

God with us

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[0:01] This morning's first reading comes from Isaiah chapter 7, starting at the first verse. 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 Romalia, 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 Shadjashub, 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 and Syria and the son of Romalia.

Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Romalia, 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.

[1:29] Thus says the Lord our God, It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. 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. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria. And the head of Samaria is the son of Romalia.

And 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 as high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to test. 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. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

[2:41] 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 have 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 on 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, they 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 worth a thousand shekels of silver will become briars and thorns.

[4:05] With bow 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, but 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 common characters belonging to Meheshalal Hashbaz, and I will get reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberekiah, 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, Maheshhalal Hashbaz, for before the boy knows how to cry, My father, or my mother, the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria.

The Lord spoke to me again, Because this people has refused the waters of Shilohah that flow gently and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Ramalia, 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.

It will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel. All right, the second reading is taken from 2 Kings, chapter 16, beginning at verse 1 and reading through to verse 20.

[6:17] In the seventeenth year of Pekah, the son of Ramalia, Ahaz, the son of Jotham, king of Judah, began to reign. Ahaz was 20 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for 16 years in Jerusalem.

And 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 way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.

And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree. Then Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Ramalia, king of Israel, came up to wage war on Jerusalem, and they besieged Ahaz, but could not conquer him.

At that time, Rezin, the king of Syria, recovered Elath for Syria, and drove the men of Judah from Elath, and the Edomites came to Elath, where they dwell to this day.

So Ahaz sent messages to Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, saying, I am your servant and your son. 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.

[7:42] 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. When king Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus.

And king Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar and its exact pattern, exact in all its details. And Uriah the priest built the altar in accordance with all that king Ahaz had sent him from Damascus.

So Uriah the priest made it before king Ahaz arrived from Damascus. And when the king came from Damascus, the king viewed the altar. Then the king drew near to the altar and went up on it and burnt his burnt offering and his grain offering and poured his drink offering and threw the blood of his peace offering on the altar.

And the bronze altar that was before the Lord, he removed from the house of the Lord from the place between his altar and the house of the Lord and put it on the north side of his altar.

[9:03] And king Ahaz commanded Uriah the priest, saying, On the great altar, burn the morning offering and the evening grain offering and the king's burnt offering and his grain offering with the burnt offering of all the people of the land and their grain offering and their drink offering.

And throw on it all the blood of the burnt offering and all the blood of the sacrifice. But the bronze altar shall be for me to inquire by. Uriah the priest did all this as king Ahaz commanded.

And king Ahaz cut off the frames of the stands and removed the basin from them. And he took down the sea from off the bronze oxen that were under it and put it on a stone pedestal.

And the covered way for the Sabbath that had been built inside the house and the outer entrance for the king, he caused to go round the house of the Lord because of the king of Assyria.

Now the rest of the acts of Ahaz that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? And Ahaz slept with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the city of David. [10:16] And Hezekiah his son reigned in his place. Great. Well, Franny and Laura, thank you for reading, especially with all those tricky names in there.

Let me just pray for you, for us all, before we start. Lord, thank you that we can come and sit under your word. We pray that we would listen to it, that we would understand it, and that we would apply it to our lives.

Amen. Well, it would be great if you could turn back to the first reading, which is on page 690. We're in Isaiah chapter 7.

And we're moving on to Isaiah chapter 8, verse 10. And you'll see on the back of the service sheet, if it helps you, there are a few headings to show us where we're going, and also some questions, which we may have time to discuss at the end.

But firstly, let's think a bit more about names, because the names are prominent in this chapter. How do you choose a name for a child? I'm told that the top girls' names at the moment are Amelia and Olivia.

[11:32] I'm not sure if there are any Amelia's or Olivia's here. They sound nice names, don't they? But apologies if you are named that. They're quite prosaic if you look at their meanings.

Amelia, I'm told, means work. And Olivia comes from the name Olive Tree. Not very exciting, really. So I looked up my surname as an alternative, Rhys.

It means Mighty Warrior. Now that's more like a name, isn't it? It may be difficult to live up to, but it's better than being named after a tree.

Well, in today's passage, there are three names where the meaning is important, and they tell the story of our passage. So we're going to look first at these names.

Verse 3 in chapter 7, Shir Jashub, means a remnant shall remain, or a remnant shall repent. Then in verse 14, a name more familiar to us, Emmanuel, God is with us.

[12:39] And in chapter 8, in verse 1 and verse 3, we see Mahershalal Hashbaz, meaning swift to the spoil, or the prey hastens.

Not such a common name today. I doubt whether anybody here is called Mahershalal Hashbaz as their middle name. But these names give the essence of the passage. Mahershal Hashbaz, swift to the spoil, indicating the judgment will come.

But Shir Jashub, a remnant shall remain. There is rescue. And that rescue will be through a saviour, Emmanuel, because God is with his people.

And a key verse in this long, detailed section comes in the second half of verse 9 in chapter 7. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.

We'll see that this passage tells us where we should put our faith, where our trust should be, in a trustworthy, constant God, not in a fickle, temporary world.

[13:49] So in the last few weeks, as we've looked at the book of Isaiah, we've seen Isaiah setting out the future for Jerusalem and for God's people. We saw in chapter 1 and 2 that God has seen the faithlessness, the wickedness of his people living in Jerusalem and Judah.

In chapter 3 and 4, we saw that God will judge this people who put their trust in worldly things and not in God. And in chapter 5, we saw the devastating effects of that judgment, how seriously God takes the way his people act.

These are all in general terms that Isaiah was setting out. And in chapter 6, last week, we saw Isaiah call to give this message to the people. And now, in today's passage, in chapters 7 and 8, we see Isaiah's themes applied now to specific historical circumstances.

Today, we get a real life example of what has been described in the first chapters. And it will be a warning for Isaiah's audience then and for us today.

But it also brings a promise. God judges his people, but he also brings rescue and salvation. So first, let's look at the big historical picture of what's happening in our passage.

[15:19] Isaiah has been commissioned in chapter 6, as Bruce showed us last week. He accepted the commission. In verse 8, we read, I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send?

Who will go for us? And Isaiah said, Here am I. Send me. And in chapter 7, here is Isaiah's first task, to speak to Judah's king Ahaz.

Ahaz needs advice because he's under threat. So our second heading takes us on to look at Ahaz's choices.

We're in 8th century BC. For 200 years now, Israel has been split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, including Jerusalem.

And Israel and Syria are both worried about the threat from the Assyrian Empire to the northeast. So we've got Israel here and Syria just above it here and Judah is just to the south of Israel and up here is the mighty Assyria.

[16:31] I realize this is not going to be so helpful for anybody who listens to the recording on the website. But Israel and Syria want to make sure there's no threat from the south, from Judah below them, while they're being threatened by Assyria from the north.

So they want to make a pact with Judah and its king, Jotham. And Jotham refuses to make the pact. So Israel and Syria get together to threaten the smaller state of Judah.

And by this time, Ahaz, aged just 20, has succeeded to the throne of Jotham. We're around 730 BC. So Ahaz is afraid of his close neighbors, Israel and Syria, but he's also afraid of joining them against Assyria, since he worries that he may be joining the losing side.

It's as if Europe is being threatened by the new superpower, China, and France and Germany are worried about this and they tell the new Prime Minister, Theresa May, that UK needs to rejoin Europe or they'll destroy us.

And Theresa May thinks, no, I won't rejoin Europe. The people voted Brexit. But the UK can't go it alone so we'll become a dependency of China. And we'll send them everything in the Bank of England.

[17:56] You can see the analogy falls down at this point because there's probably nothing left in the Bank of England. But the threat to Judah is from the local places but they're even more worried about the superpower beyond it.

And you might think that Ahaz's actions here seem sensible. He's threatened by two strong local countries but he decides to seek help from an even stronger country of Assyria, their new superpower.

And in verse 12 in chapter 7 Ahaz says he will not put the law to the test. At first sight that doesn't seem too bad either, does it?

But the passage we had read to us that Laura read to us from 2 Kings 16 tells us a lot more about Ahaz's actions. He took the treasures of the temple in Jerusalem where God had dwelt with his people and he sent those treasures to Assyria.

He destroyed the altars in the temple and instead built copies of pagan altars and sacrificed on them. So Ahaz's choice is very clearly to turn away from God and to put his faith elsewhere with a new superpower.

[19:10] And if we run the story forward and we see what does happen, the Assyrians destroy Syria and Israel named Ephraim in our passage and Judah becomes a vassal state of Assyria.

Ahaz's son Hezekiah turns to Egypt for help but this fails and Jerusalem is besieged by Assyria but then Assyria itself is destroyed by the new Neo-Babylonian Empire and the people of Judah end up exiled to Babylon in the 6th century BC.

So that's the historical background. Let's look at what's going on for Isaiah and for Ahaz. What mistakes does Ahaz make? What can we learn from them?

So Isaiah is sent to speak to Ahaz tell him to stop worrying and to trust God. The message is delivered at the upper pool a pool of water supplying the city of Jerusalem.

And in verse 4 the message is be careful be quiet do not fear do not let your heart be faint. Syria and Ephraim that is Israel want to conquer you and replace you as king but it will come to nothing.

[20:29] They may seem like raging fires but they are as verse 4 tells Ahaz just two smoldering stumps. And in verse 16 we see that their lands will go on to be deserted.

And Isaiah tells Ahaz thus says the Lord God it shall not stand it will not come to pass. And to emphasize the message Isaiah is to tell Ahaz what will happen in the future. He tells him these threats that seem so enormous will be shattered. And in verse 10 Ahaz is given a second chance.

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz ask a sign of the Lord your God ask anything you want in heaven earth or under the earth you're being threatened by armies God will show you that he is the one to be trusted.

He will give you any proof you want. But Ahaz has decided to reject God's offer so he says no he won't put God to the test.

[21:36] A response that shows again his disobedience shows that Ahaz will not trust God even offered anything. God offers to show that he's more powerful than all these threatening armies that any worldly threat but Ahaz chooses to put his trust in worldly security instead.

So let's move on to our next section to see God's response. In verse 13 Isaiah makes clear that it's not pleasing to God and it's not just Ahaz making the wrong choices and coming under judgment here.

In verse 2 the people were all frightened by the threat and the footnote in the Bible here shows that you the term you in verses 9 and 13 and 14 is plural all the people are called to be firm all in the house of David are weary in God and the judgment is on Ahaz and the people.

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.

The one they trusted for protection will be the instrument of their punishment. Ahaz wouldn't ask for a sign to show his trust so Isaiah says God will give Ahaz and the people a sign.

[23:13] But along with the sign the land will be devastated and the problems for Judah and God's people will come through the Assyrians. God will use their choice as the instrument of his judgment.

And look at the wonderful language that Isaiah uses in verse 18. 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.

So these mighty nations are regarded as tiny insects compared to God, the God that Ahaz has rejected. Assyria will be used like a razor, a tool in God's hand.

And the result of all these wrong choices for Ahaz and for Judah will be hard times for God's people. The judgment that had been described in chapter 5 will take place.

Where there were vines flourishing in the land, they'll be destroyed and thorns will grow. Where there were herds of cattle being farmed, people will have just one or two animals left.

[24:27] The fields that they cultivated will be overgrown. The people will survive, but only just, depending on their last few animals, eating what they can find. But alongside this judgment, God is merciful.

The people will not be completely destroyed. There is hope. Remember the name we saw in verse 3, Sheer Jashub, a remnant shall remain. Hope that was first signaled in the last verse of chapter 6, verse 13, when the oak is felled, the stump remains, and the holy seed is its stump.

God is with us. God gives them in verse 14, is that a virgin or a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel.

God is with us. Now looking at this with New Testament eyes, we see this Emmanuel as looking forward to Jesus, to a virgin giving birth 800 years later, Jesus who gives us salvation, God with us. we can read Isaiah's prophecy knowing Matthew chapter 1 verse 21 when the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and says of his wife Mary, she will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

[25:53] All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said by the prophet. Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel which means God with us.

So Isaiah's words in Matthew's gospel showing us that Jesus is the Emmanuel. So the sign for us to show us that we should put our trust in God not in the world is that he sent his only son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins to take the judgment that should be ours and to die in our place.

But for Judah over 700 years earlier there is no obvious Emmanuel no virgin or maiden who bears him.

And for them Isaiah's prophecy may represent something more like the nation giving birth to the surviving remnant of the people. That seems to fit more with the way Emmanuel is used again in chapter 8 verse 8.

But what's sure is the truth of the meaning of the name that it shows that God is still with his people. He is in control throughout these hard times throughout this judgment.

[27:10] What's also sure is that we can see God moving through history and providing us with a saviour if we put our trust in him if we're firm in our faith.

So Isaiah prophesized that the people will come through with God's covenant promises. God's promise to Moses was to bring the people into a land flowing with milk and honey.

Here they are in the promised land and even in these hard times with the crops turned to thorns curds and honey are what the people eat. God is trustworthy.

He doesn't forget his promises. So chapter eight then goes on to tell us some more details of the way these things will happen. This judgment through the Assyrians and the name of Maher Shalal Hashbaz swift to the spoil reflecting judgment.

In chapter seven you remember the offer to trust God was made at the quiet waters of the upper pool but Ahaz rejected that offer. The reminder in chapter eight verse five is that because they refused the gentle waters of Shiloah peaceful existence with God now they'll suffer the dramatic consequences of this rejection.

[28:37] The mighty and many rivers of the Assyrians flooding over the land the people nearly drowning up to their necks verse eight. The Assyrian flood is commanded by God but again it's not complete destruction.

God promised that wouldn't happen again after Noah and the flood. A remnant is saved and the water stops at their necks and the Assyrians who've been used for God's purpose are now destroyed.

Despite their armor verse nine their armor is shattered. They'll come to nothing. They will not stand because God is in control.

God is with his people through all the suffering. And our passage today ends in chapter eight verse nine and ten. Leaders, tyrants, bosses, parents, they may look powerful.

They may think they decide the future. But God is in control and he will be with his people. So it's a dramatic account bringing Isaiah's warnings from the first five chapters into real history.

[29:47] So let's just reflect. Where did Ahaz go wrong? What message does this have for us? How should it influence our decisions? Ahaz was under real pressure.

A small country threatened by three large powers around him. Everything looks bleak. Now individually we're not likely to be threatened by countries in the same way.

But sometimes the world is a difficult and scary place. We may be threatened by circumstances. people in power, bosses at work, it may be money or relationship problems or illness.

Sometimes it's not an obvious threat but a temptation, an invitation to choose the world instead of God. It may come from friends who seem convincing.

Why don't you join us in doing whatever? Something that you know in your heart is wrong. And the easy response, the one that makes life easy, may be to go along with them.

[30:52] It may be easiest to take the worldly option. That's what Ahaz does. That's where he puts his faith. That's what brings disastrous consequences for him and his people.

So let's look a little more at this key verse in the passage. Look back with me at chapter 7, the second half of verse 9. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.

Ahaz puts his faith in the world around him. Isaiah is challenging us. Where will we put our faith? Where's our confidence when the world threatens or when the world seems attractive?

Where's our safety? How does our faith affect decisions we make on our job, our mortgage, our education, our friends? Are we prepared to trust God when the worldly wisdom would be to go with the flow?

We prepare to be different. The world will fail us as Assyria failed Ahaz. So banks, education, jobs, friends, they'll all turn to nothing.

[31:59] But God is trustworthy, firm, and will not fail us. And this phrase in verse 9 is picked up in the New Testament. For example, in 1 Peter chapter 5, we read, be sober-minded, be watchful.

Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith. So the pressure may not be threats, it may be temptation.

But the response is the same. Be firm in your faith, trust God, choose to follow his way. Your faith is a gracious gift from God. Why would you trust anything else?

So the pragmatic worldview would have been for Ahaz to pick Assyria, or even to pick Israel and Syria against Assyria. But Isaiah shows that none of them can be trusted with our salvation.

They're just used in God's plan, and they can be destroyed at his whim. We've got less excuse than Ahaz. For us, Emmanuel has come.

[33:06] the sign is there for all of us to see. God is with us. Jesus has died for us and left his Holy Spirit with us until he comes again. If you're here today and you've not put your faith in God, then perhaps this is the chance to take an opportunity to talk to somebody around you after.

You might like to find out more by taking part in our Christianity Explored courses that go on, where you can ask more questions about what firm faith looks like.

So back to the names. There will be a judgment, but a remnant will remain. This remnant from the days of Judah has grown today to a worldwide church of over two billion people following Jesus.

The remnant of God's people who are saved through the death of Jesus. God is with us. Our salvation comes through his grace.

We just need to have faith. So for us, the challenge, for future challenges and decisions that we face, will we be guided by worldly pressures, our safety, our self-worth, what people around think of us?

[34:20] Will we look to follow God's plan and to listen to verse 9? If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.

Try you Don't have tongue allowing years to come on to ■■ in love. How to do I love you?

Do you understand, how to flick a o into Maybe Demount she will be ooh or