

Isaiah 7:1-8:10
Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

I want to start with a question. What is the thing going on in the world today that is the greatest threat to the church? To us, here at Christ Church? What is the thing that the world does to us, or could do to us, that makes us most fearful, that we think "goodness, I don't know how we're going to cope with that? Please God, don't let that happen."

Is it the religious Hatred Bill? The threat of being sent to prison for speaking the truth. Is it the threat of science somehow proving that there is no God? Is it postmodernism, or post-post-modernism, or whatever phase we're supposed to be in now, and its claim that there is no knowable objective truth? Is it just apathy, perhaps?

I don't have a "right" answer to that question, but whatever it is that you're thinking of, next question is, how do you respond to that? Or, if it hasn't happened yet, what would you do if it actually happened? What would you change? Where would you go to for help? Well, this passage is all about what God's people do when they're under threat. When we're scared, when we feel like we're about to be defeated or wiped out. Perhaps you feel like that right now. Perhaps you don't – but one day you probably will, so listen in anyway.

It starts in verse 1 with a king called Ahaz, the Son of Jotham. And he and his people were scared – look at verse 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."

Right, lots of names and places there, so before we go any further let's have a quick geography lesson.

The country known as Israel started out as one nation – but after the death of Solomon split into 2.

There was the northern kingdom, confusingly also known as Israel, or Ephraim, with its capital, Samaria. Then there was the smaller southern kingdom, usually known as Judah, with its capital, Jerusalem.

Surrounding these nations, which were both small, were the nations of Syria, otherwise known as Aram, and Assyria, off the map here on the other side of the Euphrates river.

And at the time of this passage, Assyria was the new kid on the block. It was the new superpower. And it was becoming so powerful that Syria and Israel had decided to form an alliance to protect themselves against it. And they wanted Judah to join their alliance. So they decided to try and conquer Judah and install their leader there, a kind of puppet king, as we see in verse 5: "Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it."

Whatever it was that scares you, that scares us as a church, this is what scared Ahaz. 2 bigger countries than him, ganging upon him. And it probably seems quite natural for him and his people to be scared.

But the question was, what was he going to do? That is the big theme of this section – where will Ahaz turn to for help? Who or what will he put his faith in?

So, firstly, let's look at the choice Ahaz faced.

The choice Ahaz faced, v3-10

We first meet Ahaz properly preparing for battle, inspecting the water supply. Look at verse 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 Washerman's Field."

Isaiah's son Shearjashub isn't along on a day trip with dad. He's not there for the ride to look at a water engineering project, as interesting as that may have been. He's there for a purpose, which is all to do with his name.

I've never met someone called "a remnant shall return, or repent". That's what the name Shearjashub meant. Now this wasn't Mr and Mrs Isaiah trying to be trendy, or funny, it was to make a point. To find out what was the point of little Rennie tagging along, let's look at what Isaiah had to say to Ahaz.

Look at verse 4 there – "do not fear. Don't panic. Don't let your heart be faint". Well, that's easy for you to say, Isaiah? Why not!

Isaiah goes on, verse 4: "these 2 kings are just "smoldering stumps of firewood, Ahaz". Cigarette butts, fag ends. Dying embers. Yes, they may seem hot and dangerous, but they're

on their way out, yesterdays news. You don't need to worry about them."

Then look at verse 7 – whatever plans and schemes these fag ends might have, God says "It will not take place, it will not happen". How do you know, Isaiah? V8-9: "For the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin". "Ephraim is going to be destroyed completely within 65 years, and the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son."

Rezin, and Pekah – they may seem dangerous and frightening now, but listen to me Ahaz, they're only **Men**. And **God** says that **their** plans will not happen. They won't be able to destroy you. Have faith in God, Ahaz – trust him, they won't succeed against you.

The reason Isaiah has to say this is because Ahaz has already put his trust elsewhere. We are told in 2 Kings Ch 16, verse 7, that when Ahaz was attacked by Syria and Israel, he asked Assyria for help. He said this to the King of Assyria: "I am your servant and vassal. Come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Israel, who are attacking me".

They are shocking words to have spoken to a foreign king. "I am your servant. Come and help me." They are words that he should only ever have spoken to God. Words that Ahaz needs to repent of.

So Isaiah takes his son along with him as a visual aid. He is calling Ahaz to join the remnant that repents.

To be one of the faithful few who look to God for their help. And, verse 9, he warns him: You might be shaking with fear now, Ahaz, but "if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all."

Are you going to fear mere men and shake like the leaves of a forest, and look to the world for your help. Or are you going to be firm and have faith in God, believing him when he says "it shall not happen?"

That's the choice you face, Ahaz.

And, thinking back to the questions at the beginning, that is the choice that we face, too. When the pressure is on, when we're worried that the world seems to be closing in on us, that the culture around is just too clever and powerful and rich and influential, we have a choice of who to turn to.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I sit in our church meetings on a Sunday or on a housegroup night, and I see the big city and the rich and the powerful people, and it intimidates me.

And we can fear the world, can't we, and compromise, or make alliances with it. That is what has happened so much in the last few decades in this country: We've had things like: "goodness, this all this modern philosophy and scientific advance means that no-one believes in miracles or the resurrection anymore. We're going to fizzle out if we still believe in them, so we'd better stop believing in them and just say that they're metaphors or fables."

Or, "everyone out there thinks the Bible is a bit out of date, irrelevant, so we had better not keep on teaching it or else no-one will come to us anymore. Or if we do keep on teaching it, we had better at least make our meetings a bit more interesting by keeping people entertained in them - making sure they go away feeling like they've had an amazing spiritual experience".

Or, perhaps closer to home, "no-one likes commitment anymore, so we'd better not ask for too much of anyone's time or money. So, you don't really have to commit yourself to a church, and certainly, no-one could possibly expect anyone to be a missionary for life nowadays, a year or two at the most will do."

That's what Ahaz was doing – looking to the world for his help and his answers, and not trusting in God's promises. And Isaiah's message to him is "don't". Don't do it. Trust God.

Trust God, when he says that he will not let his church be destroyed. When he says "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it". Don't fear men, who plot its downfall. Trust him when he says that his word is true, and needn't be diluted. Don't fear the people who say otherwise. Trust him when he says that he speaks through his word. Trust him when he says that telling people the gospel is a powerful thing, and will bring results, and that you don't need to change the message or do anything other than explain it clearly to people. Trust him when he says "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age and in the age to come, eternal life". Don't believe those who say we mustn't ask for commitment.

Don't look to the world for your answers or your security. Now I'm not talking about cutting off from the world here, but too often

the answer to the problem seems to be the latest modern management structure or the latest motivational technique.

God says how we should do things, he says how he builds his church, so trust him and get on and obey him. Well that's the choice Ahaz faced – faith in God or faith in the world.

The choice Ahaz Made, v10-12

What happens next in verse 10 is extraordinary. "Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." Imagine it – God says to Ahaz, "I want to prove to you that what I say is true, that Syria and Israel won't win against you, so ask me for any sign you can think of, and I'll do it for you. It can be anything – anything in the world, from the depths of the earth to the heavens above".

That's some offer, isn't it!!? What would you have asked for?

Ahaz's response is remarkable, though. He might dress it up in spiritual piety, v12 – "I will not put the Lord God to the test" – but essentially, he's saying "erm, no thanks God, not interested".

Because he has already made up his mind who he's going to trust. He's banked on Assyria. He is saying "I don't need God", or at the very least "God can't help me here". He chose to continue trusting other things. Well that's the choice Ahaz faced and the choice Ahaz made, now let's see the consequences.

The consequences v13-24

Read verse 13 there: "then Isaiah said Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

I wonder if when you read that you think "wow, isn't God gracious, and patient and kind. Giving Ahaz a sign even though he didn't ask for one. Giving him the sign of Immanuel as well, the sign that means "God is with us"".

It's ok, Ahaz, don't worry, I know you're scared, but it doesn't matter, for God is with you, he's going to send Jesus".

Is that what God is saying here? Well, in short, no.

Remember the choice Ahaz faced – return to God, and join the remnant, or continue to go your own way.

Ahaz refuses the offer of a sign, and so God says, "right then, that confirms that you're going your way and rejecting my offer, so I'm going to give you a sign anyway." And the sign God gives, the sign of Immanuel, is not one of patience and mercy to Ahaz – but judgment.

Because "God is with us", is not so much "God is with us", or "God is **with** us", as "God is with **us**". "God is with **us**", says Isaiah. He's not with you, Ahaz, your faith is elsewhere.

You might have noticed the change in language between verse 11- "ask the Lord **your God** for a sign", and verse 13 "the Lord **my God**". My God, Ahaz, not yours anymore, says Isaiah.

The consequences of Ahaz's rejection and refusal to repent are that God says to him "I'm not going to be with you, anymore, Ahaz".

I'm going to create a remnant, a small group of people who are faithful to me, and who I promise to be with.

Elsewhere in Isaiah Zion is commonly described as a woman, and in Isaiah 66, Zion – God's people – are described as a woman in labour, giving birth to a new people.

V14 literally reads "the virgin **has** conceived and **is** giving birth to a son". So Immanuel is being born now, as Isaiah speaks. Immanuel is the remnant.

Let's read on, though, because Isaiah is going to spell out more consequences of Ahaz's rejection.

Read verse 14-16 there: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. [a remnant will be born]. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste."

But when Ahaz heard about this defeat of the kings of Syria and Israel he probably thought – quids in! God really is with us! Maybe he thought God was worth having after all. Certainly God's assurance of v7 has been proved true, hasn't it.

But if he was thinking that, he was brought back to earth with a bump in verse 17. Because as well as defeating his enemies, "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."

I think that last phrase would have been read out with real drama – with one of those deep dramatic Hollywood trailer voices. Because the King of Assyria was the person who Ahaz feared most – that was why he'd tried to get in league with him.

You see, sometimes the things which we trust in seem to work, don't they? We change the way we do church because we think people will enjoy it a bit more, and more people start coming. Great, we think!

Or the money we rely on, or the career, whatever – often those things seem to be working for us.

Well, just like Ahaz, we too will be brought down to earth with a bump – because even if they seem to be working for us now, they will, one day, be the things which destroy us. The Assyrians are going to bring devastation.

Verses 18-19, they're flies and bees, that will swarm in and settle all over the land, including the precious water holes.

Verse 20, they're described as a razor, that will be used to shave the land, of its inhabitants, of its vegetation. They're going to leave the King and his land humiliated, naked.

21 and 22, no-one living there will be able to eat proper food, just nomads food.

23-25, the farm land will be turned into a wasteland of thorns and briars, where people hunt and animals roam – but no useful crops are grown. It's a desert, a dangerous place, full of insects, nothing good there at all.

It's bitterly ironic for Ahaz really, because the people who are going to defeat and devastate his nation are the very people to whom he had turned for help.

It's like one of those films where someone is in terrible danger, and some nasty evil person is after them. But it's ok, because they have a heroic saviour guy who can help them, and he comes along and bashes the evil person on the head. Hurray! you think.

But then heroic saviour guy turns out to be even-nastier evil person and ends up bashing them on the head as well.

The people who Ahaz thought were his lifeline, who he thought could save him, were the people who eventually were going to devastate his country.

But, shockingly, actually it's not Assyria who is doing this to Judah. No, it's **God!**

Verse 17, in that Day **the Lord** will bring on you this terrible time.

V18: In that day **the Lord** will whistle for the flies and the bees.

V20: In that Day **the Lord** will use a razor.

That's what happens when you reject God's promises and trust anything else. God himself judges you. It's intentional. It's not God **letting** judgment happen to you. It's God himself doing this.

Eventually, whoever or whatever you turn to for help will turn and devour you. The thing that you hope in, trust in, will be the thing that proves your downfall. God will make sure of that.

If not in this life, certainly in eternity.

Well after the choice Ahaz made, and the consequences he faced, we see finally, the conclusion.

God's conclusion, v9-10

We haven't had time to look at Ch8 v1-8, but essentially it is a repeat of the second half of chapter 7, except instead of being directed toward Ahaz, it's a message that is displayed for all the people to see.

And it ends with the picture of a great river – Assyria, again, that will destroy Syria and Israel, but also then overflow into Judah, and completely consume it – well, nearly completely, anyway.

Because again there's a reminder that there is a remnant, called Immanuel. God is with them, v8

The flood reaches to its neck, it doesn't completely destroy it.

And then we come to last word in this passage, v9-10. Reading from the ESV which I think captures it better, Imagine it as Isaiah says: "Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered; Give ear, all you far countries – [Israel, Syria, Assyria, whoever] Strap on your armour and be shattered; Strap on your armour and be shattered. [come and have a go if you think you're hard enough. But you're going home in a big white ambulance.]

Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing,
Speak a word, but it will not stand,
For God is with us".

It might seem a bit strange for Isaiah to say this at the end here so confidently. After all, he's just said that Assyria will come and invade Judah and nearly defeat it, and leave it

devastated. And then just a century later, it will be completely defeated by Babylon and they'll all be taken off to exile.

It doesn't really seem the time to be saying "bring it on, let's see what you're made of".

So is Isaiah really right to be so confident, and say "whatever you plan, it will not stand, for God is with us"?

We might ask a similar question of churches in this country recently. Numbers declining, popularity dwindling. Modern culture seems to have got the better of us. Can we so confidently say "God is with us"?

Yes, Isaiah is right to say that, because he has recognized that not all of Israel and Judah are actually God's people anymore. God's people aren't those who belong to a particular nation – **not** everyone in Judah can say "God is with us". Only those who stand firm in faith in him, and who don't turn anywhere else.

And today, in the same way, belonging to a church does not make you able to say "God is with us". Coming to Christ Church does not make you able to say it, being a member, being a **leader** does not make you able to say it.

God's faithful people who trust in him and his promises are those who are the remnant, and he will be with them always, always ensuring that they remain.

And that remnant, started in Isaiah's time and carried on down the years, contains the line of Jesus. And of course, Immanuel, "God, with us" is ultimately all about Jesus, isn't it.

It's because of Jesus that we really know God is with us. Because he is God, with us. So it's only **if we are trusting in God and his promises to us in Jesus**, that we really can confidently join with Isaiah and say to the world around us "Take counsel together, make whatever plans you like. Plot all sorts of things against us – but they will not take place. It will not stand. For you are mere men, smoldering stubs of firewood. Fag ends. You are men, but God is with us".

Whether it's the government and any new laws they come up with, whether it's clever journalists predicting the demise of the church, whether it's Richard Dawkins on his one man crusade to do away with God, whether it's your boss or university lecturer or tutorial group, with their snide comments and cheap shots.

Whatever it is, if we are trusting in God and his promises to us in Jesus, we can join Isaiah in verse 9-10. We can stand firm, knowing that because of Jesus, God is with us.

Isn't that a great encouragement to us as a church?

But isn't it also a reminder to us to ask ourselves the question "who am I trusting?"

I can't answer that question for you – it's something you have to ask of yourselves, really examine yourself – who or what is my hope in?

Because it's only an **encouragement** to us if we have faith in him. Faith in God's promises of rescue for his people. Faith in the promises of Immanuel, fulfilled here in Jesus.

But if we are looking elsewhere for our help, Jesus is not a sign of God's mercy and forgiveness, but a sign of God's judgment against you. You will not stand.

Don't be like Ahaz, don't be stupid, and say that our help lies elsewhere.

Have faith in Jesus, be someone who trusts in him and can therefore say "God is with us".

*Jeremy Clark
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