

The Lord himself will give you a sign
Isaiah 7:10-14

¹⁰ The LORD spoke to Ahaz again. He said, ¹¹ “Ask for a sign from the LORD your God. Ask for it either in the depths below or in the heights above.” ¹² But Ahaz responded, “I will not ask. I will not test the LORD.” ¹³ So Isaiah said: Listen now, you house of David. Is it not enough for you to test the patience of men? Will you test the patience of my God as well? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give a sign for all of you. Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and name him Immanuel.

Isn't it amazing how God blesses us, even when we don't expect it or even ask for it? We see that in the Scripture before us. God had his prophet Isaiah approach a wicked king with a challenge: Ask for a sign from the LORD your God. Surprisingly, the king wouldn't do it. God in his grace made himself available. But it didn't matter to this king to ask for a sign from God. Still, the Lord himself would give a sign. It's the sign of the virgin birth. As we gather less than a week from celebrating our Savior's birth, we'll take a closer look at the sign of that birth given 700 years earlier. We'll see it's a sign that dispels doubt. It's a sign that displays God's power.

The Prophet Isaiah had an assignment. God sent him to speak to Ahaz, the King of Judah. Ahaz was a direct descendant of King David. But Ahaz had followed the detestable ways of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites entered the Promised Land. Now Ahaz finds himself in a crisis. The threat of an attack was coming. The only solution that Ahaz could think of was to turn to the powerful nation of Assyria for protection. That meant showering Assyria's king with gifts of gold and silver from the temple and the treasures of the royal palace.

Did Ahaz need to pay for protection? He was king of God's chosen people. All he needed to do was turn to his Lord and he'd have all the protection he needed. That's what Isaiah told him in the verses before our text. But Ahaz only turns to Assyria for help. And he met the prophet's words of comfort and encouragement with silence. The prophet's words made no impression on him. Despite the hardness of Ahaz' heart and his disregard for God's ways, God still reached out to this wicked king. The Lord was willing to identify himself as Ahaz' God. God's covenant promises still applied to him as a descendant of David.

Isaiah proposes that Ahaz demand any sign or miracle. That's where our text begins. This display of God's power and the opportunity to fulfill his promise, would confirm the prophet's words. Then Ahaz could rest assured that he was safely in God's protecting hands.

But Ahaz wouldn't do it. He tells Isaiah, *“I will not ask. I will not test the LORD.”* It may sound pious. Satan tempted Jesus to jump from the highest point in the temple. God would surely send angels to protect him. Satan even quoted Scripture to prove it. So jump already. But Jesus responds with a correct use of Scripture: *“Do not put the Lord*

your God to the test" (Matthew 4:7). When Ahaz said he wasn't going to test the Lord he was actually showing the hardness of his heart. He's not willing to take God at his offer. Asking for a sign would be saying: "Lord, I'm at a loss here. I have nowhere else to turn except to you." To request a sign from the Lord would have shown there was faith in Ahaz' heart. It meant Ahaz still believed in the power of the Lord to fulfill what was spoken through his prophets. God displays amazing grace here. He still recognizes Ahaz as his own. He is willing to reveal himself to the king. With gracious love he draws near.

But Ahaz won't ask. He has no intention of obeying. He turns from God, knowing what God's will is and what God requires of him. He is commanded to believe. The gospel words of God's prophet are preached to him. He refuses to believe the Lord. He chooses to lean on his own understanding. This refusal shows a complete lack of trust in the power of God and in the faithfulness of God. Faith shows itself in obedience. But Ahaz in unbelief disobeys. In a time of crisis, Ahaz is too busy for the Lord. He'd rather follow his own way than put confidence in God.

Isaiah quickly points out the false piety of Ahaz. *Listen now, you house of David. Is it not enough for you to test the patience of men? Will you test the patience of my God as well?* Ahaz is making God tired. He wearies the Lord with stubborn refusal to trust him and listen to his Word. God had been steadfast in addressing the house of David, both with his promises and with his warnings. But Ahaz refuses to believe. He trusted neither the Lord's power nor his faithfulness to deliver. God had offered him his choice of a sign to prove God's faithfulness. But Ahaz rejects God's grace. He cuts himself off from God fully and finally.

Not taking what God offers is a serious sin. Consider what we're telling God when we fail to take him at his Word. God had given his Word to show you how much he loves you. But if we refuse to listen or let our thoughts drift away when his word is preached and taught, how important is God's Word to us? But God in his grace, keeps coming back to us. Through word and sacrament, God assures us of his love. God's Spirit will use those tools of grace to strengthen faith bring us manifold blessings.

God's plans are carried out whether or not we are willing to go along with it. The sign did not depend on Ahaz. It would take place as God said it would.

No, Ahaz would not ask for a sign. He did not wish to dispel his doubts. Despite the king's unbelief, the Lord himself would give him a sign that would display his power. The prophet announces: *Therefore the Lord himself will give a sign for all of you.* Ahaz had rejected the covenant God made with Ahaz' forefathers. Now a different side of God steps forward. He is the Almighty One who controls all things. And he is going to display his power: *Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and name him Immanuel.*

With this sign God is rejecting the king and announcing his judgment. For Ahaz still hardened in sin, the whole sign of the virgin's Son contains no trace of mercy. For him it was the announcement of a final rejection. The royal house of David would fall. Immanuel would be born, but not from royalty in an elaborate palace. He would be born of a poor, despised virgin. Nobody gave him the honor that is due to royalty because the house of David had long since collapsed and gone to ruin. You want proof. On the day he was born no one in Bethlehem had room for this expectant virgin and her soon to be born son. They could only find shelter where animals were kept. The virgin birth is a sign of judgment to impenitent and hardened sinners. Those who reject him with unbelief, will someday discover they have rejected the very One who came to save them.

But to sinners in need of a Savior, the virgin birth is a sign of God's salvation. We know who the virgin is. She's a girl from Nazareth who is pledged to marry a carpenter from Nazareth by the name of Joseph. When he finds out Mary is pregnant and he's not the father, he decides to quietly end the relationship. That is until God's angel shows up with news that God was fulfilling the promise he made to unbelieving King Ahaz 700 years earlier. God was displaying his power. And the world's only Savior was about to enter our world.

What a wonderful sign! The incarnation of God has captured the imaginations of believers for centuries. To this day we cannot fully comprehend this mysterious nature of Christ, both true God as well as true man. To troubled disciples, Jesus said, *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9). Look at how he chooses to deal with us sinners. He didn't enter our world to condemn us, but to save us. He is patient. He is persistent. He has a plan. He promises and he fulfills. He does that which only God can do. He uses his power for our good.

May this be a joyous Christmas for ourselves and for everyone about us. Thank God, we have more than a sign to raise our spirits. We have the glorious fulfillment of God's promises before our very eyes on the pages of Holy Scripture. A virgin did conceive and did bear a son. From the realms of heaven, angels burst forth to proclaim to men that Immanuel had come. God is with us. He gave himself for us. He is an ever-present help in trouble, our refuge and strength. We will not fear, though everything around us may roar and shake. The Lord of armies is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge. No matter what tribulation we face, we endure it all by the aid of our merciful God. He gave us his Son, miraculously born of a virgin. He gave his Son to live for us, die for us, and live again. He didn't enter life to condemn us. He came to save us. And save us he did. As we reach out to others with this good news, we pray more and more will dispel their doubts and will rejoice in God's display of power. Yes, the virgin did give birth to a Son. He's your Savior from sin. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel has come to you. Let us adore him, Christ the Lord!