

All Saints Talk for 21 April 2024

Callum Houston

The Power of Godly Vision

'Courageous Vision'

Isaiah 7:1-14

The Sign of Immanuel

7 When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

2 Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

3 Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Launderer's Field. 4 Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. 5 Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, 6 "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." 7 Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

*"It will not take place,
it will not happen,*

*8 for the head of Aram is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.*

Within sixty-five years

Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.

*9 The head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.*

*If you do not stand firm in your faith,
you will not stand at all."*

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11 "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."

¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

Isaiah is one of the major prophets of the Bible, and probably one of the most confusing books in the entire Bible as well. 66 chapters, just like the 66 books of the Bible itself, and all of them are just as complicated as the passages we've just gone through. The prophets I always find so interesting, because with the Prophets, they can often be very scathing in what they say. Their rhetoric can be very damning sometimes, but there's always an element to hope to it. Because, of course God is our father, and just like a father, sometimes you need a bit of tough love. Say your children go to walk out into the middle of the road. You might say, Oh, what are you doing. And sometimes that's how I look at the prophets: I see the profits as it's God, putting his foot down when his children are being a little bit too naughty. And maybe that's a bit of an understatement, considering some of the things that the Israelites did get up to in the Bible. But, with the Lord, He is scathing, but he is always hopeful.

And with the prophets, they're extra interesting, because they're timeless pieces of literature. Just like the Psalms, they have a temporal context, which would have gone for Judah and Israel at the time that they were written. During the time of Isaiah, you have King Ahaz in charge, with the imminent threats of the Babylonian and Assyrian invasions and then in Isaiah you also have the Christian context, the context when the scriptures were fulfilled with Christ. So you also have the foreshadowing of the coming of the Messiah. But then there is also a timeless context, just like with the Psalms, and with the Proverbs, which we can live by every day, not just focusing on what has passed, but also some pretty solid advice for how to live our lives in the day to day.

Now, reading through this passage in Isaiah, there's a couple of things that jumped out to me. The first is God referring to those leaders who are threatening Israel as smoldering stumps of firewood, which is a bit of a slam on God's part there. The way that I interpret it is that I see it as these kings who see themselves as high and mighty in this world, they have wealth, they have armies, they have the power to go and conquer Israel, and yet, in the Lord's sight, they're just smoldering embers of firewood, that could be snuffed out by his foot. And because of that, any power that they do get, they only get it because the Lord allows it. And it's the same with all our leaders, with all leaders good and evil. Their power only comes from the Lord, even if they forget that quite often in themselves.

And then another thing that really jumps out to me in the passage is the name of Isaiah's son, Shear-Jashub. Now, his name means 'a remnant will return'. I find that particularly interesting when you consider the later Christian context, once the scriptures were fulfilled with Christ, because not only do you have a remnant of God's covenant, returning and freeing his people, but also, you could also see it as a reference to the historical context, where you have a remnant of Israel returning after the Babylonian exile. And again, going back to the historical and the later context for Isaiah, I always find it interesting to think when Isaiah was receiving these visions from God, and when God was speaking through him, Isaiah knew the context of his time, he knew the context of the imminent threat of invasion and how far his people had fallen. But I often wonder whether or not he knew that he was also foreseeing the coming of the Messiah. Now, that's something that's up for debate. But I often find it very interesting to ponder on, to think if Isaiah was brought to the present and we said to him, Look, this is what came to pass, would he have said, 'Yes, I know', or would he have said 'Wow, that's amazing'. Either way, what I find incredible is that the prophets, in my opinion, are the greatest evidence, the greatest proof that Jesus was who He said He was, because he lived up to those promises that were made sometimes up to 1000 years before he was born.

And then another thing that jumps out, is the Lord saying that even though he will allow these kingdoms to come and attack Israel and Judah, he will still shatter them, as he says, as a people. And that makes me think, of course, that the Lord, even when he does allow bad things to happen, even when he allows our enemies to overcome us in battle, he will always protect us even more fiercely than he will allow our enemies to hurt us, be those physical enemies, even spiritual enemies. But anything that does attack us, God will always be protecting us. And when push comes to shove, he will always shatter those threats for our sake.

And then the last thing that really jumps out to me, in this passage in Isaiah is, of course, when it talks about the Virgin having a child and calling him a Immanuel: a child who will know from a very early age to refuse evil. Now, if you're looking at the purely historical context, you could say that perhaps the Virgin was a reference to the city of David. However, of course, after the Messiah, we now know that it is a prophecy of predicting the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it always gives me goosebumps, when I read the prophets, just thinking about how word for word, they can predict things that you see in the Gospel. And I just think that when you think of other faiths and other spiritual traditions, I can't really think of any off the top of my head, where time and time again, they live up to all of those promises and all of those predictions made, sometimes as I say, even over 1000 years ago.

Now, for me, the main theme of this passage is, if you don't stand firm in faith, then you won't stand at all. And it's something that I think that we should all really remember and try to apply to our everyday lives. How can we apply these kinds of things to our lives? Well, yesterday, I did an absolutely terrifying abseil down a church tower that was far taller than it looked. And when I was up at the top of the tower, there was this moment where I had to step over the wall to begin the abseil. absolutely terrifying! I'm really not good with heights. But when I was up there, of course, I had Isaiah in my head. I've been thinking about it all week, getting ready for this talk, and when I was up there, the chap who was the ropes man, I don't know the technical term, but he said to me, 'trust in the equipment, don't worry, the equipment has you, no matter what you are secure'.

And then he said, 'I also have my safety line. So even if you let go, even if you make a mistake, I have you. Nothing will go wrong'. And I couldn't not think about Isaiah, and thinking about, okay, trust in the Lord. Because again, in Isaiah, it's all about hardships. It's about hardships, and war and times when you could easily give up your hope in the Lord. But remembering to stay firm, with that hope to stand in your faith, and to trust in the Lord because quite often, the way that the Lord redeems and saves us is through trials and tribulation. I think that hardships, we like to avoid them in our modern world. We often wait for the good times, and we try to dismiss the bad times. But the thing about life is that life isn't good times with bad times scattered in or bad times, with good times scattered in, but it's both, and it's a cycle and God is always there holding our hand through these things. So even when life might seem hard, it's because God has something greater in store for us and if we trust in Him, then we will receive those rewards, just like how Israel was threatened with the invasions under King Ahaz, yet, later down the line, of course, Christ came and he redeemed his people.

So as I was standing on the precipice of that wall, absolutely terrified to go over, I just thought, well, if my faith is my faith in the equipment, and if I could imagine that safety line, as being God's promise, God's security holding on to me, then I had nothing to fear, and I began to repel down the building. So I turned the abseil into a bit of a visual metaphor for Isaiah and that certainly helped me get to the bottom there. But I think that that same principle can be applied in all of our lives. I think that when we have those hardships, it's so important just to remember that these aren't something to run away from. These aren't something to be afraid of, but they are something to experience. They are something to learn. and they are something that God has deliberately put in our path for a reason, not because he's angry with us, but because He loves us and because He wants us to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be. So of course, hardship always comes before hope. And if you don't stand firm in your faith, then you won't stand firm at all.

And just as I wrap up here, I would encourage everybody to try and wrestle with one of the prophets: if you haven't read any of the prophets in a while because they are shockingly complicated, I do recommend wrestling with them, because it's when you wrestle with them and you come upon those parts in Scripture that don't make much sense and are quite difficult, it's by wrestling with those, that you really start to unlock those messages that God has seeded all throughout the scriptures. So, to finish, I'd like to invite you all, to study the Scriptures, especially the hardest parts and the most confusing parts and to encourage you all to stand firm in your faith.