

LESSON 6

The Sign Ahaz Refused

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

— Isaiah 7:9

Two kings march on Jerusalem, and God offers Ahaz a promise and any sign he wants; Ahaz has already decided to buy Assyria's help instead, and the sign he gets is a child whose name is the very thing he wouldn't believe.

WHERE WE ARE

About 734 BC. Ahaz, Uzziah's grandson, has been king of Judah for a year or two. Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria is pushing west toward the Mediterranean. Rezin of Aram, the kingdom we call Syria, and Pekah of Israel have joined forces against him and want Judah in their alliance. Ahaz has refused, so they are marching on Jerusalem to put their own man on his throne. The question this passage answers: when what you can see is terrifying, will you take God at His word?

Introduction

AHAZ WAS TWENTY WHEN HE BECAME KING, and Second Kings sums up his reign in one line: *He did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God like his ancestor David*, 2 Kings 16:2. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, 16:3. You'd expect God to send Isaiah to him with a sentence of doom. Instead, He sends a promise and an offer you'd give a great deal to hear.

The danger is real. Two armies are on the way, and Judah has already lost thousands of men to them. Ahaz has a plan of his own, though, and he's settled on it. Assyria is the great power of the day, and its king is pushing west. If Ahaz can pay Tiglath-pileser to fall on Syria and Israel from behind, his problem goes away. It's the kind of plan a sensible king makes. Isaiah comes to tell him it's the wrong one.

That's the problem chapter 7 poses. What does God ask of a frightened man when the danger is real? What happens when the man has already made other plans? The chapter contains one of the Bible's best-known prophecies. Matthew quotes it in his first chapter, and you probably knew it from Christmas cards before you ever found it in Isaiah. It was spoken first to a king with an army at his door. He never asked for it.

Two Smoldering Sticks (7:1–9)

This took place during the reign of Ahaz, son of Jotham, son of Uzziah king of Judah: Aram's King Rezin and Israel's King Pekah son of Remaliah went to fight against Jerusalem, but they were not able to conquer it, 7:1.

Isaiah gives you the ending first. They couldn't take the city. Then he backs up to the day the news came. *When it became known to the house of David that Aram had occupied Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the hearts of his people trembled like trees of a forest shaking in the wind, 7:2.* Ephraim is Isaiah's usual name for the northern kingdom of Israel, after its largest tribe. Syria's army was camped on Israelite soil, within easy striking distance of Jerusalem.

The fear made sense. Chronicles says Pekah killed a hundred and twenty thousand men of Judah in a single day, one of the king's sons among the dead, 2 Chronicles 28:6–7.⁴⁸ By any count, Judah was losing.

So, God sends Isaiah out to meet the king. *Go out with your son Shear-jashub to meet Ahaz at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, by the road to the Launderer's Field, 7:3.* Jerusalem's water came in from outside the walls in those days, and Ahaz is out inspecting it. It's what a responsible king does before a siege.

Isaiah takes his boy along on purpose. *Shear-jashub* means "a remnant will return." The name cuts both ways: only a remnant, or a remnant for certain. Which one Ahaz would live to see depended on what he did next.⁴⁹

Then the message. *Calm down and be quiet. Don't be afraid or cowardly because of these two smoldering sticks, 7:4.* Ahaz sees two blazing armies. God sees two burnt-out stubs of firewood, still smoking. The enemy's plan is real enough. *Let's go up against Judah, terrorize it, and conquer it for ourselves. Then we can install Tabeel's son as king in it, 7:6.* Nobody knows who Tabeel's son was.

This is what the Lord God says: It will not happen; it will not occur, 7:7.

Watch how Isaiah sizes up the enemy. *The chief city of Aram is Damascus, the chief of Damascus is Rezin . . . the chief city of Ephraim is Samaria, and the chief of Samaria is the son of Remaliah, 7:8–9.* Follow each threat to the top, and you find one man. Isaiah won't even say Pekah's name; he calls him Remaliah's son, the way you'd mention someone hardly worth naming. In the middle of the poem, Isaiah looks further ahead: within sixty-five years the northern kingdom would cease to be a people at all.⁵⁰ Isaiah stops before he gets to Judah. Ahaz could have finished the pattern himself: the chief city of Judah is Jerusalem, the city God chose, and its king sits on the throne God promised David would last.

Then comes the warning. *If you do not stand firm in your faith, then you will not stand at all, 7:9.* The CSB catches the wordplay. Isaiah uses one Hebrew verb twice, from the root that gives us the word *amen*. Be firm in God, or you won't be made firm at all.⁵¹ And the *you* is plural. Isaiah is speaking to the whole royal court.

So far God has asked Ahaz for nothing except to keep still and believe Him. With an army on the way, Ahaz would rather do something.

The Sign He Would Not Ask For (7:10–13)

Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz: "Ask for a sign from the Lord your God—it can be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven," 7:10–11.

Sheol is the realm of the dead, the deepest place an Israelite could name. Heaven was the highest. Anything in between was on the table. God offers to prove His own word, and He makes the offer to the same king who sacrificed his son in the fire.

But Ahaz replied, "I will not ask. I will not test the Lord," 7:12.

It sounds devout. It's even a Bible verse: *Do not test the Lord your God as you tested him at Massah*, Deuteronomy 6:16. At Massah, Israel demanded proof that God was with them after He had already split the sea for them. That's what testing God means, refusing to trust Him until He performs on your terms. Ahaz had it backward. God had set the terms Himself, and Ahaz turned them down by quoting a verse.⁵²

Why would he? Second Kings tells us what was going on behind the pious words. *So Ahaz sent messengers to King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, saying, "I am your servant and your son. March up and save me," 2 Kings 16:7.* He paid for it with *the silver and gold found in the Lord's temple*, 16:8. God had called David His servant and promised that David's heir would be His son, 2 Samuel 7:5, 14. Ahaz gives both titles away to the king of Assyria.

Once you've made up your mind, you don't want a sign. A sign might obligate you.

Isaiah's answer has an edge. *Listen, house of David! Is it not enough for you to try the patience of men? Will you also try the patience of my God? 7:13.* Two verses earlier, it was *the Lord your God*. Now it's *my God*. Isaiah has also turned from Ahaz to the house of David, the whole royal line, whose future one young king has just put at risk.⁵³

A Virgin and a Son (7:14–17)

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel, 7:14.

Ahaz wouldn't choose a sign, so God chooses one, and the *you* is plural again. *Immanuel* means "God with us," exactly what Ahaz had refused to believe.

The sign came with a timetable. *By the time he learns to reject what is bad and choose what is good, he will be eating curds and honey. For before the boy knows to reject what is bad and choose what is good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned, 7:15–16.* A child learns right from wrong early. Before that much time had passed, the threat would be gone.

It was. Tiglath-pileser took Damascus in 732 BC and put Rezin to death, 2 Kings 16:9. About the same time Hoshea led a conspiracy against Pekah, killed him, and took his throne, 2 Kings 15:30. Within two or three years of Isaiah's words, both kings Ahaz dreaded were dead. That's what the sign meant to the people standing at the conduit.

The sign doesn't stay comfortable, though. *Curds and honey* sound like rich food until 7:22 shows it's what survivors eat when the fields are gone. The child would grow up in hard times. Then 7:17: *The Lord will bring on you, your people, and your father's house such a time as has never been since Ephraim separated from Judah: He will bring the king of Assyria.* The worst day in Judah's memory was the day the kingdom

split two centuries earlier, 1 Kings 12. Ahaz's choice would bring a worse one. He had sent for the king of Assyria. He would get him.⁵⁴

Who was the child? Commentators divide here, and honest readers can too. Some see a boy born in Ahaz's own day, Isaiah's son or the king's. Others hold that Isaiah saw one child only, the Messiah, and that 7:16 measures the short life of the threat by the span of an infancy.⁵⁵ Isaiah's own book narrows the question. In the next chapter, as the Assyrian flood rises over Judah, the prophet cries out, *its flooded banks will fill your entire land, Immanuel!* 8:8. The land belongs to Him. In chapter 9 a child is born to sit on David's throne, and one of His names is *Mighty God*, 9:6. The longer Isaiah talks about this child, the less he sounds like anyone born in 734 BC.

The word *virgin* has drawn its own argument. The Hebrew word, *almah*, means a young woman of marriageable age, and wherever the Old Testament lets us check, she is unmarried. Jewish translators rendered it with the Greek word for a virgin long before Jesus was born.⁵⁶

The Razor He Hired (7:18–25)

The rest of the chapter is four short oracles, each beginning *On that day*. They show Ahaz what he bought.

On that day the Lord will whistle to flies at the farthest streams of the Nile and to bees in the land of Assyria, 7:18. The swarms settle everywhere, 7:19.

Then 7:20 names the price. *On that day the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the Euphrates River—the king of Assyria—to shave the hair on your heads, the hair on your legs, and even your beards,* 7:20. Ahaz thinks he's bought protection. Shaving captives was how a conqueror shamed them, and Ahaz paid for the razor with the temple's gold. But notice who holds it. *The Lord will use it.*

Chronicles tells how the bargain turned out. *Then King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came against Ahaz; he oppressed him and did not give him support,* 2 Chronicles 28:20. Ahaz stripped the temple to pay him, *but it did not help him,* 28:21. From that day on, David's sons sat on the throne at the pleasure of Assyria, and later of Babylon. When David's true heir was finally born, there was no crown left to inherit.⁵⁷

The last two oracles turn to the land. Where a thousand vines once grew, *worth a thousand pieces of silver,* there will be *thorns and briers,* 7:23. Those are the same thorns and briers God promised His fruitless vineyard in 5:6. The vineyard song of chapter 5 now has an enemy with a name.

Isaiah saves one more detail for later. In 701 BC, thirty-three years after this conversation, the king of Assyria sent an officer with *a massive army* to Jerusalem, and *the Assyrian stood near the conduit of the upper pool, by the road to Launderer's Field,* 36:2. It's the spot where Isaiah met Ahaz. The help Ahaz paid for came back to stand where he had refused God's offer.

Looking to Christ

Seven centuries later, a carpenter in Nazareth learned that the young woman he was engaged to was pregnant. The angel who came to him in a dream called him *Joseph, son of David*, and told him, *don't be afraid*, Matthew 1:20. Then Matthew adds, *Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord*

through the prophet: See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated "God is with us," 1:22–23.

Two sons of David were told not to be afraid. Ahaz heard it at the conduit and went looking for Assyria. Joseph heard it in a dream, woke up, and *did as the Lord's angel had commanded him*, 1:24. Joseph, a working man of David's line, believed what he was told. Ahaz never did.

In Jesus, God was with His people in a way Isaiah could only point toward. Matthew's Gospel opens with that name, and it closes on the same promise from Jesus Himself: *And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*, 28:20.

Applying the Text

Follow your fear to the top. Isaiah traced the armies that terrified Ahaz back to a single man. Whatever frightens you has a top too, whether it's a doctor's report or a company's balance sheet. None of them sits on the throne. Write the fear down, follow it up, and see where it stops.

Keep still when God tells you to. God's first word to Ahaz was *Calm down and be quiet*. Inspecting the water was his job. Buying a rescuer God had told him he didn't need was unbelief. Some of your busiest weeks are the same thing: you need every outcome secured before you'll rest. Ahaz got the help he paid for, and it *oppressed him and did not give him support*.

Be suspicious of your most spiritual-sounding excuses. *I will not test the Lord* was a Bible verse used to say no to God. "I'm waiting on the Lord" can mean you've already decided. "I don't want to impose" can mean you don't want to be asked again. When your reason sounds devout, ask whether it's a reason or a cover.

Live like God is with you. Ahaz had a promise and a prophet standing in front of him, and he still trusted what he could see. You have the name Matthew gave the Son of Mary and the promise Jesus made on the mountain in Galilee. What would you do differently this week if you believed He meant it?

For Discussion

1. List what Isaiah tells Ahaz to do and not to do in 7:4. Then read 2 Kings 16:7–8. Which of Isaiah's instructions did Ahaz follow?
2. Compare *the Lord your God* in 7:11 with *my God* in 7:13. What changed between those two verses, and why does Isaiah turn to address the whole *house of David*?

3. Ahaz quoted Deuteronomy 6:16 to refuse God's offer. How can a true Bible verse become cover for unbelief? When have you used one that way?
4. Read 2 Chronicles 28:20–23. Did Ahaz's plan work? In what sense did it succeed, and in what sense did it fail?
5. What fear in your life right now would you rather manage yourself than bring to God? What would *calm down and be quiet* look like there?
6. Is there a decision you've already made that you're now asking God to bless rather than direct? If He offered you a sign about it, would you want to see it?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 7: The People Walking in Darkness (Isaiah 8:1–9:7)

Isaiah posts his second son's name in public before the boy is conceived, and the Assyrian flood Ahaz invited rises to Judah's neck. The people go looking for answers among the dead, and the land goes dark. Then a light breaks over Galilee, and a child is born to sit on David's throne.

Before you come: read Isaiah 8:1–9:7 and Matthew 4:12–17. Mark every place in chapter 8 where the name *Immanuel* or the words *God is with us* appear.

⁴⁸ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 200, 206, 209. On 7:1–2 he sets the chapter in the Syro-Ephraimite War of 734–732 BC, draws the casualty figures from 2 Chronicles 28:5–8, and notes that Assyria had campaigned down the coast into Philistia in the summer of 734, so the smaller kingdoms knew they had to band together before the next season. He also observes that Isaiah, unlike Chronicles, does not stop to call the war a punishment for Ahaz's idolatry; his whole aim is to bring the king to trust.

⁴⁹ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 86. On 7:3 he notes that until Hezekiah's day Jerusalem's water came to the city overground and was vulnerable in a siege, and he reads *Shear-jashub* as deliberately ambivalent, a threat of decimation and a promise of survival at once, so that Isaiah made the word of God "become flesh" in his son.

⁵⁰ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 87–88. On 7:8–9 he hears in "Remaliah's son" a deliberate put-down, traces the six-line poem from country to capital to king, and takes the sixty-five years to point to about 671 BC, when Esarhaddon's import of foreign settlers ended any hope of reviving the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17:24; Ezra 4:2).

⁵¹ Young, *Isaiah*, 1:277. On 7:9 he explains that the same verb appears in two stems, "to show oneself firm" and "to be made firm," and argues that faith in Isaiah means committing oneself to the truth of God's word and acting on it; he links the line to the promise of an established house for David.

⁵² Motyer, *Isaiah*, 88. On 7:11–12 he defines putting the Lord to the test as refusing to trust Him and His past faithfulness unless He proves Himself all over again, and calls Ahaz's reply a pious misuse of Scripture that marks his point of no return. Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 212, grants that refusing to ask God for proof can be a real act of faith, but notes that here God was the one making the offer, and that Ahaz had probably already settled on Assyria.

⁵³ Young, *Isaiah*, 1:282. On 7:13 he observes that Isaiah turns from the king to the whole court, which is why the verbs are plural, and that the sin of wearying God's patience is all the heavier because God is slow to anger.

⁵⁴ Young, *Isaiah*, 1:295. On 7:17 he puts it in a line: Ahaz asked for the king of Assyria, and he would have the king of Assyria; sometimes the heaviest punishment is to be given what we asked for.

⁵⁵ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 202–205, 216. He surveys the main readings of 7:14, a son of Ahaz, a son of Isaiah, an unnamed child of the day, the Messiah alone, or a double fulfillment, and concludes that 7:14 promises a future righteous king of David's line whom Isaiah's later revelation in 9:1–7 identifies plainly as the Messiah. Young, *Isaiah*, 1:291, and Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 44, both hold that the child is the Messiah and no one else.

⁵⁶ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 90–91. In an additional note on 7:14 he works through every Old Testament use of *almah* and *bethulah*, finds that *bethulah* by itself does not guarantee virginity, and argues that *almah* means a woman who is young, marriageable, and unmarried (as Rebekah in Genesis 24:43), so that Isaiah chose the word nearest to "virgin" of those available to him.

⁵⁷ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 89–90. On 7:15–17 he notes that Damascus fell three years and Samaria thirteen years after this meeting, and that from Ahaz onward David's descendants reigned as puppets of Assyria and then Babylon until 586 BC, so that when Immanuel was born, the heir to David's throne was an unknown carpenter in Nazareth.