

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ISAIAH

iv. Misplaced Fear

Isaiah 7 and 8

The year is 734 BC, some six years after the death of King Uzziah and the call of Isaiah. Judah is threatened by a coalition of her northern neighbours, Israel and Syria. They intend to replace Ahaz with a puppet king thereby forming a tripartite alliance against Assyria. Isaiah tells Ahaz to trust the Lord for deliverance and not resort to political intrigue. His words “be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid... if you do not stand firm in your faith you will not stand at all” (7:9b) are ignored. Isaiah is accompanied by his son Shear-Jashub (a remnant will return) a sign and symbol that not all Judah follows the sinful example of their king. Ahaz contemptuously dismisses God’s further prophetic sign of Immanuel (God with us) and prefers to seek help from Assyria against the northern alliance, thereby catching a tiger by its tail. Ironically, Assyria once having dealt with Israel and Damascus would turn on Judah and lay siege to Jerusalem within a decade or so.

Isaiah proceeds to declare two oracles. The first is declared to Judah. Having rejected the “gently flowing waters of Shiloah” (8:6), a reference to God’s presence and protection, the “mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates (Assyria)... will sweep on into Judah” (vv 7,8) and a bird of prey “will cover the breadth of your land” (v8). Despite the peoples’ disobedience, Immanuel remains committed to the land (v 8b). The second oracle (vv 9,10), against the warring nations directed against Judah, states bluntly that they will ultimately fail because “God is with us [his people]” (v10).

Thereafter God reassures Isaiah. The fear of God drives our lesser fears. He will be a sanctuary for the faithful remnant and stumbling block for the faithless (v14). Isaiah records his spoken oracles in writing (v16), thereby placing on record his ultimate trust in God. In the absence of God’s word the people resort to “mediums and spiritists” (v19) thereby increasing their alienation from the covenant care and word of God. Isaiah anticipates the New Testament exhortation “All people are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of the Lord endures forever” (1 Pet 1:24,25).

The promise of Immanuel [God with us] remains, despite the rampant disobedience of the people. He is the eye of the storm, a place of refuge and peace amidst the mayhem and destruction. “A bruised reed he shall not break and a smoking flax he shall not quench” (Isa 42:3). The promise is further elaborated in the New Testament, “Learn of me for I am meek and lowly in heart and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matt 11:29,30).

Alan Cameron
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