

Signs

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Date: 22 November 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, we would never be able to live properly without the help of signs, would we? I mean, take road signs, for example. How chaotic would driving be if we didn't have any road signs?

Here, for example, is a sign about falling cows, which is a true sign in California of America. Road signs are vital to our survival, not just to warn us of falling cows, but various dangers, unseen dangers, things that we need to know about coming up on the road.

As you come into Bredasdorp, there's a sign that says, beware of our schoolchildren. I don't know what makes their schoolchildren so dangerous, but whenever we drive to Bredasdorp, we make sure to steer clear of the schoolchildren.

While some you'll see on your way to Baghdad, like this one, might warn you about fighter jets and armed militia, which may well be as dangerous as Bredasdorp's schoolchildren, I don't know.

But signs tell us what to look out for. They tell us of dangers. They tell us of things to be cautious of. The world is full of signs. You see them wherever you go. We don't even think about them because our world is just full of signs.

[1 : 08] Wherever you go, you'll see signs that make us aware of things that we can't yet see. That's what the purpose of a sign is. It represents something that's maybe around the corner, around the next bend, over the hill, but something that you can't yet see.

But it changes your action now because it's warning you of that thing. That's what a sign does. Well, God also gives us signs for the same purpose, to warn us about things we can't see, spiritual things or things yet to come which we must respond to.

Human history is full of God's signs which are recorded for us in the Bible. And so if you've ever wanted a sign from God, if you've ever gone to God and said, just give me a sign, I want you to know this morning that He has.

He's given you hundreds of signs. And they're recorded in Scripture for us. And we want to look at one of those signs this morning. And just to see what God wants to tell us this morning through this sign.

And we find the sign in the book of Isaiah. It was the passage that Alan read for us earlier. Please do turn there in your Bibles if you have them with you. Chapter 7 of Isaiah. Now, to give you some background, Isaiah was a prophet who lived in the 8th century BC.

[2 : 24] And as a prophet, he was one of the men that God had used throughout history. God used prophets to communicate to His people. Specifically here, His people living in Judah at the time where Isaiah was called to minister.

Now, Judah were under the rule of King Ahaz, who wasn't the greatest king that they've ever seen. And they found themselves at this time in a very precarious political situation as well.

And I'm going to read from Isaiah 7 again, just for us to get a picture of what their situation was. From verse 1. When Ahaz, son of Jotham, the son of Isaiah, was king of Judah, King Rezan of Aram and Pekah, son of Remelia, king of Israel, marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

Now, the house of David was told, Aram has allied itself with Ephraim. And so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken as trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. Okay, so basically what's happening here is there's a large coalition army that is marching against Judah's capital city, Jerusalem.

And the people were pretty much freaking out, as you would if an army was coming to march against you. But, during this time, God sent Isaiah the prophet to Ahaz with a message.

[3 : 38] And it happened to be when Ahaz was checking the city's fortifications and their water sources to make sure that they could hold out during a siege. It was at that time God sent Isaiah to tell this to Ahaz from verse 4.

Be careful. Keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood, these two enemies that were about to invade. God wants Ahaz to realize that they're far less threatening than he thinks.

And then verse 7, listen to what God says. He says, it will not take place. It will not happen. And then he describes how these enemies will be defeated and says at the end of verse 9, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

Okay, now we've got to understand what God is saying to King Ahaz here. God is challenging Ahaz to believe that God is going to do something, that God is going to save his people.

He's going to intervene to stop this threat. And then I want you to notice what God says next in verse 10. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or the highest heights.

[4 : 51] Okay, God is saying to help you to believe, I'm going to offer you a sign. Because this tells us something about God. God never calls people to believe in his promises blindly.

He always gives concrete signs that we can put our faith in. Faith in God, this God, is not blind faith. It's faith that is based on actual signs that God has given us.

You know, just like a road sign, warning of maybe a rail crossing ahead, makes it not unreasonable to believe that there is actually a rail crossing ahead. So, God calls us to believe things that we can't yet see, but not to believe them blindly.

He always provides signs so that we have reasonable evidence to base our belief on. You see, Christian faith is not blind faith. It's based on what God has already revealed to us.

The signs he's already given us. And so, he told Ahaz to ask for a sign for this particular promise. He didn't ask Ahaz to believe him blindly, especially with these two armies marching up to Jerusalem.

[6 : 00] It's not the appropriate time just to take a leap of blind faith and hope for the best. No, God wants Ahaz to be sure that God will do what he says. And so, he says, ask for a sign.

And you know what Ahaz did? Well, he effectively said, no thanks. It's okay. I don't need a sign from you. He made it sound all pious by saying, oh, I don't want to put God to the test.

But actually, the truth is, what we see later, it's because Ahaz had really no intention of believing God's promise, that he didn't even need to ask God for a sign. But God doesn't really take that well, and he gives Ahaz a sign anyway, as we see in verse 13.

Then Isaiah said, Here 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 Emmanuel, which is Hebrew for God with us. For 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.

[7 : 08] The Lord will bring on you and your people, and on the house of your father, time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah, he will bring the king of Assyria. Okay, now we must understand what's going on in this passage.

So Ahaz didn't want a sign. He didn't care much for a sign, because he didn't care much for God's promises. He didn't have any interest in believing God. But God sent him a sign anyway, that what was around the corner for Judah, God told him what was about to happen.

And that sign would be, the sign that would be the visual representation of God's word, would be a child being born. And the sign would signify God's presence to Ahaz and Judah.

And before this child grew up, the two nations would be destroyed, and a new one, Assyria, would rise to power. So that is a summary of what God is saying here. And then if we turn to Isaiah chapter 8, the very next chapter, you know what happens?

A child is born. It's one of Isaiah's children, who God names Maheshal al-Hashbaz. You thought your parents gave you a bad name.

[8 : 17] Be thankful Isaiah isn't your dad. Maheshal al-Hashbaz is the name of Isaiah's child. But what that name means, and it's very important to understand what it means, it means quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.

And that is essentially God's way of saying, watch out, invasion is coming. It's interesting that God didn't only speak through the prophets by giving them words to say.

He also told the prophets what to name their children often. And that would also be God's word in concrete form. And so it was here. Isaiah's son, Maheshal al-Hashbaz, quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil, invasion is coming.

This is God's warning sign. You know, as you're driving along and something's around the corner and you don't know, there's a big warning sign and it's got exclamation marks and it's big red and it's in big red letters and you can't ignore it.

Well, this was God's warning sign to Ahaz. It was a sign that he wasn't supposed to ignore. God was warning him, invasion was coming. But you know what Ahaz did?

[9 : 22] He ignored God's sign. He drove along without even taking notice of the sign. He ignored God's promise to defeat these two nations.

And instead, you know what Ahaz went on and did? We find this in 2 Chronicles. He went and made an alliance with none other than Assyria, the very nation that God warned him against.

Okay? Because he was so worried about these two other nations coming so he thought, well, I'm going to be sneaky. I'm going to do my own thing. I'm going to make an alliance with Assyria to defeat this imminent threat. But what we read about elsewhere in Scripture is sure enough, Assyria later turned on the alliance.

They betrayed Ahaz and they invaded Judah. Exactly what God had warned him about and that he had ignored. Now, we've just gone, what is this, 2,800 years into the past.

Why? What relevance does that have for us today? All the stuff that was happening in Judah and Assyria. Well, the point of all this, for us, is to realize the foolishness of ignoring God's signs in his world.

[10 : 30] Ignoring what God has told us that he is doing in his world. And instead, doing things our own way, without reference to God's word, which we all tend to do, don't we?

We all tend to live our lives without much reference to what God is doing today, what God is doing in my life, what God is doing in this world. And we go our own way, very much like Ahaz did, not really taking God's word on board and just doing his own thing.

You see, maybe Ahaz was very much a Sunday Christian, or not a Christian, a Sunday Israelite. He wasn't even an Israelite because they had split. A Sunday Jew, maybe. He kind of, well, it would be Saturday, wouldn't it?

Anyway, you know, one day of the week kind of God follower where he's got his religion in a box, his God's there and he does the right things.

But then Monday to Friday, he goes about doing things his own way, his own life, and God doesn't really play much of a role in Monday to Friday, in kind of work, in the day to day.

[11 : 37] But God's nice for the weekend and maybe for a quiet time here or there. Ahaz was very much like that and we see that because God said, I am here, I'm with you, Emmanuel. And what did Ahaz do?

Okay, thanks very much God, but I'm going to go and make an alliance. I'm going to do my own thing. You don't really have much role to play in my Monday to Friday work. You see, this is Ahaz and yet it's very much of us very often, isn't it?

Ahaz ignored God's word. He ignored God's presence in his world and in his life. And you know what happened? He was defeated by his enemies.

That was the result of him ignoring God in his Monday to Friday. He was defeated by his enemies. And that was the case for Ahaz and the sign God gave him, but it's also the case for us and the sign God gives us.

But what sign does he give us? Well, he gives us the same sign that he gave Ahaz. You see, the signs that God gives throughout history don't have an expiry date.

[12 : 41] They tell us something that's true for all people of all ages. Even this sign, especially this sign of this child to be born, it's a sign from God to you and me as well, not just Ahaz.

And we know that because it wasn't only fulfilled in Ahaz's time. It wasn't even properly fulfilled in Ahaz's time because the mother of Maheshal al-Hashbaz wasn't a virgin, which is strange.

Maheshal al-Hashbaz had a younger brother. And yet, other details of this prophecy were fulfilled in Isaiah's son, which tells us that this first fulfillment of this prophecy wasn't the complete fulfillment of the sign.

This first partial fulfillment was for Ahaz and Judah in that specific time, but there's more to the sign than meets the eye. There's more to the sign than just what was happening 2,800 years ago.

In fact, just a few chapters later in Isaiah, we read of another mysterious child that's going to be born sometime in the future. Isaiah tells Ahaz and the rest of the people of Judah that there's another child to come.

[13 : 55] His son was just the first partial fulfillment. But then you know what happens? Isaiah passes on and Ahaz passes on and hundreds of years pass and nothing happens.

It's almost as if God's forgotten about this sign. People forget about it. People close their their Bibles. They don't think about it again until in a dusty corner of Israel a simple carpenter named Joseph finds that his fiancée is mysteriously pregnant and not by him.

And so he thinks she's been unfaithful and wants a divorce until a messenger of God, an angel comes to Joseph and says this and we read it in Matthew 1.20.

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

[15 : 12] Have you ever considered why Mary was a virgin? Why that is so special in Christian tradition? Why it's part of the Apostles' Creed?

When she gave birth to Jesus, why was it so important that she was a virgin? Well, it was to show us that this is the fulfillment of the sign that God gave Isaiah all those centuries before.

It was to link it to what Isaiah had said so we understand the significance of what God is doing and that we respond the right way which Ahaz didn't the first time around. It's the same sign that Ahaz got.

It's the sign that God is with us and he's here working in our world, in our lives, day to day to defeat our enemy. But we need to believe that.

We need to live in light of that. We need to live and make decisions in light of the reality that God has come into this world and not ignore him and live without reference to him Monday to Saturday.

[16 : 14] God has come and is here and he's at work to defeat our enemy and we've got to get on board with that work. But who is our enemy? If I had to ask you who's your enemy today?

Would it be the lady who lives next door who always complains that your leaves falling in her driveway? Would that be your enemy? Or is it criminals? Is it the crowbar gang who likes breaking into houses in this area?

Is that your enemy? What about ISIS? Terrorists? The guys who bombed Paris a couple of weeks ago. Is that your enemy? Is that your greatest enemy?

No. Our enemy is sin. We see in verse 21 that's our true enemy. Sin. That spiritual disease that's inside all of us that separates us from God.

That is our greatest enemy. Far worse and far more deadly eternally than any other enemy we might face on earth. And it threatens all of us every day.

[17 : 18] The Bible says sin is crouching at your door and it desires to have you. Do you take that warning seriously? Or do you like Ahaz did with Assyria do you make an alliance with your sin?

Do you make a peace treaty with your sin and get along with it and not be too bothered about it? Well then you're not taking God's sign seriously. But God made it clear in his sign that he is here.

He is coming to our world. And that sign was the virgin birth of Jesus. To mark him out as different from any other baby that's ever been born. That is supposed to tell us that God has arrived.

God is here and he is here to destroy the sin that threatens to destroy you. And he did that in Jesus by giving himself to die on a cross to take the punishment for your sins.

He went the full extent of doing everything to make sure that your sin can be paid for and that you can come to him. He gave himself to break sin's hold over you to break you out of the slavery of sin and then he left his Holy Spirit on earth to help you to live the life that God has called you to live today.

[18 : 37] But you've got to believe that. You've got to get on board with that. Are you going to do that? Are you going to engage in God's work in your life and listen to him and follow him and prioritize what he says every day above everything else?

Or are you going to live your own way? Make your own decisions like Ahaz did and just be a Sunday Christian. Well look where it got him.

Look where it got Ahaz. He was defeated by his enemy. And likewise anyone who ignores God and ignores his sign in Jesus will be defeated by their sin and will end up in hell.

And I don't want anyone here to be there one day. And so take God's sign seriously that he is here. That he is right here. Stop ignoring God in the world that he's made.

Stop putting other things as a priority in front of God. Your career or your college or your studies or your money or whatever it is. Your family or your holidays.

[19 : 48] Whatever it might be that you're putting in front of God that you're sidelining him. Stop ignoring God in the world that he's made. All of those things they come from God. God has given them to you.

Stop concentrating on the gifts and ignoring the giver. Come to Jesus and submit to him truly as your God and your king. And if you have done that now get on board with what God is doing to destroy sin in your life.

Don't make an alliance with your sin. Don't have a peace treaty with your sin but identify it. Identify where it's eating away at your soul day to day.

Identify it and with the help of the Holy Spirit root it out. Be ruthless with your sin. You know what Jesus said to make the point? He says if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out. If your arm causes you to sin chop it off.

You know he wants us to know that sin is something we can't live with. We mustn't try to get along with. We must root it out. We must be ruthless with our sin and he is there and ready to help us defeat our enemy if only we would get on board with what he's doing.

[20 : 55] Let God into your life every day and hand control over to him and keep in step with his Holy Spirit which you do by reading his word daily and taking it seriously.

And then don't only get on board with what God is doing in your life to destroy the power of sin but with what God is doing in the world out there to destroy sin's power and dominion over the lives of other people.

He has called us his people to be involved out there to fight the war that he has come to fight to destroy the world's greatest enemy. He calls his followers to a mission in the world.

You know just like the first disciples when they realized who Jesus was you know what the first disciples did? They dropped everything. They dropped their careers. They were fishermen right? They were on the lake of Galilee.

They had all their what they had invested in for years and years their fishing boats and their nets and all their equipment and they were busy going about their daily lives until Jesus came along and he said two words.

[21 : 52] He said follow me and they dropped everything and followed him. They turned away from everything else they were chasing in life to follow Jesus when they realized who he was and so all who truly believe that Jesus is God with us are called to stop living for your own mission and start living for God's life.

Because really if you really believe that this is the creator come to earth come into your life you can't you can't concentrate on anything else. That is supposed to take your full attention every day does it?

Look what Jesus says to his followers at the end of Matthew. Now we are at the beginning of Matthew. If you have your Bible just turn a few pages to the end of Matthew chapter 28. It's what's known as the great commission and I want you to notice something very interesting.

verse 18 of Matthew 28 Then Jesus came to them and said All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you and surely notice this I am with you always to the very end of the age I am with you Emmanuel You know just as Matthew began his gospel with God's promise to be with us he ends with God's promise to be with us as we carry out the mission that he's given us on earth and when you do when you get in line with God's mission when you stop living for yourself and you orient your life and your priorities towards what God is doing in the world then you will experience the truth of

Emmanuel God with you as you do the work that God has called you to not only will you find real true purpose in your life but you will find God's presence with you every day and every step of the way which is by far the greatest human experience and the best way to live this life on earth is that the life that you're going to live with God with you let's pray heavenly father we thank you that you have not called us to a blind faith but you have given us signs throughout history recorded in scripture for us thank you that we don't need you to give signs to us every day because we have your signs right in front of us help us lord to take heed of those signs help us lord to take you seriously in our lives and this sign the sign that you have given that you have come into our world that you have come into our lives help us to take this sign seriously help us to live every day in your presence carrying out your will lord we can only do this with the power and the help of your holy spirit and so we pray pour your spirit into our lives into this church so that we would carry out the mission that you've called us lord we pray this all in Jesus name amen