



• Great unbelief in both Judah and Israel

Isaiah now goes on to deal with the very great unbelief that was to be found in the two nations, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This part of the book describes the critical moment of unbelief in Judah¹, and then will show us that exactly the same kind of unbelief was to be found in northern Israel². Both sections of the nation fell into serious trouble for much the same reasons.

1 17:1-9:7
2 9:8-11:16

Judah had to decide whether to:
• Ally itself with Assyria
• Ally itself with Syria and Israel, or
• Try to remain independent

The situation was as follows. Assyria in the far north-east was threatening to conquer all the lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. South of Assyria there was Syria or Aram. Further south was Israel (also called Ephraim). And further south still was Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem. All of the promises of God involved Judah, Jerusalem its capital city and the line of kings who descended from King David. In Isaiah's time the problem that Judah had to face was (i) whether to become an ally of Assyria, (ii) whether to combine with Syria and Israel in order to resist Assyria, or (iii) whether to do nothing and stay independent altogether. Ahaz chose the first option. He became an ally of Assyria. Then Syria and Israel invaded Judah, perhaps to prevent Judah from supporting Assyria in a time of war.

• Syria and Israel failed to conquer Jerusalem

1When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

The two countries to the north of Judah failed to conquer Jerusalem. The story of this first invasion is told in 2 Chronicles 28:5–8.

• Now there is a second invasion

Isaiah 7:2 tells us of a second invasion. It is now sometime after 732 BC, at least eight years after Isaiah's call. King Jotham (740–732 BC) has come and gone. King Ahaz is ruler of Judah. Syria and Israel have been allies for many years but now their soldiers are assembling together again, getting ready to invade Judah for a second time. Ahaz hears about it.

2Now the house of David was told, 'Aram has gathered together with Ephraim'; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

Faith has to persist despite serious challenges

Faith has to persist despite serious challenges. Faith is always based on the character of God and the promises of God. You cannot believe God if you do not have a word from God. But King Ahaz had a promise. He was the 'house of David' – the king from among whose descendants was promised the coming Saviour for Israel. But now the kings of Syria and Israel are threatening to remove the line of David from the throne. There is a serious threat coming against the promises of God concerning David's line. Ahaz is being invited to persist in faith. God gives promises, but the question is: will we believe them?

• King Ahaz had a promise

Persisting in faith sometimes means standing still while God gives a great victory

Persisting in faith sometimes means standing still while God gives a great victory. Ahaz looks only to earthly resources but God asks him to do nothing at all.

3Then Yahweh said to Isaiah, 'Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field.'

Ahaz is checking up on the safety and security of the water supplies of

• Ahaz is worrying about earthly resources

Jerusalem. There was an aqueduct, an above-ground channel for bringing water into the city, and Ahaz is wondering whether it will remain secure when an invasion comes. But Isaiah has advice of an altogether different kind. God says to Isaiah.

• Isaiah's word from God is to do nothing

⁴*Say to him: Watch yourself so as to stand still, and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smouldering stubs of firewood — because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.* ⁵*Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying,* ⁶*“Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.”* ⁷*Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord Yahweh says:*

*‘It will not take place, it will not happen,
⁸for the head of Aram is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.
Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered
so as no longer to be a people.
⁹The head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.
If you do not stand by faith, you will not stand at all.’*

• Whether Ahaz acted in faith or in compromise with the Assyrians would lead to the survival or ruin of Judah

Isaiah's word from God is: 'Watch yourself so as to stand still' or (as we might paraphrase) 'Be very careful to do nothing!' When we face frightening opposition, often we are called simply to stay where we are and look to God to defeat our enemy without our doing anything at all. This was what was being asked of Ahaz. It was the key to his survival. 'If you do not stand by faith, you will not stand at all.' Whether Ahaz acted in faith or in compromise with the Assyrians would lead to the survival or the ruin of Judah. He was asked simply to trust God. The Syrians and northern Israelites would soon collapse. After the 680s (about sixty-five years ahead) many Assyrians would move into northern Israel and so the Israelites who had been exiled to Assyria had no land to return to. Israel, the northern section of the nation, would cease to exist. Ahaz need not fear them at all. But if he will not continue in faith, then he too will come under God's judgement.

• He was asked to trust God

God invites Ahaz to believe and then he is to ask for an immediate sign from God

God invites Ahaz to believe and then he is to ask for an immediate sign from God.

¹⁰*Again Yahweh spoke to Ahaz,* ¹¹*“Ask Yahweh your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”*

'God does not often encourage signs¹⁰. And unbelievers are not given signs at all¹¹. But sometimes on special occasions those who are already believers are given something to confirm their faith (as in the case of Gideon!). This is a very great occasion in the history. Ahaz is being asked to trust in God, and then he is allowed to ask for any sign that he wishes in order to confirm his faith. It is a very wonderful offer, for a very special occasion. God is willing to be his God. However, Ahaz responds in unbelief.

¹²*But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask; I will not put Yahweh to the test.’*

• Ahaz will not ask for a sign because he doesn't believe God can deliver Judah

His pious language is quite deceitful. The fact is he has no faith in the possibility of God's delivering Judah.

God speaks of an undated sign that He will give to those who have faith

God speaks of an undated sign that he will give to those who do have faith. God speaks again through Isaiah.

¹³*Then he said, ‘Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough that you weary men? Will you try the patience of my God also?’* ¹⁴*Therefore the Sovereign Lord himself will give you a sign. Look! The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call his name Immanuel.’*

¹⁰ remember John 4:48
¹¹ remember Matthew 16:4

¹⁴A miracle-child will be born without any human father. A virgin will give birth

• A virgin birth will be the sign of God's purposes

• The birth of the miracle-child will remain undated

• Unbelief will ruin Judah for centuries

without there being a sexual relationship with any man. It will be the sign that God's purposes of salvation are proceeding. Isaiah can see the child in prophetic vision as if the child were right there before him. Imagining the child to be present – for there is no date attached to the promise – the threat to Judah will disappear before the miracle-child could be a few years old. But because of Ahaz's unbelief, the line of the house of David will suffer a serious blow, through the invasion of the Assyrians. The birth of the miracle-child will remain undated, but will be pushed into the future. Unbelief will ruin Judah for centuries. Refusing to hold to the faith we have professed is a serious matter. God wants us to go on believing no matter what crisis may be ahead of us. Ahaz could have been delivered from the Assyrians there and then. But by unbelief and impatience he failed to inherit the promises at that point.

Dr Michael Eaton (1942-2017) was highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. Born in the UK, he lived for many years in Kenya where he became a citizen. He was one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship in Nairobi. His Preaching through the Bible books are highly popular worldwide, written in a clear and down-to-earth style but underpinned by rigorous scholarship. Some of these books have been reformatted as individual sheets for personal and group study and preaching. The New Testament volumes have been re-edited and combined in the Branch Commentary. The Old Testament, including previously unpublished material will follow. More details: www.slices.org.uk.