



JESUS: SAVIOR OR STUMBLING BLOCK?

Isaiah 8

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After Friday's terrorist attacks in Paris, the Islamic State released a statement claiming responsibility. It highlighted the attackers' religious faith in this way:

This group of believers were youth who divorced the worldly life and advanced towards their enemy hoping to be killed for Allah's sake... Allah blessed our brothers and granted them what they desired. They detonated their explosive belts in the masses of the disbelievers after finishing all their ammunition. We ask Allah to accept them amongst the martyrs and to allow us to follow them.

Meanwhile, all around the world, people responded on social media, offering condolences with a religious hashtag: #prayforParis.

Late Friday night, a Charlie Hebdo cartoonist posted a cartoon to Instagram asking for a different response. He said, "Friends from the whole world, thank you for #prayforParis, but we don't need more religion!" For this cartoonist, and for much of the Western world, *belief* is the problem rather than the solution.

Yet we're all believers—all 7.4 billion of us. GK Chesterton reportedly said that when a person stops believing in God, he or she doesn't believe in *nothing*, but will in fact believe in *anything*. There's no such thing as an unbeliever. Some believe in the God of the Bible. Everyone else believes in something or someone else.

I think back to the years I studied with brilliant scientists in a teaching hospital. They were often befuddled and amused by my faith in Jesus. I was likewise befuddled and amused by their talk of biorhythms, karma and occasionally UFOs. Most surprising of all? Their faith that education and human progress would put an end to all the problems in the world.

In the aftermath of last week's terrorist attacks around the world, there will be many who blame religion, saying it's *believers* who commit terrorism. True enough, but it's a distraction from the real problem. *All terrorists are believers, but not all believers are terrorists.* We all don't share the same faith. As a brother said in our prayer gathering last night, Christians "fight hate with love,

revenge with forgiveness, and evil by the power of the Living God.” We believe that our broken world will be redeemed, not through terrorism, but through the love of Jesus.

Transforming the world through the love of Christ is a beautiful vision, but it’s rarely easy in practice because Jesus’ way of redeeming the world is so counter-intuitive. We want speed and strength. His ways often leave us feeling vulnerable. Truth be told, we often would prefer another savior than the one God sent us. And so, as we continue this series, let’s learn a lesson from Isaiah about how to cling to the Lord even when we’re frightened.

KING AHAZ WAS A BELIEVER

In the 8th Century BC, King Ahaz of Jerusalem stood terrified at the crossroads of faith. To the north, the allied kings of Samaria and Damascus had rebelled against the massive Empire of Assyria. Now that rebel alliance was preparing a campaign to annex Jerusalem. Ahaz and Jerusalem were trapped between a great army to the north and a much greater empire to the east (not to mention marauding bandits to the south).

If there was ever a king who should have believed and trusted in the Lord, it was Ahaz. He was a direct descendant of King David. It was through David's lineage that God had promised to send the Messiah and set the world to rights. Against all odds, David’s line and his kingdom had been preserved for centuries, all the way down to Ahaz. How could he not trust in the Lord?

God knew Ahaz was frightened and that he needed encouragement. So God sent Isaiah to bolster the King's faith and comfort him in a time of crisis (Isaiah 7). Isaiah gave Ahaz God’s word, and it was wonderful news: a clear promise that their enemies to the north would not prevail against Jerusalem. Ahaz, however, rejected God’s word. Even when God graciously offered to provide the King with a miraculous sign, a physical means of assurance that God would keep his promises, Ahaz refused. Can you imagine? If God offered you a tangible reminder of his promises, would you refuse it? Ahaz did.

Why did Ahaz refuse God’s sign? Because at the crossroads of faith, he chose to walk by sight rather than by faith. He rejected the word of God delivered to him by Isaiah, but he didn’t stop believing. (Remember Chesterton’s maxim.) Ahaz turned away from God, but he didn’t believe in nothing. Rather, he put his faith in what he could see: the mighty Assyrian empire.

You might wonder, what’s so wrong with that? Wasn’t it wise for tiny Jerusalem to form an alliance with the world’s largest superpower? Like getting help from the mob, they would pay a high price for their protection. The Assyrians would go on to subjugate Jerusalem and plunder their wealth. From that day forward, Jerusalem would suffer, without political sovereignty or

religious freedom. Only a few decades later, the temple would be razed and the people would all be carted off into exile. By putting his faith in Assyria rather than the Lord, Ahaz had charted a path to destruction.

Ahaz refused God's offer of a sign. Nevertheless, God was determined to give Ahaz a sign to remember the path he had chosen at the crossroads of faith. So God sent this message through Isaiah: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa 7:14).

During Advent we love to sing, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," and with good reason, because it reminds us of the supremely good news that through Jesus, God is with us. Yet Ahaz had divorced God to marry the Emperor of Assyria. In his case, the sign of Immanuel meant that God planned to attend the wedding. This would have been most unwelcome news for the king.

In Isaiah 8 we have a preview of what God-with-us would mean for all of Palestine. It begins in 8:1 with another name for Isaiah's son. This time the name was four words: *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* ("quick to the booty, speed to the spoils").¹ Isaiah's son Maher-shalal-hash-baz became a living sign of what would soon happen in Palestine.

...before the boy knows how to cry 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria. Isa 8:4

In other words, just as God had promised in the previous chapter, Jerusalem's enemies to the north would soon fall to the Assyrian empire. So, by giving his allegiance to Assyria, Ahaz had bought some time. He had picked the winning team.

But now let's consider the consequences in vv 5-8, where God said that the invasion would come like a flood. Instead of the gentle stream of Shiloah that brought drinking water to Jerusalem, The River—that is, the mighty Euphrates, which flowed through the capital of Assyria—would rise over its banks, sweep into Palestine, overtake all the countryside, and come right up to the very walls of Jerusalem.

The Lord spoke to me again: "Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah, therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on

¹ Imagine how different life would be if God named our kids in this same way. During the holidays we always read the naming stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son, whose name shall be called, "John." Joseph and Mary will have a son, whose name shall be called, "Jesus." Solid, respectable, Christian names. If God gave these kinds of names to our kids, who would argue? But what if God named your son "Maher-shalal-hash-baz?" Like a boy named Sue, that kid is going to have a tough time at school.

into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.” Isa 8:5-8

In other words, God was going to allow Ahaz to have the object of his faith. Since Ahaz rejected the Lord and put his trust in the Emperor of Assyria, that’s exactly who God would give him. But the Assyrian Emperor wouldn’t be Jerusalem’s salvation. Rather, Jerusalem would be up to her neck in Maher-shalal-hash-baz. They would be surrounded by destruction, courtesy of Immanuel.

Here, then, is what the sign of Immanuel would mean for all of Palestine in that day. It would be another Tower of Babel moment, as God-with-us would utterly shatter their autonomy. Isaiah’s poem describes that day in this way:

Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered;
give ear, all you far countries;
strap on your armor and be shattered;
strap on your armor and be shattered.
Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing;
speak a word, but it will not stand,
for Immanuel (God is with us). Isa 8:9-10.

To sum up, Ahaz was a believer, but not in the Lord. God approached him tenderly, to comfort and save him. But Ahaz trusted in what he could see. He put his faith in an imperial idol and his plan backfired. His false security became his downfall.

THE TENANTS IN THE VINEYARD WERE BELIEVERS

The story of King Ahaz is more than just a history lesson. It’s a parable about faith. False gods give us false security. Only the Lord can truly save us.

Centuries later, God fulfilled the promise of Immanuel in a different way. He sent his son Jesus to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to God. But as St. John writes, Jesus “came to his own and his own people did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:11-12)

Ever since Palestine fell into the hands of the Assyrians, the people had been waiting, longing, praying for Messiah. When would God raise up a new Son of David to be their Savior and King? Then after centuries of waiting, the Virgin Mary conceived and gave birth to a son who would fulfill God’s promises. Immanuel, God-with-us, had come.

Jesus grew up to become a mighty healer and teacher, leader and friend. But he didn't do what many of the Jewish leaders wanted him to do. Instead of a military campaign, Jesus fought "hate with love, revenge with forgiveness, and evil by the power of the Living God." Consequently, there are a great many stories in the Gospels of people standing at the crossroads of faith, staring at the savior God had sent them, and then turning to put their faith in something else. Most poignant of all is when Pilate brought Jesus out to the Jewish leaders saying, "Behold your King!"

They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:14-16).

Like Ahaz before them, the Jewish leaders preferred an imperial savior over the Word of God. Less than 40 years later history repeated itself, as the Romans leveled their temple and slaughtered the people.

In the days immediately preceding his crucifixion, Jesus told another parable about faith (Matthew 21:33). He said that a master leased his beautiful vineyard to tenants, who were to serve him faithfully by working it to produce fruit. But the tenants rebelled against the master. They stole his produce. And they refused the master's every effort at reconciliation. Finally, as a last resort, the master sent his son to them, but they killed the son as well. So, Jesus asked (16:40), what do you think the master will do to the tenants who rejected him?

They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." (Matthew 21:41).

Matthew records that the chief priests and Pharisees knew that Jesus was speaking about them. Yet they went on to put their faith in an imperial savior rather than the one God had sent them. So once again, Immanuel, God-with-us, sent to be good news for all people, became bad news for those who rejected him.

Jesus asked, "Have you never read in the Scriptures? The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces..." (Matthew 21:42)

To sum up, the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day were believers, but not in the Lord. Jesus approached them tenderly, to comfort and save them. But he wasn't the kind of savior they wanted, so they refused him. Instead they put their trust in an idol, an imperial savior, but the plan backfired. Their false security became their downfall.

ISAIAH WAS A BELIEVER

Again, God would have us read these stories as more than mere history lessons. They're a call to believe in the only savior worth following. But to trust in him is to walk by faith and not by sight, and that's so difficult to do. The world will laugh at us, because our savior seems to be so weak and scrawny in comparison with the imperial alternatives. Sometimes we will be plagued with doubts as the wicked seem to prosper while Christians suffer. So what can we do? How can we walk by faith and not by sight in such uncertain times as these?

Isaiah was a believer, too. But unlike Ahaz, he put his faith in the Lord rather than an imperial savior. In the last half of Isaiah 8, Isaiah modeled how to walk by faith rather than sight in two particular ways.

First, in Isa 8:11-15, Isaiah modeled that **it's through worship that the eyes of our hearts are opened to see what it is that we believe.**

For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. (Isaiah 8:11-13)

Those who turn away from God inevitably fear anything and everything but God. The more we worship false gods, the more anxious we become about the fragile state of things under the false security of those false gods. So, for example, the presidential debates offer a kaleidoscope of conspiracies which currently terrify the right and the left. To the degree that we have set all our hopes on the White House rather than the risen Christ, we too will be terrified by these same things. Meanwhile, the more that we worship the Lord, the more we see him as the Almighty Creator and Redeemer of all things, and we find true security in him. On the day of his commissioning (Isa 6), Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up," in all his omnipotent grandeur. From that point on, Isaiah walked by faith and not by sight.

When we worship the Lord and the eyes of our hearts are opened to him, we see him as our savior and sanctuary. But when we turn away from him, he becomes a stumbling block.

And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken." (Isaiah 8:14-15)

A friend of mine who lived in a group house on the Hill with other single men told me about coming home one day to find an enormous industrial AC unit in the middle of the living room.

He just tried to ignore it, because he believed that it belonged to another guy in the house. Everyone else did the same. Weeks passed before someone finally asked what the owner planned to do with it. Only then did they discover that none of them had put it there. Former roommates had snuck in one day and dropped it off as a “gift” when nobody was home.

For weeks, there had been a huge obstacle in the house, but because the residents believed it belonged to another roommate, no one had dealt with it. No doubt, many “stumbled over it and were broken” before they learned the truth.

Until we believe in the Lord, he will be an enormous obstacle to navigate around. But when we see him as he is, he is transformed from stumbling block to sanctuary. We find true security in him, so that we no longer fall prey to all the anxieties and conspiracies terrifying the world. That’s why worship is so important, especially transcendent worship that exalts Jesus as Lord and savior. In a city preoccupied with power, we need regular reminders that only God is omnipotent, and he is mighty to save.

Second, in Isa 8:16-22, Isaiah emphasized **the importance of clinging to God’s word when our faith is threatened**. As the Assyrian floodwaters continued to lap against the walls of Jerusalem, Isaiah found God’s word to be his only secure anchor point.

Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. (Isaiah 8:16-17)

God had spoken in his word, and that was enough for Isaiah. His hope was in the Lord.

Those who turn away from the Lord inevitably will believe anything but his Word. Apparently the people of Jerusalem wanted Isaiah to become their medium and conjure up dead spirits for them. But to Isaiah, this was absolutely ridiculous. Why seek counsel from the dead? Isaiah said, “Should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony!” (Isa 8:19)

Again, until we believe that Jesus is our King, his word will be an enormous obstacle to navigate around. But when we do put our full trust in him, his word becomes a secure anchor point, a source of stability in the midst of an uncertain world. God’s word is powerful. God’s word is alive. God’s word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Build your house upon it and come what may, it will not fall.

CONCLUSION

Everyone believes in something. King Ahaz trusted in Assyria, and God-with-us became his stumbling block. The consequences were devastating. Isaiah, on the other hand, trusted in Almighty God, and God-with-us became his sanctuary. By clinging to the Lord through worship and the word, he and his children were able to ride out the storm.

Centuries later, Jewish leaders stumbled over Jesus in order to give their allegiance to Caesar. They had God's son put to death. In so doing, they unwittingly opened the way for Immanuel to become good news for all of us.

We stand at the crossroads, as individuals and as a society. Will we fear what everyone else is fearing? Will we call conspiracy all that the others call conspiracy? Will we fight hate with hate, revenge with revenge, and evil with evil? Or will we find sanctuary and rest in Immanuel? He is the only sure anchor point in life's storms.