

Immanuel: Grace for the Unworthy

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Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

[0 : 00] Father, sometimes your word is very, very puzzling and hard to understand and not what we were expecting. And Lord, today that's one of those times.

And so we ask that your Holy Spirit would illuminate our hearts and minds so that we might understand your word and that it would give us great comfort in your great offer of grace to know that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us every day of our lives.

And until we see you face to face and enter the new heaven and the new earth for all eternity. So Father, bring your word home to us. And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen.

Please be seated. Amen. It says the solemn setting of the timepiece. So it's a Christmas sermon. Let's consider doom, judgment, and hell. Now, you might be wondering that you might say this is the weirdest Christmas sermon that I have ever heard.

[1 : 17] Even the fact that we are going to consider doom, judgment, and hell. You go, I thought this was a Christmas sermon. Well, here's what happened. So we have a church plant, Messiah West slash Messiah Kanata.

And so the pastor there, who's an associate of this church, he and I are talking about, like, what should we preach for Christmas? You know, we'll have 18th, 24th, and 25th will be our Christmas services. They won't have a service on the 24th.

We do. And so we're talking about what to preach on. And he's just starting out in ministry. I've been doing this, you know, since, you know, since, you know, Moses was a little baby. And so we're just talking about it.

And then he said, you know, well, let's, you know, let's, why don't we do this? Like, there's this very ancient Bible reading pattern that goes way back. It's over 1,600 years old. And according to this very ancient Bible reading pattern, on Christmas, you would read, the gospel text would be John, John 1.

And the non-gospel text would be from Hebrews chapter 1. And why don't we do, like, one of each of that? And then we're talking about what to do. And then they said, you know what, why, you know, the other big Christmas text is in Matthew.

[2 : 22] But rather than preaching on Matthew, why don't we preach, you know, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7. So why don't we read the Isaiah 7 text? And I say, sure, let's do that. And so that's what we're doing.

But here, lo and behold, two things happen. The first thing that happens is, and this, by the way, is what happens to me all the time when I preach from the Old Testament. I look at it for the first time and I think to myself, what on earth am I going to say about this weird text?

The second thing, actually, there were three things that happened. The second thing that happened is, and this happens to many people when they look at Isaiah 7 for the first time. For Christians who know that he gets quoted in Matthew, they go, how on earth does this text connect?

Like, why did Matthew think this was a, like, what's going on here? And then the third thing that happened to me is that I'm getting to read into it. I realize that it's a text that talks about human doom and God's judgment.

But it does it in the context of a profound offer of grace. So, let's look. If you have your Bibles, the text will be up on the screen.

[3 : 27] But if it's always better to have your own Bibles, you can look around and see if I've missed the context. Just one other note, just checking for some of you. Don't watch the soccer game pretending to look at your Bible on your phone or your iPad.

That's sort of not, like, if you want to do that, you can go out there and just watch the soccer game and, you know. In fact, actually, it's going to be important to be hypocritical to do it, which is sort of connected to the text.

Anyway, Isaiah 7. I have the wrong book open. Here we go. Isaiah 7. So, here's how it goes. Isaiah 7, verse 10 to 17.

Just one thing to know. This book was written somewhere between, like, the 740-ish B.C. to 800 and, you know, 810 or 90 or something like that B.C., which is a long time ago, and people might wonder how on earth you could ever think you could get anything worthwhile from something which was written that long ago.

But it actually has a very profound psychological insight, and a very, very profound psychological insight, even though it was written so long ago, which, of course, I would expect because I think it's not only something that was written so long ago, but it's also God's Word.

[4 : 46] So, that's an old text, and here's how it goes. Verse 10, Isaiah 7, verse 10. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ask a sign of the Lord your God.

Let it be deep as Sheol, sort of like that's another word for hell, or high as heaven. Now, just sort of pause there for a second. Like, who are these people and what's going on? Like, why does it say again?

So, okay. So, basically, Ahaz is the king of Judah. And, like, right now when we think of Israel, there's just the one nation of Israel, and it's called Israel.

But back in those days, the Jewish nation got divided into two separate countries with two different kings. The northern one, and throughout this, it's going to be called either Ephraim or Israel.

And the southern one is called Judah, after the main tribe that stayed with King David's line of sons. So, Ahaz is the king. And what's going on here is actually a perennial issue, and it's just as prevalent as an issue today.

[5 : 50] I was reading a news report a little while ago that Poland has been arming itself, has been on a major arms race, because they don't trust the Americans in the European Union to protect them.

If Russia was to continue to expand or there were some other types of problems. They don't trust Germany. They don't trust the EU. And learning from Ukraine, where the Ukrainians have sort of had to deal with this themselves, they've been arming themselves to the teeth.

So, there's something like, and you know about all the saber rattling that's going around, about Chinese expansion and Taiwan. And so, this is just like reading, watching BBC World News, reading The Economist, like just following the world.

It's as old as history. And what's happened is there's this very, very mighty empire called the Assyrian Empire. And they've been quiet for about three decades. But they've gotten restless.

They've been dealing with some internal things. They've gotten dealt with. They've gotten restless. They want to expand their empire. And they're looking down to this region where there's a whole lot of small nations.

[6 : 55] And what's happened is they've decided they're going to invade. The Assyrians are going to evade. They're starting to move down. And so, the small nations do what small nations do compared to a mighty empire. A couple of them get together and say, maybe if we form an alliance, if we all work together, there'll be enough of us so we can resist the Assyrian army.

And scholars differ whether there's two or four nations in it. We know there's two. But basically, that northern kingdom, which is called Israel now, back then, and not Judah, which is under David, and this other group, a nation that we would now call Syria, and potentially two other nations.

Scholars disagree whether Edom and Philistia were also involved in it. But they decide they're going to create an alliance to resist the Assyrian empire. And they want Judah to join them.

And Ahaz is having cold feet about wanting to join them. And so, these nations decide they're going to do, well, they're going to do what happens all the time in the world. In fact, wasn't there just an attempt to have a coup in Germany?

So, what they decide to do is they're going to send some troops, and I guess some special forces types down there. They're going to kill Ahaz, put their puppet in place, and that puppet will now rule that country, and they will now, depending on how you count, three or five nations will all work together to resist the Assyrians.

[8 : 13] So, Assyria, so Ahaz is the king, and he knows that there's this pressure that's been going on. And when it says, again, that was because just before this, Isaiah has confronted him about this

whole situation and calling him that he needs to trust God's promises, the Lord's promises, that he would protect the Davidic line, he would protect his people, and that Ahaz has to trust in the Lord, that that's the primary way.

It doesn't mean that you don't bring in water. It doesn't mean you don't arm your troops. But beyond all of those things, the fundamental thing is that he needs to trust the Lord. That's what's just gone on. And so, he's speaking to him again.

That's why, look at verse 10 again. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz. So, he spoke to him earlier. That's verses 1 to 9. You can go read that later if you want. And Ahaz, he says to Ahaz, listen, you need a sign to show that God is actually going to do what he's promised, that he'll protect you, the nation, that there will be victory, that you will not succumb to Assyria and be conquered by it.

And so, verse 11, ask a sign of the Lord, your God. Let it be as deep as hell or as high as heaven. And what we see here that's going on is very, very, very significant.

You see, and this is what, if you just, if you were to read the whole book, and then if you were to read 2 Kings, and you look around, and you read very, very carefully, what you discover is that Ahaz has already made up his mind about what to do.

[9 : 47] Between the first nine verses and this, the first account and this one, he's already made his mind up. And what he's done is he's taken money, he's emptied the treasury, he's taken many of the most precious items of the temple, and he's given them to the king of Assyria.

He's already become a vassal of the Assyrian empire, and he's paid off the Assyrians to invade Israel and Syria and the other countries and kill them.

He's already done that. Now, he's hidden it from the people, but he's already done that. That's what he's done.

Now, what you think, when you realize this, one of the things then you're going to see right off the bat, this is a, when you understand this, this, what you have here is a profound act of grace by God. A profound act of grace. Ahaz is given an opportunity to repent and to trust in the Lord. He's very unworthy.

[11 : 00] In fact, if you were an Israelite back then and you understood that he's, in fact, sold the most precious items from your worship and your temple, and emptied your treasury, like you would be furious at him.

But God offers him a chance to repent. He offers him grace. And he says, you can pick a sign to show that not only am I offering you a chance to come under, back under the Lord, but I'm offering a chance to show you that the Lord will, in fact, keep his promise to you to protect you.

And you can ask any sign you want. It can be as deep as hell. It can be as high as heaven. How does Ahaz respond? Well, look at verse 12. It tells us how he responds.

And see, when you understand this, you understand, well, here, listen to it. But Ahaz said, verse 12, I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test. Ah, he's so pious. He is such a godly man.

But he's not. His answer isn't pious. You know, it's like back in the day, I don't think they do it anymore. You know, when a U.S. president got in trouble, what would you see the next Sunday?

[12 : 18] You'd see the biggest, fattest, blackest Bible they could find in his hand as he's walking into church. And that's what Ahaz is doing.

Yes, I'm very pious. Of course, it's wrong to put the Lord to the test. No, that's not what's going on, Ahaz. You're refusing grace. You're refusing the opportunity to repent.

And you do not want, you do not want it come to light that the Lord is going to deliver you and you just gave away all the money.

How will that look for Ahaz? Because for Ahaz, what's most important is Ahaz. that's what's most important.

And that's going to just knock the legs underneath. You see, the Bible has nothing to do with your daily life. None of us or none of the world ever does anything to do remotely with that. We're never concerned with appearances and our own importance and position.

[13 : 23] You know, so I like to say in this church, one of the problems people have when they read the Bible is they expect something like a Hallmark movie and they get human reality in all its mess.

And it catches us by surprise. So, how does the Lord respond to Ahaz's hypocrisy and his refusal to accept grace?

His refusal to accept the opportunity to repent? Well, that's what is happening in the next verses.

Verses 13 through 16 in particular. We see how the Lord responds.

And here's how the Lord responds. Look at verse 13. And he said, here then, O house of David. And when Isaiah speaks, it's God speaking. And he said, here then, O house of David. Because Ahaz isn't just Ahaz. He is, in a sense, the current representative of the house of David, which the Jewish people have been hoping that it is through that house that the Messiah will come. [14:28] it's through that house, that line, that the Messiah will come. And so, the Lord speaks to Ahaz because there's something more important than you here, Ahaz.

O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men that you weary my God also? So God calls him on this hypocrisy. This isn't godliness, Ahaz.

This is just your attempt to try to weary me, wear me down. And frankly, which is going to happen when people hear what you've done, you're just wearying people as well.

Your hypocrisy accomplishes nothing. Your superficial, surface religion and piety accomplishes absolutely nothing other than to weary people and to weary people of the true and living God.

Now, for us, when we catch people in hypocrisy of such a major thing, we write them off. We cancel them.

[15:39] We ghost them. Is that what God does? Well, let's look what he says next. Verse 14. Therefore, the Lord himself will still give you a sign.

What's the sign? And for those of you who are Christians and you're familiar with the Bible story, here's the sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel. Right? You see, this sign is originally given to a hypocrite who's rejected grace. Rejected the sign, rejected the opportunity to repent and God says, I'm going to give you a sign anyway.

And it's this sign that Matthew, 700 years later, will say is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, the virgin birth of Jesus. And, well, we're going to talk again.

And some of you guys say, whoa, whoa, whoa, okay, George, what's, uh, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, virgin birth. I mean, that's how, like, George, just to even talk about a virgin birth just shows that you're ignorant, you don't know science, you can't think.

[16:49] And God with us, I thought God was everywhere. Like, George, none of this makes sense. So, by the way, I'm not going to talk about that right now. I'll just sort of put a little sticky note with it. If you want to hear me talk about it, come on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning or both, because I'm going to talk about one on Christmas Eve and one on Christmas morning.

How can God be present if he's everywhere, and how can there be a virgin birth? And you don't have to kiss your brains goodbye to believe it. It's not a matter that they were all gullible that they believed this sign.

But the other thing you might ask is, George, it seems a little bit unfair to Ahaz to say that I'm going to give you a sign, and by the way, you're going to have to wait 700 years to see it.

That seems not quite gracious of God. Well, let's look at the rest of what is said. Verse 14, we'll read verse 14 again, therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.

Verse 15, he shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.

[18:05] Now, just sort of pause there. It depends a little bit on the context, but in one of the context, the language of curds and honey is a reference, and that's the reference here, is a reference to devastation.

It's a reference to the fact that what you really need, you just have one little, you have a couple of goats, and you need to just be, all you can do is just basically eat found stuff. You have your goats that you keep alive, because goats can survive, they're very hardy, and you're just surviving on their milk and the honey that you can find.

It's an image in this particular case of great hardship. And what he's saying is that there's a boy who's going to be born, and before the boy, in a sense, reaches the age of being able to make moral decisions that are binding, which let's say would be around 12, before this happens, the nations that you fear, they will no longer be a worry.

Now, so, what, so, so here's the issue. I could go all grammar nerd on you at this point in time, but it's a sermon, not a grammar nerd lecture, but basically what happens is if you look at the text very, very, very, very carefully, what's happening here is that there's a, there's a bit of room in the word virgin, and there's a subtle shift in the language, and when you combine that with the context, what

you see is that God promises a sign for his time right then, for Ahaz, but at the same time that he promises a sign that, that can be understood for right, right then, he also, it also would be obvious to everybody that that couldn't be all of the sign, because the sign, that sign isn't as deep as hell and as high as heaven, that there's, like that language and the other language that goes on implies that there has to be a later fulfillment that is greater, and it comes with this subtle shift of boy, so here's the thing, the fundamental meaning of virgin is virgin, but it also has, in a sense, a secondary meaning, that it could just mean a woman, a young woman who's a virgin right now, but isn't a virgin when she has a boy, it goes from child to boy, and what he's saying is that right now, within 12 years, within the time that a boy, even in the midst of devastation, is old enough that he can be held responsible for his moral decisions,

Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel will not be a concern, and that prophecy came true. Within two years, Syria was destroyed, and in less than a dozen years, not only was the northern kingdom destroyed, it was destroyed, destroyed, destroyed, destroyed, destroyed, destroyed.

[21 : 10] There are, in fact, every Jewish person you meet is descended from either the tribe of Levi, Benjamin, or Judah, because all of the other tribes were lost, in 722 when Assyria crushed the northern kingdom and carried the Jewish people away to vanish into history.

You see, if you think about it for a second, you know, just because they didn't have TikTok and flush toilets didn't mean people back then were dumb.

In fact, there's an argument that would be made that TikTok is making you dumber than they were. Bit of an aside point, TikTok doesn't raise your IQ. Probably lowers it, as with most social media. And if Isaiah just made prophecies and all of them were for 700 years in the future, or 2,700 years in the future, or 3,000 years in the future, who on earth would have believed him or kept his book? He had to be having prophecies fulfilled that were fulfilled right then, and that's what happened in his life. Like, this profound thing, the Syrian threat that he so dreaded was completely removed, and the threat from Israel was completely removed.

[22 : 31] But at the same time, when people saw that, they said, okay, well, that's like, whoa, like, who would have seen that coming? But at the same time, they go, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, you know, but that's not a sign that's as deep as hell and as high as heaven.

they were already familiar with people as a people that God made promises that would be fulfilled right in the here and now, but also pointed down history. And so it was that Matthew makes his profound announcement, and I'm sorry, but it's not going to be up on the screen because I forgot to send the text to the tech people to put it on screen, but listen to how Matthew chapter one goes like this, verse 18 to 25, now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together, in other words, before they came together sexually, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

She had a virgin birth. She wasn't a virgin who married and then had sexual knowledge and then gave birth. She never had sexual knowledge and she became pregnant.

Before they came to be together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered those things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David. Notice that? House of David.

[24 : 10] Ahaz's actions, as we're going to see in a moment, began the process that ended the house of David, apparently, from being able to rule. Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, which means God saves, for he will save his people from their sins.

God saves. And then Matthew says, all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. What had he spoken? Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called the son's name Jesus. God saves. Now, some of you are saying, George, you said you were going to talk about doom and judgment. I haven't heard, I don't know why on earth you said that.

[25 : 19] Is that just one of those cheap things you did at the beginning as a teaser to get our attention? No, look at verse 17. Go back to Isaiah chapter 7 and look at verse 17. And this is a very

profound insight about the human condition.

So, it hasn't been revealed that Assyria, that Ahaz has already paid off Assyria, that he's already made himself a vassal to Assyria.

But look at verse 17. Okay, because the land's going to be deserted and there's this image of the devastation. There's still going to be devastation that Israel has to face. Verse 17, the Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house.

Notice that? Upon you, upon your house, and upon your people. Such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim, that's another name for Israel, departed from Judah.

What's this terrible doom? The king of Assyria. Now, what's happening here? His hope and confidence is his doom.

[26 : 30] His hope and confidence is his doom. If there was a point, it would be this.

Apart from God's grace in Christ, your hope is in fact your doom. See, one of the things that people have about the doctrine of judgment in Christianity and about hell is that we often say, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I mean, this is just completely and utterly fair.

Here I am wanting to live a completely and utterly fine and normal life and God grabs me by the hair and drags me off to this place and inflicts all of these tortures upon me and this is a completely abhorrent image.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. What if happens in judgment is that God says your will be done. All your life you've wanted to serve money, you will spend eternity serving money. All your life you were concerned about maintaining your appearance, all you'll do is try to manage your appearance for all eternity.

[27 : 46] all your life you've just wanted power, well that's just what you're going to have, it's going to consume you, it's going to eat you up, it's going to spit you out, you can't live in a universe, you can't live in eternity with a billion people who all want to be the center of the universe, that means you're just going to be locked up by yourself and your desire to have that which you can't possibly ever have because that's just not reality, that will eat you up.

Your hope apart from Christ is your doom. We already see it on this side of life, don't we? We see marriages messed up because people have wanted to serve their sexual appetites, to serve money, to serve career, to serve all sorts of foolish things, to maybe serve a political party or a business that just chews you up and spits you out, and we see it already even on this side of the grave, and that's this profound thing.

But some of you might say, George, are you saying that Christians are better? Are you saying that that's not your case? Are you saying, George, that you and other Christians like you, that you somehow or another aren't like this, that you just have the right types of desires, and you're able to repent?

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's not what this text is all about. The text is that I desperately need this good news from God, a good news that will go down to the depths of hell and the heights of heaven.

I need one who can both deal with the depths of hell and the heights of heaven, but will be with me and with you. That's what I need. That's what I need.

[29 : 29] You see, the fact of the matter is, is what, remember how the text all began? The Lord offers grace to the unworthy Ahaz. And the fact of the matter is, is that the Lord does not need my worthiness, I need his grace.

You, the Lord does not need your worthiness, you need his grace. And the good news of the gospel isn't, well, read this text and go ahead and do it.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no. You see, what happens is, you know, I've never swam, been caught up in a riptide, I've heard about them, and I, you know, I know there's places on the Ottawa River you're not supposed to swim because there's these deadly currents, and I know that very strong swimmers can go there and they can capture it by currents and they can be dragged down and they can go to their doom even though they're very, very strong swimmers, and the message of the gospel is not that when I am caught in the riptide and the currents of my desires that will be my doom, that God calls down from heaven and says, swim like this.

Well, that's useless advice. I will still be consumed by the riptide, the currents of my desires apart from Christ?

No. I have one who is both very humble but very, very strong, who jumps into the riptide of my currents and is right in in my mess and I cannot fight the power of the currents of my desires that are my doom but I have a strong and certain hope and his name is Jesus and he is God with us and he jumps into the currents of my desire that will doom me and he rescues me.

[31 : 37] That is my hope in life and death. I have no other. I cannot swim. I need one who can.

And Jesus comes amongst us in human history. He is not a deistic or amorphous God. God who is everywhere is another way of saying that he is nowhere.

Little pointer. You say God is everywhere, you have just said he is nowhere. He is not distant. He comes with us and he lived amongst us.

And because of who he is, because he is God with us, he can transcend time and history and he can be with you and with me. The death he dies, he dies with me.

He dies in a sense for the currents in my life that I cannot fix. And he dies on the cross for me and he understands those currents.

[32 : 40] He bears them and he rises from the dead having defeated them. And he is with me and it's now his righteousness that closes me, clothes me and it's his taking my place that pardons me.

And he is with me now. You know, there's wonderful words from that great old hymn, Great is Thy Faithfulness. Pardon from sin and a peace that endureth your own dear presence to cheer and to guide.

That is Emmanuel. That is God with us. your own dear presence to cheer and to guide. I want to close by saying the words of a Christmas carol.

it's the last verse of a little town of Bethlehem. Listen to how profound it is. I'm not going to attempt to sing it. O holy child of Bethlehem, right, Emmanuel, descend to us we pray.

Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell.

[33 : 50] O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. That is the gospel. That is the good news.

For those of us who believe and trust in Emmanuel today is an opportunity to say Lord Jesus thank you so much that you did not come for the worthy but for the unworthy.

I am unworthy and I am yours. Be Emmanuel with me every day. Every day until I see you face to face. And if you are here and you have not known him then just look up those last words of a little town of Bethlehem and make it your conversion prayer.

Let's stand. I'm going to say it again. For some of you it can be an act of just remembrance of Christ and a recommitment to Christ and for some it can be an entering into Christ or having him enter into you.

O holy child of Bethlehem descend to us we pray cast out our sin and enter in be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell O come to us abide with us my Lord our Lord Emmanuel.

[35 : 08] Father we ask that your Holy Spirit would grip us with this profound gospel message and help us to live every day knowing that our sins have been pardoned that we can then confess our new and daily sins to you knowing that they have already been pardoned by Emmanuel who lived with us and entered into our life and died for us and help us Father to live each day not on our own and not in our own power but that we would walk with Emmanuel that he would be God with us that he would heal our desires that he would tame our desires that he would inflame godly desires that he would make us more human as we follow him and prepare to see you face to face and enter into the new heaven and the new earth for all eternity and we ask this in the name of Jesus your son and our savior and all God's people said amen amen You