

Isaiah 7:10-14 *Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹"Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." ¹²But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test." ¹³Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Have you ever been in a situation where you wished God would just give you a sign that everything is going to be ok or that a decision you are making is the best decision and will work out just fine? Wouldn't that be great if God did that: gave you a sign-some sort of visual, outward display of his presence or blessing? God, if you just bring healing to my daughter, I'll know that you are here with us. God, if you will just make this work out, I'll trust you more and will be certain that you love me. God, if you'll just show me something to tell me this will all be fine, then I'll have no doubts about your love and care! Of course, the problem is that God has never promised that he would work this way. He has never promised to send us these visible, outward signs that he is with us and that things will be ok. Even when you ask and see something that appears to be what you asked for, we can't be sure that it came from God. Unless God tells us specifically, we can only speculate. What a fickle faith to put our trust in signs which may or may not be from God but give us no real certainty at all.

But we can be sure God is with us and confident that we will be ok and safe in his hands. We can be certain of his love for us and that his deliverance will come. More than signs, God has given us his promises. We have his Word and his promises which give us certainty that he will do everything that he said he would do. Even though God doesn't normally give signs to his people, this is exactly what God offers to you this morning—a visible, outward display of his love to give you certainty and confidence that he is with you and that he will rescue you eternally as he has promised. In his Word, God gives us everything we need to trust that he will save us. We don't need signs. **We have promises.**

Let's set the background for this prophecy. It was the beginning years of Ahaz's reign. Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus had been waging a vigorous military campaign against Judah and God had granted them major victories. Rezin had carried off many of Judah's citizens to Damascus as hostages. Pekah had attacked from the north and in a single day killed 120,000 soldiers of Judah. Because the Philistines had attacked from the west and the Edomites were attacking from the south, Ahaz had no choice but to order what was left of his army to flee behind the walls of Jerusalem. The situation was desperate. The armies of Rezin and Pekah were advancing on Jerusalem to begin the siege. Not only was the throne of Ahaz at stake, but also the nation of Judah. From an earthly standpoint, their demise looked imminent. Physically, there was not much that Ahaz and his army was going to do to stop the enemies from destroying them. All they could hope for was to hold them off as long as possible.

Just prior to our text, God had spoken through the prophet Isaiah to assure Ahaz that even at this time of crisis there was sure help for him and his people with the Lord, if only they would turn to him. God told Ahaz that the evil plan of Rezin and Pekah would fail. Though they were threatening Judah, they were powerless against the Lord. All they needed to do was turn to the Lord. God in his patience was leading Ahaz and the entire house of David to trust in him for deliverance. This is where our text picks up the account. To lead Ahaz to trust fully in God's deliverance, he offered to Ahaz a special sign. God acted outside of his norm. He gave Ahaz the chance to pick any sign he wanted that would give him proof that the Lord was with him. He could have asked for anything "*whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.*" He could have asked that right at that moment there be a huge earthquake to assure him of God's intentions. He could have asked that the earth suddenly open up in front of him. He could have asked to see at that moment a huge bolt of lightning in the sky. He could have asked that heaven itself would have been torn open and that he would see into God's heavenly throne room. He could have asked for the most spectacular sign he could think of and God would have done it to assure Ahaz he didn't need to be afraid. God would be with him and save his people.

We think, "Wow! How awesome that would have been!" What would you have asked for? What would be a sign from God big enough to convince you God is with you and will save and rescue you? What an opportunity for assurance for Ahaz. What did he ask for? Nothing. With the almighty God offering to give to him what he seldom gives to anyone else, how did Ahaz respond? With complete unbelief. Oh, what he said sounded pretty pious and humble. He claimed that he didn't want to put God to the test by asking for a sign. Putting God to the test would sound something like this: God, I'm not going to believe you unless you do this for me. Putting God to the test is trying to dictate the terms to God. A person tempts God when in unbelief, without any divine promise, he demands God perform some specific miracle. That's not what happened here. God in his grace was making a tremendous offer to Ahaz. His response simply showed the wickedness of his heart. He couldn't get himself to lean on God and trust in his promise to save him. His answer was only miserable hypocrisy. Ahaz was one of the most godless of Judah's kings. As if he, a rebellious idol-worshiper that he was, was at all concerned about committing one sin more or less. As if accepting God's promise in faith is tantamount to tempting God! The real reason for his refusal was his persistent unbelief. He refused to believe that God would be a reliable defense against Judah's enemies. He had sought out relief on his own, making a treaty with the mighty Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser. He was not minded to commit himself to such an unreliable God and to break the treaty he had already negotiated with Assyria.

Yet, God would not be refused by this wicked king. What was originally intended to be an act of grace became an act of judgment. God was resolved to give to the house of David precisely that which it did not want: tangible proof of the supernatural power of the Lord. Only this sign wasn't just for them. It was for all of Israel, for all people, and for you and me today. We have the opportunity to see God's faithfulness as well as his power and desire to save his people as we see him fulfill in Jesus the sign he gave to Ahaz. God did exactly what he said: a virgin would give birth to a son and be called Immanuel. This is what we are preparing to celebrate in Christmas: God not only intended to save his people, he actually followed through on that plan by sending Jesus into the world. This sign, fulfilled in Jesus, is proof that God would keep his promise to save his people!

So, if God gave Ahaz a choice to any sign as proof of his desire to save people, why would God have chosen the one that he did: A virgin giving birth to a son? I think there are some important reasons we can point to. First of all, this was a unique sign that was way outside the normal way of doing things. That means the fulfillment of this sign would be obvious! Outside of artificial means, there is only one virgin in all of history who gave birth to a son—Mary. That means her son is Immanuel—God with us. It leaves us with no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth born of the virgin Mary is indeed the Savior God promised and sent for our salvation. God was indeed intent on saving his people—first and foremost from their sin. So God sent into the world the exact Savior we needed to carry out this work—his own Son, who is God with us on this earth. As God, Jesus could go forward to live perfectly under the law and offer the perfect sacrifice which would fully satisfy God's need for justice for our sin. Therefore, we can have the confidence and certainty that this Jesus whose birth we are about to celebrate is indeed the Messiah God sent to save us! This is what makes Christmas a celebration of God's love. He gave to you and to me the greatest gift of all—a Savior from our sins.

This sign of a virgin giving birth to a son also speaks to God's power to help us in all things. God has the power to work outside the normal way of doing things to help us as we face the problems of this life. In other words, he not only cares about the spiritual problems we face, he is right there with us to help us face any problem that comes our way in life. We don't need to search for help in other areas. We can simply rely on our God for his help and guidance regardless of what obstacles come our way certain that he will provide his deliverance.

The temptation for us is to follow the lead of Ahaz and bypass the promises of God and rely on ourselves to find our own solutions to problems. When we are confronted with a seemingly impossible and insurmountable problem, we focus on ourselves, on what we can do, our skill, our ingenuity, our talents or our financial resources. God's promises become secondary. Maybe as an afterthought we say, "Oh yeah, those things came from God and we should be thankful. But you know God helps those who help themselves." We dress up a self-centered heart with outwardly pious words. We think we have all the solutions to our problems. We don't take the time for Bible reading or private worship. We don't have the patience or the time to wait for God's solution. If not this, we might find ourselves tempting God and asking for a sign. We fall into the earthly trap of needing to see something tangible or visible before we'll put our full trust in God's deliverance. We don't like to think of the reality that it is pure unbelief to say to God: "I'm not going to believe unless you do this for me." That is tempting God. We defy God by refusing to fully trust him unless God does things our way. Friends, these actions put us in the same boat as wicked Ahaz. Whether it is looking to ourselves and outright refusing God's help or trying his patience or wicked unbelief, God promises the same punishment for people who live this way: His eternal punishment of hell.

God has given you all the signs that you need. With this sign given to Ahaz and fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, God has given us all that we need to trust him. He sent his Son, born of a woman, who was more than a little child, he was and is Immanuel God with us. This is the miracle we celebrate at Christmas. We celebrate God's love in setting aside the full use of his divine power and glory and coming to this earth to rescue us from our sin. God was with us on this earth to live perfectly in our place. It was that perfect God who gave his life on Calvary's cross to make a payment for our sin. That God has made some wonderful promises to us. He promised that our sins are forgiven. He promised that all who believe in him will live with him eternally in heaven. He promised that he would be with us always until the very end of time. Here's our comfort: Jesus was not only Immanuel when he was born of Mary...he still is. He is still with us. Throughout the Bible we hear of this. Psalm 23 says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." The refrain of Psalm 46 is "The mighty Lord is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress." When you are afraid, whether it is because of a storm or because of disease or whatever it might be, the most comforting thing you can hear is: God is with you. Jesus is with us here today. He promised, "Wherever two or three gather together in my name, there I am with them." He comes to us through Holy Communion and says, "This is my body and this is my blood." The message of Christmas is that God came to be with us in a special way. That baby in the manger means you don't have to do anything alone. The one who came into this world promised, "I will be with you always to the very end of the age."

Here's the main point: With this sign to Ahaz, God has given us all that we need to be sure and certain of his deliverance—spiritually from our sin and physically from whatever problems might come our way. We don't need any more signs. We have God's promises. We see the evidence of God's love for us on the pages of Scripture and can trust God's promise of love no matter what we face. With simple faith, we stand firmly on these promises of God. We don't need signs. **We have promises.** Amen.