled with my thoughts and have had to face some of my worst fears. As if that was not hard enough, about three weeks back, I received news that my contract which has been terminated in October will not be renewed. This happens when we’re just about two months to the wedding date! My world shattered…like Ahaz and the nation of Judah, my heart trembled with fear like trees shaking in a storm… Yet, this message that was intended for Ahaz remains true and relevant even for me today. The Lord who is fully aware of my situation is saying “Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart”, God says to me “Unless your faith is firm, I cannot make you stand firm!” Very well, how do I do this…how can I stay calm and firm when practically things fall apart?

Up to this point we have been focused on the background of today’s key verse. Now, let’s read Isaiah 7:14, “Therefore, the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” God provides a sign even to the unfaithful and obstinate King Ahaz. Amazingly, even though Ahaz didn't ask for it, God does this. Here, God's kindness and perseverance are evident. God himself gives Ahaz a sign instead of leaving him, and this sign turns into one of the Bible's most important prophecies: Immanuel, God with us.

More profoundly, Isaiah 7:14 is a prophecy of God’s ultimate salvation, fulfilled 700+ years later. The Gospel of Matthew identifies this fulfillment in the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew 1:22-23 reads as follows: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’).” God's decision to give Ahaz such a profound prophecy is astounding. Why would God show such mercy to a leader who was disloyal, rebellious, and unmotivated to pursue Him? Ahaz's representation of more than just himself holds the key to the solution. He is a reflection of humanity's disbelief and disobedience. His lack of faith in God is a reflection of the state of the human heart. God, however, never gives up…even when we fail to comport in accordance with His call for us. God intervenes in spite of Ahaz's rejection, demonstrating His constancy and presence. This act foreshadows the ultimate fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy in Jesus Christ, who came to dwell among us.

What does this prophecy of Immanuel teach us?

1. God loved first. When King Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, God still gave him one, demonstrating His grace unilaterally and unconditionally. Since the fall in Genesis 3, God’s love for humanity has been evident. From the very beginning, God initiated the plan of salvation, demonstrating His faithfulness to His promise. The apostle John in 1 John 4:10 says: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” And again in 1 John 4:19: “We love because he first loved us.” The fullest manifestation of this love is the birth of Immanuel Jesus. God was the first to reach out to humans. Before we even realized how much we needed Him, His grace came after us. We give thanks to Him for this wonderful, unadulterated love.
2. God loves in spite of us. The coming of Jesus, Immanuel, also reveals the God who loves us in spite of ourselves. One of the best quotes by Timothy Keller, partly says “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God.” This is the essence of God’s grace. He does not love us because of our goodness or accomplishments but in spite of our sin and failures. Paul puts it this way in Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” What kind of love is this? It is a love so deep that it reaches down to where we are, no matter how far we’ve fallen. God did not turn away from our sinfulness but instead chose to dwell among us, entering our brokenness.
3. God loves us continually. God's promise of salvation was fulfilled with the birth of Jesus, Immanuel. This is not just a story of God supporting us during difficult times or providing momentary solace. It is the narrative of God's fundamental and everlasting deliverance from sin. "You are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins," the angel told Mary when he revealed the birth of Jesus. Matthew 1:21 Immanuel is more than just a reassuring name. It is a statement of God's unwavering resolve to use His Son to rescue humanity. Through the Incarnation, God accomplished what no human effort ever could; the perfect and complete redemption of His people.

In conclusion, Immanuel, God with us. My situation has not necessarily changed…I am still planning to get married in two months’ time, I am still without a job. I feel terrified by the decisions I have to take; I feel vulnerable to the snares of the Devil…but knowing that God is with me is what makes the difference. He is not just with me to find material comfort like marriage and a job…but He is with me to conquer and triumph over sin. He is with me to live a life of faith. For us, Christmas is not just a frenzy celebration and hype of holiday mode! It is the reminder and realization that God gave a sign, and His name is Immanuel, because He is with us. Merry Christmas!