

IMMANUEL, A SIGN OF GOD'S LOVE

Isaiah 7:1-14

Key Verse: 7:14

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

When you are in love with someone, you want to show your love by giving the person a sign of your love. It could be a red rose or a pair of warm gloves. It could be a hand-written poem on a piece of paper. Such a sign would touch the person's heart. Now what did God give us as a sign of his love? He promised to give us a son. This sign was not an idea he came up with suddenly one day. He had planned it for a long time. In today's passage, we learn that about 700 years before Jesus was born, God promised to send him to be our Savior. Isaiah prophesied, *“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* May God help us to know what it means that we have Immanuel among us!

I. DO NOT LOSE YOUR HEART (1-9)

Look at verses 1-2. *When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. 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.* Ahaz was the 11th king of Judah (2Ki 15:38; 16:1-20). He became king when he was 20 years old and he reigned for 16 years, beginning about 735 B.C. He was a bad king who promoted idol worship that included infant sacrifices (2Ch 28:1-4).

Early in his reign, Ahaz decided to rely on Assyria, a powerful empire that dominated the region between the 9th and the 7th century, B.C. It was a political gamble. Because of his decision, the anti-Assyrian alliance of Northern Israel and Syria invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem, the capital city. They threatened to dethrone Ahaz and replace him with a puppet king. In this crisis, Ahaz asked the king of Assyria for help, offering him silver and gold from the temple treasuries and saying to the foreign king, “I am your servant” (2Ki 16:7). This was against the advice of the prophet Isaiah, as we will learn in this scripture. At first, his gamble to depend on Assyria seemed to pay off. Assyria invaded Northern Israel and Syria (2Ki 15:29). Ultimately, however, Assyria “distressed” Ahaz, demanding excessive tribute (2Ch 28:20-21). Ahaz and his people became economic hostages of the Assyrian Empire. They lost freedom when the king ignored the word of God.

Spiritually, Ahaz stopped following in the ways of the four good kings who had preceded him (Joash, Amaziah, Azariah, and Jotham). The young king made a decision to abandon God and worship idols. Perhaps he was rebellious toward God just like some young people today. This decision had more devastating effect on his nation than his political gamble. He made images of Baal and offered sacrifices to idols in the Valley of

Ben Hinnom and at the high places. He even sacrificed his own sons on the pagan altar (2Ch 28:1-4). He came under further pagan influence through his visit to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser III, the Assyrian king. Seeing a pagan altar there, he commissioned Uriah the priest to build a replica of it in Jerusalem.

Look at verse 2 again. *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.* The house of David refers to Judah, the southern kingdom, while Ephraim refers to the Northern Israel and Aram is another name of Syria. When the two powerful enemies in the north invaded Jerusalem, King Ahaz and his people trembled in fear like leaves in the wind. It was their national crisis. Perhaps they trembled like some of us did on 9-11. But the real reason why the king trembled in fear was because he put his trust in men, not in God. When their leader trembled in fear, the people were shaken as well.

Fear is inversely related to faith. We fear when we don't have faith in God. When our faith increases, fear declines. We cannot deny that we fear something sometime. I had fear when MRI showed a tiny tumor in my brain. I also had fear when my son was diagnosed with genetic atrophy on his good eye. Most of us have vague fear and anxiety for future about career, marriage, children, health and so on. But we should know that fear does not come from God. It is Satan's favorite weapon. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, many people were fearful. In his inaugural address, FDR said: “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Still we cannot overcome fear by our own strength. We can overcome fear only by trusting in the Almighty God. We can overcome fear by believing in the promises of God. I encourage everyone of us to remember that when we have fear, it is time to come to God and put our trust in him.

Look at verses 3-6. *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 Launderer's Field. Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. 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.”*

Ahaz was an evil king, but the God of mercy did not abandon his people. He sent his servant Isaiah to counsel the king. So Isaiah took his son and went to the king. Isaiah told the king not to be rattled by the political development. He told him to see things from God's point of view. It was not a time to tremble in fear; it was time to trust in God. The enemies looked terrifying, but God told him that they were nothing more than two smoldering stubs of firewood.

Look at verses 7-9. *Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says: “It will not take place, it will not happen, for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”*

The prophet Isaiah told Ahaz, “this is what the Sovereign Lord says, ‘It will not take place, it will not happen.’” But the king would not believe in the word of God. He did not turn to God and trust him for deliverance. Instead, he plunged deeper into idolatry and self-destruction. Ahaz’s decision brought divine judgment on Judah in the form of military defeats. Jerusalem was spared from its northern enemies this time, but his refusal to trust in God had terrible consequences on his nation. Edom revolted and took captives from Judah. The Philistines invaded Judah, capturing several cities. Rezin of Damascus seized control of Elath, Judah’s port on the Gulf of Aqaba (2Ki 16:5-6). It was because Ahaz would not listen to God’s warning: *“If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”*

II. THE SIGN OF IMMANUEL (10-14)

Look at verses 10-12. *Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”* Why did God tell Ahaz to ask him for a sign? It was God’s gentle way of encouraging him to depending on God rather than a superpower nation. It was God’s initiative to reach out to the rebellious king. This reminds us of God’s imitative to send his one and only Son to save us when we were still sinners.

What was Ahaz’s response to God? He said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.” Ahaz appeared humble when he said he would not test God by asking for a sign. But in fact, God had told him to ask for a sign. God had encouraged him to depend on the Almighty God. Then why did Ahaz refuse to obey God’s word? It was because he didn’t really want to find out what God would say. He did not want to follow God’s direction. He did not want to depend on God. He was arrogant before the merciful God. He was too proud to accept the word of God. Often we use some excuses, such as not wanting to bother God when we don’t want to obey his words. This is not humility. It is arrogance. God is ready to help us. Let us not be arrogant by rejecting his hand of mercy.

Look at verses 13-14. *Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* Ahaz had refused to ask God for a sign. He had his own plan; he wanted to rely on Assyria, not on God. But God still had mercy on his people. God promised them a sign anyway. What kind of sign did he promise? Was it a warning sign? Was it a sign of punishment for their arrogance? No, it was a sign of love. It was a sign of Immanuel.

“Immanuel”—what does this word mean? It is a Hebrew word which means “God with us.” What an amazing word this is! The Holy God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe, is with you and me. Would you believe it if Queen Elizabeth says she will be with us in Shippensburg? No, you will say, “Why would she leave the Buckingham Palace to come to be with us? It does not make sense!” Of course, God is a million times greater than the queen of England is. How can we believe that God is with us? How can

we be sure? Let us read verse 14 again. *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* God proved that he is with us. The Lord himself would give us a sign. The virgin would conceive and give birth to a son, and would call him Immanuel. And this happened just as he promised. Some 700 years later, a baby boy was born in Bethlehem to a virgin named Mary. No one noticed his birth except for some shepherds and wise men from the east. There was no news coverage. He was born in an animal barn and laid in a manger. But his humble birth changed the human history forever. It was a moment when B.C. became A.D.! Let us think about why the virgin birth of Jesus is so important, to the point that it changed the human history forever.

First, the miracle of the virgin birth assures us of our salvation. It is not natural for a virgin to give birth to a child. Who among us was born to our mother when she was a virgin? No one! All of us were born because our father made love to our mother. We know human biology. But our Savior Jesus was born to a virgin, just as Genesis 3:15 called him “the woman’s offspring.” Joseph was not his father. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. People have a hard time believing in the virgin birth of Jesus. But this is one of the undeniable facts, clearly recorded in the Bible. If you believe in the word of God, you cannot deny the virgin birth, no matter how strange it sounds. The fact is that the virgin gave birth to a son and we call him Immanuel. As we said, humanly it is impossible for a virgin to have a child. Actually Mary asked the pointed question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel Gabriel answered, “... with God nothing will be impossible” (Lk 1:27; NKJV). In other words, it happened because God made it happen. It happened by God’s purpose and design. The virgin birth of Jesus happened because God wants us to believe that he can work a miracle in our lives as well.

God gave the sign of Immanuel to his people in Isaiah’s time. More importantly, the sign was given to all people who are in need of salvation, like you and me. The promise of God was fulfilled when Jesus was born to be our Savior. Beginning with his virgin birth, the life of Jesus was filled with one impossible thing after another that God made possible. He walked on the water. It was not a trick or special movie effect. He really did. He fed 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. How was this possible? He opened the eyes of a man born blind. He made a deaf and mute person to hear and talk. He made a man who had been a quadriplegic for 38 years to get up instantly and jump around. He didn’t even need physical therapy. Jesus drove out demons. He raised a widow’s son from the dead when he was being carried in a coffin. Jesus raised Lazarus from his tomb. Finally, Jesus died on the cross to take away the sin of the world. Above all, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day! None of these things would be possible for humans. But our God made it possible. So what does this mean to us personally? It means God can make things possible for us. He can work miracles for us. The biggest miracle is that we are saved from our sin and death when we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, no matter what kind of sins we committed against God. We become the children of God. Think about it! We have not done anything good to deserve such wonderful grace and privilege. It is a miracle! A miracle that is possible because Jesus was born to a virgin!

Second, the virgin birth assures us that God is with us. Look at verse 14 again. *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* God gave us Immanuel as the sign of his love. God promised to be with us. This is an amazing sign of love. Toward the end of the famous movie, Dr. Zhivago, there is a scene of dialogue between a Russian general and his niece Tanya. He asked her how she and her father were separated when she was a little girl. She said she got lost in the midst of chaotic revolution and fires. The general asked her again about the real reason why she got lost. Reluctantly, Tanya answered in tears, “He let go of my hand; he let go of my hand.” The general told her, “The man who let go of your hand was not your father. Your real father was Dr. Zhivago. If Komarov were your real father, he would have never let go of your hand.” This is true. A father who loves his daughter would never let go of her hand no matter how bad the situation may be.

In the course of our lives, we taste the love of those who are around us. Recently I was very sick for 10 days with high fever, bronchitis and laryngitis. I lost five pounds. One of our church members made a large pot of ginger-and-pear drink for me. Another offered to give me a ride to work when M. Deborah was away for a couple of days. I felt loved by their small gestures. I am also very happy because M. Deborah loves me and takes good care of me everyday. But this kind of love cannot be compared to the love of God. For one thing, human love is limited and temporary. I cannot expect M. Deborah to be with me forever. I cannot expect our coworkers to be with me forever. But God’s love is different. His love is forever. It is not conditional. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb 13:8). We can depend on him. The sign of Immanuel means that the Lord is with us forever, no matter what our situation may be.

Our God is the God of Immanuel. He is with us. He is with us in times of good and bad. He would never let go of our hand. Jesus said in John 10:27-28: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.” Jesus will never let go of our hand. Not only that, no one will snatch us out of his hand! That is, unless we let go of his hand. The question we must ask is: “Are we with God?” Are we proud like Ahaz who refused to listen to God’s word? God is with us, but are we closing our hearts toward him? There are times when we don’t want God to be with us. We shut the Lord out of our lives. The result is that we reject God’s blessings. For example, if we include Jesus into our Sunday schedule, but we do our own things on other days, then we deprive ourselves of the blessings of Immanuel. When we say, “Okay, Jesus, today I am going to hang out with my friends, so would you mind leaving me alone?” Or, “Jesus, I’m trying to get along with people at work. I just don’t have time to be with you. So can you wait outside? You can join me when I go home.” If we cut ourselves off from God this way, how can we expect him to help us when we face fearful situations? When we cut ourselves off from the Immanuel God, we cut ourselves off from the source of real life.

Christmas is a joyful season. But Christmas without Jesus is only an empty affair, because without Christ, it is just another party that ends with hangover. But when we are with Jesus, everyday of the year can be Christmas for us. In our small church

community, we are in different stages in life, experiencing different things and facing different challenges. Many of us are still students. Some of us are looking for stable jobs or experiencing financial difficulties. Others are doing well financially but are facing other concerns. But no matter where we are at, every one of us can have the same confidence that God is with us. Christ is with us and gives us the strength and the direction to see us through our life on earth and beyond. It doesn't mean that our life is going to be one continuous emotional high. We are often frustrated, but we know whom to turn to in our distress. In the midst of our trials, we can find the comfort in the Immanuel God. Why would God who sent his one and only Son to us now abandon us? Jesus willingly died for our sins on the cross. Why wouldn't he help us now as we struggle to follow him? We must remember that God is with us in times of good and bad. And if God is with us and for us, who can be against us? Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ro 8:38-39).

Today's passage reminds us that God gave us a precious sign of his love. It was a sign of Immanuel. *The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.* We can put our faith in God, because this prophecy was fulfilled exactly as Isaiah said it would be. Christmas is about the birth of Christ. It is about God coming to us to save us. He is with us. May the Immanuel God be with you this Christmas and always!