

Psalm 147:1  
Hymn 11:1,2  
Psalm 1:1,2,3  
Psalm 34:6,7  
Hymn 12:1-5  
Isaiah 7  
2 Kings 16:1-9  
Matthew 1:18-25  
Isaiah 7:9b

Yarrow, December 19, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Of the entire chapter we read from the prophecies of Isaiah, there is undoubtedly one verse that stands out to us due to its familiarity. That, of course, is vs 14, that prophecy about the virgin conceiving and bearing a son whose name shall be Immanuel. That verse is so familiar because Matthew quotes it in relation to Jesus' birth (Mt 1:23). This familiarity, together with the fact that this one verse is quoted in the New Testament, leads us to assume that the message of vs 14 is *the* central point of our chapter, is the hinge on which the whole chapter turns. As it turns out, though, it is not so. The prophecy about a young maiden becoming pregnant and bearing a son appears in a context, and that context is this: will the king of David's house –and his people with him– believe God's Word or will not?

Will they believe.... That same question presses upon us. Next week is Christmas, and central to Christmas, of course, is the notion that our Lord Jesus Christ was born in the flesh to pay for our sins. But the glorious message of Christmas helps you nothing *unless you believe that you need this Saviour*. Years ago King Ahaz had to believe (else he would not be established); today still we're to believe – else we'll not be established.

I summarise the message of our text with this theme:

## THE LORD CHALLENGES KING AHAZ TO BELIEVE HIS WORD.

1. Ahaz needed the challenge
2. The Lord deepened the challenge
3. We are confronted with the challenge

### ***1. Ahaz needed the challenge***

The words of our text were spoken by the prophet Isaiah to king Ahaz. This king is told that if he would not stand firm in his faith he wouldn't stand at all. To get a handle on this text, we need first to understand something of the circumstances that prompted Isaiah to speak this word to the king.

According to what we read from 2 Kings 16, Ahaz was a most ungodly man. Vs 2: "he did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God, as his father David had done." Instead: "...he walked in the way of the kings of Israel; indeed he made his son pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, on the hills, and under every green tree" (vs 3f). He was but a young king –21 years old when he became king, and the events of Isaiah 7 occurred in the first couple of years of his reign– he was but a young king, but (and this we –especially our young people– must

notice!) *the Lord holds him fully responsible for his actions*. He should have come to that stage when he could (and would) make profession of his faith in the Lord his God-by-covenant (and then, of course, live according to that confession), but he did not; he chose instead the gods of the Canaanites. Ungodly he was, with not a shred of faith in the Lord God, not an ounce of reliance on God. In the words of the Catechism as it explains the first commandment: King Ahaz did not "...know the only true God, [did not] trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience, [did not] expect all good from Him only, and love, fear, and honour Him with all [His] heart" (LD 34).

But faith, the Lord had said, is what this man had to have. For Ahaz was not just a somebody; Ahaz was *king*, more, was king *over God's covenant people*, king in *Jerusalem* where the temple stood, where sacrifices were to be made for the forgiveness of sins, where the Lord dwelt with His people. In *that city*, over *that* people Ahaz the king had no regard for the Lord at all; he instead embraced the gods of the Canaanites.

To focus the problem more: King Ahaz was *of the house of David*, of the family of which the Lord had said –2 Sam 7– that his throne would be established forever. More, from this family the Messiah would be born, the Prince of Peace who would bring salvation to mankind. Here's the problem: between Jesus the Messiah and king David stood king Ahaz, *and this king had no regard for God, acknowledged no need for the Christ*. **This** is the man addressed in the words of our text: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

We hear those words and conclude that Ahaz needs to embrace in true faith the gospel of Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the sacrifices still burning in the temple of his city; that's what the word "believe" implies to our ears. And it's true: Ahaz must indeed believe the gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' blood. But that's *not* what God encourages him to believe in our text. Notice the context in which our text appears. It follows the promise of vs 7: "Thus says the Lord God: It shall not stand, Nor shall it come to pass" (vs 7). What would not come to pass? Vss 5 & 6: "Aram, Ephraim, and the son of Remaliah have taken evil counsel against you, saying, 'Let us go up against Judah and trouble it, and let us make a gap in its wall for ourselves, and set a king over them, the son of Tabeel.'" And the reason it won't happen is the king of Damascus and the king of Samaria are *only people*, insignificant people.

*That*, says God, is what would not come to pass. The political alliance formed by the king of Syria and the king of Israel to put on the throne of Judah a puppet of their choosing would, said God, not succeed. That's the punch of vs 7: "Thus says the Lord God: It shall not stand, Nor shall it come to pass." Having said *that* the prophet challenges Ahaz with the words of our text: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." That is: Ahaz must believe *the Lord's promise to frustrate the efforts of those two kings so that their plan to overthrow Ahaz and install a puppet in Jerusalem will come to nothing*. **That's** what Ahaz must believe – lest he collapse.

Now, we're further to know, brothers and sisters, that this challenge to the king to believe that the Lord will frustrate the efforts of those two kings lies in a wider context still. For consider: why was it that those two kings of Syria and Israel were threatening Ahaz in the first place? Nothing, Scripture insists, happens by chance, but all things come from God's almighty hand (LD 10). None less than God Himself, then, had sent Rezin and Pekah to threaten Ahaz. Why?

Here we need to recall the promise of the Lord to David in 2 Sam 7. Said the Lord at that time concerning any son of David who would sit on David's throne: "If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men" (vs 14). Ahaz, we've already learned, was a most ungodly king. It was then no surprise that his kingdom was invaded; according to God's Word of long ago, the Lord Himself sent those two kings against Ahaz because of his ungodliness. Those two kings were the "rod of men" with which the *Lord* was chastening this unbelieving son of David.

Yet the purpose of the Lord's chastening (through these two kings) was not to crush Ahaz, for the Lord God had said in 2 Sam 7 that His *mercy* would never depart even from the ungodly kings of David's line (vs 15a). Instead, through this chastisement *God wanted to move Ahaz to repentance*. God was not pleased that on the throne of David should sit a man who had no regard for the God of the covenant; God was not pleased that the road to the birth of the holy Son of David to be born in the days of Caesar Augustus should be blocked by a godless son of David who saw no need for the gift of a Saviour. So, in mercy to the house of David, God the Almighty chastened Ahaz with the rod of men.

In that light, the challenge of our text gains an added depth. Ahaz must believe –believe what?– must believe the word of the prophet that the efforts of the two kings shall come to nothing. By believing such a promise, *Ahaz would need to concede that with this chastisement God was actually showing him mercy, was seeking to move him to repentance*.

As it turns out, brothers and sisters, Ahaz rejected the mercy of the Lord to the house of David as revealed in the chastisements through the two kings. Ahaz did not accept the challenge of our text, did not *believe* the word of the prophet that the two mighty kings would not succeed in their efforts to overthrow Ahaz. In the face of the word of the prophet, there was with the king only hardened unbelief.

But we know how it goes (is it not?): rejecting God's mercy in discipline, refusing to acknowledge the chastisements God sends for one's good, *that*, beloved, leads to greater punishments from the Lord. There's our second point:

## ***2. The Lord deepens the challenge.***

You will have noticed, dear brothers and sisters, that our text includes a promise: "If you will not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." The point here is that the only way Ahaz can survive in his kingship is by believing; any other response to God's chastisements will result in his downfall. Yet if Ahaz would fall, it would not be just *this one king alone* who would fall; because of the king's unbelief his house would disappear, David's dynasty would disappear. But here's now the thing: God had promised that David's house would receive an eternal throne, would last forever (2 Sam 7:13,16). How shall that promise be fulfilled if in fact Ahaz refuses to believe God's word?? Will his unbelief not threaten altogether the coming of the Saviour??

Here is now, beloved, where that familiar prophecy of the virgin conceiving a son fits in to the whole chapter. Given the Lord's pledge in our text to destroy Ahaz if he does not respond with faith to the chastisements God sends, the Godly of Jerusalem could easily despair of salvation itself. For Ahaz rejects the challenge of our text with unbelief, and so his future was on the line, *more, the future of the whole house of David was therefore on the line*. In that circumstance the Lord makes mention of a most marvellous sign for Ahaz and Jerusalem, a sign infinite in depth and eternal in height for splendour (vs 11). True, godless Ahaz doesn't want a sign (vs 12), but God insists on giving it anyway. It's the sign of the virgin: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (vs 14).

And No, that sign does not refer in first instance to the virgin Mary and her Son Jesus. If this sign referred in first instance to Mary and her Son Jesus, it could not be a sign for Ahaz; Mary, after all, conceived and bore her Son centuries after Ahaz died. Besides, vs 16 speaks very specifically of the land being delivered from the threat of the two kings before the child in question knows the difference between right and wrong. We are, then, to understand that a young woman, now yet single (for she's a virgin still), would shortly marry, conceive, bear a son, and call the boy's name Immanuel. How this would be a sign for Ahaz and for Jerusalem? The sign would not be that a girl now a virgin would become pregnant; that happens regularly after the young girls marry. Nor would the sign be that the

child would be a born; that also happens regularly. Would the sign then be the uncommon name "Immanuel", and the faith expressed in that name – "God is with us"? That might be so, but it's not likely since names signifying reliance on the Lord were common; even the name of Ahaz's own son Hezekiah involved a confession of faith in God – Hezekiah means "Yahweh strengthens". No, the sign involved in the birth of this child lies elsewhere.

What the sign is? This: vs 14 makes mention of a mother *but not of a father*. A young woman, presently unmarried, now still a virgin, shall conceive and bear a son. There's a man involved, no doubt of that. *But the man receives no mention*. The child receives a name, but *the father plays no role* in naming the child. *The father is totally ignored here*, pushed into the background, forgotten.

Who that father is? Isaiah is speaking to king Ahaz (see vs 13). To king Ahaz the prophet speaks of "*the virgin*". The use of the definite article "the" means that Ahaz knew very well who the young woman in question was. More than likely, she was Ahaz's fiancée; shortly 21 year old Ahaz would take a wife, she'd conceive and bear a son, and she would call his name Immanuel.

*But father Ahaz receives no mention*. Why not? That, beloved, is because of the Lord's words in our text: if Ahaz would not believe the word of the Lord through Isaiah, he would therefore not stand at all. Well, in vs 14 the Lord makes clear how Ahaz would not stand: though father of a prince in the house of David, he as father would not even receive a mention; because of his refusal to repent, he does not rate in any discussion about the future of David's line.

See there how the Lord deepens the challenge to Ahaz in our text. On the spot the Lord makes clear to Ahaz what the consequences of his unbelief would be. Ahaz is so concerned to preserve his throne from the attacks of his two enemies, but the Lord makes clear that *unbelief has no future*; the ungodly have nothing to contribute to the next generation, they're forgotten. As the psalmist said it: "The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, To cut off the remembrance of them from the earth" (Ps 34:16; cf Ps 1). As long as Ahaz refuses to believe what the Lord has said, he has no future; he will not be established. His son will have a future, though, for God will be with that son, Immanuel.

In the course of time –for God's Word always comes to pass– the young woman bore her child and called his name Immanuel: "God is with us". Did Ahaz, in the light of the fulfilment of God's promise, *now* repent and believe? From the books of Kings and Chronicles we know that he did not. Despite the evidence on his doorstep that God's Word is true, this son of David persisted in his unbelief, serving the gods of the heathens. The result was that the prophecies of the rest of chap 7 were fulfilled on Ahaz too; he escaped from the two kings of Syria and Israel only to fall under the terrible tyranny of the king of Assyria. And the land was decimated as a result. In truth, Ahaz had no future, none because of his unbelief.

But David's line continued, and so the way to Christ's coming remained open; God sovereignly saw to it that in Ahaz's house a child was born, a child whose father's contribution was meant to be forgotten, a child though who would testify that God was always present with His people.

That brings us to our last point:

### ***3. We are confronted with the challenge.***

For what now, beloved, of ourselves? The Word of the Lord to king Ahaz is included in Holy Scripture for our instruction. More, the Holy Spirit saw fit to move Matthew to write that the sign given to unbelieving Ahaz was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Says Matthew: "Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel...'" (Mt 1:22f). In Jesus Christ is fulfilled,

then, the sign which the Lord was pleased to give to Ahaz and to his house. That is: at the birth of Jesus Christ "the virgin" conceived, bore a son, and called His name Immanuel.

This time, though, even more so than in the days of Ahaz, the sign was infinite as the depths, eternal as the heights. For this time the Father of the Child was *not* to be forgotten, was not unworthy of mention; this time the Father was very much there. Vs 18: before Mary and Joseph came together, Mary was found to be "with child of the Holy Spirit". This mother was a virgin in fact, not only *before* she conceived, but also *after* she had become pregnant. God Almighty sovereignly directed events in such a way that Mary became pregnant without the involvement of a man.

And why? Why did the Lord God direct events in such a way that a virgin conceived without the aid of man? This act of God, beloved, confronts us with our depravity; so depraved was the human race that we could not generate a holy Child. Not only is our memory as father to be *forgotten*; we could not even *be father to this Son of David*. If Ahaz was humiliated in that his role as father was to be forgotten, how much more are we humiliated in that we are *replaced* as fathers; Another, holy God Himself, fathered the Child in the womb of the virgin because we had to be excluded on account of our sins. No, here is nothing flattering for us; here is only failure on our side, our sinfulness, our depravity. That is the terrible, condemning message of Christmas.

But now, beloved: do you *believe* this? Do you accept as true that humiliating sign of Christmas: none in the human race –and so none of us either– can be father for Jesus Christ, none can be because of our sins? For Yes, the sign is humiliating; here we're confronted with our depravity, told that at bottom we're no better than Ahaz. *Do you believe this sign of Christmas?* So much, beloved, so very much hinges on *what you do with that sign!* For the words of our text apply to us as much as to Ahaz: "if you will not believe, Surely you shall not be established." We might not like it that the Lord God has directed circumstances in our lives in such a way that we are excluded from being fathers of the Saviour. *But we shall need, beloved, to accept God's way with us here, lest we perish eternally.* Without the conviction that Yes, God did well in excluding us, we shall face a future more disastrous than Ahaz faced; because of *his* unbelief *he* was promised the chastisements of the king of Assyria, in the face of *our* unbelief *we* are promised the chastisements of hell eternal.

And what if we recognise this humiliating sign for what it is? What if we, in child-like faith in God, acknowledge that Yes, we're too depraved to father the Saviour, we need the humbling chastisement of being excluded as fathers? To ask the question differently: what if we, in child-like faith, acknowledge that God did right in leading the circumstances of our personal lives in such a way that we could not father the Saviour? The promise of the text is clear: such a one, my brothers and sisters, *shall be established!* To such a person apply the words of vs 4: "...be quiet; do not fear or be fainthearted...." This Christ –Son of God Almighty that He is– has triumphed over the enemies of every Christian, has defeated the devil, the world, our own flesh. In fact, this Christ has "established" His elect as children of God, sinners forgiven by His blood so that we might reign with Him eternally over all creatures!

Christmas approaches, and we're encouraged to rejoice in the season. And indeed, we may and must rejoice. But the rejoicing gets its depth and its colour from our awareness of our own spiritual bankruptcy; we shall need to believe that we cannot bring forth salvation ourselves, cannot solve mankind's problems, are dependent on God's intervening work – to the point of fathering the Saviour Himself through the Holy Spirit.

Christmas: it's a *test* of faith: do you believe the sign God gave as evidence that *He* frees His people from bondage to Satan?? Do you believe your own depravity, and therefore the riches of God's free grace in Jesus Christ??

The question is important. "If you will not believe, Surely you will not be established."

