

When Your World Is Falling Apart



SABBATH AFTERNOON

One Sabbath, Connie and Roy drove into their driveway after church. A bantam hen flew frantically across the yard in front of them. Something was wrong. The pet birds were supposed to be safely in their pen but had gotten out. Quick investigation showed a tragedy in progress. Beethoven, the neighbor's small dog, also had escaped her yard and was down by the pond with Daisy in her mouth. Daisy was a beautiful laying hen with fluffy white tail feathers. Connie rescued Daisy, but it was too late. Her precious pet, now with a mangled neck, soon died in Connie's arms. She sat down in the yard, holding the dead bird, and wailed.

Another pet was deeply disturbed. A tall, white duck by the name of Waddlesworth saw Connie holding Daisy and seemed to have assumed she had killed her. So, for the next few weeks, whenever Waddlesworth saw Connie, he would viciously attack her, pinching her painfully with his strong bill. Sometimes it is hard to sort out who your friends and enemies are.

This week we'll look at a king of Judah who also had this problem as we seek to understand why he made the wrong choices he did.

The Week at a Glance: What threats was Judah facing, and why? How did King Ahaz respond to those threats, and why? What great thing did the Lord promise to do for him, if only he would show faith? What does it mean that "God is with us"?

Memory Text: "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (*Isaiah 7:9, NRSV*).

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 17.*

Danger From the North (*Isa. 7:1-9*).

What terrifying crisis did King Ahaz face early in his reign? *2 Kings 15:37, 38; 16:5, 6; Isa. 7:1, 2.*

The kingdoms of northern Israel (Ephraim) and Syria (Aram) ganged up on the smaller country of Judah, to the south. This happened when Judah was weakened by attacks from the Edomites and Philistines. In the past, Judah had fought with Israel, but an alliance between Israel and Syria was an overwhelming peril. It appears Israel and Syria wanted to force Judah to participate with them in a coalition against the mighty power of Tiglath-pileser III, of Assyria (*called “Pul” in 2 Kings 15:19*), who continued to threaten them with his expanding empire. Israel and Syria had put aside their longstanding struggle against each other in view of a greater danger. If they could conquer Judah and install a puppet ruler there (*Isa. 7:5, 6*), they could use its resources and manpower.

What was Ahaz’s solution when his world was falling apart? *2 Kings 16:7-9, 2 Chron. 28:16.*

Rather than recognize that God was the only Friend who could rescue him and his country, Ahaz tried to make a friend out of Tiglath-pileser III, the enemy of his enemies. The Assyrian king happily complied with his request for aid against Syria and Israel. Not only did Tiglath-pileser receive a rich bribe from Ahaz, he also gained a good excuse to take Syria, which he promptly did (*2 Kings 16:9*). The power of the Syrian-Israelite alliance was broken. In the short run, it appeared that Ahaz had saved Judah.

This action on Ahaz’s part, however, should not come as a surprise. He had been one of the worst kings Judah had up to that point. (*See 2 Kings 16:3, 4; 2 Chron. 28:2-4.*)

When we read about what Ahaz was like, it is understandable why he reacted to danger as he did. What lesson is here for us on a personal level? If we’re not obeying the Lord now, what makes us think we’ll have the faith to trust Him when real trials come? (*See James 2:22, Jer. 12:5.*)

Attempted Interception *(Isa. 7:3-9)*

While Ahaz was weighing his political options to meet the threat from Israel and Syria, God knew some things he did not. For one thing, it was God who had allowed trouble to come upon him in order to discipline him and bring him to his senses (*2 Chron. 28:5, 19*). Moreover, although appealing to Tiglath-pileser for help seemed logical and attractive from a human standpoint, God knew it would bring the Davidic kingdom of Judah under foreign control from which she could never recover.

The stakes were staggeringly high. So the Lord sent Isaiah to intercept the king (apparently as he was inspecting Jerusalem's water supply in preparation for a siege) in order to dissuade him from contacting the Assyrian leader.

Why did the Lord tell Isaiah to take his son, Shear-jashub, with him (*Isa. 7:3*)?

Ahaz would be startled when Isaiah greeted him and introduced his son, named "A Remnant Shall Return." Remnant of whom? Shall return from what? Because the boy's father was a prophet, the name sounded like an ominous message from God about people going into captivity. Or was it about returning to God in the sense of repenting (the verb "return" also carries the meaning of repentance)? The message from God to Ahaz was: It means what you make it mean! Turn from your sins or go into captivity, and from captivity a remnant will return. The decision is yours!

How did God's message address the king's situation? *Vss. 4-9.*

The threat from Syria and Israel would pass and Judah would be spared. Powers that looked to Ahaz like huge, fiery volcanoes were in God's sight only "two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (*vs. 4, NRSV*). There was no need for Ahaz to appeal to Assyria for help.

But in order to make the right decision, Ahaz needed to trust the Lord and His promises. He needed to believe in order to be established (*vs. 9*). The words for "believe" and "be established" are from the same Hebrew root, from which come also the word for "truth" (that which is reliable) and the word "Amen" (affirming that which is true/reliable). Ahaz needed to be sure in order to be made sure; he needed to rely in order to be reliable.

Look at that last section of Isaiah 7:9. Why are faith and belief so important in order to be "established"? Established in what?

Another Chance (*Isa. 7:10-13*).

Ahaz did not respond to Isaiah's call for faith. So, God mercifully gave the king another chance, telling him to ask for a sign that was "deep as Sheol or high as heaven" (*vs. 11, NRSV*). Here is one of the greatest invitations to faith ever given to a human being. Unlike lotteries or sweepstakes, this invitation did not carry restrictions in fine print. God did not even limit His offer to the half of His kingdom as human rulers did when their subjects reached the upper limit of their generosity (*compare Esther 5:6, 7:2, Mark 6:23*). He stood ready to empty all heaven and earth for a wicked king if only he would believe! Ahaz could have asked for a mountain of gold, as a sign, or soldiers as numerous as grains of sand by the Mediterranean.

Why did Ahaz respond in the way he did (*vs. 12*)?

At first glance, Ahaz's answer seems pious and respectful. He would not put God to the test, as the Israelites had centuries before, during their wilderness wanderings (*Exod. 17:2, Deut. 6:16*). But the difference was that God invited the king to put Him to the test (*compare Mal. 3:10*). To take Him up on His overwhelmingly generous gift would please Him, not test His patience. But Ahaz was not even willing to allow God to help him to believe. He barred and bolted the door of his heart to shut out faith.

Read Isaiah 7:13. What is Isaiah saying here?

Isaiah pointed out that by refusing to put God to the test, outwardly to avoid wearying God, he, in fact, wearied God. But the most troubling aspect of this verse is the fact that here Isaiah refers to "my God," by clear contrast to verse 11, where earlier the prophet asked the king to ask a sign of the Lord "your God." When Ahaz refused the divine offer, he rejected the Lord from being his God. The Lord was the God of Isaiah, but not of Ahaz.

What does this day's study teach us about God's forbearance and willingness to bring all of us to salvation? What also does it tell us about the blindness and hardness of the human heart when not surrendered completely to the Lord? In the end, even if God had given Ahaz any sign that he had wanted, do you think Ahaz still would have believed? Explain your answer.

Sign of a Son *(Isa. 7:14)*.

An offer of a sign as “deep as Sheol or high as heaven” (*vs. 11, NRSV*) did not move Ahaz. So, when God says He Himself will come up with a sign (*vs. 14*), we expect it to have breathtaking dimensions that only the divine imagination could devise (*compare Isa. 55:9, 1 Cor. 2:9*).

Surprise! The sign is a son. But how could a young woman bearing a child and calling him “Immanuel” be a sign of biblical proportions?

Who is the woman, and who is her Child?

Nowhere does the Old Testament point out a fulfillment of this important sign, as it had done for the signs given to other people, such as Gideon (*Judg. 6:36-40*). So, here are some of the possible fulfillments, based on the Old Testament alone:

1. Because the word for “young woman” refers to a young woman of marriageable age, many assume she is a married woman living in Jerusalem, perhaps the wife of Isaiah. Isaiah 8:3 does record the birth of a son to Isaiah by “the prophetess” (referring to his wife, whose prophetic messages consisted, at least, of her children; *compare Isa. 7:3, 8:18*). However, her son was named Maher-shalal-hash-baz (*Isa. 8:1-4*), not Immanuel. Nevertheless, the signs of the two boys are similar in that before they reach the stage at which they can choose good or evil, Syria and northern Israel would be devastated (*Isa. 7:16, 8:4*).

2. Some suggest that Immanuel is Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, the next king. But nowhere is the name Immanuel applied to him.

3. Because Immanuel is somewhat mysterious and his name, commonly translated “God with us” refers to God’s presence, He could be the same as the special Son prophesied in Isaiah 9 and 11. If so, His exalted description as divine (*Isa. 9:6*) and “the root of Jesse” (*11:10, NRSV*) surpasses anything ascribed to good King Hezekiah.

4. A natural birth for an unmarried woman of marriageable age would result in an illegitimate child through promiscuity (*see Deut. 22:20, 21*). Why would such a child be a sign to inspire faith?

In contrast, the New Testament identifies Jesus as Immanuel (*Matt. 1:21-23*), born miraculously and with purity to an unmarried but betrothed virgin. “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman” (*Gal. 4:4, NRSV*), to give us the presence of God with us.

Dwell on the reality of Christ’s coming into humanity. What kind of comfort can that reality give us amid what seems like a cold, fearsome, and uncaring world?

“God Is with Us”! (*Isa. 7:14*).

Like the name of Isaiah’s children (Shear-jashub, “a remnant shall return,” and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means “swift is booty, speedy is prey”), the name of Immanuel has a meaning. It is literally “with us God.” But the commonly accepted translation “God with us” misses something important. As with other Hebrew names of this kind that lack verbs, the verb “to be” must be supplied, because it is not expressed in Hebrew. So, Immanuel must be translated “God is with us” (*compare the same words in Isa. 8:10*) just as the name “Jesus” (Greek, and short for Hebrew Yehoshua, or Joshua) means “The Lord is salvation,” with the verb again being supplied (compare Isaiah, which means, “salvation of the Lord”).

But the name “Immanuel” is not just an abstract description; it is an assertion of a promise that is fulfilled now: “God is with us”!

What is the significance of the promise that God is with us?

There is no stronger assurance and comfort. “God does not promise that His people will not endure hardship and pain, but He promises to be with them. The psalmist says: ‘Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me’ (*Ps. 23:4*).

“God says: ‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you’ (*Isa. 43:2*). Where was the Lord when the Babylonians threw Daniel’s three friends into the fire? With them (*Dan. 3:23-25*). And where was the Lord during the time of Jacob’s trouble when he wrestled until daybreak? In Jacob’s arms, as close as he could get (*Gen. 32:24-30*).

“Even when the Lord does not appear in physical form on earth, He goes through the experiences of His people with them. Where was the Lord when the mob condemned Stephen? ‘Standing at the right hand of God’ (*Acts 7:55*). But when Jesus ascended to heaven, He ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (*Heb. 1:3*). Why did He stand when Stephen was in trouble, about to be stoned to death? As Morris Venden has said, ‘Jesus wasn’t going to take that sitting down!’ ”—Roy Gane, *God’s Faulty Heroes* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Pub. Assn., 1996), p. 66.

Even though we have the promise that “God is with us,” what difference does that make if we still face terrible trials and suffering? What good does the knowledge of His presence, then, do for us? Explain your answer.

Further Study: “ ‘His name shall be called Immanuel, . . . ‘God with us.’ ‘The light of the knowledge of the glory of God’ is seen ‘in the face of Jesus Christ.’ From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father; He was ‘the image of God,’ the image of His greatness and majesty, ‘the outshining of His glory.’ It was to manifest this glory that He came to our world. To this sin-darkened earth He came to reveal the light of God’s love,—to be ‘God with us.’ Therefore it was prophesied of Him, ‘His name shall be called Immanuel.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 19.

“Well would it have been for the kingdom of Judah had Ahaz received this message as from heaven. But choosing to lean on the arm of flesh, he sought help from the heathen. In desperation he sent word to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria: ‘I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me.’ 2 Kings 16:7. The request was accompanied by a rich present from the king’s treasure and from the temple storehouse.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 329.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** When you are in the process of making a decision, is it appropriate to ask God for a sign? What dangers are possibly inherent in doing something like that?
- 2** It is good to have human assistance, but how do you recognize its limits?
- 3** Russian author Leo Tolstoy once wrote to a friend that “Once a man has realized that death is the end of everything, then there is nothing worse than life either.” How does our knowledge that “God is with us” answer such a statement?

Summary: God brought faithless King Ahaz to circumstances in which he had to make a difficult decision: To believe or not to believe, this is the question. Even though the Lord offered him any sign that his imagination could devise, Ahaz even refused to allow God to demonstrate a reason why he should believe. As his “friend” he chose instead the king of Assyria.

A Difficult Life

HANNAH Z

Nine-year-old Prakash lay shivering and helpless on his sleeping mat. Silent tears traced patterns on his sallow cheeks. At last he burst out, “Ama [Mama], help me!”

His mother rose slowly from her own mat and crept silently through the darkness to where her young son lay. “Son, I don’t know what to do.” Her own voice sounded tired. It had been two years since her son ran and played with the other boys. Finding a match, she lit a candle and sat beside her son until he fell into a troubled sleep. Why was life so cruel? Prakash’s mother wondered. But let it be, she decided. Perhaps in the next existence we will have a better life.

Eventually Prakash regained some measure of health, but the mysterious sickness had stunted his growth and kept him from attending school. Uneducated and small for his age, Prakash could not find steady work, so he farmed to help support his family.

Then Prakash learned that some Christians lived in a nearby village. “Perhaps you should become a Christian,” a friend advised. “Maybe they can help you get well.” It was illegal to convert to Christianity in Prakash’s country, so he crossed the border and sought Christians to share the news of Christ with him. At age 25, Prakash was baptized. He returned home a believer. Prakash and some friends began meeting quietly in their own village. But the police discovered the small group of Christians and burst into their meeting place. They confiscated their Bibles and arrested the men. For months while Prakash languished in prison, his wife struggled to provide food for herself and their child.

Eventually Prakash was released, but tragedy struck again when his wife died of cancer, and he was faced with the task of raising a young boy alone.

Prakash lost his little garden plot when the local land was sold to large tea plantations. His small physique kept him from working in the new plantations. Prakash suffered deprivation as well as loneliness, but his faith remained strong.

One day Prakash met a widow named Maile who was thirsting to learn about Christianity. Soon after she gave her life to Christ, the couple married. It is still difficult to be a Christian in their homeland, but the couple share their faith with family and friends who will listen.

Pray for Prakash and the people in his country, where Christians often are persecuted and freedom to worship is not guaranteed.

HANNAH Z and her family are working in a closed country in Asia.