

Emmanuel

Isaiah 7-9

David H. Roper

Our three-year-old, Joshua Andrew, is afraid of Santa Claus. His mother continues to assure him that Santa Claus is no great threat. I overheard a conversation the other day in which she told him he did not need to worry about Santa Claus, because he isn't a real person - he represents Mom and Dad's love - anyway, Christmas is a time when we think back to the birth of Jesus. Joshua said, "Yes, Jesus will save me from Santa Claus!" And I thought, "Right on, Joshua!" If there is any time we need to be saved from Santa Claus, it is now. I do not know how you feel about this season, but I can very easily get discouraged. There seems to be an inordinate amount of pressure, and when you couple with this the economic situation, these are troubled times. I think we need Jesus to save us from Santa Claus.

In a prophetic foreview, Isaiah tells us of the Jesus who saves us from Santa Claus, and it is that passage I would like to have you turn to with me -- Isaiah 7, 8, and 9. Isaiah begins by giving us the historical background of this prophecy. We need to remember that all of these prophecies have an historic setting. These were not shots in the dark. They were all rooted in some predicament in which God's people found themselves. And God responded to those circumstances.

Now it came about in the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel went up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not conquer it. When it was reported to the house of David saying, "Syria has camped in Ephraim [i.e., Syria has arrived to reinforce Israel, the northern ten tribes]," his heart and the hearts of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind.

Ahaz was a very young man, probably in his early twenties, when this event occurred. He had a godly father, Jotham, and a godly grandfather, Uzziah. But he himself was a very wicked man. There is something extremely distressing about a young man who is very wicked, who is destroying his potential for life and utilizing his resources in the wrong ways, and this characterized Ahaz. Early in his reign the Lord brought these two enemies from the north against Jerusalem and they besieged the city. We know that they depopulated much of Judah, took almost a quarter of a million prisoners back with them. If we can place the opening chapters of Isaiah in this time, Jerusalem is described as a watchman's hut in the middle of a cucumber field. It was the only place left. Pekah and the king of Syria were encircling Jerusalem, and the situation indeed looked grim.

So Ahaz, rejecting the word of the prophets, made an alliance with Assyria, paid tribute to them, and asked them to come and deal with Syria and the Northern Kingdom -- which they did. Within months they besieged Damascus and destroyed it. They besieged Samaria and took a number of people captive. This was the first deportation of the Northern Kingdom. But they kept right on coming. They came into Judah and made it a tributary. For the rest of the life of the nation they were in slavery to foreign powers. And this came about because Ahaz insisted upon looking to other sources for help, instead of the living God of Israel. God raised up a number of prophets at this time, one of whom was Isaiah, who prophesied to Ahaz:

Then the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Sheadashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller's field, and say to him, 'Take care, and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted because of these two stubs of smoldering firebrands, on account of the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria, and the son of Remaliah. Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah has planned evil against you,

saying, "Let us go up against Judah and terrorize it, and make for ourselves a breach in its walls, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it ["Tabeel" in Hebrew means "good-for-nothing" evidently this was not really a person but God's assessment of the person they would set up as king]," thus says the Lord God, "It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus and the head of Damascus is Rezin (now within another 65 years Ephraim will be shattered, so that it is no longer a people), and the head of Ephraim is Samaria and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you will not believe, you surely shall not last""

The Lord does two things through Isaiah to speak to Ahaz. First, Isaiah and his son become a sign to Ahaz. God speaks through individuals, both by their lives and their spoken witness. He begins with the persons of Isaiah and his son. If we can read between the lines, a bit, we can see Ahaz on the west side of the city, perhaps repairing some section of the walls, and checking the water supply to make sure they would have enough to endure the siege. And he turns, and there is Isaiah, a relatively young man at the time, holding Shearjashub by the hand and just standing there, for at first he does not speak, since the names of Isaiah and his son are intended to be the word of God to Ahaz. Isaiah's name means "the Lord saves", and Shearjashub's name means "a remnant shall return." They declare God's ability to save and preserve his people.

But then Isaiah speaks and tells Ahaz that the two men he fears so greatly are nothing more than "smoldering firebrands" -- a Hebrew word denoting the wooden pokers the Jews used to keep their fires burning which, though they might smoke, would not flame. He said, "Rezin and Pekah are like smoldering fire brands. They are only men. The head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin, he is only a man. The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is Pekah, and he is only a man. So why are you frightened? Why are you afraid of men? Trust God. Do not look to Assyria for help; look to the living God of Israel, because in 65 years these two kings you dread will be dead, and their lands will be devastated." And 65 years from this date, in 676 B.C., the Assyrian king depopulated Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and they no longer existed as a people.

And Isaiah says to Ahaz, "If you won't believe, you won't last, either." The only people who last in times like this are people who walk by faith, people who believe. That is what enables you to stand -- having confidence in the living God of Israel. Isaiah is attempting to correct Ahaz' perspective on things. Ahaz was looking at things and people, which were transient and temporary; but Isaiah was looking at the God of Israel. He says to Ahaz, "Get your eyes off these things that oppress you. They are not going to last. In 65 years they will be swept away, forgotten. But you will endure if you walk by faith."

That is the same message the Lord proclaims to us today. You look around at this Christmas season, and there is so much pressure, so many problems -- people, things, circumstances. But they are not eternal, they will not last. We will endure if we get our eyes off of them and onto what really lasts. But it is amazing how preoccupied we can become with them, and how overwhelming they can be.

Last week Carolyn asked me to put up a window shade in Joshua's room. It was one of those days when I had a number of other activities planned, but very reluctantly I put it up. You men know how these projects go -- there is always something else which must be done associated with what you originally set out to do. I had to do some work on the curtains, and a number of other details as well. But finally I got back to doing what I felt was really important. The shade was up about an hour when Joshua got up from his nap. In attempting to raise it he ripped the whole thing off the wall! It really made me mad. It just ruined my whole day. Who in the world does he think he is? Here I am, the king of the world, who used a whole hour of my precious time to put that shade up, and he tore it all down! I grumped around the house all afternoon because of a thing, a window shade.

How often are we assaulted by things, things that do not last, do not count? They are all going to be burned up someday anyhow! What does it matter? You see, the thing that will allow us to endure is our faith. If we believe, Isaiah said, we will last. Evidently Ahaz did not respond to Isaiah's word, because the Lord speaks again:

Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God;

make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven. "But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!"

This sounds very pious, except we know that at this time Ahaz had already made up his mind to call for help from Assyria. He really did not want the Lord's word, did not want a confirmation from the Lord. He had already made up his mind, and he did not want to be confused with the facts. So Isaiah says,

"Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men that you try the patience of God as well? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign [whether you want it or not]: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken. The Lord will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah -- the king of Assyria."

Then there follows a description of the desolation that will take place in the land of Judah. This is a remarkable prophecy. It is fulfilled ultimately, of course, in the birth of Messiah, as recorded in Matthew 2. But it is apparent from this passage that it also had to be fulfilled in Isaiah's day. Notice verse 16: "For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken." That is, "Before this child is able to make this kind of discrimination, the land of Syria and Israel will be desolate." So this prophecy, as is true of much of prophecy in Scripture, had both a near and a far fulfillment. It is fulfilled in Messiah, in his birth of a virgin. But it was also fulfilled in its contemporary setting, in Isaiah and his wife, because Isaiah's wife was the maiden referred to here who would bring forth a child.

The Hebrew term here translated "virgin" is ambiguous. It can mean either virgin or maiden -- a strong young woman of childbearing age. And often in the Old Testament it is used to refer to married women. There is another term Isaiah could have used which means only virgin, but he did not use it. He used the more ambiguous term. Isaiah's wife was not a virgin. She already had one child -- Shearjashub. The prophecy here is that she would conceive again and bring forth another child, a son, who would be called Immanuel.

Now, that in itself is not a remarkable prophecy. Many of you men could say, "My wife will conceive and we'll have a son (you have a fifty percent chance of being accurate on that) and we'll call his name Immanuel." What kind of sign is that? But that is not the point. The essential feature of the sign is the diet the child would eat. Isaiah says he will eat curds and honey at a time when he knows better. The phrase in verse 15, "at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good" is not a reference to his ability to make moral discernments, but rather to choose between good and bad food. When he knows better, when he would prefer to have a steak sandwich, he will be eating curds and honey.

That is not sumptuous fare. That is the diet people live on when they are reduced to very humble circumstances. That is wilderness food, the food of a pastoral society. Judah at this time was a highly complex urban society. They ate filet mignon. But Isaiah says, "The time is coming when the child who is born of my wife will eat curds and honey, simple pastoral fare, even though he knows better, because there will be nothing left to eat." The Hebrews had the practice of putting milk in a skin and shaking it until it thickened, and that was the curds they ate. Their honey came from wild bees, and the people gathered it from the rocks and trees, wherever bees built their hives. This is a prophecy of desolation.

In verse 16 Isaiah says, "For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good [i.e., before he is weaned] these two nations off to the north will be left desolate." And in verse 17, "The Lord will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come For the Assyrians kept right on coming into Judah, the Southern Kingdom, and oppressed them. This is a very far-reaching prophecy, referring to the Assyrian captivity, to the Egyptian invasions of the Southern Kingdom, and ultimately to the Babylonian captivity. Look at verses 22 and following:

...and it will happen that because of the abundance of the milk produced he will eat curds, for everyone that is left within the land will eat curds and honey. [There would be an abundance of milk because there would be very few people left in the land, most of them having been deported.] **And it will come about in that day, that every place where there used to be a thousand vines, valued at a thousand shekels of silver, will become briars and thorns. People will come there with bows and arrows because all the land will be briars and thorns.**

Wild animals would inhabit the thickets where people once planted vineyards. And where there used to be cities, there would be dangerous places, where you had to defend yourself with a bow and arrow, for the land would be left desolate. And that is what happened. When the people were taken from the land, the land reverted to nature. Where there had been beautiful vineyards, there was desolation. Where once they lived on bread and wine, they then lived on curds and honey.

But in the midst of this terrible desolation there is the birth of this young man named Immanuel, "God with us". It is this that Isaiah wants God's people to see: no matter how adverse circumstances may be, God is with us. God dwells in our midst. Wherever this young man went people could look at him. He was a sign to God's people that God was in their midst, protecting, preserving, ministering to the believing remnant. And some seven hundred years later, when Israel was still oppressed and under the boot of Rome, another young man was born whose name was Immanuel, who was God with us - not in some symbolic way but in reality. He was born of a virgin, because Matthew picks up the Hebrew term and translates it with a Greek term which can mean only virgin. In Israel's oppressed state a child was born, of lower class parents, who literally lived on curds and honey. But he was God with us.

You see, that is what sustains us when we are oppressed, when the pressure is on. That is what saves us from Santa Claus. God is with us. God lives in our hearts. God is available to us. The Scriptures say, "Let your forbearance be known to all, because God is at hand." No matter how dark and gloomy and desperate the day may be, God is with us.

Unfortunately, Ahaz did not respond. He turned a deaf ear. So in chapter 8 Isaiah is told to take a large tablet and write on it in ordinary letters (i.e., the common language of the people, so that everyone could read it), "Swift is the booty, speedy is the prey." The Hebrew is "Maher-shalal-hash-baz", and this later becomes the name of Isaiah's third child. I am not sure about this, but I have a feeling that Isaiah wrote this in the style of a Burma Shave sign, and put it on the freeway between Ninevah and Jerusalem! For it is a word addressed to the Assyrians. It means "Haste to the spoil," or in the modern idiom, "Easy pickings, come and get 'em." This was the word which was given to Assyria: "My people are without protection."

God took his hands off his people; he let them go. That is what God does if we insist on going our own way. He loves us enough to let us have our own way. He took his hands off of his people and he whistled for the Assyrians and said, "Come and get them. Easy pickings, easy prey." Then Isaiah's son was born and named Maher-shalal-hash-baz. So the word was addressed not only to the Assyrians but also to God's people as a reminder that judgment was immanent. From this point on the message comes to Isaiah himself, and it is one of encouragement to him. God no longer speaks to Ahaz; he has spoken. But Isaiah needs encouragement:

**And again the Lord spoke to me further, saying,
"Inasmuch as these people have rejected
the gently flowing waters of Shiloah,
And rejoice in Rezin and the son of Remaliah;
Now therefore, behold, the Lord is about to bring
on them the strong and abundant waters
of the Euphrates,
Even the king of Assyria and all his glory;
And it will rise up over all its channels
and go over all its banks.
Then it will sweep on into Judah,
it will overflow and pass through,**

**It will reach even to the neck;
And the spread of its wings
will fill the breadth of your land,
O Immanuel."**

Isaiah was standing next to the conduit which flowed to the pool of Siloam, or Shiloah. They had built a conduit which carried water from a spring outside the city to the pool within. This was their water reservoir for the siege -- the waters of the pool of Shiloah, a gentle stream. The Lord said to Isaiah, "My people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, and so I'm bringing upon them the strong and abundant waters of the Euphrates." What a vivid picture! God is the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, who gently and quietly nourishes us, encourages us, purifies us. "Shiloah" comes from the Hebrew word for peace. It connotes peaceful waters. When we reject them, God will use harsher measures.

In the case of Israel it was the waters of the Euphrates which inundated the Northern Kingdom. They were taken away into captivity and never found again. And Isaiah says this flood will flow down into Judah. But, did you notice? Limits are set. It will flow only to the neck. And God may be acting in judgment against our nation. The waters may flow up to our necks, but God will not abandon his people. The limits are set.

Paul says in the New Testament, "No temptation has over taken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." There is a limit set. God may judge, but he will go only so far - and there is a way of escape. The way of escape is Immanuel, Jesus Christ himself, one whom we can lay hold of in times like this. And that is why Isaiah appeals to Immanuel for help. He says, "The Euphrates will overflow into Judah and reach to the neck, and the spread of its wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel. This is your land, this is your people, Immanuel; you must preserve them." And the Lord replies in verse 9,

**"Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered;
[referring to the enemies of God]
And give ear all remote places of the earth.
Gird yourselves, yet be shattered;
Gird yourselves, yet be shattered.
Devise a plan but it will be thwarted;
State a proposal, but it will not stand.
For God is with us."**

This is the same term, "Immanuel." How can God forget his people? How can he allow his land to be devastated? It is his land, his people. And though all nations may conspire against his people -- no matter how great their strategies may be -- they will be thwarted and frustrated, because God is with us. Then Isaiah is instructed not to walk in the way of his people, he is not to fear or dread the Assyrians or the Ephraimites, but God is to be his fear and his dread, and he is to be Isaiah's sanctuary. Then, beginning in verse 16, Isaiah speaks:

**Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. And I will wait for the Lord who is
hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him. Behold, I and the
children whom the Lord has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of
hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.**

"Bind up the testimony and seal the law." That is, "There will no longer be a revelation of God's will to Ahaz. The law and the testimony are sealed." Ahaz had rejected the truth, rejected it to the point that God is no longer speaking to him but is speaking to Isaiah and his family. And Isaiah and his sons, this little family in the midst of a Judah in this terrible condition, and Isaiah's disciples, were the ones who turned to the law and the testimony and waited for the Lord. There was no light anywhere except in this little community of believers. That is why in Hebrews 2 this reference is applied to Jesus who gathered with his "children" in simple trust in the Lord.

Isaiah announces to this little group that they are not to consult the wizards and the mediums who whisper and mutter. Then he says, "Should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the

living? To the law and to the testimony!" That is where you resort, in times like this. "If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn." The sun no longer rose in Israel. There was darkness and gloom and depression. He continues,

And they will pass through the land hard pressed and famished, and it will turn out that when they are hungry, they will be enraged and curse their king and their God as they face upward. Then they will look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be driven away into darkness.

What a terrible picture of the moral and spiritual darkness that obtained in Judah during this time! A little group of believers holding fast to the Word, loyal to the Lord and to his testimony; the rest of the world in darkness. Ah, but God never leaves things like that. Isaiah's ministry is one of comfort. God said to him, "Comfort my people." And there is never any good news, there is never gospel, unless there is comfort, unless there is a lifting up. And so in chapter 9 he says,

But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphthali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.

This was the area where Assyria first invaded, where the darkness and gloom were first felt, the region of Zebulun and Naphthali, which was the area on the east side of Jordan and around the Sea of Chinnereth in Galilee. They went under first; that is where the darkness was felt. But do you know, this is precisely the place where Jesus began his ministry! In Matthew 4 this prophecy is referred to Jesus. Remember that he went to Judea in the south and was baptized there, went out into the wilderness for a period of time, then back to Judea, gathered his disciples, went north to Galilee, and lived there for perhaps one year, training his disciples. Then John the Baptist was placed in prison, and Jesus began his ministry -- where? Right here where the gloom first began, right where things were darkest, an area which was rife with demon possession, with spiritual darkness everywhere. Matthew said it was here that the people who walked in darkness began to see the great light. And again, it is in the midst of gloom and darkness that Immanuel speaks. It does not matter how dark your day is -- God is with you. Isaiah describes in verses 4 and 5 the defeat of every enemy:

**For thou shalt break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders...
For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult,
And cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire.**

Who will bring peace to Immanuel's land? Verse 6:

**For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.**

The One who will bring peace to his land is God incarnate, a little baby in a manger in Bethlehem, a child who was born, a son who was given. When those shepherds looked down into that manger and saw that little baby boy, they saw God himself, who was a wonder as a counselor - Wonderful Counselor (the term means a wonder-working -- a supernatural Counselor). We do a great deal of counseling around here at PBC, but we cannot work any wonders. Your psychiatrist cannot work any wonders. But there is a Counselor who works wonders. He changes peoples' lives.

And then Isaiah describes him as the Mighty God. Some of the translations have obscured this statement. But, as

though the writer of Scripture anticipated this, in chapter 10 of Isaiah there is a clear reference to Jehovah as the Mighty God. This exact term is used to refer to Jehovah. This baby who was to be born in Bethlehem would be the Mighty God, the Eternal Father. Many of you do not have fathers. Many of you never had a father; you do not know what it is like to have a father. But here is One who is an Eternal Father, who never falls, who is always available.

And finally, he is the Prince of Peace. The function of a king is to bring peace to his people, and here is One who has the secret of peace. It is when God is with us that every circumstance can be seen in its right and proper light, and there can be peace. Henry Kissinger is not the prince of peace. No political party is the prince of peace. There is only one Prince of Peace: Jesus of Nazareth, Immanuel, God with us. That is the Jesus who will save us from Santa Claus.

Father, we say with the writer of the song, "Come into our hearts, Lord Jesus. There is room in our hearts today." We thank you that you are with us, within us. You are the God who is present and able to dispel the darkness and to lift us out of oppression, to give us the right perspective on things, and to supply all that we need. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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