

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

In the midst of our daily lives, dear Lord, we often forget to talk to You or give You the time that is Your due. Forgive us, we pray, and make Yourself known to us while we do our work, day by day, and hour by hour. Whenever we worship You in church, we proclaim You as Lord and master; so, Lord Jesus, come and reign within us, take authority within our lives, and transform us by Your glory! Dear Lord, do not delay! AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: SCHOOLS

**1. For yourself**

*Seek time to focus on your prayers today, and when you do so, say them out loud to God. Bless the Lord by speaking to Him as you would to anyone else*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Praise God for the education that you have been able to receive within your family, and pray that God will use it for good, even for those of more advanced years.*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Give thanks for all who work with children and schools, and pray that the Bible will be wisely used and taught*

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

*Pray in earnest that freedom will be granted to enable the Bible to be used in schools by teachers and children. Pray that the Bible will again become part of the essential reading for all who wish to understand the history of the world, and the eternal salvation plan of God*

### Meditation

Do not fret, the Lord is gracious,  
And He will never turn away an anxious call

Do not stress, the Lord is calm  
And He will always lead a troubled soul to peace

Do not worry, the Lord knows best  
And He will make His plans for you unfold

Do not be tense, the Lord is free  
And He will lead you on with love and patience

Let the Lord now do His work in you  
Be content to let Him change your world for good

Let the Lord now make His home in you  
And welcome Him within, for now, and for all eternity

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Isaiah 7:10-17

<sup>10</sup> Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz,

<sup>11</sup> 'Ask the LORD your God for a sign to help you; let it be as deep as the underworld or high as heaven.'

<sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said,

‘I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.’

<sup>13</sup> The Isaiah said,

‘Then hear this, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to try the patience of men that you try the patience of my God as well? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman will conceive and bear a son, and call his name Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He will eat curds and honey by the time he learns to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land belonging to the two kings you dread will be deserted. <sup>17</sup> The LORD will set the king of Assyria on you, on your people, and on your father’s house; bringing days like those not seen since the day Ephraim departed from Judah.’

## Review

This famous passage of Isaiah contains the great prophecy ‘the young woman will conceive and bear a son, and call his name Immanuel’ (7:14), and there is no doubting the importance of these words. Principally, they are recorded by Matthew (Matt 1:23f.) in his description of the birth of Jesus, and they have had a huge influence on our understanding of the figure of the ‘Messiah’. We could explore a number of issues that arise from this direct connection with the New Testament, but we will focus on what the prophecy meant when Isaiah gave it, initially as a rebuff to King Ahaz. In doing this, our understanding of God’s work through His Messiah is greatly enhanced, and we will begin to see why it was revealed through the prophetic ministry of this great man, Isaiah.

The story line for this ‘Messianic’ prophecy is not generally understood, and it runs like this. King Ahaz of Jerusalem and Judah (as we saw yesterday), was being threatened by a coalition of King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Syria. Isaiah received a word from the Lord saying that although Ahaz and the people of Jerusalem were deeply fearful of the consequences of this threat, it was relatively insignificant in the greater scheme of God’s plans for the world (7:1-9). It was not the war by which the people of Judah would be judged by God; Isaiah had prophesied this, but it was still yet to come (5:25-30). We can assume that Isaiah said all this to Ahaz, but the beginning of our passage today we discover that Ahaz would not listen to Isaiah or accept this prophecy, and he therefore remained fearful of invasion.

Isaiah next suggested that Ahaz do what his forefathers had done at critical times in the past (7:10,11), and seek the Lord’s will on the matter through a sign (just as David had consulted the Lord before going into battle; 1 Sam 23:1,10,11 etc). Ahaz refused to do this (7:12), and Isaiah was utterly furious at this arrogant response (7:13). As a prophet, his job was to inform the king of the Lord’s will; he had done this and King Ahaz had not listened, moreover, he refused to listen either to Isaiah or to the Lord!

In disgust, Isaiah called out to Ahaz that if the king would not seek a sign of the Lord’s work, he would be given one whether he liked it or not (7:13,14)! Remarkably, Isaiah then told him what the sign would be, a child would be born to a young woman, and the child’s name would be ‘Immanuel’. Everything about this prophetic word was positive; the sign of the birth of a child to a young woman was a sign of hope and the name of the child ‘God with us’ was a confirmation of God’s covenant promises to the forefathers (Gen 17:4, 26:3, 28:15 etc.). In addition, Isaiah went on to say that before the child grew up and could distinguish between right and wrong (a few years at most), the threat Ahaz feared would have dispersed completely (7:16:16). But with a more menacing tone, he prophesied that the king of the great Empire of Assyria would soon become a threat to Judah and Jerusalem (7:17)!

Initially, you may feel that this rather political story tells us little about Isaiah’s amazing prophecy about the child ‘Immanuel’ and the connection with Jesus, but it does. It tells us that when God’s people went their own way as King Ahaz had done, God decided to fulfil His covenant promise to ‘be with’ His people in a new way, through the birth of a child to a young woman. If we remember that at the end of Isaiah 6, God revealed that He would work through a ‘holy seed’, we may realise that Isaiah’s prophecies are suddenly giving light to the way God would work on a new covenant plan. A new King was required, a child would be born, a ‘holy seed’, called ‘God with us’; moreover, the certainty of God’s action was as sure as the birth of a child once a woman became pregnant! As the following chapters of Isaiah show, all these revelations come together in Isaiah’s work to create some of the most amazing prophecies in the whole Old Testament.

## Going Deeper

There is so much in this passage, we will find it hard to cover it all, but hopefully, we will be inspired to follow some of the leads which the story gives about God’s intentions. Firstly, we will look at the matter of putting God to the

test and Ahaz's rejection of this; secondly we will look at the prophecy about the coming of the child Immanuel, and thirdly, the final prophecies about the two kings and the King of Assyria.

### ***Putting God to the test***

The narrative in verses 10 to 12 seems straightforward. Isaiah invited Ahaz to test whether what he said about the insignificance of the threat from the north was true or not, and Ahaz refused. It is quite possible that Ahaz was not interested in the Lord at all; records of his reign in 2 Kings 16 show him to be a man who was more interested in foreign gods. When he said 'I will not put the Lord to the test.' (7:12), he rejected both the Lord and also his prophet Isaiah. At the very heart of the establishment of the kingship was the principle agreed between the people and Samuel, that their king should always be answerable to God through a prophet (1 Sam 8) because the ultimate authority over God's people was God Himself. Saul answered to Samuel; David answered to Nathan, etc. The history of the kings of Israel and Judah in 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles is strongly influenced by a succession of prophets; Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many more unnamed prophets. Ahaz's rejection of the advice of a prophet was the same as rejecting the Lord Himself (7:13).

It has been suggested that Ahaz was quite reasonable to say he would not 'put the Lord to the test', because when the people of Israel put the Lord to the test in the desert by asking for food and water, it was regarded by God as a sin (see Psalm 106:14). It is easy for us to become caught up in this argument because some people accept the idea of 'putting the Lord to the test', quoting the example of Gideon who did just this in Judges 6:39, but others think of this as inappropriate. It is important to remember that Psalm 106 objected to people demanding that God give them what they wanted on their terms (food and water in the desert) whilst being impatient for the Lord's provision. Other forms of 'testing' the Lord such as David's enquiry about battle (see above), or Gideon seeking to confirm the Lord's will (using a fleece, in Judges 6) or even 'testing the spirits' in the New Testament (1 John 4:1) are all regarded by the Bible as spiritually acceptable. Isaiah asked Ahaz to do this, not to make demands on the Lord (as in Psalm 106), but to make wise discernment; but Ahaz had no spiritual understanding.

### ***The young woman will conceive***

The sign of the 'young woman' was, of course, given by God to His people whether they wanted it or not; and it was a sign which was certain to take place. It is a well attested fact of the Old Testament that when God needed to do a new work amongst His people, the birth of a child was involved. The giving of the covenant promises of God to Abraham involved the birth of a child, who was Isaac (Gen 15:1-6); the salvation of the people of Israel from their hopeless slavery in Egypt was accomplished through Moses, who was a child born to a Levite woman (Exodus 1f.); and the establishment of the kingdom of Israel was done through a new priest, Samuel, whose own birth was connected to that of Jesus by the words of his mother Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) which were echoed by Mary (Luke 1:46). It should come as no surprise to us therefore that as Isaiah sought to find the answer to his conundrum about how the Lord could save his unrepentant people, God should reveal to Isaiah that the 'holy seed' (6:13) would be a child born to a young woman.

A great deal of time has been wasted on the discussion about the traditional translation of this passage from the 'Authorised Version' of the Bible which says 'a virgin will conceive and bear a child ...'. For many people, this text is part of the proof that Jesus' birth was a 'virgin' birth, but the scriptural facts of the matter are simple, and the 'AV' is not the best translation. Everything we need to know about Jesus' 'virgin birth' by Mary is to be found in the New Testament, and personally, I am happy with accepting this miracle as presented by the New Testament. Our passage of scripture in Isaiah is quite clear in Hebrew; the word used means 'a young woman of marriageable age'; it is not the Hebrew word for 'virgin' although a young man in Judah might have been entitled to expect that a 'woman of marriageable age' would have been a virgin. I have therefore translated this passage close to the literal meaning of the Hebrew at this point and although it does not 'prove' anything about the 'virgin' birth of the Saviour, I am not sure it is the purpose of this prophetic passage to give us this information.

One of the features of the great forefathers of Israel's history is the testimony of people that God was with them (see Gen 21:22, 26:24, 48:21 etc), and this is echoed in one of the great Psalms of the Old Testament, Psalm 46; 'The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.' (Ps 46:7; the Hebrew for 'with us' is 'Immanu' and the Hebrew for 'God' is 'El'). The radically new feature of Isaiah's prophecy in our passage today which has excited people ever since, is that it promises that a child will bear the name 'God with us'. This is another way of saying that God intended to come and be present with His people directly, in the birth of a child! God had finished using the birth of a child (Isaac, Moses, Samuel etc.) to move His people on to a deeper understanding of His covenant love. He would come as that child! It may well be that Isaiah did not fully understand the full breadth of what he was led to prophesy to Ahaz, at the time. However, later prophecies indicate that Isaiah began to understand this revelation more and more as the years went by.

### ***Curds and honey and growing up***

Although Isaiah came to realise some of the wider implications of this prophecy in later years, at the time he gave the prophecy, he was faced by an intransigent king. Almost as soon as the amazing prophecy about Immanuel had been given, Isaiah went on to address Ahaz, the king who at that moment represented to Isaiah everything that the

sinful people of God had become. What he said about the child growing up to eat 'curds and honey' has been debated as either being food for weaning, or food eaten by people during a siege because it was found naturally (honey) or instantly available from animals (curds). The expression occurs later on in this passage (7:22) where it clearly means food set by for a siege, and we will discuss this more fully at this point.

The main point of what Isaiah said to King Ahaz comes in verse 16, where it is clear (whatever is meant by the 'curds and honey') that time would soon pass before the Lord was proved right. The phrase 'before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good' is a colloquial way of describing the time taken for a youngster to grow up and reach an age of intelligent and informed decision making; in Judean terms, probably about 12 years. Putting everything together, Isaiah said that within 12 years, the threat of King Pekah and King Rezin would be gone.

What happened was that Ahaz did not take Isaiah seriously; he wrote to the Emperor of Assyria (King Tiglath-pileser) to ask for his help to defeat Israel (King Pekah) and Syria (King Rezin) and raided the Temple treasury to pay for this help (see 2 Kings 16:5-9). Note that in verse 17 of our reading, Isaiah warned Ahaz not to do this, because the real enemy was this emperor of Assyria, not the minor kings of Israel and Syria.

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## Discipleship

### Application

You will either be the kind of person who is fascinated by history or you will find it tedious! Nevertheless, it is fascinating to see how God worked to bring an eternal message about the eternal salvation of humanity out of the bickering of kings over foreign policy in the days of King Ahaz! Clearly Isaiah was furious when he gave the famous prophecy we know in Isaiah 7:14, but it seems that in his frustration, he was open to the Lord using him as a prophet in a new and radical way which both addressed the situation he faced with King Ahaz, but also spoke to the future of God's people in a far more intense and powerful way. You may well have heard the quote from Isaiah 7:14, but few Christians know the full story of how the prophecy was given.

We have already seen that Isaiah's famous prophecy brought together the idea of a child being born with the presence of God with His people and Isaiah's quest for an understanding of the 'holy seed' by which the Lord would save His people. But although what Isaiah said does not itself imply anything miraculous, for children are conceived all the time; in the wider context of Isaiah's prophecies and scripture as a whole, this prophecy jumps out at us. The idea that God would come and be with His people in the flesh is miraculous, perhaps scandalous, and this would be our conclusion whether the birth was a virgin birth or not! How amazing that God had in mind a solution to the perpetual sins of His own people by coming again as a child to be 'with us' Himself! The whole idea is fantastic from an Old Testament perspective, so much so that most Old Testament scholars will not put 'two and two' together like this and accept the full truth of what God was beginning to reveal through Isaiah. It is essential for our understanding of the rest of Isaiah's prophecies that he did, I believe, slowly begin to realise all this and progressively began to prophesy around these themes. The truth of this revelation makes the whole of the amazing book of Isaiah come alive!

It is not easy to write about how to 'apply' this text. The best thing I can do is to urge you to explore this passage and these themes in Isaiah as fully as possible and allow the Holy Spirit to work in you through them. At this point in scripture, we are being given world changing and life shattering information about God and His plan of salvation of the most powerful kind. Let us not waste it by failing to let the Spirit interpret it to us.

### Questions for groups

1. Do you believe it is right to 'test the Lord' by seeking a sign in order to know what to do? Under what conditions might this be acceptable?
2. Read the Gospel passage Matthew 1:18-25 and discuss how this passage helps us understand the birth of Jesus
3. In your opinion, does it matter whether the woman spoken of by Isaiah was a virgin.

### Discipleship challenges

- *To what extent do you have the feeling that the Kingdom of God is 'on the move' towards the accomplishment of greater things, and ultimately, His glory? Is this something that you have thought about much or not at all, and how important is it?*

- *Pray about this prophecy and let the presence of God help you to be inspired by it to have confidence in His governance of all history!*
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## **Final Prayer**

Almighty God; You made the world in love, and it breaks Your heart to see the mess people have made of what You intended to be for good, for enjoyment and for blessing. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that we may be constructive in Your world instead of destructive, and so bring joy to your heart. AMEN

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