

The Book of ISAIAH – Chapters 1-39

Catholic Scripture Study

Memory Verse: Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman (virgin) shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

The Sign of Immanuel (7: 1-25)

I. THE CALL TO TRUST (7:1-9)

A. Historical Background

During the expansion of the Assyrian empire under Tiglath-pileser III in 745 B.C., first the Northern Kingdom of Israel and then Judah lay directly in the path of that expansion.

As Judah saw the increasing pressure on Israel to the north she was called to make a difficult strategic decision on how to avoid invasion by Assyria?

Should she befriend Assyria or join a coalition against her?

By the time Ahaz ascends the throne of Judah in 735 BC a new pro-Assyrian foreign policy was adopted.

This explains why Pekah king of Northern Israel and Rezin king of Syria tried to attack Judah. Syria and Israel wanted to defend themselves against Assyria instead of surrender, whereas Judah wanted to join with Assyria.

- Ahaz was terrified by the threat posed by Syria and Northern Israel.

Isaiah chapter 7 begins with an historical reference to Syria and Northern Israel trying to conquer Judah to increase its coalition; but this failed.

God is the one who sends Syria and Israel against Judah.

Ahaz was 20 years old when he became king of Judah. He is therefore young and inexperienced and faced with a serious threat.

The next two chapters contain a sequence of signs based on the names of three children (sons of Isaiah): **Shear-jash-ub** (7:3), **Immanuel** (7:14; 8:8) and **Maher-shalal-hash-baz** (8:3).

Read: Isaiah 7:1-9

[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 they could not conquer it.

[2] When the house of David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," his heart and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

[3] And the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go forth to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jash-ub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field,

[4] and say to him, `Take heed, 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.

[5] Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying,

[6] "Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabe-el as king in the midst of it,"

[7] thus says the Lord GOD: It shall not stand,

and it shall not come to pass.

***[8] For the head of Syria is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.***

***(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken to pieces so
that it will no longer be 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,
surely you shall not be established."***

B. Ahaz the Fearful

The events described above (7:1) took place in 733 BC, during the siege of Jerusalem by Syria and Ephraim (the Northern Kingdom of Israel). The war with Syria and the northern kingdom against Judah became known as the Syro-Ephraimite War.

Note: Isaiah often referred to the northern kingdom of Israel by the name of Ephraim, the most important tribe of the northern kingdom.

Syria and Israel hoped to replace the obstinate king Ahaz with a puppet king, the son of ***Tab'e'l***.

Verse two describes the terror of the citizens of Jerusalem, including the king, in terms of trees shaking in the wind.

The term ***house of David*** simply means the king (e.g. the Whitehouse = the president of the U.S.A.), and highlights the fact that the underlying theme of these chapters is the survival of the Davidic dynasty, from which was to come a savior (9:6-7; 11:1-5).

C. Trust in God

God sends Isaiah and his son ***Shear-jash-ub*** (meaning “a remnant will return”) to meet Ahaz by the upper pool where he stands quaking and trembling. Ahaz was probably inspecting the water supply to prepare for a siege.

Isaiah's message from the Lord is that Ahaz has nothing to fear (**take heed, be quiet, do not fear**). The message informs Ahaz of the plans to put the son of **Tab'e'l** (the name means "good for nothing") on the throne of Judah as a puppet king.

The Lord tells Ahaz through Isaiah that these two countries (Syria and Northern Israel) will not survive. Why? Because their rulers are human kings, **Rezin** and **Pekah** (the son of **Remaliah**), whereas the true king of Judah is God.

- Ahaz should have had complete faith (trust) in the power of God alone. Faith in God removes fear of heart. When God says, "Fear not," there is nothing to fear.
- Faith involves calmness and serenity in the face of adversity.
- When one trusts in the Lord there is no need to fear what man will do.

Faced with the threats of Syria and Northern Israel, Ahaz had the opportunity to trust God for deliverance.

- Instead he trusted Assyria, his worst enemy.
- The result, as Isaiah predicted, was that Assyria herself overran the land.

II. THE SIGN OF IMMANUEL (7:10-17)

A. Overview

Even though Ahaz did not listen, the Lord graciously offers him a sign to encourage his faith and trust in God rather than in Assyria.

In this passage the prophet puts Ahaz to the test. Although he invites Ahaz to test God, it is really the king himself who is being tested.

Will Ahaz trust in God, or Assyria, to protect him from attack by Syria and Ephraim (Israel)?

Read: Isaiah 7:10-17

[10] Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz,

[11] "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

[12] But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test."

[13] And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?"

[14] Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

[15] He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

[16] For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

[17] The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah -- the king of Assyria."

B. Ask for a Sign (7:10-11)

"Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz." The first sign (through Shear-jash-ub) had had no effect. So the Lord invites Ahaz to "ask for a sign," implying "if you don't believe me, then ask me to prove it."

- How does the Lord, a Spirit, speak to Ahaz?

He speaks through the mouth of His prophet. The words of God and that of His prophets are **equated**.

Ahaz is now challenged to give God a chance to prove his trustworthiness. Although our faith is not to be in the signs, nevertheless God has, throughout the ages, given his people evidence (signs) by which their faith might be strengthened.

God puts no limit or conditions on the sign: ***let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.*** Ahaz could even ask for a miracle if he wished. (In the Bible signs may be miraculous or they may simply have a symbolic meaning).

C. The Response of Ahaz (7:12)

The response of Ahaz seems pious. ***"I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test."*** Of course, the real reason for his response is that he has made up his mind to trust in Assyria.

- He doesn't want to hear what God has to say through Isaiah.

His rejection of the advice of God's prophet is equivalent to blasphemy, treating God in the same high-handed manner as he treats his subjects.

What God requires of Ahaz is very plain. Ahaz knows precisely what he is required to do. God's word was given to him, and he rejects it.

- Knowing clearly the will of God, he refuses to obey that will.
This is a tragedy!

Ahaz takes silver and gold from the temple and palace to offer tribute to Tiglath-pileser, the Assyrian king, and becomes a vassal state. Ahaz tells this king, "I am your servant and your son" (2 Kings 16:7) and asks the king of Assyria to save him.

But whether Ahaz likes it or not, he is going to be given something spectacular by way of a sign.

D. The Immanuel Prophecy (7:14)

God says that He will give Ahaz a sign. **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”** (Is. 7:14).

Believe it or not, this prophecy, in the original **Old Testament** context, raises a lot of questions.

In the Jewish and Christian tradition, attention has focused on the event – not on a special name (Immanuel) but on the birth of a special child.

In view of this we have to ask:

- Who is this child?
- Who is his mother?
- Was he born in Isaiah's time?, and,
- If he's a special child, what do verses 15-16 mean.

One traditional Jewish explanation it is that the child is Hezekiah, and that his conception and birth miraculously foretold by the prophet in the days of king Ahaz, heralds the dawn of a new age of hope for beleaguered Jerusalem.

“Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son . . .”

The word *“almah”* in Hebrew can be translated either as “young woman” or “virgin.” The Hebrew word for virgin (*betulah*) is not used in the text; however, the word *almah* is never employed of a married woman.

Christian tradition, also influenced by the build-up in the preceding verses and the parallels in chapters 9 and 11, identified the Child with Jesus, another “son of David,” and the young woman with Mary his mother.

“When the Gospel of Matthew quotes this verse from the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) to describe the Virgin Mary (Matt 1:23), the more precise Greek word *parthenos* is chosen, which means virgin.

“In the Isaian context the son would probably be a son of Ahaz. The name *Immanuel* meaning “God with us” only occurs here in the Old Testament and expresses trust in the presence of God.”

Verses 15-16: “Before this child reaches maturity, Syria and Israel will be destroyed. Ahaz’ decision not to trust in God but rather in a political solution with a human king will lead to the destruction of his household and Judah” (*Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah, pg19*).

The age of maturity (or of accountability) of the child, who is to be conceived shortly, is considered to be around twelve years. At this age he ***knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.***

E. Catechism o the Catholic Church

“The catechism indicates that there is a literal sense and also a spiritual sense of scripture (CCC 115-117). Many Bible passages have an immediate interpretation (fulfillment) and a deeper spiritual significance that is fulfilled later.

“So, in the literal sense, a young woman would bear a son in Isaiah’s time, perhaps a son of Ahaz” (there is disagreement among scholars on this point).

“But at a later time that neither Isaiah nor Ahaz could have imagined, God would bring forth a greater fulfillment of this prophecy when a virgin would conceive and bear a Child, who would actually be the God-man with us, the King of Kings who would redeem the world” (*Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah*).

III. THE RAZOR OF ASSYRIA (7:18-25)

A. Overview

The end of Isaiah 7 describes the destruction of Judah and the eventual siege of Jerusalem that will take place as threatened in verse 17.

The formula **“in that day”** introduces four graphic descriptions or images of how things will be when the king of Assyria invades Judah.

The Judeans will be disgraced in defeat. The countryside will be so depopulated that there will be no one to eat the produce of the few remaining animals or to cultivate the once-fertile hills. The land will return to wilderness.

Sadly, had Ahaz been able to believe that God is indeed present with his people, it need not have been so. But because he trusted something less than God, that object of trust now becomes the instrument of the very devastation he dreaded.

Read: Isaiah 7:18-25

[18] In that day the LORD will whistle for the fly which is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee which is in the land of Assyria.

[19] And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thorn bushes, and on all the pastures.

[20] In that day the Lord will shave with a razor which is hired beyond the River -- with the king of Assyria -- the head and the hair of the feet, and it will sweep away the beard also.

[21] In that day a man will keep alive a young cow and two sheep;

[22] and because of the abundance of milk which they give, he will eat curds; for every one that is left in the land will eat curds and honey.

[23] In that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns.

[24] With bow and arrows men will come there, for all the land will be briers and thorns;

[25] and as for all the hills which used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not come there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread.

B. Swarms of Insects (7:18-19)

In the first image, the armies of the invaders (Egypt and Assyria), are compared to a plague of insects (flies and bees) summoned by a signal from God to swarm all over the land of Judah – similar to the plagues of the Exodus.

C. The Razor of Assyria (7: 20)

The second image represents God as using Assyria like a razor on wretched Judah, just as in 10:5 he uses Assyria as a stick to beat her.

The shaving of the body probably refers to the denuding of the land, stripping it totally bare of all vegetation. The shaving of the head may be a reference to the way in which captives were treated, but more probably it is the figurative expression of the disgrace which comes to a defeated nation.

- The figure here is one of complete humiliation: *all* the hair of the body is shorn off, even to that badge of respect, the beard. Humanly speaking Judah will have no honor left.

“hired beyond the River” is probably an ironic comment upon Ahaz’s alliance with Assyria. He had “hired” Assyria from beyond the River (the Euphrates) to attack his enemies. But that same razor, in God’s hands, would turn upon him shortly.

D. Complete Devastation (7:21-22)

Interpretations differ, but it will be a day of complete devastation and it will be a day in which one will keep or preserve alive his sheep, protecting them for the invaders. No longer will the land be agricultural, but rather pastoral.

The future is determined. The punishment will come. Only a few men remain in the land, and with respect to them there will be an abundance of making milk.

Because there is an abundance of milk men will eat the products of milk, namely, curds.

E. Devastation Continued (7:23-25)

In continuing to deal with the effects of the devastation, Isaiah now turns to its impact on the cultivated land. In fact he says it will revert to wilderness - to **“briers and thorns”** which are mentioned three times.

Even the finest vineyard, stocked with the most costly plants, will shortly become briers and thorns. The only thing it will be good for is hunting (v.4). Men will venture into this desolate land armed with arrows and bows both for hunting and to protect themselves from wild animals. It is a wilderness: **briers and thorns** again!

The mountains, the glory of Palestine, were inaccessible to the plow, but were dug up with the hoe. The hills are terraced and even they are places of cultivation. But into the hills, out of fear of the **briers and thorns**, men will not go.

Into these once carefully and tenderly cultivate places, mankind will not enter. Only cattle and sheep will trample destructively over this ground.

The last scene contains no glimmer of hope: even the cattle and sheep were hostile and destructive. There's no trace of peaceful grazing or rich dairy produce here as in verse 22.

IV. APPLICATION

A. The Long View and the Short View

These verses speak of the difference between the long view (God's) and the short view (ours).

The short view will always plunge us into fear and instability, just as it did Ahaz. Ahaz could only see the immediate danger and therefore thought he had to find a way out by entrusting himself to what was a much greater danger – Assyria.

If he had taken the time to listen to God's perspective on the matter, he would have known that the extreme measures he thought he had to take were in fact unnecessary.

Because he refused to do what Isaiah urged him to do, that is, trust God and look at the situation from God's perspective, he was ruled by fear and made a bad decision.

- Decisions made out of fear will almost always be bad ones.
- Decisions that grow out of calmness borne of explicit trust, however, can be thoughtful and reasoned.

B. Piety and Faith

Ahaz demonstrates a profound truth: piety is not the same as faith.

Piety is the appearance of religion while trust in God is the substance of religion. Ahaz does not have the substance and tries to cover this up with a veneer of appearance.

Jesus condemned the Pharisees for the same sin. They tithed and prayed and gave charity to the poor, but it was all a show. They were worshipping themselves being pious. True piety follows as a result of trusting in God.

There are certain behaviors that reflect a life given over completely to God. To say we trust God and yet refuse to obey his commands is a contradiction in terms.

True, it is possible to have genuine trust in God and lack certain evidences of piety, but it is not possible to have genuine piety while lacking genuine trust in God.

C. Decision-Making Time

To make good and godly decisions, especially in the important areas of our lives, we need to seek God's Word – something Ahaz did not do. We need to seek it:

- in the Scriptures,
- in the counsel of godly and mature leaders,
- in the nature of the circumstances, and
- in our own hearts.

What we must avoid at all costs is what Ahaz did, deciding what we want and then asking God if he could not please bless what we want.

- We need to come to him at the beginning of the process and ask his will with the most open mind possible.

When we have the confidence of his word on the subject, we can then go forward with a clear conscience, a courageous heart, and a confident step.

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Preparation for Week 8 The Assyrian Invader

1. Read Chapter 8 of Isaiah
2. Read Chapter 2 of ***Come and See*** *Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah*, and answer questions 13-20.