

Fear and Faith

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[0 : 00] to keep that passage open in front of you. Let us come before the Lord in prayer before we come to it. Father, we thank you for your words.

We thank you that you have spoken to us through it, and we pray that you would do so now by your Spirit, that you might reveal Christ to us, and so evermore make us into his likeness.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Who do you turn to in a crisis?

Who do you turn to in a crisis? When the car breaks down, when you run out of money, when you injure yourself, who do you turn to? I reckon I know the answer.

I admit it's not very specific, but the person you turn to is whoever you trust most to help you.

[1 : 06] Maybe it's always a parent that's the first to get the call and guide you through a crisis. When you get ill, you phone the doctor.

When the boiler breaks down, you phone the plumber. When you lose something, you phone your wife. Whenever we find ourselves in a crisis, we turn, don't we?

We turn to whoever we trust most. We turn to whoever we believe will be able to help us best.

Well, King Ahaz found himself in a crisis. Ahaz is the king of Judah, the smaller southern half of the once great nation of Israel ruled by his forefather David.

And as we saw at the beginning of Isaiah chapter 7, in Ahaz's time, there are enemies conspiring against him to the north. Each of these two nations allying themselves against Ahaz's Judah, each of them individually would have posed a significant enough threat.

[2 : 19] But together, together they are almost certain to overwhelm his small kingdom. There's a little bit of good news for Ahaz.

The capital of his kingdom, Jerusalem, is one of the premier fortresses of the ancient world. It is built in high ground, up upon a hilltop, surrounded by walls.

It was almost impregnable. Right? Mighty armies of great nations could come and besiege Jerusalem. And Ahaz would have been confident it would stand, not just for days or weeks, but months, and perhaps even years.

But in the time of Ahaz, it had one major weakness. As strong as the walls of Jerusalem were, the water that every individual in that city needed to survive came through an exposed channel from outside the city walls.

If enemy forces managed to cut off their water supply as strong as the city itself might have been, the people defending it would only have survived a matter of weeks at best.

[3 : 38] That is where Ahaz finds himself in verse 3 of Isaiah chapter 7. He is assessing the great weakness of his kingdom's capital standing at the end of the upper pool.

He is looking at the one major flaw in his capital's defenses. And he is worried.

He is very worried. Who does he turn to in a crisis?

The enemy forces are gathering themselves to the north. And Ahaz is afraid. Who do you turn to in a crisis?

Who does Ahaz trust most to help him in his hour of needs? What we see in the verses that follow is that who Ahaz trusts most is the one he puts his faith in.

[5 : 01] And Ahaz trusts most in the powers of this world. And so he puts his faith in the powers of this world.

Fear of the world leads to faith in the world. As Ahaz is standing there facing his fortress one and only weakness shuddering at the thought of Ephraim and Aram united against him someone arrives with what should be more than just a word of helpful advice.

Because the someone who arrives is Isaiah the prophet. the mouthpiece of the lord of hosts. Like the bearer of the word of the king of kings.

That is who comes to Ahaz. And he comes before him with what should have been wonderful words of assurance and hope.

Because the God of heaven and earth comes to Ahaz and says doesn't he in verse 4 keep calm. Keep calm and do not be afraid.

[6 : 12] Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood. These two nations that are conspiring against you. We saw something didn't we of the glory of God in Isaiah 6 last week.

And having seen that king on his throne resin and pecca whoever they are are going to be no match for him are they?

And that is exactly what the sovereign lord says to Ahaz in verses 7 to 9. This invasion you're worried about it is not going to happen.

It is not going to happen because these are small time players you're worrying about. It is only resin.

It is only Ramalia's son says the sovereign lord. But he then leaves Ahaz with a word of warning doesn't he?

[7 : 23] At the end of verse 9 there if you do not stand firm in your faith you will not stand at all. In your moment of crisis who Ahaz who are you going to put your trust in?

Ahaz is facing a threat to his kingdom and into that situation the lord simply says trust me trust me to help you in your crisis and you will stand but if you do not you and your kingdom which you are so desperate to protect will not stand at all.

We'll see this more clearly expressed when we get to chapter 8 in a moment's time but what is really being asked here of Ahaz is who do you most fear?

Who do you most fear? I wonder how you would answer that question this evening. Not fear in the sense of running scared from a spider in the bathroom but who do you fear in the sense of who do you believe to be the strongest force at play here?

Who do you believe to be holding the most power in their hands? Because excluding phobia that is what fear is isn't it?

[9 : 03] It is what we feel when we recognize something or someone is far more powerful than we are. It's why you would rightly fear facing a bear or a shark or a tornado.

So I am forever convincing people that my fear of cows is perfectly rational. Because all of those things are more powerful than you. So fear although we might not enjoy the feeling of it we might not enjoy the feeling of knowing we are not the most powerful person around it is not necessarily negative is it?

It is a wise response to a force more powerful than we are. And what we fear we rightly make sure we are on the right side of.

If you stand face to face with a bear you're not going to start deliberately provoking it to anger. If there's an armed police officer standing in front of you even if you trust them you're going to make sure aren't you to act in such a way that keeps you on the right side of them because you rightly recognize the power they hold.

There are lots of things we can and should fear like bears and tornadoes and cows. That is wisdom. But the question being laid before Ahaz is who do you fear most of all?

[10 : 40] who do you believe to be most powerful? Because whoever you fear most whoever you think is most powerful that is whose help you will depend on above all else.

That is the person you are going to make sure you are on the right side of isn't it? We find out in the following verses who it is that Ahaz fears above all else and so who he puts his faith in above all else.

The sovereign Lord offers Ahaz the greatest deal of all time. He says all I require of you is to stand firm in your faith and I will guarantee the security of your kingdom forever.

And then in verse 11 there he says he tells Ahaz to ask him for a sign. A sign is what God used to ratify his promises with people.

Telling Ahaz to ask for a sign here what he is saying is kind of like he is saying I have written up the contract and everything is in your favor all you have to do is ask me to sign the dotted line and I will do it.

[12 : 11] Just ask me to push down the rubber stamp of approval and I will always be for you. Just show your faith in my ability to carry it out and I will deliver you.

What does Ahaz do in verse 12? I will not ask. He declines God's offer.

It sounds really pious doesn't it? I will not ask. I will not put the Lord to the test. But it is in fact a blatant refusal of relying on the Lord's offer of salvation in Ahaz's kingdom's moment of crisis.

He is right. We absolutely should not put the Lord to the test. But asking God to do something he has just told you to do does absolutely not constitute putting the Lord to the test.

That is obeying him, not testing him. So Ahaz does his best to sound polite and pious, but his response betrays where his trust truly lies.

[13 : 35] What he fears most is not the Lord of hosts, but as it turns out, the king of Assyria.

We get a further fuller account of Ahaz's foolishness in 2 Chronicles 28. But even here, Ahaz displays, doesn't he, that he does not want to put his faith in the king of kings.

And because Ahaz does not stand firm in his faith, just as the Lord promised, he does not stand at all.

The Lord shows Ahaz's folly by bringing against him the very power he put his trust in. Just look across there to verse 5 of chapter 8. The Lord spoke to me again.

This people, this people here is actually those of Ephraim and Aram, the countries conspiring against Ahaz and Judah. And according to the word of the Lord back in chapter 7, they are indeed destroyed, aren't they, before they ever get near Jerusalem.

[14 : 49] And they are destroyed by the king of Assyria. See there in the middle of verse 7, in all his pomp, likened to the floodwaters of the Euphrates.

And by the end of verse 7 of chapter 8, it sounds like Ahaz's plan might just have worked. He went running to the king of Assyria to help, and sure enough, the king of Assyria has come from the north and swept through Ephraim and Aram.

He has duly destroyed the enemies Ahaz was fearful of, but look at what happens next. Look at what happens there in verse 8.

Ahaz's kingdom. The king of Assyria in his march south, carrying out the will of the Lord does not stop there. They sweep on into Judah.

The floodwaters do not stop at the borders, but keep on flowing south, overwhelming Ahaz's kingdom. If we believe anything in this world is more powerful, more able than God to deliver us, we will not stand.

[16 : 10] Ahaz put his faith in the world because he feared the powers of this world more than he feared the power of God. But it was his misplaced faith that caused him to fall.

And so he and his kingdom were washed away by the very floodwaters he had trusted to deliver him. Except not entirely.

Ahaz is indeed washed away, but not everything is washed away. You notice there in verse eight, the floodwaters rush through Judah, but they reach up only to its neck.

They are left treading water. The judgment visited upon Ahaz and his kingdom is calamitous, but it is not total.

And there are a few details we have kind of skipped over in the last chapter and a half that give us a glimmer of hope for the future. And they come primarily from the names of the children that appear in this passage.

[17 : 29] The first is back in verse three of chapter seven, where the Lord sends Isaiah's son with him to Ahaz. Not for some work experience, but as a message, a message of warning to Ahaz and as a note of hope to all of God's people who are caught up in Ahaz's folly.

Because Isaiah's son, if you look there, is called, I'm not sure where you'll find this in the top hundred baby names, a remnant will return. A remnant will return.

He stood before there, before Ahaz, as a sign. As a promise of what was to come, the first glimmer of hope is that the destruction brought about by Ahaz, by Ahaz's misplaced faith, would not be terminal.

There will be something of this kingdom left. But better yet is the child God promises, despite Ahaz's rejection of his divine aid.

God's sign. Because after Ahaz refused to ask for God's sign, God says, well, whether you want it or not, the sign is coming.

[18 : 58] Standing there with the contract written solely for our good, he says, I will still sign it. Because of Ahaz's fear and faith in the world, the sign will not come until after he and his kingdom have been laid waste, but God will and does still send his sign.

Not to Ahaz, but to God's people. To them he will send Emmanuel, God with us.

To the remnant that shall return, the promise of Emmanuel. God stands as a beacon of light. To them a child will be born who will be a sure and certain sign that I am with you and I am for you.

You will grow up in a Judah that has been laid waste by foreign powers, but he will still come. And to all who put their faith in him, they will stand forever.

We get an almost moment at the start of chapter eight when Isaiah has another son and you think, is this it?

[20 : 30] Is he coming? But Isaiah's second son is not called Emmanuel, is he? He is called Maher-shalal-hash-baz.

I'm sure his older brother was delighted to have the better name in the family because this son is called quick plunder swift spoil. Really rolls off the tongue, doesn't it?

This is not yet the promised Emmanuel. This is the sure sign of what is going to happen in Judah's immediate future because of Ahaz's folly.

But the promise still stands and so Isaiah will wait with his people because despite the faithfulness, faithlessness of Israel's king, God has remained, hasn't he, forever faithful to his people.

by sending his own son, by sending Emmanuel to be the son of David, who would not follow in the footsteps of Ahaz, but would live faithfully all his days.

[21 : 49] The king of God's people who is forever faithful and so brings instead of temporal condemnation, as king after king did in the Old Testament, Emmanuel, brings eternal salvation.

And if we want to partake of that eternal salvation, if we want to be part of that everlasting kingdom, under the rule of the promised Emmanuel, God with us, we need only to reject the way of Ahaz, who fear in the world, put his faith in the world, and instead fear God, and so put our faith in God.

Let me assure you this second point will be much briefer than the first, but we see in the latter part of chapter eight that Isaiah and his sons choose the path that Ahaz rejected, placing their trust firmly in the Lord, because it is he who is to be feared above all else.

Just look down there with me at the Lord's instruction to Isaiah from verse 11 of chapter eight. He says, this is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people.

Do not call conspiracy, he says, everything this people calls conspiracy. Do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.

[23 : 29] The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. He is the one you are to fear. He is the one you are to dread.

Do not fear what they fear, but instead fear the Lord, because he is the one who is most powerful.

He is the one who is most able to help you in every time of crisis. Invisible though he may be, he is the one we are to fear, because he is holy.

He is other. There is none like him in anything, including his fearful power. Not the kings of Ephraim and Aram, not the kings of Assyria, nothing compares to him.

And so in the midst of the political turmoil, the Lord says to Isaiah, do not put your lasting hope in any of these temporal kingdoms.

[24 : 35] A change of government is not going to save you. A few good friendships won't get you anywhere. Trust in me and in me alone, because I am the God who is to be feared above all else.

Only then will you stand. And so verse 17, that is what Isaiah does. He stands firm, waiting for the Lord.

It is in him alone he puts his trust. Isaiah is not the anointed king of God's people, and so while he is faithful, the present circumstances do not change for him.

But in the midst of a life of war and famine, one thing will remain true for Isaiah throughout. He will be standing forever. Because it is to him and to all those who put their fear and faith in the Lord, that Emmanuel was going to come and now has come.

Isaiah and his children stood as signs and symbols of the Lord's promises. We'll see in chapter nine the glorious picture presented to Isaiah and the remnants for this awaited son.

[26 : 13] But no longer do we look forward to the day when signs and symbols would become reality. No longer do we wait upon the Lord to fulfill this promise.

Rather, we look, don't we? We look to the Lord Jesus himself, Emmanuel, God with us, the Messiah who came to save all his people, all those who put their faith in him, to save him, as Matthew makes so clear in his gospel, not from kings or nations, but from our sins.

In a crisis, we, like Ahaz, will always turn to whoever we think is most able to help us. the greatest crisis each and every one of us face is not the present problems of this world, many and great as they may seem to be.

The greatest crisis facing every individual is facing the fearful holy God as sinners who have not put our trust or faith in him.

as the writer to the Hebrew says, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. I wonder if you believe that this evening.

[27 : 52] Do you know God's power? Do you know his holiness? And so know it would be the most fearful thing to fall into his hands if they were stretched out against you in judgment for all that you have ever done wrong.

That is a terrifying thought, is it not? If you do not think God is fearful in his power and majesty, you risk walking the path Ahaz walked.

And that will end no better for you than it did for him. but if you do believe that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, put your faith in what you most fear because he graciously invites us, commands us to put our trust firmly in him and in him alone.

He is fearful, but he longs for us not to be receiving his condemnation but his mercy. And we can do just that when we stand firm before him in faith.

It will be a faith that does falter and fail, but to have moments where we err is not to fall into the same folly that Ahaz lived in.

[29 : 25] Ahaz deliberately refused to put his faith in God when presented plainly with his aid. But if we know and trust God to be our ever-present help and aid because of Emmanuel, because he came to be with us, because of the sure sign of the promise that God will save his people, we can rest assured that we will never fall into the hands of the living God in judgment but only ever in grace.

And to them, to us, Jesus promises we will never fall. So who will you turn to in your need of help?

The sovereign Lord extends his offer to you, having already through Emmanuel succeeded for his people where Ahaz fails, he now invites you too into his kingdom and we can enter simply by trusting in him and his son above every other power that might be in this world.

Because through him alone can we find the greatest help we need in our deepest trouble. Let us stand with Isaiah and his sons putting our faith in the Lord whom we rightly fear, knowing that when we do so he will deliver us from what only he can, salvation from our sin, and then we too will stand forever with him.

Let us pray as we close. Father, we come acknowledging that you alone are a God and so you are to be feared above all else.

[31 : 37] But we give you thanks that you are not only a God of power and majesty but of love and mercy and so we come before you now in right fear of you who are holy, holy, holy, but also coming boldly for you have promised us mercy and forgiveness to all those who put our faith in you and your King Emmanuel who was and is forever faithful to you.

And so we come in our weak faith relying on his eternal faithfulness that we might stand with you in your kingdom forever. We pray that you would keep us from putting our faith and trust in anything other than you and draw us quickly back to yourself when we do so.

For your glory and the honouring of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.