

ISAIAH: **THE GLORY OF GOD IN A WORLD OF CHAOS**

Part 3: "Which King Will We Follow?"

Isaiah 7:1-4, 10-14; 9:2-7

By David A. Ritchie

August 30, 2020 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

"In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. When the house of David was told, 'Syria is in league with Ephraim,' the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. And the LORD said to Isaiah, 'Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.'

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: 'Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.' But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.' And he said, 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.'

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (Isaiah 7:1-4;10-14; 9:2-7, ESV).

Almighty God, we ask that your Spirit would enlighten our eyes this morning as we look into your Holy Scripture that we may see Jesus. It is in his mighty name we pray, AMEN.

Introduction

When you read prophetic literature in the Bible, it is easy to find yourself easily mystified and confused. Often the prophets refer to names of people and places and events that modern audiences are completely unfamiliar with. For that reason, if you found yourself a little lost in today's reading, I want you to know that you are not alone.

With that said, God's word in Isaiah 7 and 9 is saying something profoundly meaningful and important for us today. And for us to access that meaning, we have to understand the historical situation in which these words are written. As one Old Testament scholar has illustrated, to read a prophetic book without knowing the context is like listening only to one side of a phone call.¹ But once you do understand that historical context – once you hear both sides of the conversation – things begin to become much clearer. That is especially true of our Scripture readings today.

The setting of our readings today is the year 735 B.C. at the beginning of an event remembered in history as the Syro-Ephraimite War (736-732 B.C.). It has been five years since Isaiah received his call and commission to become a prophet of the living God. The last golden era of peace and prosperity for the kingdoms of God's people has come to an end. And the peoples of the Promise Land are being invaded by the brutal and powerful Assyrian Empire [[show image of the Assyrian Empire](#)].

It is the defining crisis of a generation.²

The world is in chaos. The people of God are desperate for vision, for direction, and for defense. They want to know what to expect. They want to know what the plan is. And they are looking to the king.

Our text shows us several very different types of kings who respond to this crisis in very different ways. As the king goes, so the nation goes.

In many ways, our world is in a similar time of crisis. We live in an age of pandemic, economic recession, social division, political polarization, and isolation.

We, too, are looking for vision and direction for the future. We, too, whether we realize it or not, are looking for a king.

And it is against our situation that the word of God sets a question before us: *in this moment of crisis*, **"Which King Will We Follow?"**

¹ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 25.

² Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 86.

Exposition

1. The King of Control

The first type of king we can follow is who I want to refer to as the King of Control. In our Scripture reading today, he is represented by Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel [show image of **King Pekah**].

Now, remember, at the time of Isaiah's life, the people of God are divided. The twelve tribes of Israel once dwelled together as a united kingdom. But centuries ago, this united kingdom divided into two pieces – the kingdom of Israel to the North and the kingdom of Judah to the South [show image of the **Divided Kingdoms**].

So, what are the big differences between these two kingdoms? The Southern Kingdom of Judah worships the Lord at the Jerusalem temple, according to the law of the Old Testament. The Northern Kingdom of Israel worships at two false temples, which include (believe it or not) graven images of golden calves (1 Kings 12:26-33). The Southern Kingdom of Judah has had *some* good kings. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has had *no* good kings. The Southern Kingdom of Judah has been ruled by an unbroken dynasty of kings directly descended from King David, who was chosen by the Lord to be king over God's people. By the time it ends, the Northern Kingdom of Israel will have had nine different dynasties, as a result of violent coups and murderous conspiracies.

In fact, King Pekah of Israel became king by murdering his predecessor, and he will cease to be king when he is murdered by his successor (2 Kgs 15:23-31).

Israel is a kingdom that makes alliances with other wicked nations. Israel is a kingdom that worships the false gods of other nations. Israel is a kingdom that has so adopted the ways of the world that they have become virtually indistinct from the nations of this world.

Instead of seeking the Lord, trusting the Lord, and faithfully following the Lord, the kingdom of Israel has tended to trust in the power of the sword. When Israel has been given an opportunity to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God, they have instead thumped their chests with bravado, over-estimated their own strength, and trusted in their capacity to control their situation and their world.

That tendency to idolize a sense of human autonomy and control is embodied by King Pekah of Israel.

When the threat of Assyria comes [show image of **The Syro-Ephraimite War**], he does not fast, pray, and humble himself before the Lord. Instead, he makes an alliance with the pagan nation of Syria (which is a different nation than the Empire of Assyria). Then, he tries to bully the kingdom of Judah into the same sinful alliance. This is what is going on in Isa 7:1, ***In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to***

Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. Like a gangster mob-boss, King Pekah of Israel is saying, basically, “Look Judah, you can join us to fight Assyria, or else we will attack you.”

The King of Control says, “I am going to coerce my will into reality by any means necessary. My desired end will justify any sinful means. I am my own Sovereign. I am my own Savior. I will create my own salvation.”

But Israel has an unrealistic appraisal of self. They view themselves as invincible when united with their allies. But God sees them as “two smoldering stumps of firebrands.” They think they are a raging fire. God sees them as two fizzling cigarette butts in an ashtray.³

And do you know what happens? Both the kingdoms of Israel and Syria are crushed by Assyria. They are broken, devastated, exiled, and scattered. And they never rise again. For all their trust in their capacity to control, the kingdom of Israel becomes the living embodiment of Proverbs 29:1: ***“He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing”*** (Pr 29:1).

In our own time of crisis, there is still a very real temptation to put our trust in the king of control. Especially as Americans, we believe we can plan, maneuver, and coerce our will into being.

And don't get me wrong. A diligent and determined work ethic honors the Lord. Planning and preparation belong to the way of wisdom. We are to take responsibility for our lives and the choices we make. But God's people are called to place all our diligence, all our planning, all of our responsibilities under the sovereign dominion of God. We are to hold our future with open hands.

But when we put our trust in our own capacity, our own strength, our own will, we are often crushed under the burden of our anxiety, expectation, and circumstances.

If there is some silver lining to this nightmare of a year, it is that God has mercifully exposed the illusion of our capacity to control the world. In reality, our future has always been uncertain and contingent. But now, we truly know how foolish it is to boast about our plans for tomorrow (Pr 27:1).

We cannot control the uncontrollable. But we can *trust* in the one who commands all creation.

2. The King of Convenience

The second king is found in our reading today is who I would like to call the King of Convenience. He is personified by Ahaz, king of Judah [show image of **King Ahaz**].

³ Ortlund 88.

As far as heritage and ancestry go, Ahaz comes from strong stock. He is twelfth in an unbroken line of kings directly descended from King David, the greatest of ancient kings. David was a courageous giant-slayer. David was a man after God's own heart. David was the humble shepherd boy who became king.

But by the time we get to Ahaz, the apple has fallen very far from the tree. Instead of a giant-slayer, Ahaz is an indecisive coward known for selfishness and taking the path of least resistance. Instead of choosing what is best for his people, he chooses what is easiest for himself.

King Ahaz even sacrificed one of his own children because he thought by doing so, a false god would give him his desires (2 Kings 16:3).

So, when the Assyrian threat comes, Ahaz's initial response is to simply pretend like it is not happening. His strategy is avoidance. After all, Judah does not share a border with Assyria directly, so he should have nothing to worry about.

But then, Israel and Syria start making plans to fight Assyria together. They invite King Ahaz of Judah to be a part of their alliance. Ahaz refuses because he doesn't want to inconvenience himself.

But, as we have already seen the King of Israel won't take "no" for an answer. The King of Israel and the King of Syria plan to bully the kingdom of Judah into doing what they want. So, they are going to attack Ahaz and prop up a puppet king in his place.

What will be Ahaz's response? Will he respond with the courage and wisdom of his ancestors? No, as verse 2 of our text says, *"When the house of David was told, 'Syria is in league with Ephraim,' the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" (Isa 7:2).*

And it is at this point that Isaiah, the prophet, enters the story. God sends Isaiah to speak on his behalf. Isaiah and his son find King Ahaz checking the water supply to the city. The king is preparing for a siege and making defenses. Isaiah tells Ahaz, *"And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah'" (Isa 7:4).* He tells him a few short verses later, *"If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all" (Isa 7:9b).*

Isaiah is essentially saying to King Ahaz, "Remember who you are! You are a Son of David! These guys are thugs and criminals! Despite your sin, despite your unworthiness, my plan is to help and defend you. Place your faith – place your trust – in me!"

Then, God does something rather extraordinary. He says that he will confirm his word through a miraculous sign. He actually invites Ahaz to choose a miracle: *"Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: 'Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven'" (Isa 7:10-11).*

But instead of responding with faith, Ahaz responds with false piety. He says, “No, no, I would never want to put God to the test.” God commands him to ask for a sign so that God could demonstrate his faithfulness to Ahaz. But Ahaz disobeys. He does not want to risk putting his faith in God.

Instead, he places his faith in none other than Tiglath-Pileser III, the wicked and brutal king of Assyria. We learn from the book of Kings, “*So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me*” (2 Kings 16:7).

Ahaz gets what he wants. He chooses the easy way out; the way of convenience. The kingdoms of Israel and Syria are destroyed. But in doing so, he subjects his kingdom to tyranny. Instead of strengthening Judah, Assyria will afflict it with pain (2 Chr 28:20).

When King Ahaz looks at the chaos of his world, the most powerful force he can see is the King of Assyria. But Isaiah has seen something more. He has seen the glory of the Lord, high and lifted up, enthroned over all creation (Isa 6:1).

We, too, have the same temptation as Ahaz. We try to find an easy answer, an easy escape. But when we look to salvation in things or people outside of God, those things enslave us! We, too, need eyes like Isaiah that are trained to see the transcendent.

Ahaz fails his people. But that will not mean that God will fail his people. And it is in this precise context that one of the most famous lines of prophecy in the Bible is uttered, “*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*” (Isa 7:14).

This, of course, brings us to the last King we see in our text.

3. The King of Kings

Now, the Isaiah 7:14 Immanuel prophecy is a subject of a lot of debate among Old Testament scholars. The question regards who the immediate fulfillment of the prophecy refers to. Some scholars think that it refers to a son that Isaiah will soon have (see Isa 8:1-4).⁴ Other scholars think this prophecy refers to Ahaz’s son, King Hezekiah, who will be destined to become the greatest king of Judah since the time of Solomon.⁵

But what all Christians agree on is that the ultimate fulfillment of Isa 7:14 pointed to something much, much more extraordinary. The name “Immanuel” is not just a random name. In the Hebrew language, it means “God with us.” In other words, there is no way the prophecy of Isa 7:14 could refer to any normal child.⁶

⁴ Ortlund 90.

⁵ John Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2015), 42.

⁶ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 212.

God's answer to all the swaggering bullies and self-interested bureaucrats is a baby, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born to a virgin. God's answer to all brokenness in this world is Jesus – God in human flesh! The answer to all the problems in the kingdom of man is not another version of the kingdom of man. The answer is the kingdom of God!

And Isaiah 9 gives us a glimpse of the king who will bring this kingdom.

What is this King like? He is like no king we have ever seen before. Isaiah 9:2 tells us he is like light shining out of darkness. Isaiah 9:3 he will bring more joy than when a farmer finally takes in the harvest of his long, treading labor. He will bring more rejoicing than when a hard-fought battle is finally won, and the spoil is divided.

Verses 4 and 5 say, *“For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.”* This is an allusion to the story of Gideon in the book of Judges, who was an unlikely hero that you would have never guessed would be the one to lead his people into victory and freedom from the oppression of a country named Midian (Jdgs 6-8). Isaiah is saying this King will also be a somewhat unlikely hero. He, too, will lead his people in victory. But unlike Gideon, this King will bring an end to all wars.

How will this king come, who will this King be? Verse 6 answers that question, *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”* (Isa 9:6).

This is who King Jesus is! He is the Wonderful Counselor, who alone possess perfect wisdom. He is the Mighty God, who fights the battles on our behalf that we could never win on our own! He is the Everlasting Father, who loves us and embraces us even at our unworthiest, as a good father embraces a child! He is the Prince of Peace, the one ruler who will bring about Shalom (שָׁלוֹם) – our peace, our perfection, our wholeness.

And Jesus will not just be a king for Judah. He will be a king for all nations! He will be a King who conquers not through conquest, but by dying on a cross and rising again. He will not just be a king who could rule. He will be the king who should rule. He will be powerful enough to bring forth perfect justice. But he will be good enough to bring forth perfect righteousness. His kingdom will come not by the will-power or good works of men, but rather *he* will be the author of our redemption. As verse 7 says, *“Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this”* (Isa 9:7),

Redeemer Christian Church, in our own age of angst and chaos, let us not be like Ahaz and the people of Judah. Let us not fix our eyes on the kings of this world. But with unveiled eyes, may we behold the King of all kings, and the Lord of all lords. And *“...let*

us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God' (Heb 12:1–2).

AMEN.

Prayer

That we would have eyes to see the true king above all
For schools
For students
For teachers
For administrators
For parents
For health
For our nation

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

1. This week's Scripture reading came from Isaiah 7:1-4, 10-14, and Isaiah 9:2-7. These readings are historically set in the period of history known as the Syro-Ephraimite War (736-732 B.C.). Read 2 Kings 16 and summarize in your own words the big events of this period of time.
2. When the Assyrian invasion comes, King Pekah of Israel does not seek refuge in the Lord. Instead, he makes a military alliance with a pagan nation in an effort to save himself. In what ways are we often tempted to idolize our own sense of control? In our own age of chaos, how might the Lord be challenging that tendency in you?
3. King Ahaz of Judah looks for security by seeking refuge in the King of Assyria, who, in Ahaz's eyes, is the most powerful force in the world. How does Ahaz's vision of the king of Assyria contrast with Isaiah's vision of the Lord in Isaiah 6:1? How are you tempted to find your safety in other things than God? In the midst of great challenges, why is it so important for the people of God to cultivate an awareness of God's almighty power?
4. Read Isaiah 9:2-7. What does this passage teach us about Jesus? What part of Isaiah 9 do you find most meaningful and life-giving in this season?

Bibliography

- Goldingay, John. *Isaiah for Everyone*. Old Testament for Everyone. Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2015.
- Motyer, J. Alec. *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 20. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999.
- Ortlund, Raymond C., Jr., and R. Kent Hughes. *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005.
- Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Christ of the Prophets*. Abridged Edition. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004, 2008.
- Smith, Gary V. Isaiah 1–39. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen. The New American Commentary. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007.
- VanGemenen, Willem A. *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.
- Van Pelt, Miles V. and J. Ligon Duncan, et. al. *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.