

Isaiah 7:10-17

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Date: 21 December 2025

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- [0 : 01] Let's pray together as we stand. Lord, I ask this morning, as we come to your word, that we would see how you are faithful, even in the deepest and darkest times.
- That we remember that we can't save ourselves, but that you can save us and that we can trust you. And we pray this in your name. Amen.
- Have a seat. Well, I wonder if you've ever heard a sermon on Isaiah 7 before. Maybe not. I don't think I have.
- So far this Advent, we've had three different portraits from the prophet Isaiah. Three promises about what Jesus brings when he arrives.
- And we've just heard the fourth and final promise, and it actually showed up in both of our readings. The Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.
- [1 : 01] This is the same truth we just said together in the Creed. That Jesus was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man. This is the center of Christmas. God with us. Jesus, our Emmanuel.
- I don't know if you've noticed, but today is the darkest day of the year. I've been feeling it.
- The holiday sentiment is not moving the needle for me this year. I want sunshine. Not vitamin D, but real, live sunshine.
- Turkey and presents aren't going to do it. And so if you're feeling a little bit grumpy about the weather like me, Isaiah 7 might just be for you. It's about how God is faithful in the deepest and darkest times.
- How we can't save ourselves, but he can come to where we are and save us, and that we can trust him. And so the fulfillment is pure sunshine, right?
- [2 : 01] This news about Christmas. But the prophecy meets us down in the gloom, which is maybe where we are. And it comes 700 years before Jesus is born. And God's people are divided into the north and the south, Israel and Judah.
- And despite God's calls over and over to repent, both of these kingdoms are enmeshed in a cycle of idolatry. And they stand in immediate danger of invasion from more powerful neighbors.
- And they're both barreling towards judgment and exile. So these are dark days indeed. And that's where King Ahaz of Judah is when he's visited by the prophet Isaiah in this reading.
- And the prophet comes and he brings two words from the Lord into this time of darkness. One is a warning and the other is a sign. So let's look at the warning. The context of Isaiah's appearance is war.
- Powerful Assyria is to the northeast. It's ruled by Tiglath-Pileser III, which is just a great name. He's pretty famous, actually, in history.
- [3 : 08] He's a really aggressive expansionist. And so under his rule, Assyria actually doubles in size. They double their territory. And he goes about it by chomping out little bits and bites of the smaller nations around him.

And he kind of just bites, bites, bites. And then he'll just chomp a whole nation up. And he kind of builds piece by piece rather than taking on a big empire like Babylon. And so this is what's happening to Israel and Syria right now.

Assyria is taking little bites, little bites, little bites. And he's about to swallow them up. And they're like a buffer in between Assyria and Judah. So Israel and, I can't, I don't know.

I should have put a map up, right? Israel and Syria are kind of this buffer. And Judah's down here and Assyria's up here. And so Israel and Syria have been soaking up the onslaught.

Or sorry, Israel, yeah, Israel and Syria have been soaking up this onslaught from Assyria. And they can't last very long. They're just holding out. And so what they decide to do is ally.

[4 : 08] So they created an alliance against Assyria. And this is led by these guys that are mentioned here, Rezan and Pekah, the kings, in verse 1. And they want Judah to join them in their resistance against Assyria.

And Ahaz refuses. And so they attack him. And they think to themselves, what we're going to do is install a new ruler in Judah who's going to join with us.

And that's what verse 6 is talking about. They say, we're going to go down there and put our guy Tabael in charge. And then we're going to have a united block against Assyria. And then Assyria will leave us alone. And so that's the context.

And it's really dire. I think all these nations know we have no chance against Assyria. And so there's this Assyrian threat.

And then the two nations above Judah that are just right about to attack Judah. And that's where we get verse 2. It says, Ahaz is preparing for the siege.

[5 : 16] He's checking the water supply in verse 3. That's why he's up by the pools. And then God sends his word into this situation. I wonder what God will say.

Be careful. Be quiet. Do not fear. Do not let your heart be faint. Why?

Because Israel and Syria's grand plans shall not stand. They shall not come to pass. Within 65 years, they will be shattered. They won't even be nations anymore. But watch out.

Because if you're not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. So two armies at the doorstep. A superpower behind them.

And the Lord says to his people, the house of David, Ahaz their king. Be careful. Be quiet. Do not fear. Do not let your heart be faint. Be firm in faith or melt to nothing.

[6 : 15] So the Lord is saying right now, right in this crisis, right in the darkness, in the current impossibility, when you have no solution, now is the time to trust me.

Be careful. Watch out. Be alert to the opportunity that you're in. This is an opportunity to trust. You have to watch out so you don't miss it.

Be quiet. Be quiet. Be quiet. The stillness that comes from trust, right? I think it's like relaxing into a back float in a pool. Just kind of this quietness, right?

This rest before the Lord. Put aside your fear. Don't give up hope. And what's really interesting about this set of commands to me is that trusting God has both an active and a passive dimension.

So we know that our trust is swift in obedience. Right? Right? When we trust God, we know that his commands are best and we try to keep them. But trust is also patient.

[7 : 23] We can't be saved when we're busy saving ourselves. If God says he'll catch us, we might have to let go of the rope. And I think that sounds a little bit spiritualized, but it's actually pretty grounded in our daily life.

For example, when I don't trust that God knows the truth of the situation, I might choose to gossip. But if I trust that he knows, then I can release those words.

I can be quiet. When I don't trust that God will provide, then I choose to stockpile and hold on. But if I trust that the harvest will be in his hands next year and I can trust him, I can let go a little bit of what I'm holding.

When I don't trust that God is just, that God's judgment is true, then I might choose bitterness. But if I trust that God can make things right, then I can let go, I can forgive.

And so the heart of idolatry is about choosing my devices and my desires because I don't believe that God will follow through on his. Ahaz and Judah are called to let go of their own solutions and believe that God will do what he says, even though it looks impossible.

[8 : 40] And they don't do it. Surprise. No, they don't do it. Ahaz completely ignores Isaiah. He goes and he makes an alliance with Assyria. He gives them tribute.

So he goes to the temple and takes the gold out of the temple and gives it to the king of Assyria. And he says, I'll give you this gold if you come down and you smite, peck it, and resin these guys that are threatening me. He comes up with his own solution to the problem.

And then having trusted Assyria one time, it's a little bit hard to stop. So he goes on and he offers his sons his burnt offerings in the Assyrian way. And he actually goes and makes a perfect copy of the Assyrian altar that's in Damascus.

He sends people up and he says, take the exact dimensions. We're going to bring this altar, this Assyrian altar. And he brings it back right into the middle of the temple in Jerusalem. And he actually moves God's altars out of the way over against the wall so he can put this perfect Assyrian replica in the middle of the temple.

And Ahaz becomes the perfect Assyrian vassal. And this continues until one day Judah isn't a vassal of Assyria. They simply are Assyria. And they're in exile of their own choosing.

[9 : 54] And that's the warning. Trust God to stand firm or be washed away. Ahaz and Judah don't heed it, but we should. Well, what about the sign?

Amazingly, at the same time that the Lord calls Ahaz to trust, he promises him any proof that he wants by a sign of his choice. Ask for a sign, God says.

Anything from heaven to hell. And we just learned that trust has this aspect of holy inaction or passivity or release. But here we learn something different.

That trust isn't based on signs. And isn't it amazing that God tells him to do this and Ahaz refuses even to ask.

And I think this is because he's already decided not to trust the Lord. But his refusal is just the most smug and smarmy hypocrisy you can imagine.

[10 : 55] And he says, well, I just couldn't possibly, I wouldn't dare test the Lord by asking for a sign. And our hearts are hardest when they're puffed up with religiosity.

When we keep the letter of the law by breaking its spirit. So he quotes God against God. Imagine refusing to hear God's direct word under this guise of spiritual decorum.

Refusing to hear God's word by pretending that we already have. And Isaiah says, ugh, I can't even stand you anymore. I don't even know how God stands you.

I can't even stand to listen to you. And rightly so. This is the sickness of God's people. It's like a genetic trait that comes back generation to generation.

Pops back to light with Jesus and the Pharisees, doesn't it? This kind of smug hypocrisy. We're so sure that we're pleasing God that we can't hear God. And it comes up for us as well.

[11 : 55] Even as God's word comes to us today, we have to be careful of this. God can't save the sick when they're busy pretending that they are well. And God says, trust me, rest in me, ask me for help, ask me for a sign, literally ask me for anything.

And Ahaz on behalf of the nation, on behalf of the house of David says, no, there's nothing you can do to make me trust you. It's amazing.

It's dark days indeed. Well, what will the Lord do? Again, something kind of unexpected. He says, I'm going to give you a sign anyway.

Behold, look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and call his name Emmanuel. And this sign works within two time frames.

So it's got a double fulfillment. That's often the way that prophecy works. There's a near and there's a far fulfillment. And the near fulfillment is a sign directly for Ahaz and the nation. It's a sign of judgment, actually.

[12 : 59] And it's essentially by the time an unmarried girl bears a son and that son grows up into a boy, that boy is going to be feasting on honey and curds in Syria and Galilee.

And the implication there is there's going to be all kinds of food there because the land is going to be empty. So, you know, giving us this time span and saying, by the time this time span is complete, these kings that you're worried about are going to have been carried off into exile.

Their lands aren't even going to exist anymore. But Judah is going to reap the fruit of faithlessness. And that's in verse 17. You'll have the king of Assyria who you've invited in with open arms.

So, in the near fulfillment, God gives Ahaz the salvation he's chosen, which is Assyria. But the far fulfillment is what we opened with.

700 years later, the sign that begins in judgment blossoms into redemption and promise. And this is, there's so many lovely phrases that symbolize this in Isaiah, right?

[14 : 10] There's still a seed within the stump. The stump. There's still a shoot coming from the stump of Jesse. A remnant remains. All of this language is about how, even though the tree has been cut down, God is still going to bring life out of it.

There's still something there in his people. And that's what's happening in this prophecy. God will keep his promise to save through the house of David. God is faithful in the darkest times.

And we can't save ourselves, but he can save us, and he will. And we didn't trust, and we didn't ask. And yet, he is given the sign of Emmanuel.

God with us in these deep, dark places. The God-man who knows how to watch, and knows how to be quiet, and doesn't fear, and never gives up. Who fights and wins.

He is the sign for us. And so, that's how the word of the Lord comes to us today. A warning. Be careful. Be quiet. Do not fear.

[15 : 13] Do not let your hearts be faint. And a sign. You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah, the virgin has conceived and born a son, and called his name Emmanuel. God with us. So, if you aren't feeling the sunshine, know that the Lord comes to us in the gloom.

Amen. Amen.