Immanuel: The Condescension of the King

**Isaiah 7:10–16** 10 Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying, 11 “Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” 12 But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!” 13 Then he said, “Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? 14 “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. 15 “He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. 16 “For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.

*The Crisis of the Kingdom*

The story of Ahaz is an impossible drama. Here is a king with the weight of world on his shoulders. Not only does Ahaz have the pressure of measuring up to his grandfather’s and his father’s legacy, he also has the pressure of being the king that sees the entire kingdom crumble before his eyes. When history would be told, Ahaz stands on the precipice of being a king whose legacy will remain on the ash heap of history as the king who either sided with his political opponents in the northern kingdom, or with the enemies of God in the distant kingdom of Assyria. On the one hand, if he does not act now, king of Aram or Syria (Rezin) and the king of Israel or Ephraim (Pekah), will depose him and install their own king, “the son of Tabeel” (v.6). On the other hand if he does not hold on to power now, when Assyria comes, he will be totally defenseless against their invasion from the north. Furthermore, if Assyria destroys the Arameans and the northern kingdom of Israel first, the southern kingdom will implode and begin to go into an all out panic state! Ahaz is trapped. His gut reaction will be to try and appease Assyria and join with Tiglath-pileser in defending the northern border from Rezin and Pekah. This is indicated by the reference to the “conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller’s field” (v3). Which means he was preparing for Rezin and Pekah to invade. But this would mean that Judah would become an Assyrian vassal- something God would never tolerate for His kingdom. At this critical point, Isaiah enters the fray at the direction of the King of glory:

**Isaiah 7:3–9** 3 Then the Lord said to Isaiah, “Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller’s field, 4 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 Aram and the son of Remaliah. 5 ‘Because Aram, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has planned evil against you, saying, 6 “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,” 7 thus says the Lord God: “It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass. 8 “For the head of Aram 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), 9 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.” ’ ”

Several things to see from this oracle. Isaiah speaks prophetically to Ahaz (and thus the nation) both through divine pronouncement and through the living parable of one of his children, “Shear-jashub” meaning, “a remnant will return” or “will repent,” which connects this whole passage to the preceding context and the “holy seed” as the “stump” of salvation (6.13). Probably a mixture of the two meanings were implied in this prophetic name, the repentant remnant will indeed survive and one day return from captivity. In other words, the believers will survive and the non-believers will perish. Also, as God reveals the plans of the wicked kings of Aram and Ephraim vv.4-6; so too, God reveals His sovereign plans to bring these rulers, as well as the Assyrians, to ruin. For Ahaz’s part, all that is required of him is *faith*, “If you will not believe, you surely shall not last” (v.9b). Here is God, establishing His kingdom by faith alone!

*The Sign of the King*

Remarkably, it is in this very context, that a “sign” is introduced. Ahaz’s faith would not be without its tangible object as with all the instances of God’s demanding faith from His people; God always provides us promises and symbols to latch onto by faith. However, not only does Ahaz fail to trust in the Lord, He fails to ask for a sign to confirm God’s promises.

**Isaiah 7:10–12** 10 Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying, 11 “Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” 12 But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!”

Ahaz is given the opportunity of a lifetime, ‘ask for yourself a sign to confirm that what I say will come to pass, so make it a good one.’ But he refuses, “I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord” (v.12). Although the idea of not tempting the Lord sounds pious enough, here, Ahaz is not genuine in his refusal. It is not borne out of a desire to not to offend God, it is borne out of a desire to avoid being left with faith as his only option (v.9). The sign which was meant to confirm faith, will now confirm judgment! Whether Ahaz likes it or not, it will be “deep as Sheol… high as heaven.” What was meant to comfort the nation would now stand as dread to the nation. Shrouded in enigma, this sign would be hope only for the faithful, and interpreted through the eye of faith.

The Messianic prophecy contained here is usually seen from the perspective of blessing, hope, joy and we build our music and hymns on it. However, in its historical setting, this prophecy was spoken as a judgment against the nation (cf. John 9.39). For those who would side with Ahaz, the sign would be an unintelligible oracle too baffling to have any real significance in light of the present danger and would only serve to deepen Ahaz’s unbelief and render his heart “insensitive” (6.10). To those who, like Isaiah, were waiting for the hope of salvation from the power of God, this sign would develop into a rich messianic promise, the promise of a Redeemer who would identify with them and enter into their experience (59.20). It will be that only the believing remnant will be able to rejoice in His salvation, for the remnant are those who, unlike Ahaz, will wait patiently, even under duress, for His deliverance:

**Isaiah 25:9** 9 And it will be said in that day, “Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.”

This was something Ahaz was unwilling to confess because he did not believe it or trust it! But what makes this prophecy “deep as Sheol” and “high as heaven?” To understand this question we need to see it from its broader context, its redemptive historical development, and its significance in the overall plan of God for His people. In a word, what makes this “sign” so deep and profound is captured by the condescension in the title, “Immanuel” (14). The fulfillment of this prophecy has at least a dual fulfillment. From the immediate and historical angel, the “virgin” mother of the “child” may be both a young lady and or a virgin that gives birth to Isaiah’s own son, “Maher-shalal-hash-baz” who is described in similar ways as Immanuel (8.3-4). Isaiah’s sons having been already introduced as possessing prophetic significance (as were Hosea’s) (cf. 7.3); this son will be a partial fulfillment of God’s redemptive work among His people and establishing the reality that God is “with us.” Isaiah’s son is thus the link between the “holy seed” of Isaiah 6 and the holy remnant symbolized by Isaiah’s other son, Shear-jashub. This places our prophecy directly in the stream of all of God’s promises for His people going all the way back to the original promise of Genesis 3.15! The birth of Maher will ensure the destruction of the kings whom they dread. But the fulfillment at this level is limited. Isaiah’s wife was not a virgin, maybe not even a young lady, his son was not himself named, *Immanuel*. Thus, while this view serves to typify the fulfillment of this prophecy, it does not itself fulfill it.

Furthermore, the people and the land of Judah also serve as the imagery of the mother of the child and is consequently identified with the prophetic name, “Immanuel” (8.8). From Judah, Micah will later predict, “out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Mic. 5.2). Because this prophecy may have been partially represented by Isaiah’s own son this promise was fulfilled in the death of Judah’s immediate enemies Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel. Because this prophecy was also partially fulfilled by the remnant of believers of Judah, the Immanuel principle was also fulfilled in them by God dwelling among them even in the fire of their tribulation. Because God was with them, like a burnt stump when it is felled, the remnant will survive (6.13).

But ultimately, because this promise is rooted in the Davidic stream of prophecy, we do not see the final fulfillment until that Davidic figure comes who not only dwells with His people but will rule over His people as King:

**Isaiah 9:6–7** 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. 7 There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.

What this prophecy announces then, is a far distant messianic fulfillment beyond Isaiah’s time, beyond Assyria or Babylon wherein the Messiah-King would dwell amidst His people in suffering, with no apparent throne in power (cf. 11.11-12), a people who would live under the oppression of their enemies (i.e. Rome). The verses that follow (vv.17-25) demonstrate the judgment that will befall the people and the desolation of the land under Assyria (cf. v.17).

*The Condescension of the King*

Into the void of this kingdom crisis the promise of Immanuel is given. When the threat of losing their kingdom identity becomes all too real, God brings an unlikely and gracious assurance that His promises to dwell with His people will not fail. The essence of the sign is rooted in the *Immanuel principle* which is a covenant principle bringing God and man together in the bond of fellowship forever. It was to Abraham that God had promised, “I will be their God” (Gen. 17.8; cf. Ex. 6.7; 29.45; Lev. 26.12; Dt. 29.13; Jer. 31.33; Rev. 21.1-7). But in this remarkable prophecy there is also a theological lesson for us that is found at the very heart of the gospel itself.

*The King of Glory Dwells Among Us*

Think of the context, if ever Ahaz (and the nation) needed God to be with him it was now. But what should have been the source of strength and courage became the hope of only a select remnant. To understand the depths of this condescension, we need to see the Immanuel principle in light of Isaiah 6 and the King of Glory which Isaiah saw. From the highest exaltation to the deepest humiliation, the Son of God came to be our Light:

**2 Corinthians 8:9** 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

**Philippians 2:5–8** 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

*The Dual Estates of the King*

And here what emerges are the dual estates of Christ which lie at the very heart of the gospel that spans the Testaments (cf. 1 Pet. 1.10-11). It is Christ in His dying and rising again that forms the hope of the believer. In being born of virgin, Jesus enters our humanity to identify with us and stands in perfect solidarity with His people (53.12 cf. Rom 8.3; 2 Cor. 5.21; Heb. 4.15; 9.24). Isaiah himself will develop this thought as the dark clouds of impending judgment descends upon the people, Isaiah, in messianic fashion, steals away with his “disciples”:

**Isaiah 8:16–18** 16 Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. 17 And I will wait for the Lord who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him. 18 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.

This passage is cited in Hebrew 2.12 for the covenant headship of Jesus and the new covenant Church. This solidarity also emphasizes the Messiah’s state of humility for he will, “eat curds and honey” from His youth. “Curds and honey” is not the sign of abundance (as some argue) and delight but as the context suggests, it is the diet of poverty, v.22. The work of condescension will be costly (cf. Mt. 8.20). In addition to Jesus’ state of humility, this prophecy is not without its indications of the subsequent glories. For, in the very same text, the people are assurance victory, “the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken” (v.16).

This victory is thus implied by the typological destruction of God’s enemies represented by the coalition of cosmic powers in Syria, Ephraim, and Assyria. Isaiah’s broader context thus serves to remind us that no plan of the enemies of God will stand for, “God is with us” (8.10). In one fell swoop, Isaiah predicts the coming of the suffering Servant who condescends to come down from the realm of angels, dwell amidst His people, take on our poverty, suffer, die and rise again in triumph. And as Isaiah will make abundantly clear, this victory will be ours for the taking:

**Isaiah 53:12** 12 Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.

*Moral lessons or Messianic glory?*

In reading various commentaries and surveying the available sermons on how this passage applies to us today, many have gone the route of relaying everything to the lessons we can learn from Ahaz, his unbelief and his self-reliance. And yet, from the prophetic perspective, from the perspective of the heavenly council of Isaiah 6, the lesson to learn is more messianic than moralistic or political as this episode in Isaiah is not given here to give the world tips on politics. No. Instead of pleading with you to ‘up your prayer life,’ or to pray for your nation, though we should do both, I will plead with you to up your view of the majesty of Jesus Christ who is our Immanuel which means the Savior who condescended to come down for you and be with you for all eternity and that you should invest yourself into the depths and the heights of His salvation:

**Matthew 1:21–23** 21 “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” 22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.”