

Isaiah - Talk 6

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[0 : 0 0] 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. 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. And the Lord said to Isaiah, go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shere Jethub, your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field, and say to him, be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint, because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands at the fierce anger of Rezin in Syria and the son of Remaliah. Because Syria, with Ephraim, and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, 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. Thus says the Lord God, it shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. For the head of Assyria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin, and within 65 years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. 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. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ask a sign of the Lord your God, let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test. And he said, hear then, O house of David, it is too little for you to weary the men that you weary my God also. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. 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. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as has not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria.

In that day, the Lord will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines and in the clefts of the rocks and to all the thorn bushes and on all the pastures. In that day, the Lord will shave with a razor that is hired beyond the river with the king of Assyria, the head and the hair of the feet and it will sweep away the beard also. In that day, a man will keep alive a young cow and two sheep and because of the abundance of milk that they give, he will eat curds for everyone who is left in the land will eat curds and honey. In that day, every place where there used to be a thousand vines with a thousand shekels of silver will become briars and thorns. With bows and arrows, a man will come there for all the land will be briars and thorns. And as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not come there for fear of briars and thorns for they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread. Then the Lord said to me, take a large tablet and write on it in common characters belonging to Meher, Shalal, Hazbaz, and I will get reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jebukiah to attest for me.

And I went to the prophetess and she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said to me, call his name Meher, Shalal, Hazbaz. For before the boy knows how to cry, my father or my mother, the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will have carried away the king of Assyria. The Lord spoke to me again, because this people has refused the waters of Shiloh that flow gently and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah. Therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the river, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks. And it will sweep on into Judah and it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck. And its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel. Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered. Give ear all you far countries. Strap on your

armour and be shattered.

[4 : 58] Strap on your armour and be shattered. Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing. Speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

Well, what will we do when the future of the church looks bleak? When attendances drop across the country? When increasingly the society wants to silence the church? And gives the impression that if you're a Bible-believing Christian, then of course you're hateful and backward.

Perhaps we feel that on a personal level. Colleagues, neighbours, schoolmates who seem so apathetic or even antagonistic when it comes to the Christian faith. Now we may feel the squeeze at work and school when living publicly as a Christian is hard. What will we do when the future looks bleak for God's people? This passage has complicated names, but a simple answer. And this is the big headline.

Trust in God's promises, not human policies. Trust in God's promises, not human policies. If you remember nothing else, remember that. We're taught this through the history of the story of King Ahaz.

And as our passage opens, he's staring down the barrel at a very bleak future. I'll put a map on the screen. That was a lot clearer than the first service, so thank you. Verse 1 tells us, well, here are the places. So Judah, the yellow, that's where Ahaz, he's the king of Judah.

[6 : 44] And he's got two nations on his doorstep fighting him, waging war. Israel to the north, sometimes called Samaria in our passage, and you've got Aram, Damascus at the top there, kingdom of Aram, Damascus. And further north, they've got the looming threat of the superpower of the day, the Assyrian Empire. And Israel and Syria's plans, so Israel, the blue, and Aram up there, anti-Assyrian coalition. Assyria are on the warpath. They think their best option, right, we need to club together. And so Judah's not playing ball. Diplomatic relations have broken down. So they want to invade them by force, set up their puppet king to do their bidding, set up their coalition. And so Ahaz has got these two nations on the doorstep.

What does he do? Well, verse two tells us God's people are shaking like trees in the wind. They are really scared. And so God, in his kindness, seeks to encourage Ahaz.

Have a look down at verse three. Ahaz is preparing for the real prospect of invasion. He's inspecting the water supply. Got to have water if you're being invaded. But in the famous words of the wartime poster, the Lord says to Ahaz, keep calm and carry on.

Have a look down at verse four. Be careful. Be quiet. Do not fear. And do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.

God says for all their sabre rattling, they are smouldering stumps. They are not an advancing forest fire. They are the end of a small campfire. They are burnt out. Keep calm, carry on, don't lose heart. Well, we might think Ahaz is wise to take precautions. If there were an aggressive enemy lining up in Calais, we'd probably want troops on the border. We'd probably want the prime minister to chair an emergency meeting of the Cobra committee. But Judah is supposed to be different.

[9 : 09] Because in 2 Samuel chapter seven, the Lord promised to protect David's throne forever. It's there in verse 16 on the screen. And so God wants to assure Ahaz of the promise to establish his throne and protect his people. And so coming back to Isaiah, he says, chapter seven, verse seven, it shall not stand. It shall not come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus and the head of Damascus is Rezin.

And within 65 years, Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. Verse nine, if you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. They're just men, Ahaz, and I am the sovereign Lord. That's what he says.

Now, we think the Judah foreign office would be delighted. They can forget about their strategic defensive review or renewing trident because God himself is the only security policy they need. Trust me, God says, I've got your back. And God even makes it even easier for Ahaz. Have a look down at verse 10. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz. Ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. God offers a sign to Ahaz that he will keep his promise to protect his people and establish his throne. He can be trusted. The sky really is the limit. Ahaz asked for anything.

So the Jerusalem Cobra Committee is convened with one item on the agenda. In whom will Ahaz trust? Where will he put his faith? Verse 12 gives us Ahaz's decision.

[11:07] I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test. It sounds good, but it's actually a sham. And the reason we know that is because Ahaz is actually making an alliance with the king of Assyria. He's called Tiglath-Pileser. We'll call him Tiggy-P because that's a lot easier. And in 2 Kings chapter 7, chapter 16, verse 7, he goes to Tiggy-P and he buys his friendship with gold and silver from the Lord's temple. He's not interested in any promises of the Lord. Instead, he's finding security in human policy. The king of Assyria. It's a tactic we may remember from the playground. If you're in year 9 and two other year 9s are giving you a hard time, one solution is to make friends with a year 11 bully. Obviously, I don't condone that.

But then the people in year 9 won't mess with you anymore. That's... Well, what about us? We are in a different position to Ahaz than 8th century Judah. As a church, I suspect we're not tempted to put our faith and security in the military might of another nation.

But when the world closes in and exercises its muscle against God's people, churches can be tempted to look elsewhere for security in this world. Perhaps it's putting all the resources into political action that is seen as inoffensive and that the world rejoices in at the table.

But Isaiah calls God's people, the church, to trust in God's promises, not human policies. Keep calm and carry on. Don't lose heart. We have different promises now. Jesus promised, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it. We are to trust him. Keep calm, carry on.

Isaiah goes on to give assurances that this is not a misplaced trust. Now, we can trust God because the sovereign Lord keeps his promises. Have a look down at verse 13. It's a rebuke to Ahaz.

[13:36] And he said, Hear then, O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel.

Suddenly, this story of international politics gets all Christmassy. But before we crack open the mince pies, let's think about what this sign means in Isaiah's day.

And to this unbelieving king, the Lord imposes two signs. Emmanuel in chapter 7 and Miha Shalal Hashbaz, we'll call him Baz, in chapter 8.

Now, it's widely debated if they are the same child or two different children. I think I changed my mind about four times this week on that. But the point is, the big point, is that their birth and development will see God fulfilling his promises.

As they grow up, God will prove himself to be the promise-keeping God. Have a look at verse 16. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land in whose two kings you tread will be deserted.

[15:00] Initially, this child is going to be a sign of God's rescue. Because before he can choose between right and wrong, these two kingdoms, Syria and Israel, are going to be smashed up.

The second sign is more obvious and public. Have a look at chapter 8, verse 3. And I went to the prophetess, that's probably his wife, and she conceived and bore a son.

And the Lord said to me, Call his name, Miha Shalal Hashbaz. Poor child. But if we see the footnote, we see his name means, the prey hastens.

Or in other words, judgment is coming. You can imagine the grandparents arriving on the postnatal ward. Isaiah hands over his son and said, We've settled on a name.

We've gone for the prey hastens. Or for a nickname, judgment is coming on our land. Now this is not a weird family name. That some people may have.

[16:03] But an announcement. Before this little chap can say, Mummy or Daddy, verse 4, The wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the kings of Assyria.

The two nations that were threatening Judah will be dealt with. And through these two boys, these two signs, the Lord is showing that his promise of protection and rescue can be trusted.

Because it happened. Just a couple of years later, in 732 BC, Syria fell to the Assyrians. And just a short while after that, Israel, a northern kingdom, also fell to the Assyrian war machine.

The Lord promised it, and it happened. And the sovereign Lord keeps his promises. I don't know if you've had to provide a character reference for someone recently, or if you have to read them, if you need to employ someone.

The last one I did for someone, one of the questions was, do you consider this person honest and trustworthy? Well, I won't tell you who it was, and I won't tell you what I wrote. But it comes, when it comes to God's character reference, Isaiah wants us to have complete confidence that God is honest, and he is trustworthy completely.

[17 : 28] He promised to protect and rescue his people, and he did. He is the sovereign Lord who keeps his promises. But he is also the sovereign Lord who keeps his promises of punishment, of unbelief.

Chapter 7, verse 9, said, if you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. And when Emmanuel and Baz are announced, at first it looks good news.

The two baddies will be dealt with. But then look at verse 17. The Lord will bring upon you, and upon your people, and upon your father's house, such days has not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria.

Ahaz turned to the king of Assyria, and the irony is that the Lord is going to bring the king of Assyria in judgment.

As one commentator put it, Ahaz is like a mouse threatened by two rats calling on a cat for help. The cat chases away the two rats, but then we're left with a cat and a mouse.

[18 : 44] And we all know that won't end well. That too was fulfilled in 701 BC. Assyria invaded Judah. And we're seeing here this conquest as it is foretold.

And it's really grim. Verse 19. They will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts, the rocks, and all the thorn bushes, and all the pastures.

It will be like a rash of Assyrians everywhere. Not able to move for them. They will get everywhere. And they did. They got right up to Jerusalem.

It will be humiliating. Verse 20 is the picture of all body hair shaved off. At utter shame. It will be destructive.

Verse 21 to 24. Tell of Judah to be so tiny that a herd of three animals, that's not big at all, can feed the nation with some to spare. That they all eat like kings.

[19 : 45] And this cycle is repeated in chapter 8 as the coming Assyrian invasion is likened to a flood sweeping into the land.

And Judah will be in it up to their neck. Well, for us, trusting in the Lord Jesus this morning, then I expect we haven't decided to reject him like Ahaz.

We're believing his promises. We're seeking to follow him daily. And yet it's also true, isn't it, that we have divided hearts which are tempted to trust anything but God's promises.

And so when we're tempted to waver or perhaps tempted to water down our beliefs for the sake of job or friendship security, we are called to keep calm and carry on and carry on not losing heart, trusting in God's promises because the sovereign Lord keeps his promises.

He will build his church. He will grant eternal life to all those who are firm in faith in him. And no one can snatch them out of his hand.

[21 : 02] And finally, we can do that. We can be firm in faith because God's gracious purposes cannot be stopped.

Look back again to chapter 7, verse 3. Isaiah is instructed by God to take his son, son, Sheerjashep, to meet Ahaz at the aqueduct. Why? Well, this is not a take your child to work day, but the meaning of his name is a remnant shall return.

Even as Ahaz rejects God's word, God announces through Isaiah's son that his people won't be completely destroyed.

God is with his people. Now, there's a debate about what the sign of Emmanuel means in Isaiah's day, but there's no debate in its final fulfillment in the birth of the Lord Jesus.

Please turn to Matthew chapter 1, where Matthew picks up Isaiah's words here.

[22 : 18] It's in Matthew chapter 1, it's on page 973. I just want to notice a few things.

Verse 20, an angel comes to Joseph, announce the birth of Jesus. What does he say? Verse 20, do not be afraid, do not fear.

Very similar to God's words that Ahaz in Isaiah 7, aren't they? Do not fear, don't be afraid. And how is Joseph described? Verse 20, the son of David.

God is saying the house of David may be over, it will come to an end, but the line of David will continue and God will remain faithful to his promise to David.

As verse 22 says, all this took place to fulfil what the Lord, and we have Isaiah 7, 14 again. Joseph was to find comfort in the fact that Mary hadn't been unfaithful to him, but that God had been faithful to his people by coming to them in the Lord Jesus.

[23 : 34] All to provide a rescue, a bigger rescue, not from military invasion, but sin and the coming judgment, all if we trust in him.

So what should we do this morning and this week? Well we should do what Ahaz should have done. Ahaz should have found confidence in the word of God. He should have trusted the model of faith, who took God at his word, of a promise of the saviour, responded in trust and obedience. So what will we do when the future of the church looks bleak? Isaiah says keep calm, don't be afraid, don't lose heart.

We're tempted to lose heart when we see people ignoring or mocking God. We need to trust God's promises. Or perhaps for some of us this morning the future looks bleak on a personal level. Maybe health issues with ourselves or close family or friends. Or maybe uncertain work future is unsettling. God invites us to trust in his promises.

[24 : 46] promises. Because the sovereign Lord keeps his promises and his gracious purposes cannot be stopped. For even now God is with us.

He is with us through his spirit of the Lord Jesus. And in those short words, in that name, well that has been the solution to all the fear of God's people throughout every age, to every darkness that may dog us.

Because God himself has promised to be there in all our trouble. In a word, Emmanuel. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are a God who keeps your promises, that you can be trusted in and show us time and time again, that your gracious purposes stand, that nothing can stop what you say coming to pass.

Please help us to trust in your promises this week. Amen.