

The Sufficiency of an Alliance with God

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn our minds this evening to Isaiah chapter 14. Isaiah 14 and that passage we read near the end of the chapter. Verse 32, the last verse of the chapter.

What will one answer? The messengers of the nation. And that question is then answered, the Lord has found its eye on. And in her the afflicted of his people find refuge.

A liking for history is a distinct advantage when it comes to Bible study. If you've not liked history or studying history or just reading history, it's more difficult perhaps to actually focus on what are sometimes very long historical narratives in the Bible.

But when you come to a passage like this, you have to know something of the history behind it in order to appreciate the meaning of it spiritually. In fact, every narrative in the Bible, even if it's not a prophecy like this or in the prophets, every historical narrative, every account that you find of history in the Bible, is itself designed to bring forth for us a spiritual meaning.

And it's one of the great challenges and yet one of the great necessities in studying our Bibles that we need to take from these historical passages things which are important for ourselves spiritually to apply to our own lives, to our own age, to the circumstances in which we live.

[1 : 3 6] Because they're not just in the Bible so that we'll know something of history full stop. They're there so that as we know the history as it's recorded in the Bible, that we'll bring from that those things which the Lord himself is setting out in his recording of it, in his word, as being useful and meaningful and precious to us in the unfolding of our own lives and in the setting in which he has placed us in the history or development of the world.

So that's one of the needs, of course, for this passage. We need to get behind this passage to appreciate something of the history or the gist of it, anyway, without going into too much detail, in order to try then and bring out something of the meaning of it and how it applies to ourselves.

So what do we find in this passage? How do we get some spiritual benefit from this passage tonight? Which talks about King Ahaz and Philistia, which, of course, is the nation of the Philistines.

And then there are some mysterious references there to the serpent's root. From the serpent's root will come forth another and its fruit will be a flying, fiery serpent. And then question, verse 32, what will one answer the messengers of the nation?

What nation? What's he talking about? And why is it answered in the way that it is? Well, the first thing that you find in the passage, we can call an invitation to join forces.

[3 : 0 8] An invitation from Philistia, or from envoys or diplomats, you can imagine just as you find today, diplomats going from one country to another, especially in times of crisis.

Same thing in Isaiah today. It's always been like that in the history of the world. These diplomats had come from Philistia, the land of the Philistines, to the nation of Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem, at a time of crisis.

Because you notice the reference to the time at which this happened. In the year that King Ahaz died, came this oracle. The oracle is set amongst the other oracles there, or an oracle is really just a saying that's come from the Lord to the prophet that he's now conveying to the people.

It's all the way through. These nations are mentioned in these chapters in Isaiah. This is set in that context of the year. That King Ahaz died.

And that's important because King Ahaz, as we read just briefly in 2 Chronicles, was a bad king. Ahaz was an unbelieving king. Ahaz was a king who introduced many evil practices in the nation.

[4 : 29] Not only that, but Ahaz was a king who entered into a political alliance with Assyria. And in order to try and stem the advance of Assyria, who was then the major power growing in the world, the great superpower of the time, of course it came like every other superpower to be replaced this time by Babylon.

But Ahaz lived at the time when Assyria was powerful and taking over other nations. And he entered into a political alliance or a kind of special relationship with Assyria.

But that meant giving away the sovereignty of Judah. All the way up to the time of Ahaz's reign, there had been crises before in the history of Judah and under its kings.

But this was the first time ever, since it was established as a people, as a nation under God, that Judah actually gave away its independence or its sovereignty to a foreign power.

Now spiritually, of course, that was hugely significant to a man like Isaiah. Because to a man like Isaiah, the king of Israel, the king of Judah, was the Lord, not the king of Assyria.

[5 : 52] And we'll see that that's really the burden of this passage, especially as it ends, that having the Lord as their God is enough for any nation or for any individual without the need for an alliance with any other power.

So at that time, King Ahaz died. This evil king, this king that had led the country astray. And it seems that Philistia wanted to take advantage of that event.

And with an alliance with Egypt, if you read elsewhere, you can find that Egypt was involved. There were a whole lot of things happening in those days, just as you find today in the world and in that same part of the world.

Alliances and breakups and fights and all of these tensions. It's been there all the way through history. It's nothing new. But when King Ahaz died, the Philistine power thought, this is our opportunity.

We'll enter into an alliance with Egypt and with Judah and we'll take on Assyria together. That was the background to it.

[7 : 04] That's why they came and that's what you find in verse 32. What will one answer the messenger of the nation? That's what the diplomats of Philistia are waiting for. They've come with this proposal.

Join with us against Assyria. Cast off your relationship, your alliance with Assyria. Enter into an alliance with us and with Egypt and together we'll be able not only to withstand the might of Assyria, but we'll get our independence back.

We'll get our sovereignty back. We'll be the nations again that we want to be. And they had a confidence. That's the second note you find in this invitation to join forces with them.

They had a confidence that Judah really would be pretty much unable to resist their invitation or their overture. Because you notice there in verse 29 again, Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of you, that the rod that struck you is broken, for from the serpent's root will come forth another.

Now what does it mean? The rod that struck you, that struck you Philistines, is don't rejoice because that rod is broken. It's not talking about King Ahaz. Ahaz wasn't powerful.

[8 : 21] Nothing like as powerful as to strike the Philistines. But who was the great king who established the kingdom by overcoming the Philistines?

Who in the Bible, in the Old Testament, especially, more than any other king, is the one that established himself as the most famous of all Israel's kings.

It was, of course, King David. And in the history of David's career, David's establishing of himself as king and the nation under him, you'll often find references to the Philistines and overcoming the Philistines and defeating the Philistines.

That's the rod that struck the Philistines. And the nation that David, you might say, established under his kingship. There's now a pathetic, weak, hardly recognizable nation compared to what he had.

What he's saying is that rejoice not, Philistia, that the rod that struck you is broken. The power of the nation that once smoked you and defeated you, it's broken.

[9 : 30] It's not what it used to be. It doesn't have the same influence it once had. It's not able to stand against the likes of you Philistines now, the way it was in the day of David.

But don't rejoice at that. Isaiah is saying, from God to these diplomats of the Philistines. Why must they not rejoice at that? Because although Judah is down, they're not dead.

From the serpent's root will come forth another, and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent. And the firstborn of the poor will graze, and the needy lie down in safety.

Now you notice there are elements of that that are very like the language of the days of Moses and the exodus from Egypt and Israel's time in Egypt.

It talks there about serpents and the rod of Moses as it became a serpent. The firstborn is what God called his people Israel in the time that they were actually bonded in Egypt.

[10 : 34] That's the message he sent to Pharaoh. Let my firstborn go. Israel is my firstborn. And if you don't, I will strike your firstborn.

Which is what happened. So you see, Isaiah is taking us back to that language of those times. Because there's a connection there with the days of Moses and the people of Israel and Egypt leading up to and including the exodus.

What is the connection? Well, you look at them in Egypt and you say, how on earth are these people ever going to come to be a means of fulfilling the promises of God? They can't actually look after themselves in Egypt.

They're the slaves of Egypt. They're actually in bondage to the Egyptians. They're downtrodden. They're the poorest of the poor. But Isaiah remembers what happened.

And Isaiah is taking his courage and his encouragement from what happened then. And he's putting that to the people of his own day and he's putting that to these diplomats of the Philistines and he's saying to them, yes, this is how it is at the moment.

[11 : 44] But we have a God who can change things and will do because his promises will be fulfilled. Judah is down but Judah is not dead.

But Judah is not finished. Because Judah's God is the Lord who has founded Zion. So now what's the application of this invitation to join forces?

This invitation of the Philistines to the people of Judah and Isaiah's people to join forces with them. That's the history. That's the actual situation in history that's behind it.

But what's the application of it to ourselves? How can we apply that and what does it mean spiritually or in our own believing experience? Well, begin by thinking of the church at times when it is weak.

When it is not able to progress or to see the gospel progress through it in the way that it once did or in the way that it would like to do.

[12 : 52] And that's really where you and I are today. A church that's not very influential. A people that although we pray that it will be otherwise and do hope that it will turn out to be otherwise we have to admit the fact that there is a very definite gospel weakness in our day.

And we pray for God to work and for God to change that and even in the meantime to be busy changing lives and changing ourselves too. But when you look at it in comparison to other times and as you see the ascendancy of those powers around us of secularism of worldliness of all of these things we have to acknowledge that we are weak.

And the danger is that we make alliances in times of weakness that would turn out to be rather foolish. like we read there about Ahaz this is what we read there when Ahaz had in times of his distress he became yet more faithless to the Lord.

You see distress and a weakness that comes into a lot in providence doesn't necessarily mean we are going to then actually turn to the Lord. That we are going to become more faithful to the Lord as our distresses as a people as a nation or as a church increase.

In Ahaz's day it was the opposite. The more he got into distress the less he looked to the Lord the more faithless he became. What sort of alliances are we talking about?

[14 : 40] Well there are some fairly obvious ones. temptations to make alliances with other religions other forms of religious thought we think that that may be the way to advance the gospel to put more people who are believers in inverted commas even if they are different religions together that will make a more powerful front against secularism or non-religious ideas.

Obviously that is something we dismiss very readily. but we could make an alliance with the world. We could actually seek to like Ahaz looking at the nations and the gods of the nations and how these things worked for them we could import that into the church.

We could actually devise our methods and our strategies of evangelism and outreach and Bible teaching and fellowships and all the rest of it bringing in the world as a pattern and basing the church's activities on that.

But you know yourselves that too would be fruitless and very soon would be shown up to be a disadvantage to the gospel. You don't actually look at how the world does things and then try and fit the church's way of doing things onto that.

You have to take your methods and your strategies from the Bible from the teaching of the Bible just as much as anything else. But there's another alliance that's perhaps a lot more subtle not as easy to see but still and that makes it even more dangerous perhaps that we set up that sort of alliance and that's an alliance with new ideas if we can call it generally new ideas because there is an understandable sense of frustration when the world becomes more worldly and less educated in the things of the Bible such as you're seeing nowadays when children are no longer educated the way they used to be in homes in general or in school in terms of Bible teaching and so on when you're facing a great deal out there of ignorance of the Bible it's understandable that people would want to try and redefine find new terms and descriptions for things that the Bible speaks about that are important and basic and fundamental to our understanding of the gospel take the word sin now there is a tendency to try and present to the world a very understandable tendency on the part of some who are actually reformed theologians and it's not because they're against the church or against the gospel but there's a sense in which they're very well meaningly and sincerely want to try and present the gospel as clearly as possible to the world out there but there is a limit and once you actually start defining sin by reducing your emphasis for example on the law of God then you're beginning to lose the balance that the Bible itself brings out because the Bible brings out a very important balance or relationship between sin and the law of God in fact you cannot really define sin without bringing alongside of it in the balance the Bible does the law of God because our sin as the catechism puts it is twofold it's a want of conformity to the law it's a failure to measure up to the law in other words or it's a transgression at the same time a transgression a breaking of the law of God so the two things come into it and you cannot really define sin in the biblical sense without bringing alongside of in balance a reference to the law of God or take another emphasis a book that

[18 : 45] I haven't read yet but just read a review of it today a book by N.T. Wright an important modern author whose writings are stimulating and a concern to present the gospel again to the world in which we live today and a book that he wrote more recently called How God Became King the title itself is rather intriguing and perhaps it's phrased in order to just generate some thought or some questions How God Became King poses the question what does he mean became king does he mean that he wasn't at one time king and became king well what he's saying in the book apparently according to the reviewer is that we've not really understood the gospels up to now the four gospels Matthew Mark Luke John because according to Wright what they really bring across more than anything else is that

God became king through Christ and through the work of Christ and the ascendancy of Christ and the session of Christ at the right hand of God God established his kingship and God became king through that now you might say well what's wrong with that well in a sense there's nothing wrong with that but if you actually say well he wasn't really king before that or if you say that God became king and that's the most important thing or theme in these gospels well you're then asking why do the gospels then all of them give far more space to the death of Christ than to his becoming king through his ascension you see there's the balance again we don't deny that Christ is king and that the sense in which Christ entered into his kingship as the

God man having accomplished his work on earth as he went to sit at God's right hand or was exalted by God to the right hand of God we don't deny the truth of that but if that's brought out in a way to reduce the emphasis or try and reduce the emphasis you find in the gospels on the kind of death that God died and that death being explained again more by Paul as a substitutionary atoning propitiated death where he bore the penalty of his people's sins you've lost the balance and the fact that the kingship of Christ is being described is really something that actually hides another very important doctrine the kind of death that Jesus died the place of Christ's death in the scheme of God's salvation just the other day across a studio in tongue at

Callum Martin studio he's got recording stuff in the studio just like any other studio you have a mixing desk there you have all of these controls these slider controls that control each and every voice in the recording and the instruments and everything there's a whole row of them there and it's fascinating to watch the person that can work that which of course I can't but as one slider is put up more than the others it brings out whatever that particular track is if it's a musical instrument that's what you hear most and the rest just goes into the background if it's one person's voice out of maybe six voices that's the person's voice you hear the more you slide that one up and the rest actually go down now it's like that was Bible Bible doctrine with Bible truth God has placed in the mixing desk if you like of the Bible every topic in its own place and in relation to the others and he has actually put them in a way that has set these sliders if you like on the mixing desk and if we try and manipulate them so that we put one up too high and another down too low we've lost the balance we've lost this wonderful combined sound of biblical truth and it will either have one note that's far too strong compared to others or one note that's drastically reduced and others exalted that's what I mean by making an alliance with a very sincere intention to bring the gospel to a lost world that really understands all too little if nothing of the bible what we cannot do is redefine things in a way that loses these balances now please don't misunderstand me I'm not in any way suggesting that we don't need to be very clear that we don't need to use language that people understand that we don't need to have an alliance with modern terminology in order to present the truth of the bible to this unbelieving age we need as much of that as possible but not to the extent where we end up redefining the most important elements in the bible and in its teaching with the impression that that itself will actually make the breakthrough into the world we face remember friends while that is necessary as far as it can be the proper kind of language and the interaction that is necessary and lawful for us with unbelieving people there is only one thing that will make the breakthrough and that is the power of

God himself you can bring a person time and time and time again to the brink of believing to the brink of repentance to the brink of accepting Christ and we have to do that it's our duty to do that it's our responsibility it's our privileges to lead people along to Christ but the will to receive him the opening of the heart to love him the opening of the mind to truly have the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ shine into it that is the work of God let's not try and take over that aspect of it however much we need to be concerned and whole hearted and as zealous as possible in our efforts to bring the gospel to the world so it's an invitation to join forces that's something you're going to come across in your Christian life again and again and especially when you feel frustrated and you feel kind of let down perhaps and you feel depressed that you're not really making much of an impact perhaps where you're working or where you're witnessing or whatever group you're working with and you wish there was more of it and you wish there was something really that you could do more in order to bring this breakthrough about or influence people you'll hear the little voice saying well how about trying this how about an alliance with me you always got to ask yourself where's that from what will that alliance mean am I actually giving away something of the balance of God's truth or if I affiliate myself with some other power or forces or whatever am I really giving away something that's important in the Bible's emphasis rather than maintaining it as God intends that's just briefly an idea as to the kind of spiritual matter that you can bring out of this passage and passages like it that's the invitation to join forces but let me close by the second thing which is a refusal refusing the invitation based on the sufficiency of God what will one answer the messenger of the nation

[27:11] Isaiah is really posing the question what are we going to say to these diplomats what answer are we going to give them when they've come with this offer of a new alliance that is intended to make us a better nation well the answer he gave was superbly simple and full and based upon what he knew of God as being absolutely sufficient for them this is the answer the Lord has founded Zion and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge in other words Isaiah's answer to this invitation to this overture from the diplomats of Philistia as they're waiting for an answer here they are they're saying come on sign this deal let's enter into this alliance come on give us your answer and this is Isaiah's answer we have everything we need already the Lord has established Zion and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge and isn't this really so important amongst all of these oracles here are these oracles concerning some of them the great powers of the world of the time

Assyria or in chapter 14 earlier there's Babylon there's 13 Babylon then it goes on to speak about these others Moab Damascus Cush Egypt and these oracles are full of devastation full of destruction full of defeat for these great powers and here's this tiny little oppressed people vassals of the king of Assyria at the time squeezed in amongst all of these oracles of these great nations squeezed in between these great nations actually set amongst all of that destruction yet this is what's true of them the Lord has founded them and in that founding or in her the afflicted of his people find refuge Egypt is going to be defeated Assyria is going to be defeated by

Babylon Babylon is going to be defeated by the Medes and the Persians the Medes and the Persians are going to be defeated by some other power and so it goes on and it goes on like that to the end of history but the Lord's people always have victory and it doesn't matter what situation they find themselves in and it doesn't matter tonight what the world thinks of you or thinks of what you believe and it doesn't matter how difficult it is in the providence of God it was never as difficult for you and for me as it was for Isaiah because Isaiah was given a commission by God he was called by God to be a prophet in the days in which Isaiah lived and God told him as he sent him out I'm going to send you to these people and they won't believe you you'll be sowing the seed of my word as if it was fallen onto concrete instead of good ground would you have kept going would you have liked to have been

Isaiah with all of that opposition with the ridicule yes there were faithful people certainly but there weren't many of them and he had to face kings like Ahaz whose decline and departure from the ways of God were drastic yes weakness certainly yes to the extent that he could see in chapter 53 who has believed our report to whom must the arm of the Lord been revealed of course that then brought him into the great prophecy of Jesus of Christ of the coming Messiah that's where you actually take this as well and you bring it forward into those glorious days of the Messiah because what God is saying through Isaiah is remember that the future is in

God's promises and God's promises are not confined to the weakness of the present moment because God has a complete plan and we just a tiny little slice of it and God's complete plan will be a plan where his people will be victorious and will be shown to be completely victorious and although you may feel tonight very weak and of very little influence and you may be tired to the back teeth of the thoughts and the writings and the texts and the messages of atheists of humanists of secularists that just simply ridiculed the Bible and tear it apart and with the most blasphemous descriptions actually ridiculed your faith and your standing and your Bible and what you believe so what what's changed

[32 : 36] Isaiah would say but the Lord has established Zion the Lord has founded Zion as it's put here that's what it really means the Lord has laid the foundations of Zion of his people and that's where you and I tonight find our strength we may be weak in the eyes of the world we may be weak in our own estimation we may be weak as far as influencing that world out there but in Christ remember you're never defeated you're always victorious you're always on the winning side you're always guaranteed to reign with him look to the big picture look to the Lord's founding of your own life personally who has laid the foundations of your spiritual life isn't it the Lord wasn't your own hand that's what we were singing isn't it in the psalm earlier not by my own hand not by my sword not by my might but by the Lord and by his arm that's so often the case with the psalms isn't it well psalm 46 is the classic

God is our refuge and our strength in straits a very present aid even though the hills be removed and the seas be no more though the whole creation be in turmoil as it will one day be when the Lord comes still the God of Jacob's our refuge has safely to abide Paul faced similar situations and in 2nd Timothy one of the last letters that the apostle wrote remember he said to Timothy there about certain people who had gone astray from the faith and in chapter 2 verse 18 he wrote as follows these people he said who are ungodly and enter into more and more ungodliness their talk will spread like gangrene among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus who have sworn from the truth saying that the resurrection has already happened they are upsetting or overthrowing the faith of some that's a crisis heresy actually bringing some away from the faith making shipwreck and what does he say but

God's firm foundation stands or stands firm bearing this inscription or this seal the Lord knows those who are his and let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity that's our refuge that's our confidence that the Lord knows those who are his and that the Lord lays the foundations for his people of his people's life and of his church's life in every generation for every generation that foundation is not going to shift doesn't matter what the world says the world is not the only believer left in the world that's still true the foundation of the Lord stands firm the Lord the Lord has founded Zion that's why it says in her the afflicted of his people find refuge in her it could also mean in it in the

Lord's establishing of Zion in any case what it really is saying to these diplomats is look we have the Lord here the Lord has founded us as a people and we don't need an alliance with Egypt with Philistia with Assyria with any other nation we have our king we have our relationship with God and when any nation has a relationship with God or any individual they don't need anything else it's all there it's complete and that's so important isn't it for ourselves too the words the Lord in verse 32 there are emphatic in the Hebrew text what will answer the messenger of the nation the Lord that just comes in there like a hammer blow the Lord has founded

Zion that's all we need Isaiah saying he's rejecting this overture it's a refusal based on the sufficiency of God they have everything they need there now we have to retain that in our minds and in our practice as well you may feel tonight rather downtrodden yourself you may feel that things are against you more than they've ever been you may feel that in your case it's rather unfair rather overbalanced against you compared to others and you may feel that you're very powerless to face the things that in your providence God has said for you you may be filled with fear and trepidation but you can rest in the

[38 : 36] Lord who is the foundation of your life and you can rest in him because you know that in him everything is secure as far as he's concerned everything is as it should be he will not shift beneath you and it's interesting isn't it that Isaiah talks about the afflicted of his people aren't you glad aren't you thankful tonight that that word appears there aren't you glad that it doesn't say the Lord has founded Zion and in her the comforted of his people the assured of his people find their refuge that's not what it's saying it's saying the afflicted of his people the poor of his people the downtrodden ones of his people the ones who really feel insecure the ones who know their own weakness and complain of their own weakness the ones who feel at times that the might of the world looms so large as they try to serve the

Lord that it just simply gets on top of them but that's what Isaiah say the Lord is for you the Lord is your refuge the Lord's refuge is designed for people like you for the afflicted for the ones who are weak for the ones who stagger along from day to day and you can rest in the Lord because the Lord himself knows your afflictions and Isaiah has a remarkable series of verses I'm just going to mention two or three of them in respect to that verses that of course come ultimately to be fulfilled and true in the person of Jesus Christ God's son in our nature chapter 63 and verse 9 for he said surely they are my people children who will not deal falsely and he became their saviour in all their affliction he was afflicted and the angel of his presence saved them in his love and in his pity he redeemed them he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old and then chapter 53 which we referred to already you've got these great verses in that chapter which we know are applicable directly to the

Lord of course chapter 53 verses 4 and 7 surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows yet we did esteem him stricken smitten by God and afflicted he was oppressed and he was afflicted yet he opened not his mouth like a lamb that is led to the slaughter you have a crisis but you're glad tonight that you know the Lord made it his own before it ever became yours in your afflictions he was afflicted he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows he went to the grave with these sorrows he rose out of these sorrows he lives on the other side of these sorrows he is your king indeed and in him you have your refuge resolved I don't know who came up with the phrase first of all but it's it's one that Winston Churchill has used more recently as well borrowing probably from Churchill although he may have borrowed it from someone else the saying is this never let a good crisis go to waste it was used more recently politically

I think it was one of Obama's advisors or whatever but Churchill certainly used it never let a good crisis go to waste and however necessary that is to take with you or however applicable that is let's say in a political sense it is certainly applicable and meaningful in a spiritual one we all have crises and sometimes we waste them we don't go to the Lord with him as we should we don't come to find our refuge in God's founding of Zion every crisis for you and for me should be one that we not waste but find benefit from because we find the Lord in it or through it what shall we say to the messengers who come to us what shall we say to all of these messengers who come to us and say you make an alliance with us leave these old fashioned ways say to them I have the Lord we have the one who has founded Zion and in him the afflicted find their refuge

God is in advance let's pray Lord our God we give thanks for the assurance your word gives us of your own sufficiency and particularly at times when we ourselves lose sight of it we bless you for the way that you uphold us for the strength that you give to us to go on day by day for the way that you come to comfort our hearts at times when sorrow and affliction draws near to us and fills our minds we give thanks Lord for all that you give us against our discouragements for every way in which you continue to lead us even though at times our reluctance is known to you forgive us we pray oh Lord for our doubts and for our reluctance for everything that we know is other than it should be in our lives grant that we may constantly by your spirit be drawn back to the fullness that is with you to the sufficiency that we have in you for we know that we are made complete in the one who loved us grant these mercies we pray for Jesus sake

[45 : 19] Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen We are turned out to be a constrained
tent of life for our hope we can never doal■m■ gardens we are old you love we are in you
are old our we are in you in us pardon from the begging