

Immanuel, God with Us (Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:1-17; 9:6-7)



A. The Promise of Immanuel (Isa 7, Background 2 Chr 28)

1. Immanuel is not a light-hearted holiday greeting or well wish for the new year, but a prophetic message of both hope and warning to God's people caught in intense military conflict. Around 734BC, Israel was torn by the ongoing civil war ever since the nation split into two - Israel (Ephraim) with Samaria as its capital in the north and Judah with Jerusalem in the south. Around that time young Ahaz became king in Judah, but just one year into his rule, Rezin the king of Syria, and Pekah king of Israel formed a coalition and attacked Judah. Judah suffered a heavy loss - 120,000 killed and 200,000 carried away as captives. (Prophet Obed rebuked Israel and the captives were returned to Judah.) And now they were preparing a second military campaign against Judah (2 Kgs 15:37). A fresh army from Syria was gathering in Samaria! And Ahaz freaked out, *'We are all dead! Why was I born in the king's line?'* How would you respond? Fear and terror are keywords in Isa 7-8, but the fear of God cures all other fears! (Isa 8:12-15)
2. But God had good news for Ahaz the new king. Prophet Isaiah was to take his first son, *Shear-Jashub (A remnant will return)* to the end of the aqueduct in Fuller's field to meet Ahaz, who was worried sick about securing water under siege. Isaiah prophesied to Ahaz: (i) Take heed and be quiet (v3) – listen carefully and stay calm, and don't panic; (ii) Do not fear or be fainthearted (v3) – if our heart is full of fear, we cannot believe in God's report; (iii) Though the enemy armies seem fearsome, these nations are nothing more than cigarette butts about to be snuffed out. They will be cut off by Assyrians (v3-5); (iv) Within 65 years these kingdoms will be broken, and the Ephraim will be no more (7:8).

This was God's perspective! How would you feel if you were in Ahaz's shoes? There were two forecasts for the future. Man's forecast and God's forecast. Would you believe the word of the Lord through Isaiah? What actually happened later on? (i) 2 years later, Damascus (Syria) fell (732BC); (ii) 12 years later Samaria fell (722BC); (iii) 63 years later king Esarhaddon's aggressive immigration policy made Israel's return and resettlement impossible (671BC). (C.f. 2 Kgs 17:24; 2 Chr 33:11; Ezr 4:2, 10)

3. Warning: 'If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established!' (v9) – God will always have the remnant of His people, but it is the personal faith and trust in God that will save you in the day of calamity. In other words, 'You'll live by faith, or you won't live at all.' The 'you' here is plural. Isaiah was addressing all the members of the house of David and perhaps the whole nation (v 9). God was promising salvation if Ahaz would exercise personal faith to believe God's word, or he would be replaced! God gave Ahaz a very unique offer – he was to ask God for a sign to strengthen his weak faith. Nothing was too difficult for God! (v11) But Ahaz refused, *'I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD.'* (v12) He sounded pious, but the real reason was behind the refusal was - Ahaz already had plans. He was going to rely on the political alliance with Assyria to help him deal with Ephraim and Syria. It was like a mouse sending for the cat to rescue him from two rats!
4. God gave His own sign: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel' (Isa 7:14) 'God is with us!' Where is the emphasis? It is on 'US'. Ahaz didn't believe in God's word. In v11, Isaiah refers to Yahweh as 'your (Ahaz's) God', but after King Ahaz rejects God's word, Isaiah refers to Yahweh as 'my (Isaiah's) God'. God decided to withhold His support for Ahaz but raise up His own King from David's line who would be faithful to Him. God gives a major messianic prophecy through this event. Isaiah goes on to speak of 'Immanuel' twice more (8:8,10). It means judgment to Ahaz and blessing to those who receive God's word by faith, *i.e. bind up the testimonies of hope in God who hides His face from the house of Jacob! (8:16-17).* Assyrians were meant to destroy Judah's enemies, *i.e. Samaria and Syria,* but now they will harm Judah also! 'Curds and honey' are cheap during the invasion and economic depression. Ahaz became a wicked king, burning children to Molech and practicing witchcraft and necromancy.

The king of Assyria would shave off their beard and hair to humiliate them and the briars and thorns will overtake their farming land. But God's promise to His faithful people who trusted in Him was - 'the remnant shall return' and 'God is with us – always!' These believers and their children would become signs and wonders during the time of famine! (8:18)

B. The Double Fulfillment of 'Immanuel' Prophecy (Matt 1:23)

1. Immediate fulfillment – The Hebrew word for 'alma' can be either a virgin or a young woman of marriageable age. A child would be born in Ahaz's days. The child's mother would name him 'Immanuel'. We are not told this child's identity. Perhaps he was one of the Ahaz's concubine's sons. (So, the child's mother names him?) Or maybe it was Isaiah's second son (8:1) - *Shalal-Hash-Baz* (speedy spoil, hasten the booty). Before this child reaches the age of moral responsibility, Damascus and Syria would be gone. It was fulfilled exactly. Two years later, Damascus fell, and twelve years later Samaria fell.
2. Ultimate fulfillment – The Septuagint translates 'alma' as a 'virgin'. The initial fulfillment had already happened, but the ultimate fulfillment was yet to come - not in the child's name but his very nature (Matt 1:23). 740 years later around 4BC, just as Isaiah's first son's prophetic name predicted, the remnant had returned to Judah. However, they were now under Roman occupation. The big question was, 'Is God still with us?' There was no government of Judah. No Davidic king, but the illegitimate Edomite king Herod in power. There were 400 years of silence from God since Malachi. Did God abandon Judah? Will God ever speak to us again?

Into this hopelessness, God spoke His most powerful prophetic word! His last Word to the human race! (Heb 1:2). God Himself stepped into the sinful world to dwell with us forever through the faith of Mary. *'All the fullness of God dwells in Jesus Christ in bodily form'* (Col 2:9). Ahaz didn't believe God's word, so he was not established. Mary believed, and she was established forever.

C. Unpacking Immanuel (Isa 9:6)

How can we have an unshakable hope and confidence, facing the challenging future?

1. 'a Child is born' – Jesus is fully human and was born through the natural birthing process.
2. 'a Son is given' – Jesus is the divine son given from above, the greatest gift, God's only Son.
3. 'the Government will be upon His shoulder' – The weight of the government to rule all realms will be placed upon Christ. This power will be entrusted to Christ alone, who is completely just and righteous.
4. 'Wonderful Counsellor' – Omniscient. It is the supernatural wisdom and direction to help us to make the right choices in our lives, e.g., education, family, investment, retirement, etc. One of the most difficult ministries is personal counseling. The world needs the best counsel on many challenging issues, someone whose advice is always absolutely right. Jesus never has to say, 'I am sorry I can't help you on these issues.' He has and is the answer to all our personal, national and global problems.
5. 'Mighty God' – Omnipotent. Inside this baby dwelt the fullness of God in bodily form. How can this be? He is God incarnate. God Almighty will be with us. What He calls us to do becomes possible through Him.
6. 'Everlasting Father' – Omnipresent. Added to His wisdom and power is His love. Some people do not have a good relationship with their father. We all need fathers who love us, discipline us, bless us, and are proud of us. But even if you have the best father, nobody can keep their fathers forever. But this Son will be the Father forever! This world needs a father who will remain the Everlasting Father to us all.

What a prophecy! Isaiah must have scratched his head. 'What did I just say? Mighty God will be born? A Son will be called the Everlasting Father?' Jesus said, 'I am in the Father and the Father is in Me. If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father.' He will never need to be replaced.

7. 'Prince of Peace' – The outcome of embracing Christ's lordship is peace, not a mere absence of conflict due to political power balance, but the absolute peace from complete justice and righteousness. 'Shalom' means harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, tranquillity, etc. Taking on Jesus' yoke is easy, and we will find rest for our soul.

Do you have peace in your relationship with God? Do you know God is with you and He is for you? If you believe God's ultimate sign - Jesus Christ God's only Son - then Immanuel is His promise of blessing for you.

Are you in a challenging situation like Ahaz? No matter how difficult the situation, Jesus is God's total provision and salvation for you. Call out to Him. And you will have His Immanuel presence, power and counsel.