

# The Virgin Birth and the Stubborn Grace of God

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>1</sup> In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> And the LORD said to Isaiah, “Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field. <sup>4</sup> And 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, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah. <sup>5</sup> Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, <sup>6</sup> “Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,” <sup>7</sup> thus says the Lord GOD: “It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. <sup>8</sup> For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. <sup>9</sup> And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”

<sup>10</sup> Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: <sup>11</sup> “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” <sup>13</sup> And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” (Isa. 7:1–14)

### A Familiar Verse in an Unfamiliar Context

- A. On first read through this text, much probably seemed initially unfamiliar and confusing to you, perhaps even a little troubling.
  - 1. But I imagine most of us at least recognized those words there in [v. 14](#) about a virgin conceiving and bearing a son who shall be called “Immanuel”—which in Hebrew means, of course, “God with us.”
    - a. It’s a classic Christmas text. We have whole songs that have been written about it (“O come, O come, Emmanuel”).
      - i. And rightfully so. After all, as we’ll later see, Matthew quotes this very verse in his own gospel and shows how it relates to Jesus born of the virgin Mary ([Matt. 1:22-23](#)).
- B. But, as is so often the case, we may know a verse here or there from the Scriptures (the OT especially), but, when pressed on it, we don’t really know the context.

1. And, in that, we run the risk of misunderstanding the verse entirely, or, at the very least, of not taking in the full richness of the biblical revelation.
  - a. We flatten it out, and make it two-dimensional.
  - b. We drain it of color, and make it grayscale.
  
- C. And such is the case, I think, with [Isa. 7:14](#). We know it, but do we know it? And so I simply wanted to consider it with you this morning in light of its broader biblical context.
  1. These words are given to a wayward king in the midst of terrifying times—when the kingdom of Judah seems on the brink of collapse, as a result of their own idolatry and unfaithfulness.
  
- D. I do think you'll see, when put back in this story, [v. 14](#) is much richer than we first imagined it to be.
  1. Yes, it's a wonderful prophecy and miracle, and we rejoice that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of it.
  2. But seen it's context, it is, above all else, a remarkable sign of God's sovereign and, even, stubborn grace.
    - a. By all accounts, he should be done with us. He should have washed his hands of us. He should have left us.
    - b. But instead he makes a promise, offers a sign, this Christmas child, by whom we can know:
      - i. He's not done with us; he's just getting started.
      - ii. He's not washing his hands of us; he's going to wash us in his mercy.
      - iii. He's not going to leave us or forsake us. He is Immanuel, God with us!
  
- E. So, as we make our way through this text, then, I'm going to organize my thoughts under three headings: (1) A Shaking Heart ([vv. 1-2](#)); (2) A Wavering Faith ([vv. 3-9](#)); and (3) A Stubborn Sign ([vv. 10-14](#)).

## (1) A Shaking Heart (vv. 1-2)

### Conspiring Kings

- A. It's somewhere around the year 735 B.C.
  1. A young man by the name of Ahaz, from the line of David, has just recently taken the throne there in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah, because his dad Jotham had passed away. He's about twenty years old, pretty young ([2 Kings 16:2](#)).
  2. For a little while now the foreign nation of Assyria had been an ascendant force on the historical scene—rising in power and influence, swallowing up smaller nations around them.
  3. And they were threatening to expand westward towards Palestine and things.

4. So the little nations were trying to form an alliance, assuming they'd be stronger together in their opposition of the Assyrians.
- B. This is what the northern nations of Syria and Israel were doing at this point. And they wanted Judah, and Judah's king, to get in on it with them.
1. But Ahaz refused. He had other plans, as we shall see.
    - a. And Syria and Israel, as you might expect, they didn't so much appreciate this, and they thought, this boy, young as he is, was their chance to come attack and, with any luck, they could replace him with a puppet-king who would be more favorable to their proposal. And the alliance would be strengthened and they'd at least stand a chance against Assyria.
- C. This is what is happening in the opening verses of our text: "In the days of Ahaz . . . king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah . . . the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it . . ." (v. 1). So Ahaz is told: "Syria is in league with Ephraim [another name for the northern kingdom of Israel]" (v. 2a).

## Trembling Trees

- A. And how does Ahaz respond to this news?
1. We're given quite the picture in Isaiah's description here: "[When he was told this] the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" (v. 2b).
- B. Have you ever been out in the woods during a violent storm? Have you ever seen the way the trees bend and bow before the sheer force of it all?
1. Do you remember the winds that were so strong even around San Jose last year, I believe it was, during that constant march of atmospheric rivers we were dealing with? Trees were coming down. Fences were toppling over. Power was going out.
    - a. Paul Walton, being a carpenter, was nice enough to come by and help me fix all the stuff that had blown over in my yard. And it was a busy time for him because everyone was needing help.
      - i. That's what the wind can do. It just shakes and shakes until whatever's in its way is reduced to rubble.
- C. And so it felt for Ahaz and his people in these moments. His heart was shaking. What should he do? Where should he turn for help? How could he stand firm?

## How about You?

- A. Perhaps you come in this morning, feeling similarly.

1. Your situation is different from Ahaz' no doubt, but, nevertheless, it feels just as precarious, just as threatening, just as frightening. And your heart is shaking.
- B. It's not the king of Syria and the king of Israel joining against you, but what is it?
1. Maybe it's something with your health, and it has you so discouraged and, if your honest, deeply worried. What's the doctor going to say? What's he going to find? And your heart is shaking.
  2. Maybe it's something with your relationships. It's so hard. You've been hurt. How could they say that? Why would they do that? Where do we go from here? And your heart is shaking.
  3. Maybe it's the state of your job. We're constantly reorg'ing and I never know when my role is going to be on the block. I hear the whispers. I see the signs. Who wants to lose their job at Christmas time? And your heart is shaking.
- C. So we're all here with Ahaz in one way or another. What do you do? Where do you turn for help? How can you stand firm?

## (2) A Wavering Faith (vv. 3-9)

### "Be Quiet!"

- A. Look at where God goes with Ahaz next, vv. 3-4: "<sup>3</sup> And the LORD said to Isaiah, 'Go out to meet Ahaz . . . <sup>4</sup> And 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 . . .'"
1. I love that! He sends Isaiah the prophet to him and it seems his goal is to first just get the king to slow down, to stop, to "be quiet" and reflect with him a bit.
- B. Isn't that often what we need most when our hearts are shaking like trees in a windstorm?
1. It seems counterintuitive, because we're thinking so much needs to be done. We can't stop. It's panic mode. It's go time. We're so worked up and worried.
  2. But what we need more than anything is to be quiet and remember who our God is. Only then do we start to see all this other stuff come back into its proper place. It's not as big of a deal. God gets bigger, this stuff gets smaller.
- C. Other passages come to mind at this point . . .
1. I recall that great exhortation from Moses when all the people are freaking out on the banks of the Red Sea, thinking they're going to die as the Egyptian army is barreling down on them: "<sup>13</sup> And Moses said to the people, 'Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. <sup>14</sup> The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent'" (Exod. 14:13–14).

2. And of course I thought of those familiar and no less stunning words that come near the end of Ps. 46. Everything is shaking and giving way for the people in this psalm. And what does God say they need to do above all else? “Be still, and know that I am God” (v. 10).
    - a. Listen, when your life feels so busy and chaotic that you can’t imagine taking a break to be quiet before God, that’s when you need that break the most!
      - i. In the crazy, in the panic, stuff seems bigger than it should. You make rash decisions. You don’t make things better. You make them worse.
  3. Finally, later in this same book of Isaiah, we’re given yet one more beautiful example of this sort of thing, Isa. 30:15: “[T]hus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, ‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.’”
- D. This is what the prophet is sent to this trembling king Ahaz to remind him of. “[B]e quiet!”
1. Don’t you need this reminder here now—as we’re in the thick of the craziness of the Christmas season?
    - a. Don’t you feel like you can’t stop. You have so many things going on? You got to get this gift; you have to send that letter; you’ve got to pack those bags; you’ve got to hit up Goodwill and get an ugly sweater; or whatever it may be. It can get so busy, especially if you have kids.
    - b. And the sad reality is: we can get so busy trying to get everything done that we forget what the point of all this is. It’s not about the parties. It’s not about the presents. It’s not even ultimately about family and friends. It’s about the God who so loved the world he sent his only Son to save: “Mild He lays His glory by, / Born that man no more may die; / Born to raise the sons of earth, / Born to give them second birth.” That’s the point!
      - i. And so, even though it seems counterintuitive, even though it seems impossible, what we need to do, what we must do, before we do anything else, is stop in our tracks and get quiet before God.

## And Consider . . .

- A. But then we see, as I’ve been saying, it’s not mere quietness that’s the goal, like new age meditation or something, where you just empty the mind and that is all.
  1. No. That’s a hollow peace.
  2. God wants you to have a deep and rugged peace—a peace that can withstand the shaking.
    - a. And so it’s not just quiet for the sake of quiet.
    - b. It’s quiet so you can truly consider: who is your God . . . and then you can see your trials in view of him.

- B. So with Ahaz, God rehashes the plot of these two nations coming against him, and then he says matter-of-factly: *“It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass”* (v. 7). Why? How?
1. Look at where he goes next: *“<sup>8</sup> For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. . . .<sup>9</sup> And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.”*
    - a. You’re like: “I don’t get it.”
    - b. Well, here’s what God is doing: he’s showing that the plot of these two nations coming against him will not stand nor come to pass because they are ultimately driven, not by God, but by mere men.
- C. So he slowly reduces these great nations down bit-by-bit until he’s identified a mere man at the bottom of it. He goes from country, to capital city, to king.
1. Syria → Damascus → Rezin.
  2. Ephraim → Samaria → the son of Remaliah [Pekah].
    - a. The source of all this wind and fury, it’s just a couple of men. They’re just smoking logs. They spit a lot of sparks, but the fire’s about to go out.
    - b. But I, on the other hand, am God.
- D. He’s trying to remind Ahaz in these moments: ultimately, the king over Judah isn’t you, brother. It’s me.
1. It’s as Isaiah had said just a chapter earlier after he’s given that fantastic vision of God on his throne: *“[M]y eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”* (Isa. 6:5).
    - a. YHWH is Judah’s King. Or at least he should be.
    - b. Don’t be afraid of mere men. As the prophet says in *Isa. 2:22*: *“Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?”*

## Firm in Faith

- A. I love how v. 9 ends there: *“If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”* Isn’t that the truth?
1. You see, Ahaz has a choice. What’s he going to do with those opening questions I mentioned. His heart is shaking. What should he do? Where should he turn for help? How can he stand firm?
    - a. The path diverges at this point.
      - i. Is he going to trust his God, his King?
      - ii. Or is he going to turn to human saviors and solutions?
- B. What about for you and the shaking of your heart? What are you doing about it? Where are you going for help with it? How are attempting to stand firm?

1. If it's your health stuff, are you thinking if I could just get into Stanford, if I could just get this or that specialist, I'd be okay . . . then the wind would stop and my heart would settle?
  2. If it's your relationship stuff, are you thinking maybe I can make it right by apologizing profusely, or cleaning up my act and becoming whatever they want me to be, or maybe I should just take vengeance or cut them off and get them out of my life . . . then the wind will stop and my heart will settle?
  3. If it's your work stuff, are you thinking maybe if I get this guy on my side, if I can impress this or that manager, then I'll be indispensable; or maybe I should already start sending out resumes and that way I can beat them to the punch, get something even better; if I can secure things . . . then the wind will stop and my heart will settle?
- C. Much of these things can be appropriate in their place, but none of them will provide you stability at the deepest level.
1. There will come a time where we get sick with something, and even a Stanford doctor can't fix it.
  2. You can work so hard at a relationship and do everything to make it work and the other person still just doesn't like you or hurts you.
  3. You can get your dream job and all this, and you're not at peace, you still realize that with one change of the guard or something it's in jeopardy again.
- D. So you don't put your faith there. You put it in the Lord.
1. "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all."
  2. Or as Isaiah puts it positively later in *Isa. 26:3*: "You [God] keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you."
    - a. That's the peace that can weather any storm, because it's tethered to the God who is over and under and in and through it all.
      - i. And that's the peace God wants for you and for me.
      - ii. And he wants it for Ahaz as well. But sadly, he's going to reject it . . .

### (3) A Stubborn Sign (vv. 10-14)

#### "Ask a Sign"

- A. Look first at what God says to Ahaz, it's amazing really, *v. 11*: "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."
1. Isn't that something?! God invites Ahaz to ask for a sign from him, anything, that it might help strengthen his wavering faith. "If you're not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all' . . . and I want you to be firm. So tell me, what sign can I give you that might help firm up your faith in me?"

B. It's really a stunning thing for God to do.

1. Ahaz, even to this point it seems from [2 Kings 16](#) and [2 Chron. 28](#), has already been sliding off into idolatry and syncretism and things like this.
2. And, beyond all this, God has already made plain to him that he would be faithful to the house of David and the Davidic line. He's already given his word in places like [2 Sam. 7](#), where he makes that covenant with David saying, "[Y]our house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever" (v. 16).
  - a. So you can know on the authority of God's word that Rezin and Pekah, and Assyria for that matter, will not ultimately prevail over Judah and the house of David.
    - i. Ahaz doesn't need a sign. He certainly doesn't deserve it.
    - ii. And yet God is here ready and willing to give it!

## Testing the Lord

A. But Ahaz continues his faithlessness, masked now in a veneer of reverence. So he pushes back on God's request, [v. 12](#): "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test."

1. He's clearly alluding to [Deut. 6:16](#) at this point. He's trying to act holier than God in this moment. "I know it's not right to put you to the test. People all over the Scriptures get in trouble for this."

B. And he's not entirely wrong.

1. But he's missed the fact that there is a way, it seems, to "test" the Lord, as it were, that doesn't indicate presumption or distrust so much as the opposite.
2. There is a testing of the Lord that is not moving away from him in unbelief and sin, but moving towards him in the fight for faith and hope (cf. [Mal. 3:10](#)). That's what God is calling for here. "Ask for a sign, anything. Put me to the 'test.' I'm here for you."

C. I think it's similar to that man in [Mark 9:24](#), who cries out to Jesus: "I believe; help my unbelief!"

1. Or I thought of Thomas, after Jesus had risen, and the others had seen him, but he was struggling to believe their testimony: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" ([John 20:25](#)). That seems a bit arrogant, doesn't it? And yet even still Jesus obliges: "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe'" (v. 27).
  - a. There are times where we are going to struggle with doubt and fear and, though we know the truth, we need God's help. And for the heart that is genuine, I think he is happy to come to our aid.

D. But Ahaz won't do it. Why?



1. He doesn't want to ask for this sign, not because he's worried about sinning against God. That may be what he presents, but that's not the truth of it.
2. The truth is: he doesn't want to ask because he's already made up his mind as to where he's going to turn for help.
  - a. He's going to call, not on God, but on the king of Assyria. Assyria, not the Lord, so he estimates, is his best chance for deliverance from these two bothersome kings.
    - i. So he even offers up gold and silver from the temple as a means of drawing the king of Assyria to his aid.
    - ii. He calls himself the king's "servant" and "son" (2 Kings 16:7).

E. But does he end up the firmer for it?

1. Maybe for a brief moment.
2. But not in the end.
  - a. When it's all done, though the king of Assyria will come and conquer Syria and Israel, he will also turn on Ahaz. So we're told in [2 Chron. 28:20](#) that the "king of Assyria came against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him."
    - i. The very one Ahaz had hoped in for deliverance becomes his oppressor.

F. Ironically, then, in all this he tests the Lord by not testing the Lord—by not leaning in on him for help in these moments, asking for a sign to bolster his wavering faith.

## Possessive Pronouns

- A. So the prophet Isaiah responds, [v. 13](#): "And he said, 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?'"
- B. Note the tragic change of possessive pronouns here:
  1. Back up in [v. 12](#), pleads with Ahaz: "Ask a sign of the LORD your God . . ."
  2. But now here, after refusing, after showing his cards, after exposing the deepest allegiance of his heart, Isaiah bemoans: "Why are you wearying 'my God'?"
    - a. "[Y]our God" becomes "my God". Do you see the significance? It signals the deeper spiritual transition that has taken place in Ahaz' heart.
      - i. "The one true God isn't your God. You've gone looking for help and hope from somewhere else. You've left him."
- C. And I wonder for us, do we struggle along similar lines?
  1. Do we pretend to be religious, genuflect in God's direction, but really we have our faith and hope set on an alternate Savior, an alternate god?

- a. Beware, if God is not your God, this “deliverer” will always become your oppressor in the end. It won’t go well.

## Stubborn Grace

- A. But here’s what’s so amazing, and here’s why I say this is a “stubborn sign.” Even after all of this, even after Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, God still determines in love to give it.

1. The stubbornness of Ahaz’ faithlessness is met by the stubbornness of God’s grace!

- B. And so now we come at last to v. 14: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

1. He says Ahaz, you didn’t want a sign, but I will give you one anyways.
2. And not just you. The “you” here in Hebrew is plural: “you all”: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you [all] a sign.”

- a. “Ahaz, I may not be your God anymore, but I will be the God of any who will have me. My arms are open, why must you keep your arms crossed? Stop chasing after other gods, as if there were such a thing. Come. Here is the sign. I will keep my promise. I have established and will protect the throne of David. And through it, I will save my people (and the world!) in the end!”

- C. And, while there seems to have been some partial fulfillment of this verse in Ahaz’ day with the birth of Isaiah’s second son, we know of course that the ultimate fulfillment of it comes with the arrival of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem.

1. So, after relaying the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit in Mary, Matthew makes the comment: “<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: <sup>23</sup> ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Matt. 1:22–23).

- a. He is the fulfillment of all God’s promises—they are yes and amen in him (2 Cor. 1:20).
- b. He is the King in the line of David come to sit on the throne forever.
- c. He is the one who will, as the angel Gabriel tells Joseph, “save his people [not merely from a few angry kings, but . . .] from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).
- d. He is literally “Immanuel . . . God with us.”

- D. Christmas is God supplying the sign we didn’t even care enough to ask for. It’s God acing the test we refused in our rebellion to administer in the first place. It’s sovereign and stubborn grace. It’s God coming in love for a people who don’t want him.

1. That’s why the whole trajectory of Jesus’ life begins in Bethlehem and ends in Calvary.
2. It starts in a lowly manger and climaxes on a rugged cross.
  - a. God would be near us though we would do everything we could to get away from him.

## As Deep As Sheol Or As High As Heaven

- A. I find it astounding: God invited Ahaz to ask for a sign from him—“let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven,” he says (v. 11).
1. Well, Jesus, the sign God gives him and us, truly does span these two realms, doesn't he?!
    - a. He comes from the heights of heaven, as the eternal son of God.
    - b. But, laying aside his glory, he descends, not just to earth, but to the depths of Sheol. He descends all the way to death for us.
  2. And then, to our great surprise, he spans the two realms once more, right?
    - a. He rises up from the dead on third day, conquering Satan, sin, and death.
    - b. He ascends back to the heavenly heights. But this time he takes human nature with him, opening the possibility for sinners like us to be lifted up and set in right standing and relationship with God as well.
      - i. It's as C.S. Lewis writes in his classic work *Mere Christianity*: “The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God.”
      - ii. Or, listen to how he puts it elsewhere: “In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity . . . . But He goes down to come up again and bring the ruined world up with Him” (Miracles).
- B. So I don't know where you are at this morning—whether you are struggling and feeling alone, wind-tossed and looking for help.
1. But I do know this: if you ever wanted a sign that God is with you, that he is right here, ready to help and save, to forgive and free . . . you already have it. That's the meaning of this child in a manger. Immanuel, God with us.
    - a. He's with you. If you want to be firm in whatever your facing, fix your faith on him. Merry Christmas!