

## **Isaiah 7:1-17 Put the LORD to the Test**

“Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in.” Amen.

The Word of God for our study this Sunday is found in Isaiah 7:1-17:

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.

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. 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.” 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.’ “

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.”

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. 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. 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.” (NIV)

This is the Word of our Lord.

Dear People who are loved by God and called to be saints:

What a contrast, huh? God sent messengers to them both: the angel Gabriel to Mary and the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz. But Mary's faith-full response to God's message was “May it be to me as you have said” while Ahaz's faithless response was “I will not put the LORD to the test.” It's belief vs. unbelief and humility vs. arrogance. It's human weakness & simplicity lined up against human strength & cunning. In this corner we have the young virgin, with God behind her — in the other corner we have King Ahaz, with ... his pride.

Who's going to win that contest? Ahaz certainly has every human advantage, but it's part of God's judgment on him and his unbelief that deliverance for his people will not come through Ahaz or any other king of David's line: it will

come from the weakest and most unlikely of places — a baby boy born to a virgin. Yes, the danger posed to Judah by the kings of Aram and Israel will be past by the time this son arrives on the scene, but Ahaz and his plans would have nothing to do with it.

And this would be nothing but an interesting exercise in comparing historical figures — Mary and Ahaz — if Ahaz weren't such a familiar character for us. Oh, sure, his is a name you don't hear very often — if at all — but there are modern Ahazes all around, perhaps even among, us. They are characterized not just by unbelief, but by a cloying and patronizing profession of piety. That's what we see here from Ahaz — while his words seem to be saying, "Oh, I'm not worthy to ask the LORD for a sign — I can trust him without putting him to the test," his meaning was more like, "Me? Ask the LORD for a sign? Yeah, right — like that could actually make any kind of difference, like this God of yours would actually pass any test *I* might come up with for him!"

Now, the first people that Ahaz might remind you of are the public figures — sadly, often politicians and opinion-makers — who want to come across to us as people of deep faith, but whose positions and pronouncements seem to show a disdain for true Christians and an unwillingness to actually be influenced by what God's Word actually says about certain issues. Their references to religion often go something like, "Well, yes, God says \_\_\_\_\_, and that's very nice, *but now* it's up to *us* to do what really matters."

Still, the essence of Ahaz's refusal to put the Lord to the test wasn't simply unbelief: it was stubborn, sinful pride. God was trying to give him and his people a message of comfort — to tell them that God was going to take care of their enemies — he was going to give them peace. But the king wasn't interested because he thought he already had it covered: he had asked the big bully from the next block, Assyria, to come and beat up the two bullies on his block, Israel and Aram. That plan didn't go so well in the end — yes, Assyria came and whipped the other two kingdoms, but it didn't stop there, it kept going and eventually Judah itself had to submit to Assyria.

Most of us probably know people just like Ahaz in that respect: they may even profess to be Christians, but they don't actually rely on God for anything that matters. Whatever the problem may be, whether spiritual or temporal, they think they've "got it covered" — and sometimes they almost view it as insulting if someone suggests they should trust God instead of themselves. They're like — and sometimes actually are — addicts who foolishly insist that they are in control, not their addiction, and insist that they can stop any time they want. That doesn't go so well in the end, either.

And we'd be lying if we thought we didn't at least occasionally behave that way ourselves. That, of course, is Satan's oldest lie, and the one our sinful natures are quickest to latch onto — that we are God's equals, and that therefore we can handle our lives just fine without his help. We don't want him to interfere — there's no need for him to get involved! A pastor once related the story of a man with that attitude, despite much evidence that he couldn't handle things on his own:

It was nearing Christmas, and I received a phone call from a man who needed to talk to a counselor. I met him at my church office, where he told me his tale of woe.

A decade earlier, he killed his wife in a fit of anger, and spent several years in prison for manslaughter. He and his wife had a daughter who was in the custody of his in-laws. He had not seen her since, and now, as Christmas neared, his heart ached. With tears streaming, he lamented, "I could pass her on the street and not even know who she was."

What I remember most about our counseling session, however, was what he said when he first walked into my office. Dramatically raising his arms, he said, "Now, preacher, let's just leave Jesus out of this, okay?"

As he sadly went his way that day, I thought to myself, *That's the whole problem. You've left Jesus out.*

So when we find it in our own lives or that of others, we want to recognize this, "No thanks, God — no need for you to get involved" attitude for what it is: outright unbelief, or at the very least sinful blindness. Ahaz's example shows us that it really shouldn't be that hard to comprehend — I mean, think about it: when the almighty Lord and Creator of the universe comes and tells you to ask him for a sign ... ASK HIM FOR A SIGN! I mean, imagine that you're a 90 pound weakling sinking in quicksand, and there's a 350 pound NFL lineman standing on solid ground nearby, and he's got ropes and ladders and boards and nails and hammers and hoses and just about anything you can think of that could be used to help you, and when he says, "Hey, tell me what you need so I can save you," you say, "Go away! If I wanted your help, I'd ask for it. I'll handle this on my own." Doesn't make sense — but that's what Ahaz did, and what we do far too often when God invites us to turn to him in our troubles.

So obviously, when the LORD gives us that kind of invitation, we want to listen — we want to obey (although that hardly seems the right word) when he tells us: "Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart. Ask the LORD your God for a sign." But what exactly does that mean?

God makes it plain just before he tells Ahaz to ask for a sign. He says, "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." The Lord wants us to *trust* him. He wants us to put our faith in him. He wants us to take him at his Word — to hear his promises, as he promised deliverance to Ahaz and his people, and to put him to the test — to say, "OK, God, you said you'd bless and take care of me: Now, please, do it!"

And we test him in these things in the same place we find his promises: in the means of grace — the gospel in his Word and Sacraments.

In Baptism, where he makes us his own and tells us that he has washed us clean. Put him to the test. Take him at his Word. "I am a new creature in Christ — I know that, because I have been baptized."

In the Lord's Supper he promises forgiveness and life and salvation. Put him to the test. Come to the Lord's Supper. Take it. Believe it. Hold onto it.

And in the Word of God — in the pages of the Bible — he promises to tell us everything we need to know, for this life and the next. To make us wise toward salvation. Put him to the test. Say, "OK, God, I don't need anything else — I'm just going to rely on you and your Word."

And when we do that, what do we get? What is the result? We get deliverance — rescue, salvation, from whatever problem we may have, just as the Lord delivered Judah from the problems they were facing in Isaiah 7. Whatever our problems may be — illness, injury, job troubles, money troubles, whatever — trust him — put him to the test!

And here's one of the interesting — and comforting things — about the example of God's deliverance in our text today: God even promises to deliver and rescue us from the problems that are of our own making. Why was Judah facing this trouble? It was because they as a nation had been forsaking the Lord, and because their king in particular had

forsaken the Lord, trusting in himself and in other nations. And yet God was still saying, “I have a plan for you — I’m going to protect and take care of you.”

And aren’t so often the problems that we have the most trouble with — that mess us up the most — the ones that are of our own making? Yet those are the very ones that we are most likely to say, “Oh, well, I guess I’d better not ask God for help on this one because it’s my fault and I’d better be the one to fix it.”

Maybe it’s a lie you told. Maybe it’s a bad habit you have. Whatever it is, turn it over to God. Put him to the test on that one, too. Because he will deliver you.

But of course the most important deliverance that God wants us to put him to the test for is our deliverance from sin and death. That is what the whole promise of Immanuel was all about. When the angel came to Joseph in the dream, as we see in our reading from Matthew, he made it very clear — he put a meaning to all of this that may not have been perfectly obvious to Isaiah and his people, but he said, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.” Why? Because he will save his people from their sins.

That’s what “God with us” came for” — to save his, people, all people, from their sins. That’s why he was born. That’s “the reason for the season”. That’s why he lived. That’s why he died.

Jesus is the reason for Good Friday, too. And the reason behind Easter. On the cross he washed away all our sins. And then when he rose from the grave on Easter morning — which Paul talked about so wonderfully in our reading from Romans — he paved the way to eternal life for us as well.

We get whatever we need from God — and our deepest need — salvation, a way to heaven — when we put God to the test — when we trust him. Oh, and beyond that there’s blessing up on blessing — all the things he loves to give us — material, spiritual, temporal. God loves to give gifts — not just at Christmas — but all the time.

Now, there is a “funny” thing about God’s promises: when you fail to put God to the test, you fail his test. That’s what Ahaz found — too late. This wonderful gospel promise in our text — the promise of the virgin giving birth to Immanuel — was actually a judgment to Ahaz because he rejected it.

The theologians call this “the alien work of the gospel”, because it’s not the “good news” we associate with the gospel, but is judgment instead. What we hear as comfort and joy was a message of judgment for Ahaz.

You probably memorized at some point Mark 16:16: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...” — wonderful gospel truth! Comforting! But what’s the next half of that verse? “... But whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Or from John 3 — very familiar words: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned....” What wonderful comfort — the gospel in a nutshell! But what follows? “... But whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” [John 3:16-18] God’s grace, when rejected, means condemnation.

Sadly we find this rejection that becomes judgment fairly frequently in this post-modern, relativistic society of ours. There are those who hear the truth claims of Christianity, where Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” [John 14:6]. They hear that and say, “How exclusive! How judgmental!

No, no, no, no — that can't be right!" and in rejecting that they completely miss out on the message that in Jesus they have the way they need to the Father in heaven!

It's sad. It's tragic. But, hey, let's put God to the test when he says he'll give us the strength and the encouragement and the gifts and even the very words we need when we witness to those who are lost in unbelief — who have rejected the gospel. When we tell them the truth, we give them God's comfort.

Everyone's mind is on Christmas. Christmas is an opportunity — an invitation — to put the Lord to the test.

It was for Mary & Joseph — think about that — the message Mary gets: "Wait — you mean me? I'm going to have a *what? How?*" But she believed.

And Joseph: "You mean, she's pregnant, and it's not ... but I'm still supposed to ... ?" But he believed

And the shepherds: "*Who* was born over there in Bethlehem? You're telling *us*? He will be *what?* OK!"

What will *you* hear this Christmas, and how will you respond to the invitation? Ahaz didn't listen, and responded poorly. What about you — and what will you help your friends and loved ones and others hear? Are you going to hear the good news that God intended all people to hear: the promise of salvation from your sins being fulfilled? Or are you going to hear the message (as we talked about in Bible Class this morning) of "Peace on earth" — a peace that has nothing to do with spiritual salvation. Or are you going to hear the thought, "Christmas is all about helping the poor and less fortunate." Or perhaps it's the message, "Christmas means we pretend that there is peace in our family when in fact our problems haven't been solved so we can all sit around the table or the tree and act like we get along." Or the message that everyone hears too much of: "It's Christmas — buy our stuff!" What are you going to hear?

So, what's going on in your life right now? You've probably guessed I have a cold. What about you — what's on your heart, on your mind? Maybe you have financial troubles — the end of the year really brings those into focus. Family troubles? Illness? Job problems? Is there anything that — to use Isaiah's phrasing — that has your heart "shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind"?

Then follow the simple encouragement of these verses from Isaiah this holiday season, and all year. Remember the Lord's promises. Whatever the problem might be, whenever trouble might come: put the Lord to the test. Amen.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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