

Prayers

Opening prayer

We come to You in prayer, Lord God, with joy and thanks. With joy because our salvation has been secured for us by Jesus Christ and we know that we have a place in heaven with You; and with thanks, because our sins have been forgiven and we have received many blessing through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Keep us close by Your side through all the ups and downs of this life, we pray, so that our lives may show to others the joy and thanks that is within us. We praise You Lord God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: SCHOOLS

1. For yourself

Pray quietly, and give the Lord time to speak His Word to you. Let the Lord your God be your teacher

2. For your friends and family

Be still before the Lord, and lift up to Him those you love. Ask the Lord to bless you all with His love and His compassion

3. For the church and its work

Off to the Lord the work of the church amongst young people, remembering that the Lord loves children, and loves to see them taught well. Ask Him to give His people a heart for children.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Lift up to the Lord the countless children who do not have decent schooling, and without it, can take few steps in life to improve their lot

Meditation

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.

Serve Him by living the life of a servant:
And loving others, with all of your heart.

Serve the Lord by giving Him your worship:
By joining with the praise of all His people!

Serve Him by fulfilling His Great Commission:
To take the Good News to the ends of the earth.

Serve Him by being His priests in the world:
Praying for others, and meeting their needs.

Serve the Lord by being an honest disciple:
Living every day by the touch of His presence.

Serve the Lord by fighting against all evil:
Wherever you find it, in yourself or in others.

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.
There is no reward, except true peace with God

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 7: 1-9

¹ In the days of Ahaz the king of Judah (son of Jotham, son of Uzziah) it happened that Rezin the king of Syria, and Pekah the king of Israel (son of Remaliah) came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but they could not sustain their attack against it.

² When the house of David was informed that Syria was encamped within Ephraim, the hearts of the king and his people trembled, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. ³ So the LORD said to Isaiah,

'You and your son Shear-jashub, go out to meet Ahaz at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the roadway to the Washer's Field. ⁴ And say to him,

"Take care and be calm; do not fear, and do not lose heart because of these two stumps of smouldering of firewood, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah. ⁵ For Syria, with Ephraim and Remaliah's son, has devised an evil plan against you. They are saying,

⁶ 'Let us go up against Judah, terrorise her, and split it up for ourselves, and set up a king over it; the son of Tabeel!'

⁷ This is what the Lord GOD says:

'It will not take place! it will not happen! ⁸ For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin, ⁹ and the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. But within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be called a nation. If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all.'''

Review

After the great story of Isaiah's call (ch. 6), we are plunged into an intricate story, which is of vital importance to our understanding of all Isaiah's prophecies and for the whole Bible. The story is to be found in both chapters Isaiah 7 and 8, and its broad themes are also closely related to the complex prophetic instruction Isaiah received after his call (6:9-13 – as we saw yesterday). Because of this, I suggest it is likely that these events happened not long after Isaiah's vision. Most importantly, this story contains the prophecy (in tomorrow's reading) in which Isaiah tells of the birth of a child who will be called 'Immanuel' (7:14). If we are to understand this highly significant event, then it is essential that we study today's passage carefully. We can learn a great deal about this extraordinary prophecy of Christ the Messiah (see also Matt 1:18-25) if we pay attention to the apparently mundane details of the story found here in today's passage. The 'fireworks' begin tomorrow, but we will understand why if the scene has been set properly.

Isaiah recorded this story with great attention to detail and accuracy, because he knew its importance. So he identified the historical setting with the only accurate means of dating available, which was by reference to the reign of the kings of Judah and of Israel. Isaiah's talk about the different kings sounds confusing to us because we do not 'date' things as he did, but all we have to remember is that the story is about a time when the king of Judah in Jerusalem was a man called Ahaz. Ahaz was therefore Isaiah's own king, and the message that the Lord gave to Isaiah (7:4-9) was to be given to Ahaz (7:3). It was one of the accepted duties of a prophet to advise a king and sometimes to correct him; see how the prophet Nathan interacted with King David, for example (2 Sam 7:3f. and 12:1f.), so it was quite normal for Isaiah to bring a message to the king of Judah (7:3f.).

The general picture in our passage today covers the whole of the story within chapters 7 and 8. The kingdom of Judah was being threatened by an alliance of King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Syria (Syria was also called 'Aram' and its capital was Damascus). We must remember that Israel was also called 'Ephraim', had its capitol in Samaria, and was frequently at war with Judah. Now, these two kings had gathered forces just to the north of Jerusalem to attack Judah, but failed to press home their attack (7:1); they were not strong enough to capture Jerusalem, despite their boasts (see 7:6).

The story proper starts in verse 2, where Isaiah describes the state of panic which came over the court in Jerusalem when they first heard the news that the neighbouring states of Israel and Syria (Aram) were marching on them (7:2). Then, as would have been expected in God's city of Jerusalem, the Lord gave Isaiah the prophet a word for king Ahaz telling him what to expect from these world events. The message to be given was that the Lord knew full well that these two nations were not equipped to challenge or capture Jerusalem, and the king therefore had nothing to fear (7:4). The plan against Jerusalem was evil and the Lord would not let it come to pass (7:7).

If you have been following Isaiah's prophecies you might be surprised. Everything we have read in Isaiah has led us towards expecting the Lord's judgement against Judah and Jerusalem. However, Isaiah followed the Lord's will and declared this word with a powerful word of caution to Ahaz at the end; 'if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand firm at all.' We will see what happens, but this word was timely. It was a direct warning to the king, and we will see what happens as a consequence, tomorrow.

Going Deeper

Of course, there is much more to explore. Why was Judah's brother nation Israel plotting against it with the king of Syria? Why does Isaiah introduce his son 'Shear-jashub'? What does Isaiah mean by saying that Ephraim would be 'shattered as a nation' (7:9) in 65 years time? Each part of this story has been chosen to tell us something Isaiah felt it was important for us to know and it is up to us to find it.

Why attack Jerusalem?

The period of time which Isaiah describes was around 735 BC. At that time, a series of military coups in northern Israel had seen power change hands several times since the long reigning Jeroboam II (790-749 BC). Pekah, the current king of Israel, was an army commander who had slaughtered the previous king of Israel (Pekahiah) in a bloody military revolt (2 Kings 15:25f.). Isaiah called him the 'son of Remaliah' as an insult; the King of Israel's father came from no royal household, unlike Ahaz, the King of Judah, who was a descendent through his fathers in the line of David!

What Isaiah did not record, but is available for us to see in the Old Testament, is the fact that both Syria (Aram) and Israel were weak nations and they were in the business of attempting to make alliances and extend their wealth and influence because of the growing threat of the giant Empire Assyria to their north. We know that they were weak because of reports in 2 Kings 15 of Assyria raiding Israel and Damascus while Pekah was king; even the region of Galilee was captured, and Israelites of the tribe of Naphtali were taken captive in these skirmishes (see 2 Kings 15:29). In response to these defeats, Pekah sought an alliance with King Rezin of Syria, and his broader plan appears to have been to defeat Judah and Jerusalem in order to use this extended kingdom as a base from which to mount stronger opposition to Assyria.

Needless to say, none of this had God's blessing or was part of His plan. The Lord had already spoken through Amos (762 BC) to condemn the corrupt and weak northern people of Israel (see especially Amos 1-3), and also declare that the kingdom of Israel would be defeated and destroyed, as it was by Assyria in 721 BC. As far as the Lord was concerned, the plot between Pekah and Rezin against Jerusalem was a minor incident in the greater scheme of things, and one which would come to nothing.

Fear in Jerusalem

Although we can observe this with hindsight, the news of armies marching towards Jerusalem was alarming. People had lived with stability for years during the reigns of Uzziah in Jerusalem (787 – 735 BC) and the previous Jeroboam II in Israel (790 – 745 BC), but since then, the political upheaval had been tumultuous and in the north, it was violent. Was the violence in the north now coming south to destabilise Jerusalem itself? It was this fear which gripped the 'house of David (King Ahaz) and the citizens of Judah (7:2), which was described by Isaiah as a 'forest shaken by the wind'.

Fear so easily makes people focus on the present and fail to see the wider perspectives of life, so it was entirely predictable that God would bring a message through Isaiah to the King, to tell him to trust in God and not fear (7:4). Isaiah was instructed to go and meet Ahaz at the end of a conduit or 'viaduct' (7:3) to give this message, together with his son. We might think of these comments as merely incidental, but they are not. The availability of water in Jerusalem was a miracle of its day. No city could function without water, especially in a dry country, and Jerusalem was able to exist because of a series of what we might call 'water-works' which brought water into the heart of the city through conduits and wells. One of these was famously used by David as a means of capturing the city, centuries previously (see 2 Samuel 5:8f.). The place of meeting between Isaiah and Ahaz was supposed to illustrate the miracle of Jerusalem's survival as a city, and an impressive combination of ancient engineering and natural resource. Ahaz was gripped by fear as were his citizens, and the Lord needed to use every means to draw him out of that fear and back to a confident dependence upon the Lord God.

The presence of Isaiah's son 'Shear-jashub' is also interesting. The name means 'a remnant will return', and Isaiah's son was undoubtedly named as an illustration of the prophet's early message. We have not yet come across the word 'remnant' in any of Isaiah's prophecies, but we can see the idea within the end of chapter 6 (6:13) and also the optimism of some of his earlier prophecies (e.g. 4:2). We cannot be certain how Isaiah would have used his son in talking to King Ahaz, but by introducing him, Isaiah may have presented to Ahaz the idea the he should return to the Lord. Isaiah would have to use every means at his disposal to persuade the King to turn to the Lord in his hour of need. It is also possible that Isaiah took his

son as a witness to the coming confrontation. Tomorrow we will discover that all did not go well, and in Judean society, witness reports were required for proof of what was said or done. By taking his son, Isaiah may have been attempting to ensure that what happened was verifiable.

The Lord's Word

The last part of the message Isaiah was to deliver to Ahaz was a denunciation of the two kings Pekah and Rezin. The Lord spoke twice about their plans; 'It will not take place! It will not happen!' (7:7). Whatever future judgement the Lord might have to bring upon Jerusalem, it would not be brought about by two minor kings playing god with their military spoil (7:6)! In a mocking tone, Isaiah's message pointed out that Syria was only as strong as its capital which was only as strong as its king, who was Rezin; and Israel was only as strong as its capital, which was only as strong as its king, who was Pekah (7:8,9). The language is unfamiliar to us and it does not translate too well to give the dismissive sense which is there in the Hebrew. God was concerned about the bigger things on the world stage which would one day affect Israel and Judah, and he warned that 'within sixty five years' the kingdom of Israel would be 'shattered' (9:9).

Many scholars have wondered what this means, because most of Israel was in fact invaded only 24 years later in 721 BC. However, if you read through the latter chapters of 2 Kings, you will find reference to a number of occasions when Assyrian kings re-settled the northern lands of Israel creating a land which became known as 'Samaria' (in Jesus' day), and some of these settlements took place in the decades following the invasion in 721 BC, as far as the reign of Manasseh, forty years later. Only in this way can this prophecy be said to have been fulfilled.

Lastly, prophecy frequently tells us the consequences of not heeding what the Lord says, and in this case, it comes at the end with a threat. Isaiah was to say to Ahaz; 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all.' (7:9) In other words, Isaiah called Ahaz as King of Judah to demonstrate to the people the quality of faith which was their true inheritance. Tomorrow we will find out whether this call fell on deaf ears.

Discipleship

Application

The message which comes through loud and clear within this passage is 'do not fear'. However, the very characteristic of fear is that it makes a person unable to see anything other than that which is fearful; and attempts at distraction can be less than helpful for those who are gripped by fear. Many have testified to a 'spirit of fear' from which they need God's release, and this can be an important factor in personal or private ministry. However, what we are dealing with here is the more awful problem of fear as a group response. When people support each other's fears, cultural blindness can afflict people, even God's people, in a powerful way.

The only solution to fear is reasonable caution (7:4) and faith (7:9), both of which are used by God to break the bondage of fear. The advice 'take care and be calm' is what might be said to a troubled youngster or overactive teenager by a parent, but it would be wise for us to recognise that we must seem like that to God sometimes. Fear can be generated by people trying to do things too fast, without proper care and without giving things time to settle properly, and all those in leadership (just like the ancient kings) need to hear this advice. Faith, however, needs no qualification. When Isaiah told Ahaz to stand firm in faith, he said this to remind him of the faith of Abraham whose faithfulness was legendary. We need our examples of faith as well; not just people of the present who struggle with the same things as us, but people of previous times who have already demonstrated through their lives how faith overcomes fear. God can use their testimony to help prevent the enemy taking a hold of us and locking us up with fears; but our faith in Jesus Christ remains our strongest defence against fear!

Questions for groups

1. Does a passage such as this have anything to 'teach' us today, and if so, what? Discuss this in your group
2. When you are afraid and you hear the Lord say 'do not fear', what do you feel, and why?
3. Is God so much in charge of all history that He uses all the nations variously according to His will today? How might this affect us?

Discipleship challenges

- *Write down a time-line of the dates and kings mentioned in this study and make sure that you understand who was king, where and when. If you have a Bible resource, check out to see whether you can find out more about these characters and the times in which they lived.*
 - *Read some of the other Scriptures that cover this period of time in the life of Israel and Judah (2 Kings 15,16)*
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Final Prayer

Remove from us all guilt and fear, Lord God, for the enemy will use this against us repeatedly. We turn to You, Lord God, to release us from any evil grip of terror and fear, for only You can do this by the power of Your Holy Spirit within us. Thank You Lord God, AMEN
