

Isaiah 7: 1-14; “Immanuel, A Sign to be believed”,
A Christmas sermon delivered on December 14th, 2008,
in the Morning Worship service, by Pastor Paul Rendall

We are coming close to the day in which we, as a culture and society, celebrate the birth of our Savior. We have no commandment in the Bible for the Church to celebrate it on December the 25th, neither do we know with any certainty the particular day on which He was born. The puritan commentator John Trapp says, "For the time of His birth, Christ living just 32 years and a half, and dying at Easter, it must needs follow that he was born about the middle of the month Tisri, which answers to part of our September, at the Feast of Tabernacles, to which Feast the word `escheiosen in the Greek in John 1: 14 probably alludes to. "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us." The thing which is to be celebrated on any day, not just December the 25th, and by everyone, is this blessed fact; that God has sent His only-begotten Son into the World, that we might live through Him. In this is love. (1 John 4: 9) It is indeed a good thing that not only true Christians, but also all the World know that our Immanuel was sent into this World by a loving heavenly Father and that this One is the Savior of the World, and especially for those who believe. In our days, the world has gotten a hold of Christmas and turned the Father's love into a Santa Claus who comes to give presents to everyone and especially to children. Little children are told that they must be good or they will not get their presents, for after all, Santa supposedly knows who has been naughty or nice. But, in reality, it is only God our loving heavenly Father that knows the hearts of children and adults. He knows that not only all children, but all people are naughty by nature, and they are only nice by the power and strength of His grace. It is fitting that I, your minister and pastor tell you this, this morning. God does not live at the north pole; He lives in heaven, but He fills heaven and earth with His blessings. And He does not have large groups of elves helping Him; He has myriads of angels. And He does not ride on a sleigh pulled by reindeer but He rides the skies to your help, if you will call upon His name. "There is none like the God of Jeshurun, who rides the heavens to your help, and through the skies in His majesty." "The eternal God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms." And our loving heavenly Father's greatest gift is not toys and trinkets which entertain the mind for a few minutes or hours and then they are laid aside. His greatest gift, His indescribable gift, is His Son; born as a baby in Bethlehem; born in a stable alongside the animals; born for sinners to give them eternal life by the New Birth. If you see yourself as a sinner and call upon the name of the Lord, you are given this gift; you have all things in Him.

This morning we want to get a hold on the greatness of God's gift to a world of fallen sinners, by looking at the beautiful Name of our Savior which is given to us in this text; the name Immanuel. The Lord Himself gave Ahaz a sign which has become one of the greatest prophecies of Christ's birth, in the whole of Scripture.

It was a sign to be asked for, and a sign to be believed. The sign itself was the virgin conceiving and bearing a Son, and His name being called Immanuel. We know that just before the Christ child was to be born, that the angel told Joseph to call His name Jesus, for he would save His people from their sins. But here in Isaiah it says that the virgin shall call his name Immanuel. And we do not find the name of our Savior spoken of this way, anywhere in the Bible, except here in the book of Isaiah and in Matthew chapter 1. And so I take it to be a spiritual name, part of the sign that was given. You and I must seek to understand the meaning of this sign-name for ourselves. In what ways is the name Immanuel a sign to be believed? Let me tell you how it is so.

1st- The name Immanuel is a sign of depths and heights; The depths of the stubborn unbelief of the human heart, but also the heights of the faithfulness of God.

Verse 11 says, "Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord God; ask it in the depth or in the height above." A sign, when it is given by God, is a miracle performed by a man, a prophet usually to verify the truth of what he is saying, to convince the people that he has been sent to, that he is speaking the truth regarding the most important matters of their life. The prophet Isaiah came to King Ahaz with this command from God to him. "Ask a sign for yourself from Me, the Lord your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above." A very unusual request. I cannot think of another time in the Scripture in which God comes to a man and tells him to ask for a sign. The reason that God did this for Ahaz was because of His sheer mercy to him and to the people of God. God is going to give to the king and all the people with him, this golden opportunity to hear about the greatest gift that God would ever give to any man in any time, a gift which would be for all men, women, and children who would believe. The context of this passage focuses upon the fears of Judah's king Ahaz and all the people with him. They lived in the time of the divided kingdom when Israel was divided into the Northern and Southern kingdoms, after the time of Solomon. Ephraim was the ten northern tribes and called Israel. Judah was composed of the 2 southern tribes. Each had their own kings and kingdom. King Ahaz, the king of Judah, was a particularly evil man. He was the son of a very godly man, Jotham; of whom it is said in 2 Chronicles 27: 6 - "So Jotham became mighty, because he prepared his ways before the Lord his God." But you and I should understand that the children of godly men do not always turn out to be godly. Sometimes godly men teach their children the words of the Lord and the ways of the Lord, and they even set a good example before them, and yet they do not receive the witness of their words the testimony of their lives. They do not believe when they see the signs of grace at work in their parent's lives. Oh, what a shame it was upon Ahaz that he did not humble himself or prepare his ways before God. I hope that each child and young person here will see the signs and believe.

Children, do you think that your parents are religious and godly, and believing, and following after Christ simply because they have always been that way? No, it

is not so. They are godly because God gave them grace to humble themselves so that they would prepare their ways before God. And you must ask yourself if this is something that has happened to you and something that you have responded to, and pursued with all of your heart. How easy it is for a young person to go days without number without thinking of their soul, and without ever once seeking God. Sometimes a young person will seek God occasionally for His blessings. He or she is thankful for earthly blessings, and they are thankful for their parents and their care over them. And it is not as though they are shunning or spurning spiritual blessings. They just do not think upon the signs of grace and act upon them to obtain them for themselves. And so they grow up, and they go away to college, and they may forget altogether to keep seeking God to give them Christ and to reveal to them the meaning of life, so that they might know God and serve God and love God. I pray that each young person here will carefully consider what I say, and take up the Scriptures for themselves to read them, and take up the habit of prayer so that they might find God and His blessed Son for themselves. This Ahaz did not do, even though he received the greatest sign that any man ever received in any time before Christ Himself appeared upon the earth.

We should also understand that it was not only Ahaz, the leader of the people who did not do what was right, but it was the majority of the people of Judah as well. It says in 2 Chronicles 27, verse 2, "And Jotham did what was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Uzziah had done (although he did not enter the temple of the Lord)." "But still the people acted corruptly." How awful a thing it is, when God gives the good gift of a good leader, and yet the people will still act corruptly. We need to take notice of this in our country. Even if the Lord was to give us a good and righteous man as President, and even though He were to give us a majority in both houses of Congress of righteous men; still, if the people act corruptly and do not follow the Lord and serve Him in accordance with the truth of the Bible; still His judgment will come to our nation for our many sins. And often it is the case that God will give a country leaders in accordance with the desires of the people, especially if they have had good leaders in the past, and they still have continued to love their sin and to act corruptly by breaking His commandments. I believe that it was because Judah did not respond in faith and repentance toward God, having been shown God's mercy in the gift of a good leader in Jotham; that then God gave them a leader who was in accordance with their own sinful desires; even Ahaz. Even though King Jotham had been a godly man, it did not insure that his son Ahaz would be a godly man.

It was because Ahaz was a great sinner against the Lord that the Lord allowed Rezin the king of Syria and Pekin, the son of Remaliah, to come up and besiege Jerusalem. It is sinful wickedness in leaders that paves the way for further downhill slide in a nation, morally, so that God must indeed bring his judgments. In 2 Chronicles 28 it says that Ahaz made molded images for the Baals, he burned incense in the valley of Ben-Hinnom and burned his children in the fire. He sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, on the hills, and under every

green tree. Therefore the Lord his God delivered him into the hand of the king of Syria. They defeated him, and carried away, a great multitude of them as captives. Then he was also delivered into the hand of Pekah, the king of Israel who killed 120,000 in Judah in one day, all valiant men, because they had forsaken the Lord God of their fathers. A few verses later we find this comment. Verse 19 says, "The Lord brought Judah low because of Ahaz king of Judah, for he had encouraged moral decline in Israel and had been continually unfaithful to the Lord." Sin is not only a reproach to any people, but sin is something that will bring them low. Not all depression or feeling low is as a result of sin, but you and I must ask ourselves if we are low, if this depression is due to our not being faithful to God, our not seeking Him, and our not doing what He commands. This Ahaz did not do, and suffered for it. Usually unbelieving people, and others around them who see them falling into depression, will try to assign some other reason for their being brought low. It is the fault of some other person; it is the unfortunate circumstances that have come to them; it is anything else that what it might truly be; which is, because of the sin of unbelief in relation to God Himself, and what He says in His word that we should be doing. The Christian is lifted up in His heart, and he learns to rejoice in the Lord in all things because he is trusting in God; he is asking grace of Christ. In verse 22 it says, "Now in the time of his distress King Ahaz became increasingly unfaithful to the Lord." I hope that you can see the connection here between sin, unrepented of, and fear. Ahaz became distressed over what God was bringing into his life because of his sins, but he would not believe in God and he would not seek Him. Therefore he became afraid, and he became increasingly unfaithful. This is the way that sin progresses in our lives. You and I must understand that we can never have peace if we are going to tolerate sin in our hearts and actions. Here in Isaiah 7, in the life of Ahaz, we find that all this unfaithfulness brought about fear. In verse 2 it says, "And it was told to the house of David saying, 'Syria's forces are deployed in Ephraim.' So his heart and the heart of his people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind." We need to see the principle given to us here in these words. Unbelief and fear go hand in hand. Unfaithfulness to God, especially in our leaders, will bring us to the place where God's judgments will cause us to be moved as "trees of the woods are moved with the wind."

But look at the surprising and wonderful mercy which God shows wicked Ahaz. The Lord gives Ahaz the Old testament gospel through Isaiah the prophet. He would freely give him that which would be the solution to all of his problems and change his life for the better forever. The Lord would have him to "Take heed and be quiet; do not fear or be fainthearted". He would do something very wonderful if only he would believe. Be careful and be calm, Ahaz, the Lord says. All this plotting against you will not stand and it will not come to pass. You do not need to fear men, Ahaz; you need to fear Me, God says. Trust in Me, and in My strength, and all is well Ahaz. But if you will not believe, He says to him in verse 9, surely you shall not be established." The Lord even goes so far as to tell Ahaz to ask a

sign for himself; he can ask it either in the depth or the height above. Make it ever so great, Ahaz, it shall not be beyond my infinite power, the Lord is telling him.

But here we see the stubborn unbelief of the human heart apart from grace. Ahaz does not respond positively at all to the Lord's overtures to him. He says, "I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!" Oh, Ahaz, this sounds so spiritual of you, but you are so wrong! The Lord Himself is giving you a sign. He is showing his great faithfulness to you and to all the house of David. He is going to preserve the line of the godly seed, and you would have no reason to fear if you would only believe. This should wake us up and speak volumes to us this morning. It is faith in the promises of God that establishes all the good blessings of God to ourselves whether we are believer or unbeliever. And if we will not believe, then surely we shall not be established. Unbelief is perhaps the greatest of sins. It is called wearying God and men in verse 13. It tires out God's patience for you to treat God in this way. He was commanding Ahaz to ask for a sign, to believe in the promise, to look for and to expect God to act in miraculous ways on his behalf, and on behalf of the kingdom and yet Ahaz in this mockingly pious way says, "I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!" I am sure that the Almighty does eventually get tired of our unbelief if we stubbornly continue in it. Ask yourself this morning; do I understand the place of faith in relation to all the trials that I am going through? Do I let skepticism and unbelief rule in my heart and thus attempt to road block the goodness of God to me? God will be faithful to you if you will be faithful to Him. God will be faithful to deal with you according to your faith, to reward that faith, and He will be faithful to bring you to judgment if you will not believe. But He will be exalted in His faithfulness either way! Which will you have?

"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm. Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs, and works His sovereign will. Ye fearful saints fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for his grace; behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face. His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower. Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain; God is His own interpreter and He will make it plain."

--William Cowper, Hymn 21.

2ndly - The name Immanuel is an encouraging sign of our solemn responsibility to believe in the Son who was born.

Ahaz was a man of blind unbelief, stubborn unbelief, with a steadfast refusal to consider God's great work and words. Let us ask ourselves this morning, "what am I like?" Over and over God comes to us and says, "Be not afraid, only believe." He

comes to us and says,” Have faith in God, For assuredly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.” (Mark 11: 22, 23) He says, “your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction.” (Mark 5:34)

This is why you and I need to see the significance of the name Immanuel this morning. It is not as though you and I are never going to suffer in this life, or that eventually that we will not die from some bodily affliction. It is whether or not we will suffer gloriously and die gloriously in the Faith of Jesus Christ that makes all the difference. It makes all the difference when we behold the truth of Immanuel, which means God with us. We behold the faithfulness of God. It was the faithfulness of God that preserved the line of David until the Messiah was brought forth. The sinfulness of Ahaz warranted the judgment of God that He would eventually bring on the Nation of Judah. Ahaz was entirely unworthy of such a sign as this. We all are unworthy of it. The depths of our sin deserve judgment not mercy. The sign of the name Immanuel shows us that if God is with us that our sinful independent way of thinking about things in our unbelief must cease or we will perish. God speaks to us gently in the gospel, it is news of great joy, it is for all people. But if it is refused, then God will still fulfill all his purposes. You see the proof of this over in Matthew 1 in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 9 it says that, “Uzziah begot Jotham, Jotham begot Ahaz, and Ahaz begot Hezekiah. Ahaz is in the line of men and Kings who God preserved to have the children that would establish the Royal line of David down to the birth of Christ. Ahaz was not a man that went to heaven, but he was a man who made the list of the forefathers of Christ. It is Ahaz’s fault that he did not believe the sign. And it will be yours as well if you will not believe it for yourself.

Look over at Isaiah chapter 8: 5 with me. Here we see what unbelief brings. “The Lord also spoke to me (Isaiah) again saying: ‘Inasmuch as these people refused the water of Shiloah that flow softly, and rejoice in Rezin and Remaliah’s son; now therefore, behold, the Lord brings up over them the waters of the River, strong and mighty- the king of Assyria and all his glory; He will go up over all his channels and go over all his banks. He will pass through Judah, He will overflow and pass over, He will reach up to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings will fill the breadth of Your land, O Immanuel. Be shattered, O you peoples, and be broken in pieces! Give ear, all you from far countries.” "Gird yourselves, but be broken in pieces; Gird yourselves, but be broken in pieces." "Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak the word, but it will not stand, for God is with us." This prophecy is telling us that the reason that Israel as a nation would not be destroyed, could not be destroyed, was because it was Immanuel’s land. But it could be, and they would be judged and brought into captivity because of their sins. The whole purpose of the nation of Israel finds its fulfillment and its reason for existence, in bringing forth the Christ child. "For unto us a child is born, and unto us a Son is given." But many of them did not see this as God’s gift.

They did not believe and trust in God to protect them and to provide for them, either for this life or for the next. They saw only the conspiracies of men like Pekin and Rezin against them. They saw only the armies of the Assyrians poised to come at them. And you and I may be some of those who fall into the same kind of unbelieving thinking. If you find yourself trying to find the conspiracies of men as the reason for all the bad and difficult things that are coming upon you, or even upon our society; think again. It is God who gives peace. It is God who brings blessings to men and to societies. It is not men, ultimately that you have to deal with; it is God. Verses 11- 18 of chapter 8 of Isaiah, however, will give us the answer to our unbelief. "For the Lord spoke thus to me with a strong hand, and instructed me that I should not walk in the way of this people, saying: 'Do not say, "A conspiracy," concerning all that this people call a conspiracy, nor be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.'" "The Lord of hosts, Him shall you hallow; Let Him be your dread. He shall be as a sanctuary" Is He this to you this morning? "But a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel...And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken, be snared and be taken." You must see the Lord Jesus Christ as the Child born for you, as the Son given to you. You see this by faith. You cannot walk in the way of unbelief. You must trust in God's word. Listen to verse 16, "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. And I will wait on the Lord, who hides His face from the house of Jacob; and I will hope in Him." "Here am I," says the Lord Jesus Christ, "and the children whom the Lord has given Me! We are for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, who dwells in Mount Zion." God is with us in the person of Jesus Christ. The name Immanuel is a sign of the depths of our need of Christ and the heights of the faithfulness of God to His promise. And when we believe in our Immanuel, we ourselves become a sign to people around us. We become a sign and a wonder to others who see the reality of our faith. God is with us, to save us from our sins, to save us from our enemies, so that we might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life. The Lord has given us a sign in the name of His Son; our Immanuel.