

God with us

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- [0 : 0 0] As you know, it's obvious we're in a different room. This reminds us of the pilgrim character of the Christian life. Here we have no abiding city, and it's useful meeting in a building site, because the church on earth is more of the building site than the church.
- Or the coming of the kingdom, which indeed is our subject, of course. We're looking at these passages in Isaiah about the coming of the kingdom, and we've already looked at chapter 2, the God's people gathering, chapter 4, God's city.
- And now we're going to be looking today at chapter 7, which is on the Bibles, it's on page 571, the passage we're looking at today.
- On page 571, we're going to read chapter 7, and we're going to read verses 1 to 17.
- Isaiah chapter 7, verse 1. In the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezan, king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Remali, the king of Israel, came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack up against it.
- [1 : 2 6] When the house of David was told, Syria is in league with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz, and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.
- The Lord said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shearashub, your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pole on the highway to the washer's field.
- And say to him, Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint, because of those two smouldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezan and Syria, and the son of Remaliah, because Syria with Ephraim, the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, Let us go up against Judah, and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves.
- And set up the son of Tabiel as king in the midst of it, thus says the Lord God, it shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezan.
- Within 65 years, Ephraim will be broken to pieces, so it will be no longer a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.
- [2 : 4 2] And said, If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, Ask aside of the Lord your God, let it be as deep as Sheol, or high as heaven.
- But Ahaz said, I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test. And Isaiah 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, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel. He shall eat curds and honey, and 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.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord. Now let's have a moment of prayer. Lord God, Emmanuel, God with us.

[4 : 02] We pray for you for this glorious promise. That promise we now know was fulfilled in the coming of the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. But that promise, whose final fulfillment is still in the future.

As we meet today in this building, in the middle of activity, and from the busyness of our lives, we pray that you will speak a word to us.

Lord, the hearts of everybody in this room are open to you. We do not know each other's hearts. We hardly know often what's in our own hearts.

We pray, Lord, that you will indeed bless. You will indeed give us wisdom. And give us understanding hearts. That we may learn from your word.

And by learning from it, return to our normal business, strengthened and helped. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now, we all know within a few weeks, the height and bustle of Christmas will be upon us again.

[5 : 12] The shops full of tempting goods, the advertisements all over the media and so on. And it will be very surprising if somebody doesn't tell us that Christmas is about children.

Now, I'm not Scrooge. I'm not even going to say that Scrooge is gone. But the point is, I enjoy all these things.

I enjoy the accompaniments of Christmas. I particularly enjoyed it when my children were small. And now, if I'm a granddad, I'm looking forward to a rerun of that kind of Christmas again.

But the trouble about all that is that it comes and it vanishes. For a few weeks or a few days, everyone is hyped up.

Everyone is happy or pretends to be happy. And then, life returns as it was. Nothing has fundamentally changed. The point about the kingdom that is to come, the point about the king who is to come, is that when he comes, everything fundamentally changes.

[6 : 20] It's never the same again. It doesn't mean it's easy and straightforward. But it does mean it's a permanent change. And our title today is taken from the passage, God with us.

Who is Jesus Christ? Who is he? He is God with us. Now, just a quick word about the context. The context of this chapter is power politics.

The northern kingdom, Isaiah is prophesying in Judah, the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom and Syria, further north still, have joined an alliance against the rising power of Assyria, which is essentially Iraq.

And they've asked Judah to join them. King Ahaz of Judah has refused. Not refused because he doesn't believe in power politics, but refused because he actually wants to ally himself with Assyria.

He's thinking exclusively in terms of the kingdom of this world. Whereas Isaiah is looking to God's kingdom. Now, I don't want to go into history much more than that, because names like Pica and Gremaliah and so on are hardly household words to us.

[7 : 30] But they were certainly realities at that time. I mean, it's just, I mean, the life of faith always has to be lived in the world of the time.

Whether it's the world of Pica and Gremaliah or the world of Cameron and Obama. It has to be lived in the situation of the time. And the key to the passage is verse 14.

The Emmanuel, behold the virgin shall conceive a son and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us. A real boy born of a virgin.

And this week and next we're going to focus on that boy. Because we've already looked at how the kingdom will come, as I say, as God's people gather. God's city is established.

But now we are looking at the fuller picture of the one who is God. Fullness of God in helpless faith.

[8 : 31] That's what Christmas is about. So what does it mean? Now it's very easy, as I say, to talk platitudes. To talk wonderful things about Christmas and all the rest of it.

But what does it mean at this moment? What does it mean in our world that God is with us? And that, of course, is the hope. That's what will happen when the kingdom comes.

God will be with us fully, finally and forever. What does it mean now? Because another important verse is verse 9, the end of verse 9, where Isaiah says to the king, If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.

In other words, whatever policy you follow in his world, whatever negotiations or alliances he enters, the key to it all is standing in faith.

If you do not stand in faith, you will not stand at all. Now just three things quickly. There is only one secure trust. And that's the verse we refer to.

[9 : 35] If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. Because it's not obvious that the kingdom is coming. Every time you switch on the news, it doesn't look as if the kingdom is coming, does it?

Hear about the continuing horrors in Syria and Iraq, about Ebola, about all the problems that arise, about the violence of the world, about the hatreds, about the way in which the world is going.

The grim reality seems that God is not with us. Now you see, Isaiah is challenging all this. Isaiah has already talked about the kingdom of God coming as God's people gather.

He's already talked about the security of God's city. And now he's putting worldly power in its place. The Ahaz is afraid of Syria.

Ephraim, by the way, that's the name often given to the northern kingdom of Israel. This is what he says about the inverse. For these two smouldering stumps of firebrands. That's what they are to the prophet, faggings.

[10 : 40] They are simply burnt out like fireworks, which look good as they explode in the sky, but which fade immediately into burnt out sticks.

So you see, the contrast is between the kingdom that comes silently, slowly and surely, and lasts forever, and the kingdom which seems impressive, but yet burns out.

So, that's why, as we look around at the world, it doesn't look to us that the kingdom is coming. As we look into our own hearts, it often doesn't look as if the kingdom is coming.

As we think about the circumstance of our life, the kingdom seems not to be coming at all. But Isaiah himself is speaking about the permanence of that kingdom.

The northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel during Isaiah's lifetime and ministry, is going to be taken away to Assyria. Syria itself is going to fall.

[11 : 38] Verse 8b, within 65 years, all this is going to happen. Now, in historical terms, that's a short time. It's not a short time, obviously, in a human lifetime, but it's a very short time in historical terms.

That's what the Apostle John says, the world passes away. That the one who does the will of God remains forever. God with us means we can trust him. There is one sure trust in the middle of the difficult, desperate situations often in which we find ourselves.

And secondly, there is one sure word that we can trust. Verse 3, the Lord said to Isaiah.

And then verse 10, again the Lord spoke to Ahaz. Now, the Lord is not speaking to Ahaz directly. He's speaking to Ahaz through Isaiah. See what's being said here.

The way the Lord speaks is through the words of the prophets. God speaks. God speaks. And his word comes true. In judgment when people obey.

[12 : 46] Sorry, disobeying. In blessing when they believed. All this happens both in the short term and in the long term. That's what Peter says about the words of the prophets.

They're like a light shining in a dark place. A murky place. Puzzling place. It's not just the idea of darkness. It's the idea of mist and fog. Where we don't see our way very clearly.

And this great book of Isaiah, along with the other prophets. The written words pointing to Emmanuel, the living word, God with us. You see, we have the scriptures which point us.

Guide us to who Emmanuel is. Guide us to how to live in this world. So you see, it's not... You see how these two things go together.

There's only one pure trust. One faith. But faith doesn't depend on hearsay or a rumor. It depends on the word God has given us.

[13 : 47] And now, thirdly, there is only one Savior. Looking now at verse 14. This is a very rich passage. We don't have time to go into all the details. But the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and call his name Emmanuel.

We'll hear this from the carol. Some pray will please with man as man to dwell. Jesus, our Emmanuel. And the carol, come, oh, come, Emmanuel.

Ransom, captive Israel. These songs that we'll be singing in a few weeks' time. What does this mean to Ahaz as he heard it? Now, look at verse 10.

Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz. Ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. What he's meaning here is ask the Lord about anything at all in the universe.

Because he knows the answer. Even if it's hidden in the underworld. Or up in the highest heavens. There is nothing he doesn't know. Because there is nothing he doesn't control. Now, Ahaz, unlike so many people who do not really believe, is addict at using the language of religiosity and piety.

[14 : 57] Ahaz said, I will not ask, verse 12. I will not put the Lord to the test. Now, that, of course, is the language of sanctimony, of religiosity. Ahaz has not asked for a sign.

The Lord has promised him a sign. The Lord promises something. Ahaz is effectively saying, I don't want it. What Ahaz is saying is, essentially, I don't believe all this nonsense that you're speaking, Isaiah.

I operate in the real world. The real world of power politics. Where reasonable people have to make reasonable decisions. Now, who is Emmanuel then?

Now, there's a phrase that occurs throughout this passage several times. But, the house of David, verse 13. No, he doesn't say, here then, O Ahaz.

He says, here now, O house of David. And then, back in verse 2. The house of David was told, Syria was in league with Ephraim. And the people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

[16 : 00] In other words, the house of David is in danger. What is going to happen if the house of David is snuffed out? Where is the Messiah then going to come from?

And this needs God's own intervention. See, like so many prophecies, the time is not specified. It's rather like that earliest and most basic prophecy of all.

The descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. We're not told then who that descendant is. We're not told the unthinkably long time it was going to be before he came.

We're just simply told, one day someone will come. And through all the long years passed, that hope began to become crystallized. And it crystallized around a particular figure.

The figure of David himself. David, the one whom the Lord put on the throne to be the shepherd of his people. And the covenant made with David in 2 Samuel 7.

[16 : 59] Where the Lord said that your sons will reign in the kingdom forever. Now that seems as if it was going to be set aside.

Because after all, the exile, the Davidic kingdom ended. No king ever sat on the throne again. Until we come to Luke chapter 1.

And Gabriel says to Mary, the child to be born will reign on the throne of his father David. He will reign over the hands of Jacob forever.

Of his kingdom there will be no end. So you see what Isaiah is doing. Isaiah isn't spent. Because Isaiah didn't know at that time how long it would be before the son of David was to come.

We know Isaiah lived 800 years before he did. But Isaiah certainly didn't. You must often have wondered why the prophecy seemed to be so obscure.

[18 : 05] Why didn't Isaiah just say, one day a man called Joseph will bring Mary his wife to Bethlehem. Mary will be a virgin and she will give birth to a child called Jesus.

Because Isaiah had said that. Can you imagine how many Marys and Josephs would have turned up at Bethlehem. Over the centuries. Claiming the promise.

So the prophecy has to be touched in these general terms. Until the one comes who is the true heir of David.

Who will sit on the throne. After all, history is full of impostors who claim to be a banished king and so on. So in order to avoid this, Isaiah gives a prophecy.

Which is true, but is not limited by time. Notice he is a king who will, it says, the child will eat curds and honey.

[19 : 04] That means he will grow up in poverty. That was the food of the poor. Rather like what he is going to say in chapter 53. He will grow up like a brute. Out of a dried ground. But of course, before that actually happened.

There were some indications. Ahaz was a disaster. Ahaz was an idolater. Ahaz turned the people away from God. And then astonishingly, Ahaz was followed by his son Hezekiah.

Who was one of the worthiest sons of David to sit on his throne. Hezekiah who got rid of the idolatry. Hezekiah who stood up to the Assyrian bully as long ago.

His father David had stood up to Goliath. Then in a later generation still, Josiah was to be another foreshadowing of the king who was to come.

But neither of them, neither of these good kings, Hezekiah or Josiah, were the one who is to come. So, what Isaiah is saying therefore is a prophecy relevant to us now.

[20 : 11] We know he came the first time. Don't we? We know he came in great humility. We know that he'll return in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead.

But we don't know when that will happen. It may happen within the lifetime of some people in this room. It may not happen for hundreds or even thousands of years. But we do know that he will come.

And that's the thing about prophecy. Prophecy doesn't tell us exactly when it will happen. Remember Jesus himself said about his coming of that day. No one knows. Not even the angels in heaven.

That's a secret the Father has kept in his own hand. But because Emmanuel has come. Because Emmanuel is to come again. In this dark and difficult world.

We can have faith. We can stand in faith. We can trust the sure word. And we can look to the return of the one Saviour. Because even at the darkest times, light shines.

[21 : 11] You can read over church history from over 2,000 years. There's a great deal of darkness in it. A great deal of time when the church seemed driven underground. And when it seemed as if God's cause had fallen totally out of the possibility of it being fulfilled.

The story of Emmanuel is really the story of the Bible. Because at the very beginning, in the Garden of Eden, God came to visit. God came down. And at the very end of the Bible, we are told the dwelling of God is with humans.

They will be his people and he will live with them. Our Emmanuel then is the star shining brightly in the darkness of the world.

And the star which will one day rise and blot out that darkness. And that's why we can pray in faith. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, as the world prepares for Christmas, we pray, Lord, that we may indeed prepare our hearts for the coming of Emmanuel.

[22 : 30] So that when he returns, we may not be ashamed before him at his coming. We may be ready to greet him and to rejoice in that kingdom, which will one day cover the whole earth as the waters cover the sea.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen.