

The Coming of Immanuel

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Please send your Bibles back to Isaiah 7, as we consider the second passage from the Old Testament that Jesus came to fulfill, and will come to fulfill.

Well, I wonder if you've been called to the principal's office before, or the teacher's office, and how were you feeling about it? Well, I guess how you feel depends on whether you know why you're being called, and whether the reason you're being called is good or bad.

I've been called to the teacher's office before, and I felt relieved. I'll tell you the story later. But that's what we see here in our text from Isaiah 7. Depending on your relationship with God, Isaiah's prophecy here can be either good news or bad news. God is with us, Emmanuel, but what that means can be both good news or bad news. But first, a bit of context.

This passage in Isaiah happened about 700 years before Jesus came. So if you see on the screen, there's a map. Israel, the kingdom of Israel, had been divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom is the one on the dark blue. It's called Ephraim, or the kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of Ephraim.

And the southern kingdom is the light red, the kingdom of Judah. Now Judah still had kings from the house of David reigning on the throne. And in our text, that king was Ahaz. Now during this time, the Assyrian empire from the north, if you see on the top right-hand side, the Assyrian empire from the north was threatening to attack all the countries surrounding them. And so the kingdom of Aram Damascus, the one in the green, and the kingdom of Ephraim, the northern kingdom of Israel, were nervous because they were closer geographically to Assyria. And so they faced a more imminent threat. And thus they worked together to defend against Assyria. Now the kingdom of Judah, though, because it's in the south, perhaps they felt more secure. So they're not interested in working together with Aram and Ephraim. And as a result,

[3 : 1 0] Aram and Ephraim now, in this text, were threatening to attack Judah so that they could install someone who's more cooperative on the throne. Now, because of that, Ahaz, the king, was now nervous about it.

He was panicking. And that's where our passage comes in. In our passage, God told the prophet Isaiah to tell King Ahaz to ask for a sign. Any sign, in verse 10 to 11. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights. Any sign, how great it is, I don't care, ask for a sign. Now this sign was to prove that Yahweh is powerful and he's faithful to the promise that he had made to David. Remember from last week, Yahweh, God promised David that his kingdom would last forever. Now here Ahaz, one of David's descendants, was panicking. And so Yahweh offered a sign to help him not to panic. God will protect them from imminent threats. But in verse 12, Ahaz refused to ask for a sign. No, I will not ask,

I will not put the Lord to the test. Now this might sound like a really spiritual and godly thing to do. The Bible certainly doesn't praise people who always doubt and always ask for signs.

But there's a difference, isn't there, between people who want to believe but struggle to believe and therefore they ask for signs, and people who don't want to believe and want an excuse for avoiding belief and therefore they don't want signs. From the way Isaiah responds in verse 13, that Ahaz is trying the patience of God. Perhaps Ahaz comes in the latter category.

God told him to ask for a sign. He offered it to him, but Ahaz refused, probably because he did not believe that Yahweh would be able to save them from the attack. And if we go back to verse 3, where it says that the conversation happened as Ahaz was at the aqueduct, it might indicate that he's currently checking his water supply in preparation for the attacks, and thus choosing to trust in his own policy and infrastructure rather than on God's promise to David that he would protect them.

[6 : 10] But God gave a sign regardless in verse 14 to 17. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. For before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread, Assyria, sorry, Aram and Ephraim, will be laid waste.

The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah. He will bring the king of Assyria.

Now this sign is a bit confusing. So the sign was that the virgin would conceive and bear a son and he will be called Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

Now in this passage, if taken literally, this sign is not necessarily a supernatural or spectacular miracle. The virgin bearing a son could only mean, in the original language, it could only mean that despite the threat of imminent attacks, a virgin woman in Judah will still be able to get married and have a son.

And then the son will grow up until he's able to choose what's right and wrong, which just means that the son will grow up okay to be an adult. The point of this sign during this time was to show that things would be okay.

[7 : 58] That despite the threat from Ephraim and Aram, people would survive. And because of that, the son that the woman would bear would be called Emmanuel because his existence and his growing up would remind the people that God was with them.

Defending them from the attacks and saving them. Things would be okay, just as God has promised. But there are complexities in the sign.

In verse 15 to 17, this sign sounds like good news. The son will grow up to be an adult because before he grew up, both Ephraim and Aram will be destroyed.

So they're going to be safe from the imminent threats. But then in verse 17, this sign sounds like bad news.

God will bring destruction to Judah through the Assyrian Empire. So God is going to make sure that Ephraim and Aram, the two kingdoms that are currently threatening them, will be destroyed so they can't attack Judah.

[9 : 16] But instead, he's going to bring to Judah an even greater giant, Assyria. And then the complexities continue in verse 18 to 20.

In that day, the Lord will whistle for flies from the Nile Delta in Egypt and for bees from the land of Assyria. They will all come and settle in the steep ravens and in the crevices in the rocks, on all the thorn bushes and at all the water holes.

In that day, the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the Euphrates River, the king of Assyria, to shave your head and private parts and to cut off your beard also.

So the flies and bees there symbolize the foreign powers of Egypt and Assyria that will attack Judah and they will overpower Judah to the point that in verse 19, no small spaces in Judah will be safe.

The news just gets worse here. Now not only Assyria, but Egypt will also come to attack Judah. And who's calling for Egypt and Assyria to come?

[10 : 34] In verse 18, it's the Lord who would whistle and call them over. And in verse 20, Assyria will be used by, again, the Lord to shave the hair of Judah, which is an ancient imagery that means to bring shame.

And then in verse 21, in that day, a person will keep alive a young cow and two goats.

The attack that Assyria would bring would be so devastating that a person would only have one cow and two sheep, which is a very small herd.

And instead of eating them, he would have to keep them alive to save them through the famine that would be caused by the attack. This is a sign of devastation that there would be scarcity of food.

And yet, in verse 22, And because of the abundance of the milk that they give, there will be curds to eat.

[11 : 46] All who remain in the land will eat curds and honey. So, out of the scarcity of food, there's a miracle! There will be an abundance of milk and honey.

The imagery of milk and honey in the Old Testament was used to indicate abundance of blessings. You know, like the land of milk and honey.

And lastly, in verse 23 to 25, In that day, in every place where there were a thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels, there will be only briars and thorns.

Hunters will go there with bow and arrow, for the land will be covered with briars and thorns. As for all the hills once cultivated by the hoe, you will no longer go there for fear of the briars and thorns.

They will become places where cattle are turned loose and where sheep run. So, in verse 23 and 24, the attack will be so devastating that the land that they used for growing vines will be destroyed to the point that there would only be briars and thorns.

[12 : 59] But then, in verse 25, the land would be a good place for shepherds to safely let their cattle roam and be free.

There's a sense of safety and peace there. So, to summarize, God is giving, through Isaiah, a sign.

A son will be born who will represent God's promise to be with his people despite the imminent threat. a greater threat will be realized.

It's true, but some will be saved. It says there all who remain in the land, there will be people who remain in the land.

So, some will be saved and things will be okay for them. So, this sign is good news for some and bad news for others.

[14 : 12] It's good news for those who would be saved, but for those who face destruction, the sign offers only the terror of certain doom. You see, whether or not the sign acts as good news or bad news depends on their relationship with God.

This is called a theology of the remnant in the book of Isaiah, which is repeated over and over again. The one who looks to God for salvation would find comfort in his presence and protection despite hardship.

Even though God is coming to bring destruction through Assyria and Egypt, he also promises comfort and salvation to those who trust in him.

Abundance of blessings and peace. On the other hand, the one who looks to his own strength and wisdom like Ahaz would not find the concept of God with us to be of any comfort.

After all, they don't trust him to save them at all. And so, all that is left to face is the famine, shame, and destruction.

[15 : 34] I remember a time when I was in fifth grade. There was one day where the fifth graders and the sixth graders had to share a soccer field.

So, we drew a line and we said, you play there and we play here. But while we were playing, the sixth graders just constantly moved the boundary so they would have a bigger space.

Kids, right? And a couple of friends and I from the fifth grade tried to talk to them. Not because we were wise, but because they were bigger than us.

There was this one big sixth grader that was known as a troublemaker. Let's call him Daniel. And when Daniel saw us protesting, he walked towards us and kicked me in the stomach.

Now, my friends ran away and called a teacher. Then when the teacher came over and called both Daniel and me to the teacher's office, I could see Daniel's face just panicking.

[16 : 46] he got so afraid and he apologized profusely to me. As it turned out, he was on the brink of being expelled because he was a troublemaker and he didn't want to be in another trouble.

I, on the other hand, was happy that both of us were being called to the teacher's office because that means justice would be served. In the same way how the old Israelites felt about the coming of God, the Emmanuel, God with us, would have depended on where they were in their relationship with God.

Whether they trusted him or they trusted in themselves. Whether they expected God to come to save them or to come and judge them and destroy them.

Now, this prophecy of Isaiah had probably been fulfilled during the time of Ahaz. A son probably was born during the reign of Ahaz as a sign that Judah did not get destroyed by Ephraim and Aram, but it was instead attacked devastatingly by the Assyrian empire.

So, what did Matthew mean in our second reading when he said that the birth of Jesus was to fulfill what God had said through Isaiah?

[18 : 20] Well, the birth of Jesus fulfills the prophecy more perfectly. The mother of Jesus, Mary, was not just a virgin who got married and then bore a son, naturally.

She was literally a virgin who bore a son miraculously. And Jesus is not just a sign that God is with us, he's literally God coming down here to save us, to be with us.

In the text in verse 21, the angel says to Joseph that he's to name him Jesus, which by the way means Yahweh saves, because who will save?

He will save his people. In other words, he is the Yahweh who saves. But this time he's saving us from our sin, oppression from within, the kind of oppression that makes us unable to live perfectly or to live peacefully or to live with love towards other people or even to bring peace to ourselves.

Our sins oppress us from within and he came to save us from that kind of oppression. Jesus is God himself with us.

[19 : 56] This is the ultimate fulfillment of the sign. Jesus then is God with us, Emmanuel, in a greater and more personal sense.

But again, whether or not that's good news depends on where you are in your relationship with God. For those who trust in Jesus, he is good news indeed.

he came to save us from the oppression of sins. He came to heal the sick and raise the dead. He came to feel hunger along with those who are hungry, to feel the hurt along with those who are oppressed, to cry along with those who suffer.

That's good news to those who trust him. What kind of God would do that except for Jesus? Other people of other religions might pray to their own God, save me, don't you know our suffering?

No. Their gods don't know their suffering. They haven't felt it. Jesus has because he is Emmanuel. He came to be next to us so that even when our lives are full of briars and thorns, Jesus can give us peace, just like Isaiah prophesied, so that even when we are materially insufficient, Jesus can give us an abundance of spiritual milk and honey, that we shall be satisfied in him.

[21 : 45] Catherine Berger is a Christian in the United States who battles a rare genetic disorder. Her sickness has affected her connective tissues, her autonomic nervous system, and multiple organ systems in her body.

She has endured about ten years of constant sickness and surgeries, constantly. people have been interviewed. She said, through all the suffering that I've had, God has given such comfort, such peace, such joy.

Now when I wake up every day, I need God, I need him to get through the day. And my life has gotten better, not worse. I have so much happiness now than I ever did before.

I'm not any better physically, but I am so much happier because I have Jesus and he is right here. For those who trust in Jesus, like Catherine, the fact that Jesus is God with us, next to us, brings so much comfort and happiness and joy, even when we at times suffer.

There's milk and honey, even in scarcity, and there's peace and safety, even among breeze and thorns. But for those who don't trust in Jesus, even though, even if they are already a part of the church on earth like Ahaz, Jesus is still Emmanuel, Jesus will come and be with us, but the Emmanuel becomes bad news to them, because Jesus will not come to save them from their sins, but to judge them for their sins.

[23 : 47] In Matthew 25, Jesus says, When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne, all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, the sheep, Come, you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

In this season of Advent, as we look back to the first coming of Jesus, and also look forward to his second coming, in waiting for Jesus to return, we need to always self-reflect and ask ourselves which side we are on.

Whether we trust in him or not, whether we are part of the remnant of God's people or like Ahaz, the rest. Shortly we will sing the hymn, O come, O come, Emmanuel.

[25 : 19] And as we do that, let's ask ourselves, what does Jesus mean to us? What does Emmanuel mean to us? does it mean that God is close to us, feel what we feel, meet us in our heartbreaks, will come to vindicate us like the lyric says, because we have put our trust, our faith in him?

Will Jesus be like the shepherd of Psalm 23, who lies us down in green pastures, who leads us to quiet waters, who refreshes our souls, and in whom we will lack nothing?

Or does Emmanuel mean that God will come as a judge that brings a sword, and will judge us with absolute fairness, and will lay bare all our sins, and will punish us righteously, because we have relied on ourselves like Ahaz, and refuse to have faith in Jesus?

In other words, will Jesus come as the lamb who had died for our sins, or the lion who will judge and devour us?

let's pray. Father, thank you for sending your son Jesus to be the Emmanuel, God with us, that we can trust in him and rely on him to save us from our sins.

[27 : 04] Help us to trust in him more and more every day, and less on ourselves. In Jesus we pray.
Amen.

Amen.