

“The Lord Himself Will Give You a Sign”

If only God would give me a sign. Have you ever felt that way? Maybe you were considering a job offer or two, and as you weighed the different options, you wanted the choice to be more clear than it was turning out to be. Maybe you were contemplating your long-term future and goals. What do I want to be when I grow up? What sort of career would I like? The choices seem almost endless sometimes. Maybe you were thinking about relationships. Should I ask this or that person out on a date? Are we ready to get married? Maybe you can think of other examples. There are choices and decisions in life, and you want to serve God with the choices you make. Yet, the right answer isn't always clear. You wish that God would make it absolutely clear, that he would give you an unmistakable sign.

As we look through Scripture, we realize that sometimes God does, or did, give signs. When he called Moses to be the leader of his people, the Israelites, when Moses would lead them out of Egypt and slavery and bring them to the Promised Land, God gave him signs. He demonstrated to Moses that God was truly speaking to him, and he gave these signs so that Moses could show Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, that Moses was really God's servant. God told Moses to throw his staff to the ground. When he did, it became a snake. When he picked up the snake, it became a staff again.

At another time, God called Gideon to lead his people as a judge. God said that through Gideon he would rescue his people from their enemies, the Midianites. But Gideon wanted to be absolutely sure that God was calling him, so he asked for a sign. “Make this wool fleece wet with dew in the morning, but let the ground around it be dry.” God did what Gideon asked. He offered him a sign. Contrary to the way that dew normally works, where it covers everything if it covers anything, God made the wool fleece wet and the ground dry. And just so there would be no doubt, God answered Gideon's request to repeat the sign in a slightly different way the next morning. This time, the ground was wet with dew, but the fleece was completely dry.

Jesus gave many signs to the people as he preached and taught among them. He did miracles. He healed the sick and the blind and the lame, and even raised people from the dead. But at other times, he refused to give wicked people a sign to prove his power. He promised them only one sign: the sign of Jonah. Like Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days and nights, so Jesus would be in the tomb for three days and nights.

There are plenty of examples of signs in the Scriptures, but perhaps none as important or amazing as the one mentioned in our sermon text today. This sign wasn't asked for like Gideon's signs were. But just like the other signs that we run across in God's Word, this sign proved God's power and it promoted God's promise.

We find this sign in Isaiah 7:14, toward the end of our sermon text this morning. What comes before provides us with a bit of context regarding the sign. And to appreciate the context, we'll need to consider the people involved. The first name that we run across in the text is that of Ahaz. Ahaz was the king of Judah at the time. Remember that Judah was the name of the southern kingdom of Israelite tribes. While David and Solomon had ruled one large kingdom, after that it was divided in two. The kingdom of Judah was home to Jerusalem and the Lord's temple. To the north was another kingdom. This kingdom retained the name Israel, and its capital city was Samaria. The king of Israel at the time of our text was Pekah. And you can see how bad things were in Israel and Judah when you see that Pekah was gearing up to attack Judah. And it was not only him, it was also his ally in Rezin, the king of Aram.

The next person involved was Isaiah, the prophet. As you may recall, a prophet was someone who spoke God's Word. In Old Testament times, God revealed his Word directly to the prophets who then shared it with others. God sent Isaiah to Ahaz, the king of Judah, to say that he didn't need to worry about the attack from Israel and Aram. Through the prophet, God said, “They won't succeed. Trust in me.”

And God added the offer of a sign. **Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”** Clearly such a sign would be proof of God’s power to do what he promised. Here was the message: “Ask me for anything, anything you can think of, and I will do it. Are you concerned that I can’t protect you? I have the power to offer you anything in the whole world. I can handle Rezin and Pekah.”

Let that sink in. This is our God, who has promised in the past to handle events of history in order to accomplish his will. This is our God, who has promised anything in the world to people so that they would know he has the power to keep his word. This is our God, who invites us to trust that same power whenever we face difficulties and hardships. No, he hasn’t promised to direct every aspect of our lives by giving us signs, but he has promised to help us through any temptations that we face, and to guard us against our enemies, and to work out all things for our good. And he has the power to do it all.

But somehow, for some reason, Ahaz refused. God said, “I will give you a sign.” And the king said, “No, thanks.” Actually, what he said was, **“I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”** That sounds good, doesn’t it? Jesus himself resisted the temptations of the devil by quoting Scripture, saying, **“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”** But this wasn’t good. This was Ahaz refusing to listen to God. This was Ahaz rejecting God’s gracious offer of a sign and pretending that he was more faithful and more pious for rejecting it than he would have been for taking God at his Word. That’s why God responded with anger and rebuke.

Unfortunately, we too can fall into similar temptations. It is easy to pretend that we are faithful and that we are listening to God, but not to really listen to what he tells us. We can talk about how important it is to hold on to the truth of God’s Word, but it really means very little unless we also seek to share the good news with others. We can come to church every single week and sit in the pews and nod our heads in agreement, but that too means very little if the rest of our lives are lived contrary to God’s will and his Word.

But here is the amazing thing, as amazing for us as it was for Ahaz: God does what he promises anyway. In spite of Ahaz’ rejection of God’s Word and his offer for a sign, God did protect him from his enemies at the time. His prediction regarding the demise of Israel, no surprise, came true in the course of history. And that’s not all. God also gave a sign, an amazing sign, an impressive sign: **Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.** No matter what Ahaz did, no matter what his enemies did, God would carry out his gracious plan of salvation. He would send Immanuel, God-with-us.

God certainly was reinforcing his promise that he would be with the people of Judah during the struggles they were facing, but the sign that God gave went well beyond their immediate circumstances. This sign was for a whole world of sinners throughout history. This sign was for you and for me. It shows us God’s power, that he would send a virgin-born Savior. It is another repetition of the promise God had made so long before, and it built upon past promises with an undeniably specific detail. One born of a virgin would be God-With-Us. What a beautiful description of the One that we needed!

You heard from Matthew’s Gospel today how God kept his promise, and fulfilled this sign. In only a few days we will be once again celebrating God stepping into our world, to be with us as one of us. For all of the times that we have pretended piety, for all of the times that we have refused to listen to God’s direction, for all the times that we face trouble or hardship or danger, Jesus came to be the answer. He came to rescue us from our enemies. He came to rescue us from our sins. He came to give us eternal life and salvation.

Sure, there are times when we’d love to have a sign from God to direct our decisions. But the reality is that he’s given us everything that we need. He’s given us the direction of his Word. He’s given us a Savior from our sins. That is, he has given us Immanuel.

The Text: Isaiah 7:1–17 (NIV84)

When 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.

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

³ Then the Lord 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. 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. 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 says: ‘It will not take place, it will not happen, ⁸ for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. ⁹ The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah’s son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.’”

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

¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

¹³ Then 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? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. ¹⁶ But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. ¹⁷ The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”