

12/22/2020 - Isaiah 7:1-17

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Date: 23 December 2019

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- [0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Ottawa.
- You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. Today again, if you are new visiting with us, I'm really glad you're here.
- Thanks for taking some time to be with us, for taking a risk, coming with whomever invited you. We're glad that you've come this morning. And I would love to get some time to just meet you and connect with you.
- I'd love to do that after the service. So find me afterwards. I'll be at the table snacking. So this has been a significant week in the life of our nation.
- Some people have experienced this week and all the news surrounding this week as the great crisis of our time.
- [1 : 0 3] Thoughtful and intelligent and faithful Christians are publicly, and I'm sure privately and probably on social media, disagreeing about how we as Christians ought to think about it all.
- And so the question sits before us, what is it that we are supposed to do in a crisis? What do we do in crisis times? Now, I don't think this passage talks particularly about the political mechanisms that are happening right now, but it does talk about crisis.
- Isaiah 7 is a really good passage to consider because the crisis of Isaiah's generation has broken out. Now, remember, here's a little bit of background. You have to know the background to understand this passage.
- You remember King David, the great king of Israel? He had a son, Solomon. And after the reign of Solomon, when Solomon died, the kingdom broke apart. It was about the year 940 B.C.
- That'll be significant in a minute. About that year, the ten northern tribes in Israel, they broke away. They broke away from loyalty to David and his kingdom, away from God's covenant people, and they created their own country.
- [2 : 1 4] They called it Israel, and they had their own capital, a city called Samaria. And they left the southern, two tribes, Judah, and they called it Judah.
- And they had their own country. They were still faithful to David's kingdom, still faithful to David's throne, and their capital was in Jerusalem.
- So they had spent about 200 years before this passage comes up. 200 years, they'd been like a super dysfunctional family.
- You know, like a family that's just had this massive break apart, and yet they still interact sometimes, and they still have to go to Christmas together, and they still have to do certain things together, but they hate each other.
- That's basically what you have in Israel for 200 years. And that's what's happening when Isaiah comes on the scene, and this crisis arises. And the crisis is in the form of this other country, Assyria.

[3 : 11] Assyria is like the new kid on the block. They're arising. They're kind of flexing their muscles. They're the new bully in town. They're going around. They're gobbling up all these little small countries.

So Israel, up in the north, they go and they sign a pact, a defensive treaty with one of their neighbors, Syria, different from Assyria.

This is very confusing, I realize. And they create this alliance. We'll just call them the alliance. And the alliance then comes to Judah, the southern kingdom, to the king who's there, whose name is Ahaz, and they say, Ahaz, we want you to join with us.

We're going to make one big alliance to make ourselves safe from the danger that is Assyria. Ahaz doesn't like them. He says no. And so they say, well, you know what?

The alliance, we're bigger than you. And they come and they march down to Jerusalem and they're going to force, they're going to depose Ahaz and they're going to put a puppet king in to strengthen their defenses.

[4 : 13] That's the historical context of what's happening here. This was the crisis of Ahaz's kingship. So let me read a couple of verses here from Isaiah chapter 7.

In the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezan, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Ramalia, the king of Israel.

See, this is the alliance, Syria and Israel, came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it. But they could not yet mount an attack against it. When the house of David, this is Judah, this is Ahaz, when they were told, Syria is in league with Ephraim, that's just 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.

And the Lord said to Isaiah the prophet, go out to meet Ahaz, you and Sheir, your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field.

Okay, let's stop there. So the great crisis of his generation has come and he's the king. What's he going to do in this crisis? His greatest fears were being realized.

[5 : 25] There's nothing worse than being a king and knowing that this army has the power and the will to defeat you and to destroy your people. He was vulnerable and he was desperate. They're going to be demolished.

And so Ahaz, as the king, was scared and he was desperate. Now, that should be a familiar feeling to you. Fear and desperation because the reality is crisis will come to each of our lives.

Sooner or later, you will experience a crisis whether that's the crisis of a job loss, the crisis of a cancer diagnosis, of a spouse leaving, the death of a loved one, legal trouble, an automobile accident, something that is life-altering will touch you.

Maybe not all the time, but even we most of the time experience these more mundane sense of crises as well in our lives. The crisis of, you know, failing in a really public way, whether it's in your job or in a community, going through a season of depression and anxiety, the persistence of sin that you just hate that is destroying your relationships, sins of lust and of greed and of envy and of gossip, the kinds of things that destroy a community that you're in.

Those are kind of the mundane realities and yet we live in these places of crisis all the time. You see, the season of Advent that we're in demands that you and I look at the crisis of our, the crises of our lives straight in the face.

[7 : 08] It demands that we look at the darkness. It demands that we look at the power of sin in this world that is not just out there with all the people we disagree with, but it's in here.

It's among us. It's in our own souls. And when you get to that place of crisis like Ahaz, you ask the exact same question that he did. If I trust God, what's going to happen?

How do I know that if I trust God, things are going to be okay? I mean, that's the question that confronts Ahaz right here. Things look bad. He is desperate and he wonders if he can trust God.

Doesn't that sound familiar? If you've not been in that place, you are not dealing with the reality of the world. That place of desperation, grasping at straws, grasping at anything to provide stability and safety.

So what does God have to say to Ahaz and to you in the midst of crisis? Whether that's a national crisis or a personal crisis, a major crisis or just a minor one.

[8 : 14] Here's the key. The key is right here in verse 3. And the Lord said to Isaiah, go to meet Ahaz. The key to this whole thing is that God calls out to Ahaz in the very middle of his crisis.

In the time when Ahaz felt most vulnerable, most at risk, that he had the least idea of what to do and he was most desperate, God reaches out and calls him.

It's grace. Grace is present in the midst of the crisis. That's where we have to start. Okay? There's actually a couple of things that are really cool here about God's grace in the midst of the crisis.

First is Isaiah's son. So God tells Isaiah to have these children and then gives them peculiar names. They become signs of what God wants to teach the people.

So his first son here is Sha'ir Dishub, which means a remnant will return. His son was a picture of a promise.

[9 : 18] God's promise was things may get bad for my people, but there's hope. There's an end to the story that you can't see yet. As bad as things get, I won't give up on my people.

So his son goes with him to communicate this to Ahaz. The second thing is where they meet. Did you see that? I mean, this is confusing. At the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field.

Oh yeah, sure, I know where that is. No, what that's referring to is Ahaz, when he saw these armies, the alliance, coming down for him, he knew his history. He knew that Egypt had in previous years come up to attack Jerusalem.

They had surrounded it. They had started a siege on Jerusalem and they were able to cut off the water inside Jerusalem. And Ahaz knew that. And so he built this underground aqueduct to be able to withstand a siege.

So this is really interesting. Ahaz, in his desperation, is getting defensive. He's preparing for an invasion. And in the very place that Ahaz is trying to control his world, that he's trying to become defensive, that he's trying to figure out and scheme towards his own salvation, that's the exact place where God sends Isaiah to meet him.

[10 : 40] You know what that means? What that means is that in the place of your greatest desperation, of all of your trying, of all of your scheming, God is going to meet you there.

There is grace in the midst of your crisis, is what this passage is showing us. Sending Isaiah there is like a message to Ahaz saying, Ahaz, I have not forgotten you.

I haven't left you alone. I know what crisis you're in. I know that the alliance is coming and I'm not leaving you alone. See, that's the beginning.

If you want to be able to live in the midst of the crisis of your life, the crisis of your world, you have to begin there. That God's grace shows up in the very midst of crisis.

You have to begin to look for it. You have to begin to find it there. That's the beginning. Okay, so what does God tell Ahaz to do? This is fantastic.

[11 : 45] Okay, verse 4. And say to Ahaz, be careful, be quiet, do not fear. Don't let your heart grow faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands.

That the fierce anger of Rezin and Samaria and the son of Ramalia, the alliance. Because Syria with Ephraim and the son of Ramalia has devised evil against you, saying, let us go up to 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, it shall not come to pass for the head of Syria is Damascus. The head of Damascus is Rezin. 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 Ramalia.

And then he says this, if you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. God's message, we can summarize it here is, Ahaz, shut up, be quiet, stop what you're doing, watch for what I'm about to do.

That's what he's supposed to do. Stop. The alliance, God says, is nothing. In fact, he uses that word, they're smoldering stumps. If you've been with us while we've been looking at these prophecies of Isaiah and Advent, that stump language will mean a lot to you.

[13 : 13] In fact, God did have a plan. Five years later, Assyria would come over and they would destroy the alliance. And that's when Israel gets taken off into captivity.

They're no more. And Assyria comes down and they camp right outside of Jerusalem. And you know what God does? He sends His angel who goes through the camp of the Assyrians and He utterly destroys it.

He kills thousands of soldiers. And so the Assyrians, they wake up the next morning and they're utterly destroyed. And they get up and they head back to Assyria. They go back home. And on the way, a bunch of the servants of the king of Assyria assassinate Him.

God rescues His people. God had a plan to rescue His people the entire time. Isaiah 37 tells us about that.

But see, God's message is clear. The alliance is doomed because they had turned away from God and so now, Judah, Ahaz, you've got the choice to make. What are you going to do? Are you going to listen to God or are you going to follow your own way?

[14 : 18] If you're not firm in faith, you won't be firm at all. See, when God arrives with His grace, there's an implied question. What are you going to do about it? Are you going to listen to God's grace?

Are you going to submit to His ways? Are you going to calm your own heart? Are you going to turn in faith or are you not? Are you going to keep trying to fix your life by yourself?

Are you going to persist in your own schemes to save yourself? One of my friends, he likes to call this self-salvation strategies. I really like that language. When things get bad, what are you going to do?

Are you going to try to figure out a strategy to save yourself or are you going to allow God to be the God He says He is? So, verse 10. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz.

Ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be as deep as Sheol, that's the grave, or as high as heaven. So, what is God doing there? He's saying, Ahaz, I'm asking you to stop.

[15 : 22] I know that's scary for you. I know you're not sure if that's the way you should go, but here's what I'm going to do. I want to offer you the opportunity for me to do a sign. I'll do anything you want. Any kind of miracle.

And why does God do that? Well, He's doing that because He wants Ahaz to be confident that the way that he is called to go is the right way. This is a sign of confirmation.

He's not trying to convince Ahaz to like, He's not confronting his doubt or anything like that. He's trying to give him a sign of confirmation. Man, wouldn't that be great? When I was, when Natalie and I were dating, I was terrified to get married.

I mean terrified. You know, my parents were going through a divorce. I just wasn't sure. Like, you know, am I going to be able to hold up my end of the bargain? Like, what's going to happen in 15 or 20 years?

I love her. What's going to happen in 15 or 20 years? I didn't know the right way to go. I was desperate that God would give me a sign. If God had said that to me, hey, pick a sign, any sign.

[16 : 27] I'll show you that you're walking on the right path. I would have loved it. So what does Ahaz do? It's fascinating. Verse 13. Sorry, verse 12.

But Ahaz said, I will not ask. I will not put the Lord to the test. Okay. Ahaz didn't want the sign. He decided he didn't need it.

He decided that, you know, it wasn't important for him to have a sign. That's really interesting. Why didn't he do that? And he actually uses really pious language here, right?

He says, you know, I'm not going to put God to the test. He doesn't remember that Gideon, God gave Gideon a sign to confirm in the exact same way that God had done this before, and that God was actually offering to him.

God was saying, hey, just let me show you. But Ahaz uses this pious language to reject God's grace. What's he doing?

[17 : 30] Well, I think he's refusing to deal with the reality of the situation. I mean, God is saying to him, look, you are not strong enough to meet this challenge. You can't defeat this enemy.

You don't have the power to win. All of your defensive schemes are worthless. What you need to do is stop, turn to me, watch me work, and watch me bring salvation.

But Ahaz couldn't bring himself to do it. Why? Why couldn't he do that? Well, I think about this. I wonder if Ahaz realized, you know, if I go down this road with God, there's going to be strings attached.

If I let God do this, you know what's going to happen is he's going to ask me to do something I don't want to do. He's going to demand obedience.

He's going to demand that I follow in his ways. You know what? I'm going to actually lose control in this. I don't know what's going to happen if I follow God, but I'm sure it's not as good as the schemes that I can come up with on my own.

[18 : 37] He's using pious language, super spiritual language, to deny God's grace. How familiar does that sound?

Using religiosity, using God's words to deny God. I had this college student when I was working at the University of Texas and she came to a lot of our stuff and she was purported to be a Christian, but in reality, what she was doing was trying everything to get away from God.

She did not want to have to follow the demands that came with being a Christian, but she would use all kinds of religious language. In fact, she went to Bible studies all the time.

She was the one who served and did all kinds of stuff. She filled her world with religious stuff in order to actually avoid having to deal with God.

She worked so hard to make her reputation to be unassailable so that when she decided to do the things that she really wanted to do, nobody could question it.

[19 : 54] I think we do this kind of thing a lot. You know, we use sophisticated language. You know, we use like intellectual sophistication. You know, I don't want to deal with those fundamentalist people, those fundamentalist arguments, and so we kind of pull ourselves away intellectually.

We do that in all kinds of ways. I think you should think about some of that. our reluctance to fully give ourselves over to God even when we sound pious.

Okay. So, Ahaz is in this crisis and God is asking him to follow. He's not doing it. So how does God respond? How does God deal with the failures when we find ourselves in these crises?

Jesus? Well, he shows up in verse 13. Here's what God does. And he said, here then, okay, now you've rejected me.

Here's this. Oh, house of David, is it too little for you to weary men that you weary my God also? Do you notice the change in language there? Look back up at verse 11. Ask a sign of the Lord your God.

[21 : 10] And he says here that you weary my God. What's happening there is that he's saying, Ahaz, you've been rejected. You've been passed by. I'm not rejecting my people, Judah, my covenant people, but you're out.

You haven't come to me in faith. You haven't turned over to me. And what this represents is a complete degradation of the interior world that God has created, Ahaz to have.

You see, when we turn away from following God in faith, even in the hardest moments, we actually deny the work that he could be doing in us.

We do it to our own detriment. Ahaz is becoming less capable of leading. He's becoming less profitable as the leader of his people because he's denying the way that God has done this.

Every time you find yourself in a crisis and you have the opportunity to stop, to turn to God, to seek his word, to hear his voice in your life, to see his salvation, and you choose not to, what happens?

[22 : 22] You become less, less able to live the way that he's called you to be. You know, when we move in faith, God shapes us.

He shapes our interior lives. He reorients us for him. Okay. So the question is, will we stop in the midst of crisis and watch God work and attend to his words and listen for his voice?

Ray Ortlund is a scholar that I really like and he has lots to say about this passage, but here's one, here I'm going to paraphrase something he said. He said this, what we should see from Ahaz is that God is ironically attracted to weakness.

God is attracted to need and to dependence and to trust and to honesty. God is repelled by our self-assured pride. He's repelled by our self-assured pride.

And the question is, are you willing to give up your salvation schemes in order to find the life that he has provided for you? What's the sign that he's going to give?

[23 : 32] Verse 14, Behold, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Or therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgins shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel.

Let's stop there. So the sign is that a young woman will conceive and bear a son and that son will be the confirmation of God's promise, of his covenant to David's kingdom forever.

Now this passage gets fulfilled in two specific ways. In Isaiah's day, it actually gets fulfilled in just a couple of years. The next chapter, chapter 8, Isaiah has a second son and his name is this.

Isaiah's got a problem with names. Here's the name. Meher Shalal Hashbaz. Terrible name. It means, what it means is swiftly.

As in, defeat is coming swiftly for the alliance. And within five years, that's what was going to happen. But Judah was going to be spared. The enemy was defeated because God was with his people.

[24 : 38] That's what Emmanuel means. That's what we just talked about with our kids. Could there be any more powerful reality than what we just told our kids? That God is with us.

God is near to us. That's the promise here. But it wasn't just fulfilled in Isaiah's day. Matthew picks this up. The Gospel writer Matthew picks it up in the passage that Julie read earlier.

That he sees this fulfilled in the pregnancy of Mary and the birth of Jesus Christ. That Isaiah's son was a sign that God would be at work and protect David's king in that day.

And Jesus is the greater and the permanent sign that God would be with his people in all times and in all places. Fleming Rutledge is a scholar and she says this, it's the utter audacity of the Advent proclamation.

The audacity of the Advent proclamation is that God would be with his people. That in the midst of the crisis in which you live, God is with you.

[25 : 43] Now that doesn't make things easy. That doesn't solve our problems. The fact that God is with us doesn't tell you how to think about our politics.

It doesn't tell you how to deal with the spouse that has left you. It doesn't tell you how to deal with cancer. It doesn't tell you the next steps. But it tells you, it reorients the way that you approach those crises.

It says, first, you are a child of God. You are his. You cannot on your own solve your problems. You must have your heavenly father solve them for you.

It reorients you first and then says, now based on who you are, there is a way to begin to move forward in faith by listening to him, by seeking him, by following him.

This is the foolishness of Advent. This is the foolishness of a baby being born in a manger. What Christians are saying is absolutely ridiculous.

[26 : 45] What we're saying is that Jesus Christ, as a baby, represented the fullness of God's presence in this world for all time in such a way that it is a more powerful and palpable reality than the political conversations.

It is a greater reality than your health or your unhealth. It's a greater reality than the stability of your relationships. It's a greater reality in this world than the numbers in your bank account.

That God's presence with us has a palpable reality. That's what God wanted A has to see. Yeah, I know the circumstances look terrible.

I know it looks bleak. I know this crisis feels like it's crashing in on you. I know that you're anxious. I know that you're fearful. I know that you don't know what to do. But I'm giving you the thing that you need.

God is with you. I think we need the audacity and the foolishness of Christmas.

[27 : 57] I think we need to be reoriented. If you're anything like me, you spend most of your time figuring out your own self-salvation strategies.

Figuring out how can I make this circumstance right instead of stopping reorienting to the fact that God is with us in submitting to Him.

God is with us.