

## Isaiah 7 A double edged sign

*Tim Anderson 16/12/2018*

The same sign can mean different things to different people.  
“Keep off the grass” means something different in a drug rehab unit  
to on a recently seeded lawn.

But more than that,  
the same sign in the same place at the same time  
can mean different things to different people.  
A dark thunder cloud can mean joy for a farmer  
and sorrow for a bride on the way to her wedding.  
Rising interest rates mean happiness for the self funded retiree  
and sadness for the young family with a large mortgage.  
The sound of footsteps in the corridor outside the class room  
means reward for the child who has done their work  
and punishment for the child who has been mucking around.

The key verse in Isaiah 7 is verse 14.  
“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.”  
Immanuel means God is with us.  
To the people of Isaiah’s day,  
the sign of Immanuel was a two edged sword.  
It could mean joy or sorrow,  
blessing or punishment.

And you don’t have to have a degree in theology  
to work out that the sign of Immanuel is a sign for us too.  
Maybe there was another baby in the back of God’s mind.  
“The virgin will be with child  
and will give birth to a son,  
and will call him Immanuel.”  
It sounds like more than a passing resemblance to the Lord Jesus.  
But we won’t jump straight to Jesus.

First we will see what the sign of Immanuel meant to the people of Isaiah's day, and then we will better understand the Lord Jesus.

So what is the situation for Isaiah and his people?

Isaiah is a prophet speaking to a very scared king of a very scared people.

Isaiah was a prophet to the people of Judah.

When Israel split in half after King Solomon,

the southern kingdom was called Judah,

and the northern kingdom was called Israel.

It was Judah where the people were called Jews

and became the nation where Jesus was born.

So Isaiah is speaking to the people of Judah

and they are very scared.

They have just got word that Israel and Syria have signed a pact

to unite against them

and carve them up.

In verse 2 it says,

“Aram (that's Syria) has allied itself with Ephraim (that's Israel)

so the hearts of Ahaz (that's the king of Judah)

and his people were shaken,

as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.”

They were shivering in their boots.

You might think of a situation

where New Zealand and Indonesia joined forces to conquer Australia,

not very realistic,

but if it happened,

we wouldn't be sleeping too well at night.

But there's an added complication.

Judah, Israel and Syria were only bit players on the world stage

in Isaiah's day.

The global power was Assyria.

They weren't bothering their three smaller and weaker neighbours

at the moment,  
they were busy with another war.  
But pretty soon,  
they would come through and conquer their insignificant neighbours.  
Why?

Because Assyria had her eyes on Egypt.  
And the only way from Assyria to Egypt  
was through Syria, Israel and Judah.

In terms of a modern analogy  
you could think of the United States of America.  
Currently a bit busy with trade negotiations with China.  
But imagine if they sort that out,  
imagine if they came this way.  
Imagine if they were not our allies but intent on gobbling us up.  
We would soon stop worrying about New Zealand and Indonesia.

So God says to Isaiah,  
“Go and have a chat with the king.”  
And between verses 3 and 9 we see the substance of their chat.  
Isaiah meets Ahaz at the aqueduct.  
Now you might think that’s just an incidental detail.  
He has to meet him somewhere.  
But if you think about it,  
kings don’t usually do tours of inspection of the local water works.  
They hang around in palaces and places like that.  
Ahaz is inspecting the water works  
because he’s worried about Israel and Syria laying siege to Jerusalem  
and him running out of water.  
It’s not good to run out of water  
if you live in a city with no spring or river  
and your enemies have you under siege.

At a human level we can have a lot of sympathy for Ahaz.  
His enemies have plotted his ruin.  
They’re camped outside his gates.

In verse 6, they want to give the son of Tabeel his job.

Humanly, he has every reason to be afraid.

But Isaiah comes to him with a message from God.

“Simmer down, be calm, keep your chin up.

These guys who are opposing you are small men.

They are nothing.”

Isn't the description of the two kings opposing Ahaz glorious?

They are smouldering stubs of firewood.

These guys aren't a bushfire.

They're not even an open fire roaring in a fire place.

They're the last glowing embers of something that once was impressive.

They're has beens.

In verse 8

Isaiah even has a prediction of the future of his enemies for Ahaz.

Within 65 years, the nation of Israel will be so broken,

that they won't be able to be called a nation any more.

Humanly speaking Ahaz might have had every reason to be afraid.

From God's point of view,

he had nothing to worry about.

These kings who were causing him so much angst

would be blown away like a dandelion.

The last sentence is the nub of the message for Ahaz.

“If you do not stand firm in your faith,

you will not stand at all.”

Not only does Ahaz have God's messenger Isaiah

telling him things will turn out well.

He also has the promises of God

made to his forefather David on his side.

Notice in verse 2 how Judah is addressed.

“The house of David was told.”

Ahaz is a direct descendent of the great king David.

God promised that he would have a descendent on the throne of his people forever.

The people of the Northern kingdom Israel

had decided to put someone not from David's line on their throne.

Their fate was sealed.  
But God's promise still stood for Judah.  
Ahaz had nothing to worry about.  
Compared to the promise of God,  
any army standing at his gates is nothing and nobody.  
Even the might of Assyria can't stand against the promise of God.  
Far less these two smouldering logs.  
Ahaz should have been trusting in the promise of God.  
He should have been standing firm in his faith.

The same is true for Ahaz as for us.  
Unless our trust is in God,  
we will lurch from panicking about one crisis to the next.  
If it's not one thing, it will be another.  
For Ahaz he would be panicking about Israel and Syria  
and if it wasn't them,  
it would be Assyria.  
For us we will fear our health failing,  
if it's not that it will be our family splintering,  
if it's not that it will be our homes needing expensive maintenance,  
if it's not that it will be having no one to care for us in our old age,  
if it's not that  
it will be having our savings fleeced by a dodgy accountant.  
There's always something to be scared of.  
Only by trusting in God is security possible.  
That's not to say that trusting in God  
will mean you will necessarily avoid health failure  
or a dodgy accountant.  
But when you come up against life's trials,  
you will feel secure.  
It won't rock you because you will know  
that God has you in the palm of his hand for eternity.  
"If you do not stand firm in your faith,  
you will not stand at all."

It's not always easy to trust God amidst the storms of life.

You mustn't think that at the first sign of a flutter in your tummy that God will cut you off.

“Sorry, you didn't have enough faith.”

God is very patient with Ahaz,  
giving him every opportunity to put his trust in the right person.

In verse 11, God says to Ahaz through Isaiah,

“Ask me for a sign.

I'll give you a reason to believe.”

God is very generous.

“It doesn't matter whether the sign is in the deepest depths or the highest heights.”

You name what sign you want.

Now we might think that Ahaz' reply sounds very pious.

“I will not ask.

I will not put the Lord to the test.”

He's quoting Deuteronomy.

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

The same verse Jesus quoted to the devil when he asked for a sign.

While he was tempting Jesus in the wilderness.

But Ahaz' reply is not so pious.

Ahaz had already sent messengers to Assyria  
asking for their help against Israel and Syria.

The choice before him was trust in God

or trust in Assyria.

It was foolishness.

The mouse asking the cat for help against another mouse.

He'd already made up his mind.

So he didn't want a sign,

something that might give him reason to depend on God alone.

God is like a lover

who says ‘put me to the test’,

try me out and see if my love is not there for you.

And Ahaz says,

‘Not interested.

I'm going with someone else.'

Ahaz might not have wanted a sign.

But Isaiah gave him a sign anyway.

The sign of Immanuel, God with us.

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son,  
and will call him Immanuel.

Somewhere in Judah,

there would be a little baby born  
called "God is with us."

Now in Hebrew, the word translated virgin

doesn't necessarily mean a lady who hasn't slept with a man.

A young, pure and godly woman

would call her baby,

"God is with us."

Which is nothing particularly remarkable.

People gave their babies names with meanings in those times.

The 'sign' is that Isaiah tells Ahaz about it before it happens.

So that when it happens,

Ahaz will know that God is with his people.

Is that a good sign for Ahaz?

No. It is not.

Ahaz has decided that God can't be trusted to help his people.

He's put his trust in Assyria.

Ahaz thinks God is not with his people.

This sign says "Ahaz, you are wrong!"

God is with us!

The sign of Immanuel is a double edged sword.

It's great to have God with you,

if your trust is in him.

But if you've discounted God.

If you've said, "God is not going to turn up."

And then God shows up anyway.

Then you're embarrassed and you will be cursed.

What does the sign of Immanuel mean for Ahaz?

In verse 16, the two kings he is living in fear of,  
they will have their own lands laid to waste.

So there was no need for Ahaz to team up with Assyria at all.

In verse 17, the very thing Ahaz trusted instead of God,

Assyria,

that is what will be his undoing.

The king of Assyria will raze the land.

To use the metaphor of verse 20,

the king of Assyria will shave Ahaz' head,

and well pretty much take off all the hair on his body.

It's not the things he fears that prove his downfall.

It's the things he trusts.

There's a reason God sent Isaiah's son Shear Jashub with him  
to greet Ahaz at the aqueduct.

It wasn't because Isaiah needed the company or the moral support.

Though a bit of moral support wouldn't go astray when you are telling  
off the king.

Shear Jashub was a sign to the king.

Shear Jashub means 'a remnant will return.'

Even though Ahaz has not been faithful.

Even though the sign of Immanuel is a sign of destruction for him.

God is still with his people.

After Assyria has been the Lord's instrument of punishment.

There will be a remnant.

And the sign of Immanuel is for them too.

God will be with them.

What does the sign of Immanuel mean for us?

Let's be clear from the outset,

that for us the sign is more profound.

In Isaiah's day, Immanuel, the baby, was a sign

to let people know that God was with them.

He wouldn't abandon them to the armies of Israel and Syria  
or to Assyria.

But for us, Immanuel, the baby is more than a sign of God's presence.  
Immanuel is God's presence.  
Immanuel is God with us.  
Immanuel, the baby, is God come to live amongst us himself.

Like the original sign of Immanuel,  
the baby Jesus is a double edged sword.  
Will you place your trust in the Lord Jesus?  
Do you believe that he is God with us, Immanuel?  
Will you rely on Jesus alone for your security?  
Or will you say like Ahaz,  
"I will not ask.  
I will not put the Lord to the test."

Plenty of people want to acknowledge Jesus at Christmas time.  
In some sort of a perfunctory way.  
But when the armies of Aram and Ephraim  
are knocking on the door of their lives,  
Who will they turn to for security?  
Will they take Immanuel, God with us, out for a test drive?  
Or will the sign of Immanuel be a sign of their destruction,  
as the things they look to for security instead of Jesus  
turn on them  
and devour them like the king of Assyria devoured Ahaz.

If the Lord Jesus is to be a sign of blessing for you,  
you must put him to the test.  
In John's Gospel, Jesus says,  
"If anyone chooses to do God's will,  
he will find out whether my teaching comes from God,  
or whether I speak on my own."  
The way to take Jesus for a test drive,  
is to follow his teaching.  
Jesus promises that those who put him to the test,  
those who take him at his word,  
will find out that his teaching comes from God.

How will they know?  
Because Immanuel,  
God will be with them.

Sometimes people say to me,  
“How can I know that Christianity is true?”  
Live it!  
God will reveal it to be true.  
Immanuel.  
God really is with us.