

ISAIAH 7 “BEHOLD, A VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE!” – PART 1

In order to understand this chapter better, we must refer to the historical account in 2 Kings 16:1-8. To the north of the Kingdom of Judah lay the ten tribes which comprised the Northern Kingdom of Israel (also referred to as “Ephraim”), the capital of which was Samaria. Then, to the north of Israel, there was the small nation of Syria, whose capital was Damascus. And much further to the northeast, there was the large dominion of Assyria, of which the capital was Nineveh. King Pekah of Israel formed an alliance with his neighbor, King Rezin of Damascus; and together, they planned to attack King Ahaz of Judah. Indeed, Ahaz had great cause for alarm. However, in his distress, instead of turning to the Lord, he asked the king of Assyria to come and rescue him. This decision was very foolish. Ahaz’s kingdom was small and weak; but the empire of Assyria was large and powerful, and its kings were great warriors. Between the kingdom of Ahaz and the empire of Assyria lay the two kingdoms of Israel and Syria; and as long as they remained independent countries, they formed a sort of barrier and protection for Ahaz against the ambition of his powerful Assyrian neighbor. But now he invited Assyria to become the enemy of these kingdoms – to conquer, if possible, first Syria and then Israel. But was it likely that when this was accomplished, the Assyrians would stop at the borders of Judah? Ahaz voluntarily opened the sluicagate for Assyria, heedlessly failing to consider that the flood with which he was attempting to drown the lands of his neighbors would eventually inundate his own.

To warn King Ahaz of his folly and his sin, the prophet Isaiah was now sent. His message was this: “Take heed and be quiet; fear not!” (verse 4) His words were just like those of Christ to the disciples in the storm, “Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?” (Matt. 8:26) “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Ps. 46:10) This is the message which God wants us to hear in all times of trouble and perplexity. We continually aggravate our troubles by our own haste, restlessness, and bustle. We hurry from one friend to another for counsel, until we are bewildered by the variety of their opinions, instead of seeking guidance from the Lord. But God never disappoints the hopes of those who steadily wait upon Him! A calm mind that waits for His leading will enable a person to form a clear judgment regarding his duties, prospects, and responsibilities; and if he is called to action, it enables him to act successfully.

As an encouragement to Ahaz, Isaiah was directed to tell him what would happen to the two enemies whom he now so much dreaded. “Within threescore

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- ❖ Isaiah reproves Ahaz for his folly and sin of seeking Assyrian help – verses 17-25

and five years shall Ephraim [the Northern Kingdom of Israel] be broken, that it be not a people” (verse 8). This prophecy was not long in its fulfillment; for well before 65 years had elapsed – in fact, in only about 18 years – King Shalmaneser carried the Northern Kingdom away into captivity. God meant Ahaz to know that the enemies whom he now so much dreaded would very shortly – and without his influence – be brought down to destruction. Therefore, his calling in the help of the king of Assyria was a step that was both needless and sinful.

When God makes a covenant, He generally gives a sign with it. He knows how hard it is for human beings to believe anything which they do not see; and therefore, when He promises a future and unseen blessing, He generally gives some visible symbol to help the weakness of men’s faith. For example, He gave the rainbow as a sign of His covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:11-17). He appointed circumcision as a sign of His covenant with Abraham (Rom. 4:11). When He promised Gideon that he would be a successful leader against the Midianites, He gave two signs to confirm his faith (Jud. 6:36-40). And when He promised that King Hezekiah would recover from his sickness, He gave him a sign for his encouragement, in the miraculous movement of the shadow on the sundial (chapter 38:7-8). This method of God’s dealing is full of tenderness and loving-kindness. He might have demanded simple belief in His Word, without any visible sign; but instead, He condescends to meet our infirmities and to help our weaknesses. This is why He has appointed the visible ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The words of Ahaz, in reference to the Lord’s offer of a sign for the confirmation of His Word, are remarkable: “I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord.” But how can there be presumption in asking for something when God offers it? If He says to ask, then is it not man’s duty to do so? Yet multitudes of people, even today, act as Ahaz did. Jesus makes offers, but they refuse them. They say, “I will not tempt the Lord!” Christ says, “Come now, and let us reason together; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (chapter

1:18). “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). “Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:24). But sadly, men meet all of these offers with all kinds of doubts. They think that God does not mean *exactly* what He says. They imagine that although these promises seem so free, yet there *must be* conditions and stipulations behind them. And the result is that even though the Lord Jesus says, “Come” – they shrink back and do not dare to venture forward. (continued in Part 2)



ISAIAH 7 “BEHOLD, A VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE!” – PART 2

Now mark what the prophet Isaiah says of such conduct: “Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?” (verse 13) Alas! How often has each one of us thus wearied the Lord by doubting His Word and refusing to listen to His promises; or by thinking that some sin was too great for Him to pardon, some mercy too great for Him to bestow, or some corruption too strong for Him to subdue! Let us remember that we never tempt God by trusting Him, or by expecting great things from Him! On the contrary, we tempt Him by our unbelief (Heb. 3:7-13, 18-19). David explains this in the case of the Israelites in the wilderness. In Psalm 78, he reminds us how often they provoked Him and grieved Him. “Can he furnish a table in the wilderness?” they asked. “Can he give bread to his people?” But have we never said the same thing? “Can God provide for this need that we are facing? Can He help me out of this difficulty? Can He help me overcome this temptation? Can He forgive this sin?” Let us remember that the best way in which a poor sinner can honor the Lord is by simply trusting in Him, and by boldly venturing upon His promises! Every act of faith is an act of homage to God’s truth and faithfulness, and brings glory to His name.

Despite King Ahaz’s refusal to ask for a sign, the Lord mercifully granted one to him anyway (verse 14). “The Lord himself shall give you a sign,” He said. “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel!” This promise had an immediate reference to the birth of Isaiah’s son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz – who is mentioned in the following chapter, and was evidently sent as a sign from God. “Butter and honey shall he eat,” the Lord said, “when he shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good” (verse 15). And the meaning of that is explained by the following verse. This child would be born as a sign of God’s covenant; and before he would be old enough to choose between good and evil – that is, within a few short years – Pekah and Rezin, the two hostile kings of Israel and Syria, would be destroyed. And the land of Judah, thus delivered from its enemies, would enjoy peace and plenty – abounding with butter and honey!

Now this was the more immediate application of Isaiah’s prophecy; but in the light of the Gospel, we are taught to see therein a far higher promise, for Matthew applies this prophecy to the Lord Jesus Himself! After relating the circumstances connected with the birth of Christ by the Virgin Mary, he says, “Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord

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by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel; which, being interpreted, is, God with us" (Matt. 1:22-23). Taking this view of the subject, what a glorious sign did the Lord bestow upon Ahaz! God had promised him deliverance from his enemies, and the sign by which He would assure him of the truth of this promise was the coming Savior Himself. It was as if He would say, "You may be sure that I have mercy in store for you, and will not utterly forsake you, because from your nation and your family, Jesus is to be born – and you cannot be destroyed while that blessing is in you! In due time, I will give My beloved Son as the Redeemer from sin and death. Therefore, can you doubt My power and My willingness to deliver you now, from the dangers that threaten you in the present moment?"

If Ahaz was to regard Jesus as a sign and pledge of God's lovingkindness, then so should we! The strongest consolations in times of trouble are those which are derived from Christ and our relationship with Him (Rom. 8:32). "He that spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" In times of trouble, when cares and anxieties burden us, when convictions of sin distress us, and when trials multiply around us; we are often tempted to doubt the Lord's love. We question whether He will truly deliver us, whether He will freely forgive us, whether He will help us over our difficulties, and whether He will bring us safe to heaven at last. At such times, what sign should we rest upon? Upon the same sign that God gave to Ahaz – namely, Immanuel! On Jesus, the God-Man, our eyes must rest, until every doubt of God's love and willingness to save us vanishes from our minds; and we learn to exclaim, in the confidence of faith, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31) Let us endeavor to remember this thought of God being with us, in the midst of all our daily concerns. Let us carry it along with us this day into our business and our trials – and yes, even into our pleasures and our amusements.

The latter part of this chapter (verses 17-28) contains a warning to King Ahaz. He had asked King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria to help him against Pekah and Rezin, but the Lord declares that the king of Assyria would prove to be a far more dangerous enemy. During the reign of Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria invaded the land of Judah. At that time, the prophecy in this chapter received its immediate and partial fulfillment; but its complete fulfillment, culminating in the final captivity of the Jews under King Nebuchadnezzar, came to pass some years later.

Lord, we repent of times when we have placed our trust in arm of flesh, instead of in You – the One Who condescended to be born of the Virgin in Bethlehem! Amen.

