

Our God Saves: Turn

When Nations Break

Isaiah 7-8:8

Mark Vroegop

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. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. 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!" (Isa. 7:10–17)

Like many of you, our family enjoyed some much-needed vacation time this summer. Our "go-to" summer vacation is camping in Northern Michigan. This year we decided to make a trip into the Upper Peninsula, and visit Pictured Rocks along the Lake Superior shoreline. The crystal-clean water, multi-colored cliffs, and massive rock formations were amazing.

But there was one particular place that amazed me. The rock formation is called Chapel Rock because it features a little room that would make a great chapel. On the top of Chapel Rock is a large pine tree. From a distance, the tree is stunning, but it appears to be simply another tree protruding from the forest.

A closer look changes that perspective. Chapel Rock used to be a rock formation connected to the rest of the rocky cliffs. But over time the connecting bridge eroded and collapsed, making Chapel Rock completely isolated and cut off. As you approach the formation, it's surprising that a massive pine tree could grow in that location because it's literally planted on top of impenetrable rock.

When you follow a hiking path near Chapel Rock, the mystery is solved. Protruding from the Chapel Rock pine tree and bridging the gap are two massive roots. They are nearly as thick as the tree trunk. Apparently, those roots were formed when the rock formations were connected. After the bridge collapsed the roots remained, and they've continued to provide nourishment and life to the pine tree. The image was incredibly memorable as I found myself thinking: the right roots hold through a crisis.

I think that's a helpful metaphor for what it means to be a Christian and for where we are in the book of Isaiah. We need doctrinal and behavioral roots that run deep, especially when things around us collapse.

Whether that collapse is personal, relational, physical, institutional, or cultural those roots are really important when things start to break.

We took a four-week break in July from our study of Isaiah to look at Psalm 23. I'm incredibly grateful to Evan, Bob, Nate, and Jeff for their helpful and encouraging teaching. I heard from many of you how much the Lord used this short series to give you fresh insight into this beloved psalm. Today we start back into our journey.

I'm sure that we could use a quick reminder of where we are in this book. The title for our series is "Our God Saves." In part one, we're seeing how Isaiah is calling the people of God to turn from their idolatry, hypocrisy, disobedience, and lack of trust in God. The divided nations of Judah and Israel faced big problems, and Isaiah points them to a big God. That's an important theme in this book: big problems require a big God.

Today we are in the seventh and eighth chapters. In chapter six we learned about Isaiah's vision and call to ministry. While in the temple, he received a vision of God's holiness (6:3) and a calling to a difficult ministry (6:8-10). A number of years transpire between chapters six and seven.

It's a moment of crisis and tension. The nation of Judah is reaching a breaking point, and it presents a spiritual opportunity. Is the root system of belief deep enough to hold? Which way will the people of God go? What lessons will they draw upon?

I'd like to suggest to you that crisis presents a spiritual opportunity. When life is tense, when things are challenging, when we're tempted to fear, there are spiritual opportunities before us. Let me highlight four spiritual opportunities from Isaiah 7-8:10.

1. Opportunity for Familiar Fear

The world in which we live can often be a scary place to live. Uncertainties, dangers, threats, and insecurities are a regular part of our experience. In the Old Testament, the people of God regularly faced situations that created the potential for fear.

At the end of verse two, we see the following description: ". . .and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" (Isa. 7:2b). It's a description that I'm sure you can relate to. On one level, it captures the physiological response when something scares us. Perhaps you tremble or feel so much internal conflict that you pace back and forth. Maybe when you were a child, you shook your hands violently because you were afraid.

The Hebrew word can mean to tremble but also to sway back and forth, to stagger, and even to wander. When you apply it to the heart, it seems that the idea is to bounce back and forth between a variety of thoughts: "It's going to be okay. No, it's not. This is going to work out. No, it's going to be awful."

That is what is happening in the seventh chapter. But why?

Well, verses 1-2 briefly reference a national crisis. Do your best to locate yourself in the text. Imagine what it would have been like for you to live during this time period.

At this time, Judah is being ruled by Ahaz. He's the grandson of King Uzziah, and he came to power at age twenty. Unlike his father and grandfather, Ahaz was a wicked king (see 2 Kings 16). The events listed related to what historians call the Syro-Ephraimite war that took place around 732 B.C. Assyria was the major national superpower. The two nations to the north of Judah, Syria, and Israel, began to apply pressure to form an alliance against Assyria. When Ahaz didn't balk, they attacked.

2 Chronicles 28 tells us that Judah paid dearly. 120,000 soldiers were killed, including the king's son, the commander of the palace, and the second in command (2 Chron. 29:7). Additionally, 200,000 people ("relatives, women, sons, and daughters) were taken captive along with their goods. Additionally, the southern border was being threatened. The Philistines in the southwest and Edomites in the southeast made successful invasions as well (2 Chr. 28:17-18).

The city of Jerusalem had not fallen, but it was an extremely challenging time. Isaiah 7 says that the leaders of Syria and Israel were preparing an attack on Jerusalem. Imagine the pressure Ahaz was under. Consider how much stress and concern Ahaz was experiencing.

Isaiah sets this scene for a reason. It's in this context that there are important lessons and choices for Ahaz and the nation to make. And it's interesting to me how frequently God's people face really challenging choices. So much of the Old Testament is written in crisis. And think of the New Testament. Most of the epistles are addressing some kind of deeply concerning issue, including frightening persecution.

Why do I raise this? Not only for the purpose of setting the context, but also because I think that many Christians are not only fearful, but they think the experience of fearful circumstances should be very, very rare. They emotionally respond not only with fear but with anger, frustration, and bitterness. Some Christians seem to think that they should have a life that never battles fear. For them, I think the command "fear not" means "don't ever experience fear."

Remember Jesus's words to his disciples? In John 16:33 he said, "*In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*" Part of Jesus' strategy and one of the ways the Bible helps us is helping us to see our trials and our emotional struggles with trials as fairly normal in the Christian life. First Peter 4:12 tells us to not be surprised by the trials that come.

I know that in our own culture there are many things that are scary and confusing. Some of you are finding it increasingly difficult to navigate cultural issues at work. Others are deeply concerned about the direction of the country or the direction of evangelicalism. Some of you are fearful about what kind of world your grandchildren will live in or what happens if a particular political leader or movement gains traction. Others are fearful about the state of relationships, family members, or health concerns.

I'm denigrating these concerns. On the contrary, I'm saying that we ought to expect the Christian life to be difficult and scary. We should see moments of crisis as opportunities to live through our fear. For the Christian, fear is familiar but not fatal.

2. Opportunity for Thoughtful Reflection

When crisis looms, there's an opportunity to consider the moment, who you are, and who God is. If we can "get over" the presence of fear, it's an opportunity for our faith to be applied. Sadly, however, we often fail the test because we don't realize the opportunity to live out what we believe in the crisis.

In Isaiah 7:3, the prophet is sent along with his son ("a remnant with return") to meet Ahaz at the end of the water conduit. Commentators suggest that Ahaz was supervising the protection of the water source for the city of Jerusalem in light of a coming invasion or siege. Isaiah delivers a message from the Lord.

Take note of that there are four phrases. Commentator Gary Smith suggests that this level of exhortation means that Ahaz needed a lot of encouragement.¹ As the king makes preparation and as he considers appealing to Assyria for protection, Isaiah tells him the following:

- "Be careful" – the idea is for Ahaz to be aware and watchful of the moment
- "be quiet" – the king needed to calm his heart, rest in God, and be at peace
- "do not fear" – he should not give the people or the situation more emotional power than they deserve
- "don't let your heart be faint"- embracing timidity and allowing discouragement to seep into his life.

It's interesting and instructive that while the king is busy making preparations for a potential siege that this message is delivered. The king appears to be busy. He's making the city secure. He's working the political system. Envoys were likely dispatched to Assyria. Ahaz must feel an enormous amount of pressure. And Isaiah invites him to think in spiritual categories.

In fact, in verse 9, Isaiah warns him: "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all." The NIV says, "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." With the looming pressure of an attack, Ahaz receives this exhortation from Isaiah. Not only does God know what they are saying (v. 6), but he provides a prophetic promise to Ahaz that the plans of Syria and Israel will not come to pass. He's invited to consider God's perspective on the moment. Ahaz is terrified of the kings of Israel and Syria, but God sees them as smoldering stumps of firebrands.

This is an important moment in the king's life—one that I'm sure you can relate to. It's a moment when we can give into momentary spiritual failure. Tod Bolsinger, in his book *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders are Formed in the Crucible of Change*, cites Moses as an example of two kinds of failures.²

¹ Gary V. Smith, [Isaiah 1–39](#), ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 208.

² Tod Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders are Formed in the Crucible of Change*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020), 29.

- **Failure of nerve** - “caving to the pressure of anxiety...a loss of courage the mission and return to Egypt...becoming so angry at God cynical about the very people we have been given to lead that soon we are demanding God relieve us of the burden, or, in Moses’ case, ‘put me to death.’”
- **Failure of heart** - “becoming so hardened and brittle that leading the change process is changing the leader for the worse. . .the very empathy and attunement necessary to help a group adjust to the loss and resist despair turns into cynicism”

You could also think of this as despair and disillusionment. Despair cries out, “This is impossible!” Disillusionment says, “This isn’t worth it.” They are the by-products of this kind of spiritual failure. And the problem is that often we don’t even take time to consider what is happening. We’re so busy trying to figure out what’s going on, what’s happening now, and what’s going to happen that we live as if God is dead! Or we act as if everything depends on us.

The world around us is breaking, and we’re not thoughtful, at peace, emotionally balanced, or spiritually encouraged. Instead, we find ourselves starting to wonder if God really is good and if he can be trusted. Or we find ourselves disillusioned, spiritually throwing in the towel.

Moses was there in Numbers 11. Elijah was there in 1 Kings 19. Perhaps you are there today. Are you busy and anxious? Do you find yourself fearful and angry? Do you feel agitated and easily annoyed? Are you spending too much time trying to figure out what’s going on and where’s it everything headed?

Be careful. Be quiet. Don’t fear. Don’t let your heart be faint.

Listen to me: Jesus already won! It’s just a matter of time until the devil overplays his hand.³ God has promised that he’s going to help us. The Lord is still our shepherd!

Crisis creates an opportunity for thoughtful reflection. Be careful. Be quiet. Don’t fear. Don’t be faint-hearted.

3. Opportunity for Spiritualized Excuses

What happens next in the text is truly remarkable. God meets Ahaz where in his crisis, and he seeks to encourage him. God aims to bolster the faith of Ahaz. In verse 10, Ahaz is given the opportunity to ask God for a sign – “as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven.”

Stop and think about this! God is fully aware of Ahaz’s lack of faith. He knows that Ahaz is full of unbelief and self-trust. Remember the situation with Moses in Exodus 4. He was worried the people wouldn’t believe him so God gives him the sign of a leprous hand and a staff that turned into a snake. Ahaz is in the same spot. He’s afraid. He’s under enormous pressure.

God says, “Ask me for a sign—a big one—and I’ll give it to you.” But Ahaz refuses! Gary Smith says,

³ I’m thankful for Ray Ortlund, who provided this insight to me.

“Ahaz’s rejection of God and what God might have to tell him is an indication of little faith in God. He is not really interested in trusting God, for he probably has already developed his own plan to put his trust in Assyria to deliver him from Syria and Israel.”⁴

But notice what Ahaz does! Rather than simply saying that he won’t trust God or ask for a sign, he makes it sound spiritual. He says, “I will not put the Lord to the test” (v. 12).

What a missed opportunity! God was ready to strengthen the heart of this king, but he refused. What’s more, he even made it appear like he was being obedient and even faithful. You know that we can do that, right? If you’ve been around “church-world” long enough, you can find convenient and spiritually-sounding ways to hide your lack of faith or obedience:

- “Let me pray about that.”
- “I feel peace about our decision.”
- “The Lord has called us to do this.”

In another situation, this would be the right thing to say. Jesus rebuked Satan with the same verse that Ahaz quotes. But we need to be careful because sometimes, especially in a crisis, we can spiritualize our excuses.

Isaiah is all done! In 7:13 he says that Ahaz is not only wearisome to people but also to God. His faithlessness reached a point of no return. Take note of the change of “your God” (v. 11) to “my God” (v. 13). The prophecy entails a future leader named “Immanuel” which means God with us. The solution to Ahaz’s unbelief is another leader whose reign will be connected to the presence of God.

But in the meantime, God is going to bring judgment (v. 17). The land will be overrun by foreign countries (v. 18). They will be humiliated (v. 20). The people will be impoverished (v. 21-22) and ruined (vv. 23-25).

The promise in Isaiah 7 is cited in Matthew 1:23 in reference to Jesus. The solution to a faithless world is the intervention of God through the true King named Jesus. He is rejected by the religious leaders and accused of blasphemy and crimes against the temple. The problem with humanity is so bad that we need divine intervention to rescue us from our sinful actions and our spiritual excuses.

Don’t miss the opportunity in a crisis to trust in the only one who can save you!

4. Opportunity for Humble Hope

Our text concludes in 8:1-10. Isaiah issues another message from God that before a small boy knows how to say “Father” and “Mother,” the northern threats (Syria/Damascus and Israel/Samaria) will be defeated by Assyria. Notice why.

⁴ Gary V. Smith, [*Isaiah 1–39*](#), ed. E. Ray Clendenen, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 212.

They refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently. This is referring to the rejection of God, and it's directed toward Israel. There's an opportunity to learn from the example of Israel. Israel was choosing an earthly alliance, military might, and political maneuvering over faithfulness to God. Judah was doing the same thing, and it was going to backfire. The Assyrian threat will not only decimate Israel but eventually, Judah would be threatened by Assyria as well.

And yet in the midst of this threatening time, there is hope. Verses 9-10 open the door on a theme that we'll explore more next week. There's an opportunity for God's people—even in the face of looming concerns—to put their hope in God.

Raise the war cry, you nations, and be shattered!
Listen, all you distant lands.
Prepare for battle, and be shattered!
Prepare for battle, and be shattered!
Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted;
propose your plan, but it will not stand,
for God is with us⁵

For God is with us! What an incredible truth that is, especially when you know the way that God demonstrated that to us through Jesus Christ. It means that when life is hard, confusing, and painful we know:

- There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1)
- All God's promises are "Yes" in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20)
- The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church (Matt. 16:17-19)
- Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:35-39)
- All authority belongs to Jesus and he is always with us (Matt. 28:20)

These are the theological taproots of our lives. And any and every crisis is simply another opportunity to see how true these promises really are. It's another opportunity to affirm: no matter what happens, God is with us.

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⁵ [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Is 8:9–10.