**IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US**

December 1, 2019

Isaiah 7:1-17

Key Verse 7:14 “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.”

In today’s passage we will study one of most famous Christmas Bible verses: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. What is interesting is that God gave it to the most unfaithful and wicked king among Israel’s kings. It is as if God wanted to show the world that Immanuel who is God with us is entirely based on God’s grace and not on our righteousness. Immanuel means God with us. El, the last two letters of that word, is the name for God. Immanu means “with us.” Immanuel is not Jesus’ title or his name. Jesus was never called Immanuel. That is a description of who he is. We learn in this chapter how God’s people should conduct themselves in their own real crisis, remembering that God is always with us in any circumstances. Let us now begin this Christmas by remembering God’s grace to send into the sinful world Immanuel Jesus who has the power to save us from our sins.

**First**, “Keep calm and don’t be afraid.” (1-9) King Ahaz in this passage was a very religious man. He worshipped many gods but not the God of Israel. He WAS religious. He just wasn’t religious toward the God of his fathers – Lord God Almighty. 2 Chronicles 28:19 says, “The LORD had humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had promoted wickedness in Judah and had been most unfaithful to the LORD.” Ahaz reigned in Israel for 16 years and made every effort to destroy the religious foundations of the nation of Judah. He shut the gates of the temple, and he offered burnt incense on high places throughout Judah (which the Law explicitly condemned). And he set up altars on his roof so he could worship the stars, sun and moon. 2 Kings 16:2-4 says, “… Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God. He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.” In this chapter, Ahaz is in serious trouble. Two of his arch-enemies - Rezin the king of Aram and Pekah the king of Israel had marched against Judah and were destroying the countryside. These nations had gone to war against Ahaz in the past and Judah suffered terribly for it; 120,000 of Ahaz’s soldiers were killed in a single day and 200,000 more of his people had been carried into captivity. Now Rezin and Pekah formed an alliance, and are preparing to come back for the second time, and Ahaz is afraid. In his time of trouble, King Ahaz became even more unfaithful to God. He offered sacrifices to the gods of Damascus, who had defeated him; for he thought, “Since the gods of the kings of Aram have helped them, I will sacrifice to them so they will help me.” But they were his downfall and the downfall of all Israel. (2 Ch 28:22-23) One leader’s unfaithfulness resulted in the suffering of the whole nation.

King Ahaz did not trust in God. He decided that his best option was to look for an ally that was big enough to help him defeat his enemies, and he believes the best candidate is to the north. He appeals to Tiglath Pileser, the King of the Assyria, for help. This was a really bad idea. Assyria was an extremely vicious and wicked nation. It turned out that when Ahaz DID form his alliance with Assyria, the alliance did him more harm than good. Assyria never even helped Ahaz defeat his enemies. But before Ahaz sealed his bargain with Assyria, God wanted to offer him another option. God sent Isaiah to tell Ahaz that the invasion would never happen. Neither Rezin nor Pekah would live another two years. And sure enough: within that period of time, Pekah was assassinated by his subject, and Rezin was killed by the king of Assyria.

Look at verse 4. “Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood.” Here we find how God’s people should conduct themselves when they find themselves facing their own real or imagined crises. In the typical human crisis, a person is not careful. For example, Ahaz in his crisis was not careful. He took gold from the temple of God and sent it to Assyria to buy that country’s military help to fight against these two kingdoms. The result of this was the total destruction of Judah. In a crisis we must be careful not trust in people over trusting in God, nor must we do something rash. In a crisis it is critical to keep calm and not be afraid. God told Ahaz: “Keep calm and don’t be afraid.” Fear spreads like a wind driven forest fire. Calmness also spreads if a person can keep calm in a crisis. How then can we keep calm and not be afraid in a crisis? Look at verse 9b: “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

As a metaphor of standing firm in one’s faith in a crisis, there is a story of architect, named Frank Wright. Mr. Wright was hired by Japan to build a hotel in Tokyo. Wright went to great effort to build his hotel with a foundation and structure that could survive earthquakes which Japan was famous for having. Three years after he built his Imperial Hotel, an earthquake struck Tokyo in 1923. His hotel was the only usable structure still standing in the entire city of Tokyo. To apply this spiritually we must build our faith on the grace that God gives us through faith in Jesus Christ. Apostle Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:1, “You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Apostle Paul, a man who himself faced life and death crisis every day of his life, did not tell Timothy to be strong by practicing Tae Kwon Do or study the writings of the great philosophers of the age. We must stand firm in the grace God has given us in Christ Jesus our Lord. When we stand firm in the grace of Christ Jesus we will keep calm and not be afraid in our own real or imagined human crisis.

Five hundred years ago, Michel de Montaigne said: “My life has been filled with terrible misfortune; most of which never happened.” Now there is a study that proves his saying. This study looked into how many of our imagined calamities never materialize. In this study, people were asked to write down their worries over an extended period of time and then identify which of their imagined misfortunes did not actually happen. It turns out that 85 percent of what people worried about never happened, and with the 15 percent that did happen, 79 percent of people discovered either they could handle the difficulty better than expected, or the difficulty taught them a lesson worth learning. This means that 97 percent of what you worry over is not much more than a fearful mind punishing you with exaggerations and misperceptions.

Despite the fact Ahaz never listened to anything God told him. God’s words of promise of Judah’s deliverance in Isaiah 7 were all fulfilled. Assyria eventually came and destroyed or carried away all the people of Aram and Northern Israel. Assyria attempted to swallow up Judah but by the time Assyria was ready to attack Jerusalem, Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, was king of Judah. Unlike his father, Hezekiah had faith in God and obeyed God’s word. As a result God miraculously rescued the very small Judah from the monstrous forces of Assyria. If you want to read in detail about this incredible supernatural rescue operation by God, read 2 Kings 18 and 19.

**Second**, They will call him Immanuel (10-25). Look at verses 10-12. “Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ‘Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.’ But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.’” God was incredibly gracious to unfaithful Ahaz. God offered Ahaz assurance that he would do as He promised: He tells Ahaz: “Ask me for a sign – any sign. It can be as deep as the depths of the sea, or as high as the heavens. Just ask for a sign so that you’ll know I’ll do what I say; Just don’t make the alliance with Assyria!” But Ahaz turns God down. He already decided to place his trust not in the Lord but in Assyria. He gives a pious excuse, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.” But Ahaz has never been a pious man – he truly hates the God of Israel. So he just politely tells Isaiah – and his God - to get lost or beat it.

Ahaz didn’t really believe Isaiah’s God could do anything, so he was not interested. He was just like an atheist who says he doesn’t believe in God. The only difference is that Ahaz has the appearance of being religious (many gods)… but as far as the God of Israel concerned, Ahaz didn’t believe. He is a practical atheist. So God says “Fine. Even if you don’t want to ask for a sign…I’m going to give you one anyway.” “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14) But Ahaz just turned away and ignored God. He didn’t believe the prophecy. He refused to accept the proclamation that a virgin would be with child. Today there are many people even among preachers/theologians who do not believe in the virgin birth. How could a preacher/theologian possibly reject such a central doctrine in the Bible? They say they believe in God but they don’t really believe in the Almighty God. Like Ahaz, they are religious on the OUTSIDE… but on the INSIDE they have no faith. They are theological atheists. An agnostic asked a Christian doctor if he really believed in the virgin birth of Jesus. The doctor thought about that for a minute and then told his friend, “If a person lived the kind of life that Jesus lived; performed the miracles; healed the sick; and raised the dead as Jesus did; was crucified on a cross; bodily arose from the grave on the third day; and ascended into heaven before many witnesses, Yes, I think I might be inclined to believe that such a person could be virgin born!”

Why is the virgin birth central doctrine of Christianity? Because Jesus came to earth to be our sin-offering. If Jesus had been born of a mortal woman and a mortal man… he would have been mortal. But God didn’t send a “mortal” to die for us. He didn’t send a prophet to die in our place; God didn’t send a nice man to die for our sins. God came down in human form and shed HIS blood for our sins. Now, think about it: If Jesus had been merely a mortal – he wouldn’t have been the perfect sacrifice. The Bible says he died for our sins. But a sacrifice was required by God’s law to be perfect, without blemish. A sacrifice for the sins of mankind would therefore have needed to be perfect. But Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” God looked and saw that there was no mortal being who was capable of rescuing his creation, so he did it himself. He clothed himself in human form and came to die on the cross for our sins. If God did not step down from heaven to take our sins, John 3:16 would read: “For God so loved the world that He sent SOMEONE ELSE.” But God didn’t send someone else. He did it for us, because we couldn’t do it for ourselves. When Jesus was born of Mary, he was literally God with us. If he had not been born of a virgin, that could not have been true. Being born of a mortal woman, he was completely human. And being born of the Holy Spirit, he was completely God. The people who reject the virgin birth are rejecting God’s Word. They don’t believe that Jesus could be born of a virgin because God couldn’t do that. And thus, they end up rejecting Jesus who is capable of doing anything powerful in their lives.

Look at verse 14 again. “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.” Isaiah is saying that God would be with his people even in the midst of such a disaster. Even when defeat looks near and the Assyrian army is filling the land, it is still Immanuel’s land. God will not abandon his people, even in their darkest hour. Assyria will come in like a flood, sweeping Syria and Israel away. But Assyria will eventually fade from history. Judah will remain in the land of Immanuel. God will be with them. Immanuel is a sign for God’s people that they will see victory over their enemies. Despite the doom and devastation, God will be with them, and they will be victorious. Sometimes our sins seem overwhelming. These rise to our necks and threaten to drown us—But Jesus is Immanuel, God with us! He will save us from our sins! For those who trust in him, he has taken away the punishment our sins deserve. And he will strip our sins of their power over us. He is God with us, and this is good news worth celebrating, not just at Christmas but all year long.

When people go through difficulties in life, they ask for a sign whether God is with them, or God loves them. So they suffer from doubt. What is the proof that God cares for us? God said unequivocally, “It is in the birth of the Son of God. I sent my Son as a baby in the manger 2,000 years ago.” God incarnate in Jesus Christ will never abandon or abuse us, but will stay with us - for always. Hebrews 13:5 says, “…because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” God is always with us, and God is always at work around us. If we open our spiritual eyes, we will see God at work. At this Christmas, let’s praise God who has given his Son Jesus Christ as a baby in the manger to be with us and save us from our sins. May Immanuel Jesus be with you.

Big Idea: God is always with us.