

## *The Sign of Immanuel: God with Us* (Isaiah 7)

### **1) God Who cares**

The prophecies of Isaiah are really remarkable in the light of time in history. The question at hand when Isaiah began his ministry, was not whether Israel or Judah could regain their former glory but whether these two nations would survive, at all. Therefore, in the midst of this chaos, the God of all mankind Who cares for his creation including people, called Isaiah to speak on His behalf. Yet, His call did not focus on the Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah. But rather, it presents God's love and concern for all peoples. In this chapter 7, Ahaz the King of Judah had turned away completely from the Lord, not only practising idolatry, but even sacrificing his own children as burnt offerings to pagan gods. When he heard that Pekah and Rezin had formed an alliance and were preparing an attack, he had no faith to fall back on because he knew from the bottom of his heart that he had departed from the true foundation of his father and grandfather who had been kings before him. This was why Ahaz became so afraid that he began to shake from his inside like a tree in the wind, and this fear of him did also become the fear of the nation. God Who cares in His mercy, told Isaiah to help the king to gain some perspective by taking a long-term view of the forces aligning themselves against him and his people. Instead of feeling anxious desperation, King Ahaz was invited by the prophet to have faith in God: "If you don't stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all!" In a similar way, we Christians, today, are called into a family of a God Who cares. We should take a different view of time and events of history. The Bible helps us to gain a perspective by taking a long-term view of history's outcomes, not just the short lived gains or losses from year to year. As God's people, we're a part of a process spanning generations in which are building on a legacy of our predecessors and contributing to the future of our successors. King Ahaz of Judah's reverse of the godly course of his forefathers had set by leading the nation into idolatry, including human sacrifices. It was even said that in his days, there were more gods in Judah than cities (Jeremiah 2:28). The situation was horrible, and human understanding would say that this man deserved punishment. But the God of hope sent Isaiah to help in the situation. Our world, today, is full with such kinds of attitude. We find it in higher places like politic, humanistic ideas increasing in our societies, and many unnatural attitudes. But it is all not different from the world that God called Isaiah to help. Therefore, "Advent" means hope for the nations.

### **2) The worse will get even worse**

Despite the godly ways of Jotham and his grandfather Uzziah, Ahaz could not embrace the counselling of prophet Isaiah. Rather, he trusted in his own understanding. And as a result, King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Damascus did attack Judah, killed 120000 men and carried hundreds of thousands people away as captives. Then, they besieged Jerusalem in order to establish their own king, but they were unable to take the city, just as Isaiah had prophesied (Verse 7-9). But King Rezin captured Elath which was Judah's port on the Red Sea (2nd King 16:6-8). This, also, enabled the Edomites to attack Judah from the South, and they also carried away captives (2nd Chronicles 28:17). The Palestines did also invade the low lands West of Jerusalem, capturing numerous cities and villages (2nd Chronicles 28:18-21). Despite these defeats, Ahaz did still refuse to turn back to the Lord, and he got worse and worse that he applied help from Assyria. He took all the treasure of the temple and the palace and sent it to this king of Assyria who's name was Tiglath Pileser III. The response was that Tiglath Pileser III captured Damascus and killed King Rezin (2nd Kings 16:9). But all this brought Judah only under a greater Assyrian control. Observing all these events, Isaiah warned Ahaz that his reliance on Tiglath Pileser was an affront to God that would lead to his downfall, be-

cause he Isaiah had told him, the king, to trust in the Lord God Almighty for deliverance. But he had refused to accept God's offer of a miraculous sign and had sought help from the Assyrians, instead. This is not different in the world in which we live, today: More than eighty-five percent of our national leaders go to consultations of spirits. Even in Germany, today, there are more telephone-numbers of fortune-tellers in the phone-book than telephone-numbers of pastors. In television, there are more astrologists than pastors "preaching". But there is surely a hope for the future. So far as there is still a church in the city, this hope cannot be cut off. In all the horrible situations around us, the church stands as the light of faith which presents the unfailing love of God. Just as God in His mercy wanted Isaiah to help the king and the people of Judah, any time we remember Advent, there must also be expectations that the gracious God wants to help the nations of the world through us. God is more gracious to help the politicians despite their mistakes. We should remember that they might be wrong in many ways, but they're also victims of the devil. This was the situation in Judah. Judah was pressed on every side, but not crushed. It was perplexed, but not in despair. It was persecuted, but still not abandoned. It was shook down, but not destroyed. The devil thought he had done his worst in the Land of Judah, but he didn't know that he had only built a platform for God to demonstrate His power of love. Judah was standing in a situation to see the best of God's love which is the sign of Immanuel. God gave them significant strength and grace to endure the times of trouble. And that grace is with you, also, in your situation.

### **3) The virgin will be with a child (Verse 10-14)**

The verse 10 begins with the word "again", which means, Isaiah had to speak to King Ahaz even after his disobedience of not accepting the council of the Lord. Isaiah spoke to him to ask for a natural or supernatural sign from the Lord. But Ahaz said he would not ask for it because he would not want to put the Lord into a test. The truth of the matter is that this attitude is false humility. Even though it sounds religious and spiritual, he has already put the Lord into test by sacrificing his own children to pagan gods (2nd Kings 16:3-5). Often, this is what the human nature offers. After doing our own things, instead of accepting our mistakes and pleading for God's mercy, we pretend to be religious and spiritualise everything that is even natural. In all the king's mistakes, God sent Isaiah to be a friend to him. So God may send also you and me to be a friend to somebody with whom we're working. The person may misbehave in a childish way like this king was doing, but love will cover multitude of human misbehaviour. So Isaiah said: "Hear now, you House of David, is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God, also? Therefore, the Lord, Himself, will give you a sign. A virgin shall be with child and will give birth to a son and will call Him 'Immanuel'." The immediate application of this miraculous sign was to a new bride who has been a virgin until the time of her marriage. Before her son was old enough to know right from wrong, these kings and their lands would be laid waste (Verse 16). This prophecy's ultimate fulfilment was realized in the birth of Jesus Christ by the Virgin Mary. Mary was a virgin and remained a virgin until after Jesus' birth. The conception of her son came about by a miracle of the Holy Spirit rather than through the act of a man. And the virgin's son was called "Immanuel", which means "God with us". Just as our world, today, nations number the populations of their people. Some do this every ten, others every five years. This, actually, began also in the biblical times that the kings and leaders kept records of their citizens. Several major censuses are mentioned in Scripture. So when Quirinius was the imperial legate in the Roman province of Syria, censuses were important for taxations, administration, military, planning, conscription, recruitment of labour for public work projects as well as for tithes and offerings to maintain religious institutions. Cesar Augustus used censuses to inventory the resources and needs of his empire to raise money and to determine where to locate his troops. In Biblical times as well as today, censuses had major political implications. They certainly aided the strategic delivery of services. But registrations were experienced by many as a tool

of exploitation and oppression, especially where the government maintained without the choice of the people and with little concern for their welfare. Such was the case in Israel under the Romans. Nevertheless, under this political captivity, God used the census to bring Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem where Jesus was born in fulfilment of God's plan and what He had spoken through the prophets. Bethlehem means "house of bread". The district was well-known for its agriculture and as the city of David. It is also associated with the prophet Samuel who came there and anointed David as a king (1st Samuel 17:12). David never lost his affection for the city, and it also predicted to be the birth-place of the Messiah (Micah 5:2). Historically, the site of Immanuel's birth was likely a cave near the town. Stables were normally built into caves at that time. Helena, the mother of Constantine, built a church in A.D. 330 at the spot where it is said that it was the birth-place of Jesus. Today, at this same place a church can be found which was built by emperor Justinian in A.D. 527-565.

#### **4) The angels' and shepherds' connection**

The angels' and the shepherds' connection tells us the other side of the story (Luke 2:8-20). The stable was probably a cave, and the manger a feeding trough for animals. The birth of the Saviour occurred in the most humble circumstances. Mary could have said: "Don't you know I'm the mother of a child who is going to be the King of Kings and the Saviour of the world?" But just as the latter character of her son was known, He did not live a life like a king in a palace, but rather, He lived a simple life. Let us be human and think about the situation that the parents found themselves in, with their child in the manger. If that was not a frustration period in their lives, I don't know what we think frustration is like. They were far away from home. They were on their way to fulfil the command of the emperor, and suddenly, the birth pains began. The devil may at this time have thrown a lot of thoughts that they had a battle of the mind. This was a situation of inward storm. We should not forget that the devil came in, here, and locked the hearts of the people in the city that no house was opened for the woman in her desperate situation of strong need of help. Against all hope, this family still had hope in help of their Maker to Whom our hearts are opening and all desire is known. Now they had a manger, and the child was born, so there was mixed feeling of joy and a bad environment. If you and I don't have hope in ourselves, we will celebrate Advent upon Advent and will not have any hope for our cities and nations. For one can only give what he has. As Christians, we have the hope of glory in us, and that is what the world needs. The angels of the Lord were there in the situation, even though Mary and Joseph couldn't see them with their physical eyes. But the statement that the angel went to the shepherds and told them that today, in the city of David, the Saviour was born, proved their activity in the situation. The angel didn't go to religious leaders or rich and famous people in the land who were, anyway, not ready for Jesus, but the angel went to the shepherds who were faithful like royal servants who keep watch through the long, dark night, waiting for the return of their master. They were "nobodies" in the eyes of men, but God knew their hearts that they were also waiting in faith, patience, and great longing for the coming of the Messiah. The question, here, is: Are we waiting for the second coming of the Saviour as we're celebrating Advent year after year? After the encounter with the angels, the shepherds went as fast as they could to find the holy family. And when the shepherds came in to visit and told Mary and Joseph what the angels had said to them, what do you think was this to the family? If this was not an encouragement, I don't know what you and I will accept to be an encouragement. Mary and Joseph were having encounters with God, and the shepherds, also, had had their encounter with God. But if the two groups would not have met and shared what they had experienced with their Maker, they couldn't have encouraged one another. In the same way, we as Christians should come together and share what God is doing in our lives so that we can lift up one another. It has always been that God Who is everywhere makes Himself known somewhere. And the peace that the angels proclaimed has already come to earth. Now it is personal in application to all people

who apply Jesus in their lives. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will towards all mankind” the angels had sung. Where is our passion for the world around us? May God burn our hearts just as we light the candle as a symbol of Advent and give us the hope that can reach others for His second coming!

### **5) A poor family’s sacrifice (Luke 2:22-38)**

The Gospel of Luke reveals that Jesus was born into poverty. The law required a woman to bring a lamb as a sacrifice on the occasion of the birth. But the poor were allowed to offer two inexpensive turtledoves or pigeons, instead (Leviticus 12:6-8). So did Jesus’ parents, when they brought the baby Jesus into the temple. When they were there, an old man named Simeon approached them and took the baby into his arms to bless him. There was nothing special about Simeon that qualified him to do so with the little Immanuel. To our knowledge, he was not ordained as a religious leader, and he had no credentials or special authority. He was simply a just and devoted man who had a close walk with God, and God gave him the insight just as He had given to Isaiah to encourage the suffering of humanity, the words of hope: “Immanuel is coming”. He would be the solution to this world’s destruction. And Simeon who was old had heard from God that he would not die until his eyes would have seen this Saviour of the world. Simeon’s name means “God hears”, and he is an example of how God honours those who engage in lifetimes of quiet prayer and constant watchfulness. Simeon was a man of patient faith. Yet, his waiting for the Messiah must have seemed to be interminable. He likely had many opportunities for doubt, as numerous people would have done. The sound of the alarms of false Messiahs’ was all over the place. Yet, somehow he knew that the redeemer would first come not as a great nationalists’ leader or with a political agenda of violence, but as a baby carried in the arms of his parents. His kingdom would prove to be a stumbling block to some and the rock of salvation to others, both Jews and gentiles. Simeon also knew that the young couple standing before him would be hurt by the controversies that would eventually surround their son. There was also an old woman called Anna who was known for her spiritual wisdom and the proclamation of God’s Word to the people. She spent her time in the temple serving God through fasting and prayers. When Joseph and Mary brought their son to the temple for presentation, Anna did also recognize Him, and the reason was that she was also living in expectation to the One Who would bring redemption to the world. No doubt, many of Anna’s prayers over the years had expressed a longing for God’s anointed One. Along with Simeon, Anna had helped to testify about Jesus as the sign of Immanuel being fulfilled. Her testimony as a woman would have counted for little in the Jewish courts of those days. But Luke included her in his Gospel, perhaps to highlight one of the changes that Jesus the Redeemer wanted to bring about among His followers. No longer should they regard women as witnesses who were unworthy to be trust, but as full members of a new community of faith in Christ, the Immanuel.

### **6) Heaven is a prepared place for prepared people**

The Virgin Mary had to prepare herself for the sign of Immanuel to have its earthly fulfilment through her. The promise to her through the angel Gabriel became her dream. One day, this dream became reality because of her preparation. She saw her dream growing up that even one day when she with the rest of the family wanted to see Jesus, people from the crowd said to Him: “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside seeking to talk to you.” Jesus told them that his brothers, sisters and family would be those people who were listening to Word of God (Matthew 12:48-50). In the ancient society in which Jesus lived, there were great emphasizes on blood-relationships. So, Jesus’ words, here, must have sounded quite strange to the people and especially, to his family. All the preparations that Mary had been through- which mother would not have been offended to hear such words from her beloved son? To the crowd, it seemed to be that Jesus was breaking with traditions and at the same

time, disowning his family. But notice that Jesus was not denying that Mary and his brothers at the door were His family. Rather, the point is that He extended beyond the normal understanding of family to a larger reality that anyone who would do the will of God would be of His (heavenly) family. In our preparation for the second coming of Christ which we celebrate year after year, it does often not occur to us how big the family of God is. There are young people in our churches whose parents are not Christians just as there are elder people in our churches whose children are not Christians. And Jesus wants us to relate to one another just as we would do to our natural family. This includes the unknown time of His second coming. Our church-fathers told us not to establish a doctrine through the parables that Jesus spoke. But the truth is, Jesus would not speak a parable to teach lies, but He used familiar things to print truth that would bring understanding to the simple. And the majority of them speak of our preparation towards His coming, an hour when we do not expect Him. He says He would be coming like a thief. The only way that Mary came through from the dream which became reality and saw her son being taken to the cross and put to death was that she had prepared herself to expect the unexpected. And the unexpected became the living hope of mankind. In the parable of the ten virgins, they were all called to be righteous. They all had purity at their best, but five were known as wise and received acceptance, and five not. Those who were not accepted did their best to get along, but not enough in their preparation towards the “groom’s” (Jesus’) coming. Jesus said: “I must go to prepare you a place and I will come back and receive you to myself” (John 14:1-3). This statement goes to the universal church, just as the ten virgins’ emphasizes all believers. We must constantly look to our own spiritual condition in the light of Christ’s second coming at an unknown and unexpected time. We must persevere in faith so that when that day and hour arrives, we will be received by the Lord’s returning. A failure to be in a personal relationship with the Lord at His return means to be excluded from His presence and kingdom. Christ indicates here that half of the universal church will be unprepared. He makes it clear that He will not wait or come according to our set time when we expect Him, but we have to prepare ourselves in line with His coming. For his coming will be a surprise for everyone.

This sign of Immanuel brought back focus of God’s personal concern for us and for you. It is our privilege to apply His redemption individually. The angels announced God’s good will towards all mankind. This is personal in application. Have you applied Him as your Lord and Saviour? Blessed are those who accept Him as their Redeemer and their hope for the future to come.

Yours in His service, F.P. Arthur (a missionary from Ghana)  
Contact: [peter-steffi@freenet.de](mailto:peter-steffi@freenet.de)