**THE SIGN OF IMMANUEL**

**Isaiah 7:1-14**

**Key verse: Isaiah 7:14**

In today’s passage, God reveals the amazing sign of Immanuel to King Ahaz. The sign of Immanuel is for every human being in this world who desperately needs God’s salvation. May God teach us the deep meaning of Immanuel through today’s passage.

When Ahaz was the king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel had allied and marched up to fight against King Ahaz. When King Ahaz and his people heard the news about the invasion of their enemies, their hearts were shaken like the trees of the forest shaken by the wind.

Who was King Ahaz? According to 2 Kings 16, Ahaz became a king when he was twenty years old, and reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike King David, Ahaz did not do what was right in the eyes of God. He engaged in detestable practices of idol worship and even sacrificed his son in the fire. King Ahaz was not a good king but an evil king.

However, God was still merciful toward Ahaz and had a plan to help him and his people. God sent his message to King Ahaz through the Prophet Isaiah. What was God’s message? Let’s read verse 4.

*“Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.”*

God said to King Ahaz, “Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid”. God’s message for Ahaz sounded like a kind father’s comfort for his son although Ahaz was rebellious, ungodly, and wicked. God told Ahaz not to lose his heart because God considered the two kings of Aram and Israel to be like smoldering stubs of firewood. Although the allyship of two kings looked powerful and terrifying to King Ahaz and his people, they were nothing to almighty God, just like firewood burning with smoke but no flame.

Let’s look at verses 6 and 7.

*Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah’s son have plotted your ruin, saying, “Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.”*

God knew the evil plan of the two kings of Aram and Israel to invade and ruin the Kingdom of Judah. The Kingdom of Judah was helpless before their powerful enemy. Sometimes, we are also shaken like King Ahaz because of the fear and anxiety for our powerful enemies in this world. However, we must remember that no one can harm the people of God without God’s permission. It seems that this world is ruled by powerful nations and political leaders. However, God is much stronger than any political leaders or countries, so God can stop any evil scheme according to his will. What was God’s response to the plan of two kings against Judah? Let’s read verse 7.

*Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says: “‘It will not take place, it will not happen,*

When God says “No”, it is a definite “No” no matter what. No human can go against God’s words, not even powerful leaders like the Russian President Putin or Tesla and Twitter CEO Elon Musk. In verses 8 and 9, God warned that the Kingdom of Israel would collapse if they did not stand firm in their faith.

What did God command to King Ahaz to help him out? Let’s read verse 11.

*“Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”*

God told King Ahaz to ask him for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights. God was ready to show King Ahaz any kind of amazing sign, which was God’s special favor for King Ahaz who was unworthy. What was the response from King Ahaz? Let’s read verse 12.

*But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”*

Ahaz’s response may sound spiritual and biblical given that he seemed to follow God’s commandment in Deuteronomy 6:16, “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test as you did at Massah*”. According to Exodus 17, the Israelites quarreled with Moses in the desert for no water to drink and they tested God saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”. The Israelites tested God out of their unbelief and doubt when they faced a difficult situation. It is true that we should not test God out of our doubt and unbelief. In Matthew 16, the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. Here, the religious leaders were asking for a miraculous sign from heaven out of their doubt and unbelief. Jesus knew their unspiritual intention and refused to show them a sign saying, “A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” Then, was King Ahaz’s refusal to ask God for a sign really a spiritual response based on his faith in God?

It depends on true motives in our hearts. According to Malachi 3:10, God also wants us to test him, so that he can bless us abundantly. Malachi 3:10 states, “*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it”*.

The Hebrew word used for “test” in this verse is bachan, which means “to examine, scrutinize, or prove”. God wants us to test him out of our faith to examine and prove that God is our only true and almighty God, whereas we should never test God out of our unbelief and doubt. Because of his spiritual blindness, arrogance, and pride, King Ahaz refused a wonderful opportunity to ask God for a sign, which would have blessed him greatly. King Ahaz just pretended to be a spiritual man, but in fact he had no faith in God. He rejected God and instead relied on Assyria to protect himself. Let’s not be like Ahaz who was a spiritual hypocrite.

Let’s read verses 13 and 14. *“Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

God wanted to show his mercy to King Ahaz, but Ahaz declined God’s favor and tried the patience of God. Regardless of the response from King Ahaz, God still gave him a sign, which is that the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

What kind of sign is this? This sign didn’t seem relevant to King Ahaz who was threatened by his enemies. In his desperate situation, it looked like a sign that King Ahaz needed was a mighty and strong warrior like Thor instead of a virgin and a baby boy who appear weak and powerless. It seemed that the whole thing about this sign didn’t make any sense. How can a virgin conceive and give birth to a son and how can a son born from a virgin be called Immanuel, which means God with us? I don’t think even Prophet Isaiah was able to quite understand the meaning of this sign from God at the time, but now we know that this was the greatest sign from God in all human history.

By the way, what is the biblical meaning of God’s sign? The Hebrew word for sign is “ot”. In the Old Testament, signs were given to warn people, execute divine judgement, and deliver people from oppression. Through his signs, God intended to teach his people to know and rely on him alone. However, many people often fail to see the true meaning of God’s sign because of their spiritual blindness. In Matthew 16, when the religious leaders asked Jesus for a sign from heaven, Jesus replied like this, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

It must have been puzzling and difficult to interpret the sign of God about the virgin giving birth to a son at that time when it was delivered to King Ahaz by the Prophet Isaiah, but now we believers clearly understand the meaning of this sign, which was directing to the birth of Jesus Christ, our savior. About more than 2000 years ago in a small town called Bethlehem, Jesus was born from a virgin called Mary who conceived Jesus through the work of Holy Spirit. Verse 14 shows that Jesus would be called Immanuel. Immanuel means “God with us”. What is the significance of Immanuel to each of us?

According to Genesis, God created mankind in his own image, and Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden where God was present. However, sin separated humans from God and made us the enemy of God. There was no way that the holy God could stay with sinful humans. However, God promised to be with us through the sign of Immanuel spoken by the Prophet Isaiah in today’s passage. John 1:1 and 12 state, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth*”. God sent his one and only son to this sinful world to save sinners like us by dying on the cross as a ransom sacrifice.

It is hard to describe what it was like that the holy Son of God stayed with sinful humans. It is hard for us to stay with homeless people even for one hour although we are basically the same kind of sinners. There is a neighborhood called Kensington in Philadelphia that is full of homeless people who experience serious drug addiction. Those drug addicts walking on the street are often compared to zombies because they behave like the walking dead. Would you want to stay, talk and eat with them even for a day? To be honest, I don’t think I can do it as a normal person. Then how much more difficult was it for the holy Son of God to come down to this sinful world and dwell with us? Although we, sinners don’t deserve God’s salvation, Jesus came down to the lowest point of our world, being born in a humble manger as a helpless baby. During his lifetime in this world, Jesus served people in Israel with his words, healing power, and prayer, and finally sacrificed himself on the cross. After Jesus had risen from the dead, Jesus ascended to heaven. This happened about 2000 years ago.

Then is Jesus still with us? Yes, he is still with us. Before his ascension, Jesus promised his disciples and us that he is with us always, to the very end of the age. Although Jesus was taken up to heaven 2000 years ago, he is still with us through Holy Spirit. In John 14, Jesus promised his disciples to send Holy Spirit after his death on the cross. John 14:16-20 state, “*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you*”.

It is a great blessing and comfort that God is with us always as our good shepherd. When we are a kid, our parents are with us to take care of us. When we grow up, our friends are with us. When we are married, a husband or a wife is with us. However, no human can stay with us forever. When the time comes, we have to let our beloved ones leave or we will leave them. When I was a kid, I used to say to my mother that I would never leave my hometown because I thought my small hometown was the best place in the whole world, while my mother insisted me that I should move to a big city to be successful. Despite my childhood decision not to leave my hometown, I left my hometown almost 3 decades ago to attend a college in Seoul. Then I even left my home country almost two decades ago. My last visit to Korea was 9 years ago and since then I haven’t seen my mother and only talked to her on the phone. Recently, I found that my mother was suffering from Alzheimer Disease. She has been losing her memory day by day. Now, she doesn’t remember that I am married, have two children, and live in the United States. My biggest fear is that she may not even remember me someday. I am praying for my mother everyday but it is painful to realize that my beloved ones cannot stay with me forever.

However, we are comforted by God who is with us all the time. God is with us in the time of success, in the time of failure, in the time of struggle, and in the time of trouble. Jesus who is always with us can fully understand what we are going through. Hebrews 4:15 states, “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin*”. Jesus was born in a poor carpenter’s family. While dwelling with his people in this world, Jesus suffered together with them, experiencing hunger, grief, tiredness, frustration and anger in every way. Therefore, Jesus is able to understand and emphasize with our weaknesses. Jesus fully understands our feelings and emotions. In John 11, when Jesus saw Mary and others weeping for her brother’s death, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled, and he wept with them. While living in this world, Jesus lived not in a beautiful palace as a prince, but lived with poor, sick and oppressed people like a Samaritan woman, tax collectors, lepers, the blind and the deaf. Jesus laughed, cried, and wept together with them as their good shepherd and best friend.

The “Immanuel” God is with us at every moment, even during our most challenging time. In Daniel 3, Daniel and his two friends were thrown into a blazing furnace because they refused to worship the golden image of King Nebuchadnezzar. However, King Nebuchadnezzar saw Daniel and his two friends as well as one more unknown person walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth man looked like a son of the gods. The king ordered them to come out of the furnace and he found that Daniel and his friends were all fine and unharmed. Who was another person in the blazing furnace? We believe that he was the “Immanuel” God who was with Daniel and his friends to protect them in the blazing furnace. Are you going through a difficult time, feeling like you are in a blazing furnace? Let’s remember that God is with us even when we fall into the deepest point of our life. In Psalm 23, David sang, “*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me*”. Even in the darkest valley of our life, Jesus is still with us and speaking to us, “My son, my daughter, don’t worry and don’t cry. I am with you wherever you are”.

In Revelation 21, God also promised that he will dwell with us in the Holy City, the New Jerusalem after the first earth passes away. Revelation 21:3 and 4 state, “*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*.”

The “Emmanuel” God was with us, is with us, and will be with us forever and ever. In this Christmas season, may God help us have a personal meditation on the true meaning of Immanuel for each of us. May God help all of us humbly accept your greatest sign for all mankind, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel”. May God be with us always.