

Isaiah 7:8–20 — The Sign the Lord Himself Shall Give

Ahaz's Refusal, the House of David, and the Incarnation as the Only Remedy

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 7:8–20

“For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within threescore and five years shall Ephraim be broken, that it be not a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is Remaliah's son. If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established.

Moreover the Lord spake again unto Ahaz, saying, Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above.

But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord.

And he said, Hear ye now, O house of David; is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.

The Lord shall bring upon thee, and upon thy people, and upon thy father's house, days that have not come from the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—even the king of Assyria.”

The Wrong Tool: Rezin and Pekah

One of the major purposes of chapter 7 is to establish that Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel are not God's appointed instruments of judgment upon Judah. The king of Syria, Rezin, had come against Jerusalem, and a guilty conscience is ready to see in any threatening enemy the hand of God. But the chapter is at pains to say: these two — Rezin of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Samaria — are the wrong ones. They are not that rod. They are not that ensign which God will hiss for from the end of the earth (Isaiah 5:26). The right instrument is introduced plainly at the end of verse 17: even the king of Assyria.

This has a parallel in Revelation 6, where the guilty-conscienced inhabitants of the earth cry out that the great day of wrath has come — but it has not. What is described in the early seals is terrible, but it is not the final thing. The answer is no, it is going to be far more than that. So here, the enemies at the gate feel like the final judgment, but they are not. God has appointed something else.

The Fate of Ephraim: Broken, Not to Be a People

Verse 8 declares that within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken, that it shall not be a people. This was fulfilled in 2 Kings 17, when the Assyrians overran the northern tribes, carried the people away, and brought in peoples from other places. That mixed population became the Samaritans — neither fish nor fowl, as a later generation would say. The Jews would have no dealings with the Samaritans, for exactly this reason of their mixed origin.

Hosea had much to say about Ephraim before this judgment fell. “Ephraim is a cake not turned” — half-baked, something grossly wrong and imbalanced on one side. “Grey hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not” — spiritual decline had set in, advanced and unrecognized. “Ephraim also is like a silly dove without heart: they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria” — looking to the great powers of the world rather than to God. These were descriptions of a people ripening for judgment, and God had long patience with them, as he had with

Judah also. But the word came at last: Ephraim shall be broken.

The reference point given in verse 17 is telling. The coming judgment will bring days worse than any since the day Ephraim departed from Judah — not since the last invasion, not since the days of the judges, but from that specific rupture in the house of David. That departure was itself a consequence of Solomon's sins, and it lay upon the house of David as a weight of conscience ever since. The reference point is chosen with precision: it points back to failure in David's own line.

Ahaz's Refusal: Piety Masking Flesh

The Lord offers Ahaz a sign — a blank check from the depth to the height above. Whatever he asked would have been given. Instead Ahaz says: "I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord." It sounds pious. It is not. There is a great deal of pious-sounding language that masks a great deal of flesh, and this was one such case.

The response of the prophet shifts from "you" singular to "ye" plural — "Hear ye now, O house of David." It is no longer just Ahaz being addressed; the house of David as a whole is in view. Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Ahaz's refusal was wearying to God. The diagnostic word had already been spoken in verse 9: "If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established." The words addressed to Ahaz exposed what was in his heart — unbelief.

What could Ahaz have asked for? With such a blank check, he might have asked for anything. He could even have asked for the coming of the Messiah — but that would have cost him his crown, and there lay the conflict of interest. A blank check offered to a wicked heart reveals what the heart actually wants. He asked for nothing, and showed thereby that his heart desired nothing that God could give.

Therefore the Lord Himself Shall Give You a Sign

Because Ahaz refused to ask, God supplies the sign himself. “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” The Hebrew word used here means a young woman of marriageable age who has not known a man — a virgin. The sign character of the prophecy depends upon it being a virgin. A young woman merely conceiving would be no sign at all. The Septuagint translators, working some three centuries before the birth of Christ, had no difficulty with the word and rendered it with the unambiguous Greek word for virgin — the same word Matthew uses when he quotes this passage as fulfilled.

Matthew 1:22–23 is express: “Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” He writes fulfilled, not applied. The Holy Spirit through Matthew settles the question of what Isaiah 7:14 means: it means the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The name Immanuel — God with us — is the name of his manhood. He was the Son of God in eternity; he is the Son of God in manhood. That holy thing which was born of Mary was holy because the manhood he took into his person was holy. It had no prior existence apart from that incarnation — he did not unite his divine person with a pre-existing humanity, but took that humanity into his person. And the humanity so taken was holy, not contaminated with sin. That is why he could be the Saviour. A humanity drawn by natural generation from Adam would have been contaminated, and could not have served as a sacrifice. The virgin birth is the guarantee of the holiness of his humanity.

Immanuel and the Broken Ephraim: The Only Remedy

There is a connection, not immediately obvious, between Ephraim being broken — that it be not a people — and the incarnation of the Son of God. In the millennial kingdom of the Lord Jesus, there will be no ten tribes in Samaria separate from Judah. The division that Jeroboam the son of Nebat began will not be there. What will be there is a twelve-tribe Israel, reunited under sovereign grace, as Ezekiel's vision of the two sticks becoming one shows (Ezekiel 37). The deliverer will come to Zion and turn away ungodliness from Jacob, and so all Israel shall be saved (Romans 11:26).

The remedy for the broken Ephraim, the fallen house of David, the ruin that runs through all these chapters, is not to be found in any human arrangement. It lies in Emmanuel taking these matters up for God's glory and reestablishing the throne of David. If the virgin had not conceived and born a son and called his name Emmanuel, there would be no hope for any of the tribes of Israel — no earthly kingdom, no fulfilment of the praises of God. The sign is not merely a sign of one future event; it is the sign of the only thing that can repair everything that has gone wrong.

The Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son.