

The Triumph of Grace over Failure

(this title is adapted from Ortlund's commentary 'Isaiah')

2 Kings 16:1-9; Isaiah 7:1-17; Matthew 1:21-25

Leading up to Christmas we are going to take a break from Luke's Gospel, and instead, for these few weeks of Advent, we're going to run with the theme, 'Immanuel, God with us', because *the* great message of Christmas is the incarnation.

Now, for the benefit of the youth, if you don't know what incarnation means, I bet you do know what a vegetarian is. A vegetarian is someone who doesn't eat meat – they survive on Brussels sprouts and little bits of limp lettuce and boiled cabbage. Whereas a *carnivore* is someone who does eat meat. And the *incarnation* is the theological word for God, to put it crudely, taking on meat – taking on flesh and bones and being born as a real, breathing – in-flesh, incarnated - human being: Immanuel: God, with Us.

And the fact that God was born as a man, is the great truth that gives our lives meaning and purpose and hope. That the Son of God lived and died and rose again, that he was incarnated among us, is the great fact that changes everything. So we're going to look at some of the Old Testament scriptures that foretold that this was what God was going to do, hundreds of years before he did it, and see what we can learn from them.

And the first passage that we are going to read is probably the strangest, most unlikely Advent passage you have ever heard – with not a shepherd or a wise man, or an angel in sight.

2 Kings 16:1-9.

Now, what on earth has that got to do with Christmas and the incarnation? What have nations going to war, and kings, politicians, plotting their survival and scheming other's downfalls – what has that got to do with Advent and Christmas? Well, we could turn that around, and ask, what has Christmas got to do with our own crazy world? And the answer to both of those is, everything, but to get there we need some background.

Background

The year is 734BC. Israel's greatest King, King David – the King to whom God had promised 'I will make for you a great name... your throne shall be established forever' (2 Sam 7:9, 16), had been dead for about 250 years. His son Solomon had reigned in his place, but on Solomon's death, the Kingdom split in a civil war. The 10 northern tribes rebelled against the house of David, and became Israel – the northern kingdom, with their own king. And only two tribes in the south stayed loyal to the House of David and became the Kingdom of Judah.

And by the time we get to 734BC and this passage, the House of David's glory days were well past. The king reigning in Jerusalem was this 20-something called Ahaz. Whilst he was a direct descendent of David, that was about all he shared in common with his famous ancestor. The writer tells us in v2 that 'he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God as his father David had done.' In fact, far from it. He was a worshipper of idols, of foreign gods, even to the point of sacrificing his son as a burnt offering.

But Judah's woes didn't end with a bad king. There was a new super-power, Assyria, on the move, flexing her muscles. She was, as one commentator puts it, 'the new bully in town' (Ortlund). And the little nation states of Judah in the South and Israel and Syria in the north were no match for her. And so King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Syria joined forces in a mutual defense pact. And they wanted Judah to join them, in the hope that together they could resist Assyria. But King Ahaz of Judah didn't want to play that game, and so Israel and Syria invaded Judah, with the intention of toppling Ahaz and installing a puppet king in his place.

So now Ahaz, was trapped, facing two threats at the same time: the invading forces of Israel and Syria on the one hand, and the growing threat of Assyria on the other. And in response Ahaz decided to hold out against Israel and Syria and to make himself a vassal of Assyria. He takes the silver and gold from the temple of God and decides to use it to buy the protection of Assyria: v7, '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."'

Now you might be sat there thinking, that's all very interesting, Martin, but I thought this was supposed to be about Advent and Christmas, rather than the History of Warfare in the ancient near east. What has this got to do with Christmas and what has this got to do with me?

Well, not only was this the time of Ahaz, and Assyria, it was also the time of Isaiah the prophet. And it's through Isaiah that God brings Ahaz a message. As God so often does even in our own lives, God uses this crisis to get Ahaz's attention.

Isaiah 7:1-17

Ahaz – failure in place of faith

So with the invasion by Israel and Syria imminent, the Lord, tells Isaiah to go out and meet Ahaz at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's field. What is that? Is that the 8th century BC equivalent of Starbucks or something – go and have a café latte with Ahaz, Isaiah? No. The pool was one of Jerusalem's water reservoirs and the conduit was what got the water from the pool to the city. So, Ahaz is inspecting and securing the water supply to the city for the coming siege. And God tells Isaiah 'go and meet him there' and take your son Shear-jashub with you.

Now, if you've got kids I bet you thought long and hard about a name. You didn't just take a list of names and stick a pin in it. Well what do you think of the name Shear-jashub? That'd go down nicely in the playground! Well, Isaiah's first boy got off lightly, his younger brother was called Maher-shalal-hashbaz. But both those boys served as prophetic pictures for the nation. Shear-jashub means 'a remnant will return'. And when God tells Isaiah to go and see the king, whose heart is shaking 'as the trees of the forest shake before the wind' (Is 7:2) – who's

overcome with fear, trying desperately to secure the city before the enemy comes, God tells Isaiah to take his son with him, because through that boy God is saying to Ahaz, 'even if the worst happens, even if the nation did fall, and go into exile, I am in control.' God's purposes for his people and for the house and the line of David will prevail, a remnant will return.

And through Isaiah, God offers Ahaz a radical alternative to selling out to Assyria and buying her protection – 'Ahaz', God says, 'trust me'. V4: 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.' None of us likes to face these kinds of life crises, do we? For Ahaz it was international conflict and threat of invasion. For you it might be the growing economic uncertainty, or difficulties at work or in your relationships. But God uses this moment in history for Ahaz, and he will do the same for us, to try once more and get Ahaz's attention: to offer him true peace and security – in quietness, with out fear. And He says to Ahaz, you don't need to worry about these two invading kings. They are 'smouldering stumps' (IS 7:4), to quote one commentator they're like burnt out cigarette butts. They're a spent force. Don't fear them Ahaz, rather put your trust in me.

And in v9 Isaiah challenges, and warns, Ahaz, 'If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.' It's either trust or bust Ahaz. Live by faith or you won't live at all. Ahaz, God is the real super-power here: not Assyria, you don't need to sell out to her; and certainly not Israel and Syria. Stand firm in faith Ahaz and you will stand.

And that was the dilemma Ahaz faced. With circumstances pressing in against him, would he look to his own political ingenuity and pacts with foreign powers to save himself or would he trust God? That struggle is the same one we so often face: it's easy to trust when everything is going well, but what about when things start going belly up? Do we trust in God when it seems the odds are against us, and against him coming through for us? Can we rest in quietness and without fear trusting him with our careers, studies, finances when things aren't looking great, or do we think no, I need to take matters in to my own hands? This isn't about sitting there in glorious inactivity whilst your life crumbles, but it is about where we put our trust. Can I trust God to come through for me? Even when it feels like the enemy is encamped around me? Do I trust the gospel and its promises – that in everything, the good and the bad, God works it all for my good? Or, like Ahaz, are we tempted to put God on the backburner and go looking for other solutions?

You see, God wants Ahaz and us, to trust Him, and to lean upon Him. Because He knows He is the only ally on which we can stake our lives throughout our lives.

But Ahaz is wobbling and so God takes an extraordinary step. He wants to strengthen and fortify Ahaz's faith. He knows what this guy is like, He knows his sins, He knows all about his idolatry and his pagan practices. And yet to try and persuade Ahaz to finally put his trust in Him, God makes him this incredible, unconditional offer in v11: "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be as deep as Sheol and as high as heaven." Ask anything, God says, and I will do it to prove to

you that I am serious about protecting you, that I am serious about being faithful to my promises to do you, and the house of David and my people good. I will move heaven and hell to secure and to strengthen and to solidify your faith Ahaz.'

But Ahaz turns his back on it. He declines God's offer. He says, v12, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." Now what do you think of that? Is he being holy and obeying the bible – not to put the Lord your God to the test? No he's not being holy, he's being disobedient. God tells him to ask, and he doesn't want to do that, so he tries to make it sound religious and pious. But Ahaz's problem is that at root, he doesn't want to trust God, because he doesn't want to hand control over to God. He's already worked out in his own mind what he wants to do, and he doesn't want God coming and interfering and spoiling those plans. You see, to trust God as his super-power and hold onto God would acknowledge his own dependence on God. It would humble him, and Ahaz simply didn't want to go down that path. Instead he chose to look for protection to Assyria.

And there is the tragedy. You see the problem of idols – of replacing God with something else as the ultimate thing that we look to for our protection or our safety or our identity, is that it ends up controlling us. As someone else (Oswalt) has said on this passage "Whatever a man trusts in place of God will one day turn to devour him." And God had promised King David that to his descendants, who ruled after him "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son" (2 Sam 7:14), but Ahaz turns his back on that and looks instead to Tiglath-pileser, to fill that place of a protective father: 2 Kings 16:7, "So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, "I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me."

So Ahaz and the house of David looked for salvation elsewhere. And that has to be one of the lowest points to which the line of David sank. And history tells us that the very power they looked to for help, Assyria, ended up overrunning the country and bringing it to its knees. As the Chronicler says, in 2 Chron 28:20, the King of Assyria 'afflicted [Ahaz] instead of strengthening him'. You see whether it is looking to money, or career, or relationships, or success, or a foreign super-power as our ultimate, our protector, it will end up consuming us. Because even good things are not meant to be ultimate things.

But what was God's answer to Ahaz's failure? Was that it – time up - God washes his hands of this sorry bunch – forget I ever said anything to David about a throne that will last forever? No. God's answer to Ahaz's and to our failure to trust him, is grace. It is Immanuel, God with us.

Immanuel: Grace in place of failure.

In v13-14 of Isaiah 7 Isaiah addresses Ahaz and the house of David: "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 will conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

God's answer to the failure of the line of the David is to send another Son. Out of the train wreck God is going to raise a true Son of David. And this is going to be the sign that Ahaz refused to ask for, a sign that moves heaven and hell and forever alters earth that lies between.

A virgin is going to give birth. That alone is earth shaking. The Son she gives birth to will be Immanuel, which means God with Us. Something about this boy will mean that God is in the midst of his people. In v16 Isaiah tells Ahaz that this Son will 'refuse the evil and choose the good'. He's going to make the right choices that Ahaz and every other descendant failed to make. But, by the time he comes, the nation will be in such a dire state, and the house of David in such a dire state, that this descendant of the greatest king will be reduced to eating curds and honey – the food of nomads, living in poverty.

Even if Ahaz was prepared to turn his back on God and His promises, even if his actions in turning to Assyria would bring the people of God to their knees, God wasn't going to turn His back either on his people or his promises or the household of David. He has promised to establish the throne of David forever, and even if David's descendants have proved themselves faithless, God will prove Himself 100% faithful.

Now, as the book of Isaiah goes on, Isaiah fills in some of the blanks for us as to who this Son is going to be. But fast-forward now 730 years, to Nazareth, where there is a young man, called Joseph, who is a descendent of David. But the line of David has fallen so low that this man is eeking out his living as a carpenter. He has just crawled into bed having been told something by his fiancé, which has totally destroyed his life. Mary, who he was betrothed to, who he was going to marry within the year, who he had imagined he would grow old with, has just told him she is pregnant, and he knows it wasn't him. And he's just told her that it's over, he will divorce her, but do it quietly. And as he lays down, with his world in pieces around him, he has a dream.

Let's let Matthew pick up the story:

Matthew 1:20-25

You see Ahaz might have failed, but God wasn't about to. Even when we fail, even when we are faithless, God's grace will triumph. And Jesus – whose name means Yahweh Saves - is *the* Son of David, Immanuel, God with us, God in flesh, who has come to rescue us from our enemies. Ahaz faced Syria and Israel, but instead of looking to God as his Father, who would rescue him, he struck out on his own and looked to Assyria, and it destroyed him. Now we may not face invading armies, but we do face our twin enemies of sin and death, and maybe also a multitude of problems in between. And like Ahaz you may have tried to make it on your own and save yourself, and place your trust elsewhere, and God comes as Jesus, - to be your saviour. To be the ultimate security, the ultimate super-power in your life, if only you will trust Him. And one reason among many that you can trust him is that he knows your frame – he knows what you are made of. He hasn't simply observed your life from a distance and then offers advice like a

consulting firm. No – he has lived it. God has taken on flesh and blood, and lived this life.

And this, of course, is what distinguishes the gospel from every other religion. Every one else tells you, you've got to shape up, you've got to save yourself, you've got to find your way to God. But that's not the gospel. The gospel is that God has found his way to us. We don't have to climb the ladder, he has come down the ladder. Neither Ahaz nor we are called to try and save ourselves. We are called simply to trust the one who will rescue us.

And so just as Jesus was the answer to Ahaz's personal failures and the failures of his family, so He is for our failures. Just as God was the Father to be trusted in times of political and economic upheaval, so He is for us. And just as He was the answer to Ahaz's idolatry – looking for security in something other than in God, so Christ is for us. Jesus really is Immanuel, God with Us, the One who has come to save and rescue.