

Part 4: A Comfort Better than Anything

Tyler Velin | Isaiah 7:1-17

December 24, 2022

This Advent season we have been focusing on key Old Testament births and showing how they foreshadow the birth of Jesus Christ. But perhaps you've noticed a trend. Though each birth account offers hope—each account is surrounded by the context of death, darkness and fear.

Seth came on the heels of Cain murdering his younger brother. Isaac was spared as a sacrifice by God's miraculous provision of a ram. Samuel was born to replace the wicked and condemned sons of Eli.

And today, we encounter the promised birth of another child, but only when it seems death itself is knocking on the front door of God's people.

That's because even though the Christmas season tries to focus on hope, even though our world might seem delightfully distracted by the comfort of wealth, the diversion of Netflix and the connectivity of social media—our experiences of what are good and peaceful are never far from what is dark and fearful. It's in this ever present tension that we understand the fearful weight of sin and brokenness in our world, but it's also in the allure of hope we see the relief of light in Jesus Christ.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus this morning, we are going to begin by examining a birth that predicts the events of Christmas morning—a birth that promises fearful hearts a refuge in a broken world. This will be our main point today: **Jesus delivers us from fear by saving us from sin.** We are going to see this in three ways in Isaiah 7. First we are going to see **Man's slavery to fear**, then we are going to see **God's solution to fear** and lastly we will see **Jesus is salvation from fear.**

To begin, we need to understand the context of what was just read for us in Isaiah 7. At this point in Israel's history the sins of its rulers had led to a deadly civil war and the kingdom was split into two. In the north was the Kingdom of Israel and in the south was the Kingdom of Judah. But it was the Kingdom of Judah in the south which was from the line of David, to whom God had made an eternal covenant that a King would always be on its throne. It would be a kingdom forever, God himself would see to it.

But here that promised seemed threatened. In the north, The Kingdom of Israel and the nation Syria had formed an alliance and set their sight on Judah. Verse 6 tells us that the goal of these two kings was to "go up against Judah, terrify it, and conquer it."

Their goal was to conquer Judah—their weapon was fear. Verse 2 describes the power of this fear as the heart of Ahaz, Judah's king, and the hearts of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. They were quivering with fear.

Have you ever been so afraid? Kids, I want you to think about the time you were the most scared. Was there every a time where even if you ran to mommy and daddy, you couldn't do anything to help with the feeling of fear you had in your heart?

Well, here's where I want you—and even us grown-ups who get scared—to see about God: he enters into our fear and wants to comfort us. Even when it seems mom and dad, or anyone else can't help, God wants to help.

In the midst of the trembling, God sent word to Ahaz through his prophet Isaiah and look at what he said: **Isaiah 7:3-9**.

God gives four commands here to Ahaz: Be careful, be quiet, don't fear, and do not let your heart grow faint.

Now when we often feel afraid we skip to the last two commands: don't fear, don't let your heart grow faint. But notice the order of how God speaks to those who are fearful.

It begins with a call to be careful. That word "careful" simply means to pay attention, to watch out, to examine, to guard. Why? Because not all fear is bad. If the motto of our life is do not fear, we will live a short life! God gave us fear for a purpose!

To be careful with our fear means that in the midst of shaking hears, we examine and consider the source and the potential responses to what we fear.

God's promise to Ahaz actually realigns the issue of fear. God explicitly promises that this battle will not come to pass, these kings will be able to do nothing. Why? Because they are mere men. That's what that little poem about heads is meant to show. At the end of all the power of the most fearful armies on earth—is merely a man.

And what is man compared to God? Kids, think again about the monster you may be scared of at night. Most of the things we get scared of aren't even real things. But let's say for a moment it was. Who is the creator of everyone and everything? God is. So who would have created that monster? God would have. Who would have been the boss of that monster? God would be. And who created God? No one! Why, because God alone is the uncreated ruler of all things.

So if God promises to help us, even if we are scared, who should we think is more powerful? The Monster? Or God? We should trust God!

This makes sense in our brains doesn't it! But here's the problem of fear—we aren't always careful with it. When fear is present and near to us, we almost always fear the power of man instead of the power of God. There's something about fear that enslaves us and keeps us from taking God at his word.

This is our first point this morning: **Man's slavery to fear**.

Look at what happens after God promised to protect Ahaz in **Isaiah 7:10-13**.

Now, it might seem like Ahaz is being really faithful here. In fact he's quoting a passage of scripture from the book of Deuteronomy. But when fear rules in our hearts, we often try to look like we are trusting in God while simultaneously trying to trust in ourselves or in other men.

Close Bible study helps us out here. Notice what the Lord said to Ahaz in verse 10: "ask a sign of the Lord your God." Then after Ahaz refuses a sign, look at what Isaiah says to Ahaz in verse 13: "Is it too little for

you...that you weary my God also." And now look at what Ahaz said in the middle of verse 12: "I will not put the Lord to the test."

Who does God introduce himself as? "The Lord your God." Who does Isaiah speak of God as? "The Lord my God." Who does Ahaz speak of God as? Simply "the Lord." What's missing? Any sense of personal possession.

In other words Ahaz' heart is not clinging to the Lord for hope, it's impersonal. It's not important to him. Ahaz perceives a greater hope and it is that hope he's wanting to possess. We know from scripture that despite God's promise, Ahaz is actually looking to the nation of Egypt and Assyria to be his savior. He's not trusting in God's promise to David, or God's promise to him, instead he's trying to act like he's trusting God while trusting in something else entirely.

One pastor said that, "There are situations in which outward [faithfulness] and inward unbelief are identical." What does this mean? It means we must be careful. Here, even though it was man whom Ahaz feared, it was also in man that Ahaz placed his hope. On account of his fear he didn't stop believing in God, but he stopped believing God.

Christian, how many times have we said in our own hearts: "I know God promises this...but."

But nothing else in this world is God. There is no hope beyond him. Did you notice God's comfort to Ahaz? "Do not fear, it's only man." We can certainly gather the opposite: "Do not hope in man, it's only man."

The puritan pastor John Flavel says this: **Sinful fear will cause the best people to attempt to help themselves through sinful compromises...They expect more from Egypt than from heaven, more from a broken reed than from the Rock of Ages.**

Apart from being overwhelmed by the comfort of God's nearness, we will always find ourselves in this same place of sinful doubt and fear. But be careful. Let Ahaz be a warning. Guess what? Assyria does come and wipe out the northern alliance. But do you know what Assyria does once it conquers the north? It turns south towards Judah. Anything less than God might seem to provide salvation but in the end it's only more slavery. This is the terrible treadmill of life.

But God wants you to see the comfort of his promise.

That's why he offered Ahaz a sign! He wanted to produce comfort in him, he desired Ahaz to find his rest in the promise of God and not in the promise of man. Even though Ahaz was arrogant and sinful, God in his mercy continued to call him to hope.

Look at this promise in **Isaiah 7:14-16**.

In the face of fear, God himself provides a sign and here is our second point: **God's solution to fear.**

God's solution to fear is God himself. What we need in the face of fear is God with us! That is what the name Immanuel means: God with us. God's mercy is that when we attempt to draw in the false hopes of the flesh that God himself seeks to draw nearer. God wants to comfort you, not in an impersonal hope, but with the reality of all his power and person.

But be careful! Be careful of the sign! If you wanted a sign from God that all your fears would be removed, what would you hope for?

Have you ever felt like Ahaz? You see your problem so clearly, two nations, hundreds of thousands of men, even more weapons and siege equipment. And on account of that you probably have an idea of what a sign of comfort would be: a bigger power, more men, stronger men.

But what was God's sign of comfort? A child. You see if we don't believe God is who he says he is, and that he can do what he says he can do, and that our problems are bigger than we can ever know, then all of God's provision will always look silly to us. The gospel is, as Paul says, foolishness to the world.

But in this sign, this child who will do nothing before these two powerhouse nations are wiped out, is the careful clarity of our solution: It's only God. It's always God. God chooses a physical sign because we are physical people, but the sign points to a divine power, because we need a divine power. God is going to enter into our fear with all of his powerful presence.

Now here's the wonder of this sign. It is both fulfilled in stunning clarity, and not fulfilled at all. In a short period of time Assyria will sweep in and in 721 AD history records in vivid detail how Assyria swept in and conquered Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

God kept his word. But the spirit of fear still remained. Where was the child that was Immanuel? As the kingdom of Judah goes on, many kings wrestle to be careful in their fear, they misplace their trust.

Isaiah has a son in chapter 8, and that son is tied to the destruction of the northern alliance, but his name is Maher-shalal-hash-baz, not Immanuel. He was not God with them. Isaiah, is also called "Immanuel" in chapter 8, but he was not born of a virgin.

Where is God's presence, God's Immanuel, who draws near and strengthens our faith?

Where is God with us? Isaiah's contemporary, Micah gives us another hint in **Micah 5:1-5a**.

This son, will be a ruler, a ruler born in Bethlehem, a ruler born in Bethlehem who is also eternal and from old. Isaiah burst forth into poetic joy in Isaiah 9 thinking about this child in greater detail: **Isaiah 9:6-7**.

This is where the Christmas story screams onto the scene in Matthew's gospel: **Matthew 1:18-23**.

Here is our final point this morning: **Jesus is salvation from fear**.

Do you wish for proof that God is stronger than men? Do you want assurance that God cares about your fears? Do you want the comfort of knowing God really can draw near to those who wrestle with fear? Do you seek a sign that God can really bring peace into your life?

Then here is the ultimate child-king, born of a virgin, the only hope for a fearful humanity—Jesus Christ.

Kids, have you ever been so scared of the dark that it made you feel sick to your stomach? Have you ever been so aware of your fear that your ears seem to pick up every odd and spooky noise in your

house? Well what does it feel like when all of a sudden, in the midst of your fear and darkness, someone turns on a light?

Isn't that a sweet relief?

Jesus is this light which gives us hope! Jesus is God's sign that we can trust him instead of man!

And how do we know Jesus is trustworthy, how do we know he can really help us with our fear? Look back at Matthew 1:21—because he saves us from our sin!

We are always switching our hopes around because we know different hopes are needed for different fears. You might get a Christmas bonus, but can it save you from the fear of loneliness? You might find the perfect spouse, but can they save you from the fear of death? You might find the world's best night light for your room, but can it save you from the reality of darkness?

But the Bible tells us the reality behind all of it. Sin stands as our greatest enemy. On account of sin is the darkness of all our birth narratives, on account of sin death and destruction lurk openly. You can run to all the nations of the world but at the end of the day the slavery remains—none can save you from the sin that fuels our deepest fear.

The slavery will always be there—but here is a child. You might think like Ahaz, “What good is that?” What good can something so small, or something so historically distant do? You might say, “God have you seen the problems in my life? You think that mere faith in Jesus Christ and his miraculous life can really help me with the realities of my heart?” But, it is only he who can save us from our sins. Hope in a child would be silly, unless that child can really save us from the reality of our problem.

Speaking of Jesus the author of Hebrews says this **Hebrews 2:14-15**. This is precisely what Jesus did on the cross.

In the face of fear be careful. Our problem is not generally that our fears aren't real, it's that our hopes aren't. Our world is broken and fear lurks outside of us and inside of us in an awareness of our own sins and our own failures.

But Jesus is God's sign that we can carefully trust in him. We can see him faithful that day at the conduit in Isaiah, we can see him faithful as according to his word he wiped out the threat of the northern alliance in 721 B.C., and we can see his faithfulness all through history leading up to this Christmas morning.

Will you take comfort in this hope? This might seem like a fairy tale fit for a whimsical Christmas morning. But this, and this alone is the sign that there is hope. Do not look down on it in arrogance only to turn back to the world in foolishness. Strengthen your weak knees and trust in Jesus. Be careful this morning in the best ways and speak to the problem of fear with the provision of Jesus Christ.