



UNDERSTANDING GOD PART 7: THE GOD WHO IS WITH US

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I was driving in San Diego this summer I noticed a reader board at a church. If you don't know what church reader boards are, imagine that your whole appeal to the outside world is vaguely spiritualized dad-jokes plastered on a light-up sign pointed at a densely populated intersection. Anyway, I saw one one morning and the reader board said this: "You asked God for a sign. Well, you're looking at it!"

It was so cliché, I actually took a picture of it. As tragically humorous as this sign is, it does communicate something important about our culture. The board plays up the irony of our fascination with signs. We desire signs because we want some sort of validation of what it is that we should be doing. We look to them as ground for confidence in situations where we are uncertain or unsure.

Perhaps in your career you are looking for signs that your work is being seen as valuable by those around you, or that your proposal is in line with the company trajectory. Or maybe you are just looking for the tiniest sign indicating that girl might be interested in you. The "likes" on our Facebook or Twitter posts become signs that we are accepted and noticed.

And depending on the severity of the situation the weight and perceived need for a sign goes up. A good review of a restaurant on Yelp is a helpful sign. But a sign that your spouse still loves you after a season of hardship, or that the cancer is controlled, are signs demanded by the yearning of desperate hearts. These indications can be good or bad. They can be grounds for confidence, but also indications of concern.

The implications we gather from these signs can lead to right actions and proper thoughts, but we can also misread them, they can promote false confidence or unhelpful passivity. If you have your Bible's today we are going to be looking at Isaiah 7 and 8 and in these pages we are going to read about stories and signs. Man is going to face specific circumstances and God is going to provide a sign, however it is what we do with that sign which is of utmost importance. What we are going to see today is that **"The presence of God is a sign for confidence and concern."** God is going to make himself known in history and that revealing is going to cause one of those two emotions. What we are going to see is that what proves true in the eighth century B.C. is equally as true for us today in the 21st century. It is not enough to know that God exists if we do not understand the indications of that existence properly.

Isaiah 7-8:10 is a story about a sign, and we are going to look at three meanings of this sign, but first we must understand the context and need for it. This is our first point today: **Human Threats and Divine Confidence.** One thing I love about the Bible is that it is a human book. It doesn't call us to think about God in a vacuum. It doesn't make sense only to those who have a happy life, but it is written for those who know the anxiety and weight of life. It should not be surprising that the God of all creation knows best the needs of his creation. He knows our worries and limitations, our hopes and our desires, and that is why this story is all the more important.

Let's begin **Isaiah 7:1-2.** At this point we must remember that the nation of Israel is split in two. In the North is the Kingdom of Israel, or here called Ephraim. And in the south is the Kingdom of Judah, which is the people to whom Isaiah is prophesying. Last week we read a passage which began with the death of King Uzziah of Judah, then there is a gap in Isaiah's narrative because the book tells us nothing of Uzziah's son, King Jotham, but instead picks up with the reign of Jotham's son, Ahaz.

During Jotham's reign Israel made an alliance with the nation of Syria (or in some translations Aram), and in the reign of Ahaz both Israel (here Ephraim) and Syria are seeking to conquer Judah. And it is important to notice the response of the people to this conflict. Look back at **Isaiah 7:2.** There was great fear from the top to the

bottom. Now I want you stop for a moment and imagine what the greatest fear would be in your life. What is it which would cause you to shake as these men did? And keep that circumstance in your mind as we continue today.

The story continues: **Isaiah 7:3-9**. What I love about this story is that when God goes to Ahaz he doesn't ignore Ahaz's context. It is God who says through Isaiah: "You are right, Syria is in league with Ephraim, and they are filled with fierce anger, and they are devising evil against you, and they want to terrify you, conquer you, and overthrow your Kingdom. But be careful, be quiet, do not fear, do not let your heart be faint."

Why? "Because I am the Lord, it shall not stand it shall not come to pass. What are these two nations but two mere men. Soon they will be shattered, soon they will be brought to nothing." And then God says one of the most profoundly beautiful but biting statements in all the Old Testament: "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all."

God through the prophet Isaiah is speaking to King Ahaz saying his defense against this great military threat is to be quite, to do nothing, and to have faith. To have faith which is in anything but God's word is to have nothing at all. To trust in anything other than the Lord God of Judah is to forfeit his only defense. What is interesting is we never hear Ahaz' response to this declaration of confidence. He doesn't reply with gratitude, doesn't return to his people with the declaration of certain deliverance. He is quiet.

And as much as we use terms like "life of faith" what Ahaz is illustrating is that there is a vast difference between mere faith and exclusive faith. Faith which is acquainted with God is no substitute for a faith reliant upon God. Knowing God is not equal to trusting God. This may sound like an overly simple distinction, but think about what this distinction would mean.

In the same way God explicitly told Ahaz that he will take care of the situation, so too did Jesus in Matthew 6 explicitly say to not worry, for if God clothes the lilies and the grass, will he not also take care of you? Yet how many times have we faced issues just like Ahaz which challenge our invisible hope through a visible conflict resulting in great anxiety in thought and in action? We have the declaration of divine confidence, but do we trust it?

I imagine that if this is hard for you to answer, it would be increasingly hard for Ahaz. Because not only was he facing imminent military defeat, but Ahaz was not a God fearing king. Ahaz knew God existed, but Ahaz was the master hedger of bets. Look at **2 Chronicles 28:1-4**. Yes Ahaz knew God, but he was a serial sacrificer. He sacrificed his own son in the event some god somewhere would be pleased by it. He set up alters under every tree to every possible god so that in the scenario that one of his false god's failed, perhaps another would succeed. And it was in this pantheon of deception that Ahaz attempted to fit the God of all scripture. So Ahaz' silence in the face of God's clarity is a silence of self-reliance and doubt. We know this because of what happened next.

Isaiah 7:10-12. God sees Ahaz' hesitation and attempts to encourage him in his doubt. God offers Ahaz a sign. Now God didn't need to do this, and indeed God was under no obligation to do this. His word is true, but God's word is also merciful and enters into our midst in order to help us see him better. But Ahaz shockingly refuses God's sign, saying, "I won't test you God."

Now on the surface this sound pious and faithful. Indeed God himself says in Deuteronomy 6 that you should not put the Lord your God to the test. However this remark isn't one which stems from a desire to honor God, instead it reveals the deceitful heart of Ahaz. A heart which is on display in **2 Kings 16:6-8**. Ahaz wasn't refusing a sign because he honored God, he was refusing a sign because he thought he had better odds without God. Faith is good, but swords are better. Ahaz trusted that an alliance with Assyria is the real hope for Israel. Assyria will deliver us.

You see just like Ahaz, we may know God, but in our lack of exclusive trust we can de-god our God. We can acknowledge him in some way, but still refuse to give him the trust he is due because he is our true God.

Let us read on. **Isaiah 7:13-17**. Ahaz refuses a sign, but the Lord himself has vowed to give one. A sign is coming whether Ahaz chooses to accept it or not. The sign will mean something whether he chooses to find meaning in it or not. In this text we see that this sign signifies three things. The first of them is **The Sign as Confidence**.

Earlier God told Ahaz that within 65 years Syria and Ephraim will be destroyed, but with this sign he ups his time table. He says that a virgin will conceive and before that baby is old enough to think for himself, these two kings will be deserted. God's sign is very clear here, there is going to be a young woman, a maiden, who is going to have a child, this child will be a boy, and this child will be called Immanuel which means, "God with Us." Not only will salvation happen, but the salvation which will come is a sign that God is with you. That he is not distant but that he means what he says and is faithful to do it to the uttermost. This ought to produce great confidence.

We see the fulfillment of this sign when we jump ahead to **Isaiah 8:1-4**. Sure enough Isaiah's wife conceives, she gives birth to a son, this Immanuel, but in this day God gives him a new name which means, "The Spoil speeds and the prey hastens." He receives this new name as a reminder that before the boy knows how to talk, Syria and Ephraim will be swept away. God will do it. His salvation is certain. This sign is an added undeserved affirmation from God so as to say to this disbelieving nation, "I am here, I am with you."

This sign is a sign of confidence. But if you remember, I said this whole passage is a story about a sign. And so far we have only read seven verses about the sign. Seven of the thirty-seven. That's because this sign, though it does promote confidence, it also promotes judgment. This is the second aspect of the sign: **The Sign as Concern**.

Remember Ahaz' hope is in Assyria. Assyria will save me. It is good to have God's word, better to have Assyria's might. And in one sense it is going to pay off. Look at what happens in **2 Kings 16:9** after Ahaz sends Assyria the temple gold as a purchase of their help. It would seem that Ahaz chose wisely. We may receive momentary relief from objects and assurances which are not God, but we will never experience true salvation outside of exclusive faith in God. The world may be able to defer consequences, but only God can save us from our consequences. Salvation is impossible outside of God. For look at what else this sign means to Ahaz and Judah: **Isaiah 7:17-20**.

Assyria is going to come against Ephraim and Syria, but it's not going to stop there. Like flies on the hills they will come into the whole land. You might want them to shave the head, but they will shave the beard as well. You might hope they take the northern kingdom, but they will also come for the southern kingdom.

If we skip ahead to chapter 8 again we see another illustration of this: **Isaiah 8:5-10**. Yes the people of Israel trusted in Rezin, and for that they will be judged by Assyria, but the floods of Assyria will not stop in Israel, but will sweep down into Judah. Israel's hope in Rezin was foolish, so too was Judah's hope in Assyria.

The sign of Immanuel was confidence that before he was too old he will see the destruction of his enemies. The sign of Immanuel was concern because before he died he would see the outstretched wings of Assyria fill his own land. For those who believed, "God with us" was the promise of deliverance. For those who disbelieved, "God with us" was the sign of their rejection and coming judgment. As sure as the sign meant certain salvation, it is equally as true that the sign meant certain destruction. The true reality of this text is very important for us to understand. We must see the exchange which happened here. In Isaiah 7:2 Israel shook at the fear of Syria and Ephraim, and by Isaiah 8:10 they feared at the hand of God and Assyria.

By the end of this passage the problem of Judah wasn't in what they feared, it was in what they trusted. The very object they turned to for deliverance was the very object which was going to be their destruction. The problem wasn't the fear, the problem was the object of their faith. Fear's danger isn't in its emotion but in its affection. Fear is only dangerous when it drives us to false saviors. Fear exposes what we love most.

I was listening to one world famous Chef talk once. He had experienced the peak of culinary excellence and achievement and was beginning to muse on all he had accomplished. And he said one line which struck me.

He said, "Isn't our life an attempt to fill one void after another?" This sentiment confirms that our fears often reveal to us the existence of God, that there is something greater at stake.

These voids are playgrounds of fear and hope, of faith and deliverance. We perceive the need to be accepted so we fear rejection. We feel a void of purpose and so we fear worthlessness. We are crushed by the speed of life so we fear losing control. And these voids push us to find faith in something. We attempt to read the sign of culture like this Chef, we say "fine cooking will add value so I will trust in it." Relationships will add value so I will hold out for that. Money will add control so I will serve that. Prestige will add meaning so I will pay tribute to academic success. And we, just like Ahaz hedge our bets and hope for the best.

If we are sober, we might realize the false hopes we have in our life quickly turn to slave masters of our hearts. We seek them for peace, but we stay with them out of fear. This is what Paul meant when he said that at one point we were enslaved to various passions. False saviors make real slaves. So if you are able to realize that in your life, what then is your hope for true salvation?

This sign has a third meaning: **The Sign as Christ**. Turn with me to **Matthew 1:18-23**. You see when God intervened into Ahaz' life with a sign, he knew that sign was only a shadow of the sign to come. It is true that Maher-shalal-hash-baz was a sign for confidence and concern, much more was Jesus as Nazareth a sign of salvation and judgment. Instead of being a sign of God with us, Jesus was himself God with us. Born of a virgin he was the very God of God. He came as a sign, and that sign has meaning whether you choose to accept it or not.

It is interesting because we just read this last week in **Isaiah 6:9-10**. Isaiah was called to go to a people who would reject his message. In a sense the events of Isaiah 7 are a fulfillment of that. The same is true of Jesus: **John 1:10-11**. The sign was seemingly as ignored as it was in Isaiah's day, but let us look at what Jesus himself says to his disciples in **Matthew 13:14-17**.

The beauty of the Bible, and the wonder of our God is that he sent the sign of Isaiah 7 to turn the unbelief of Isaiah 6 on its head in the person of Jesus Christ. The first sign was born as a seal of unbelief, the second and true sign born as the seal of salvation through faith. Jesus came to set the captives free by showing he is the sign of true freedom.

I want to speak to each and every one of you in here and say with great clarity: you see the sign. You see the sign in the historic testimonies secular and religious, of Jesus of Nazareth. You see the sign in the eyewitness accounts of the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ. You see the sign in the failure of historians to make sense of the growth of Christianity despite insurmountable odds at various points in history. You see the sign in the creation that proclaims a glory transcendent. You see the sign in art and music which adds no evolutionary value to our existence but merely exists as a testament to a created sense of beauty. You see the sign in the weight of death and the quest for meaning. You see the sign of God with us in the birth of a newborn and the joy of a wedding. You see the sign of God with us in that despite man's sinfulness God has restrained it and given us relative grace towards one another. You see that sign that God is with us in that there is only one Holocaust and not a thousand.

You see the sign. God is with us. The question on which either concern or confidence stems is not do you see the sign, it is do you see Jesus. Our fears, our weaknesses, our limitations and circumstances reveal to us a desire for certainty. The issue is what do you do with those fears?

Will you take them and invest them in sources of salvation which will one day be the source of your destruction? This is the temptation of life. This is Paul's observation that we have observed the glory of God, but have exchanged it for a lie. To you who are bet hedgers and serial sacrificers, I stand behind the weight of the sign of the cross of Jesus and say to you that a hope outside of Christ will always be a hope outside of salvation.

You may be like Ahaz, worried to ask God for a sign because you don't want to face the truth that what you really hope in is nothing more than an empty man or broken vessel. But God has already given you a sign, for

which of those has died to save you? Which of those offers freedom from the burden of fear? Which of those has removed the judgment of guilt which hangs over your head? Which of those endures past death? If you are not firm in faith towards Jesus, you will not be firm at all. **John 3:36**. If you find yourself on the latter end of this verse, I ask you to pray for God to give you eyes to see what the disciples saw. To see Jesus as the true and exclusive source of salvation the one who restores us to God by first bringing God to us.

To those of you who see Jesus as the sign of God leading to salvation: do not mistake mere faith for exclusive faith. The sign of Jesus and his death and resurrection is the greatest promise that even in the face of grievous evil, God works for the salvation of those who trust in him. Not only do we have God's promise in Christ, but we have God's presence in Christ. God has not called us to hope alone, he is with us. He is with you. In that moment of greatest fear, he has held up not only the promise of hope, but a sure sign of it.

For you who are believers in here I want you to do one thing this week: examine your fears. Where does your heart hope when your hope shakes? Is your fear dealt with in the promise of God? Or in the false saviors of this world? When we see these distinctions they can be ugly, but through repentance it can become beautiful.

Through that we may move forward with confidence in the sign of Jesus. God is with us, and he is our hope in the face of fear. In the face of evangelism, conflict, forgiveness, persecution and missions, we have the confidence of God because we have the sign of Immanuel through faith in Jesus Christ. Let's pray.