

God Promises

Since God is sovereign, His people can trust His promises.

Keeping a prayer journal helps me stay disciplined in my prayer life. (I recommend the practice to all believers.) Over the years I have been able to look back over my journal notes and be reminded of God's faithfulness. Of course, I first read the accounts of God's work in and through His people in the Scriptures. But then I read in the pages of my journal the ways God has worked in my life or my family members' lives. The biblical truth that God keeps His promises becomes ever more real to me!

I recently glanced back at a journal entry in which I noted that I was praying for my five granddaughters to come to know and believe in Jesus Christ. An entry from later that year recorded that two of the girls had professed their faith in Jesus. Other journal entries from the past reminded me of God's financial provisions to my family at a time of need, the healing of a sick relative, and the good resolution of a difficult situation in my work life.

The Bible encourages us as believers to look to the past for reminders of all that God has done. When we observe His past goodness in keeping His promises to us, we gain courage to follow Him faithfully in all the seasons and situations of our lives.

In today's Bible passage, the prophet Isaiah challenged a wavering King Ahaz of Judah to remember God's faithfulness. Judah's ruler faced the threat of an invading alliance of armies—the armies of Aram (Syria) and the Northern Kingdom of Israel—that wanted to force Judah to join their coalition against an even more powerful international threat, Assyria. The Lord offered to give Ahaz a sign of His sovereign protection of Jerusalem, but the king foolishly refused to trust God's promise. It fell to Isaiah to declare that the Lord would give His people a sign of His own choosing—a sign that pointed ultimately to the Messiah's appearance to save God's people from their sins.

As you explore this key passage in the Book of Isaiah, use the study to reflect on God's faithfulness in your life. What promises have you seen God fulfill? What big answers to your prayers in the past give you confidence as you live for God today? How does the affirmation that God is sovereign and His people can trust His promises challenge you personally to live faithfully for Him?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ISAIAH 7:1–12:6

These chapters are united by the theme of trusting in the Lord instead of in the apparent power of human nations. By the time of Isaiah's call to be a prophet in 740 BC, the Assyrian Empire dominated the world politically and militarily. Smaller nations such as Aram (Syria), the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah either became vassal states of Assyria or incurred the empire's wrath. From time to time smaller nations tested the empire's resolve by forming rebellious alliances. Aram and Israel formed such an alliance around 735 BC and sought to enlist Judah in the coalition as well. When Judah's ruler refused, Aram and Israel turned on Judah in an effort to force the kingdom to join the coalition or be invaded by its armies. King Ahaz of Judah concluded that he was in a no-win situation.

Isaiah 7:1-25 reports the prophet Isaiah's dramatic confrontation with King Ahaz over trusting in human schemes over the Lord's promises. The Lord was willing to give Ahaz a sign that the king had nothing to fear from the Aram-Israel coalition. However, Ahaz refused to trust in the Lord's promise and would not ask for a sign (7:12).

The Lord's response was to rebuke Ahaz and announce through Isaiah a momentous sign that not only clarified Judah's greatest danger of judgment but also foreshadowed the future birth of Immanuel—Jesus the Messiah (7:14; compare Matt. 1:20-23). Isaiah went on to describe the calamity that would befall Judah for its failure to trust in God's promises. Assyria's armies would invade the promised land and bring God's judgment; the land would become desolate (Isa. 7:17-25).

Isaiah continued to prophesy about the rebellious coalition's coming downfall in 8:1-10. The prophet and his wife would give birth to a son. The boy's God-given name prophetically signified the impending destruction of both Aram and the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the hands of Assyria. In 8:11-17, Isaiah declared that the Lord had told him not to fear the coalition's threats but to fear and follow only the Lord. Isaiah then condemned the false hope people placed in things other than the Lord (8:18-22). The people trusted in mediums and spiritists rather than in the Lord God. Therefore, God would bring deep darkness and gloom to the land.

In 9:1-7, Isaiah returned to the theme of a future deliverer for God's people. The prophet foresaw the birth of a male child who would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). This child—the Messiah—would establish an everlasting kingdom of justice and righteousness through the power of the Lord Almighty.

Next, Isaiah described the steps God would take to get His people's attention (9:8–10:4). He would reduce their territory through invading armies that conquer their land and consume their resources. Wickedness and oppression would dominate the land as some people took advantage of others and looked out only for their own needs and desires.

The prophet then delivered God's message of judgment against Assyria (10:5–34). God would use the empire as an instrument of judgment against His disobedient people. In time, however, Assyria would also be judged for its arrogance and wickedness. A remnant of God's people would be delivered from Assyrian subjugation and would return to the promised land (10:20–23).

In chapter 11, Isaiah delivered yet another message of hope regarding the appearance of a future deliverer and the restoration of God's people. Ultimately, the prophetic message points to the coming of Jesus the Messiah in fulfilling the Lord's promises to David regarding an everlasting kingdom of righteousness. Chapter 12 is a song of praise and thanksgiving the Lord's redeemed people will sing in the day of their salvation. They will exalt the Lord for keeping His promises.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GOD INTERVENES (Isa. 7:7–9)

At the Lord's direction, Isaiah confronted King Ahaz of Judah about the king's fear of an invasion by a coalition of Aram (Syria) and Ephraim (the Northern Kingdom of Israel). The prophet encouraged Ahaz to stand firm in his faith in the Lord.

VERSE 7

This is what the Lord GOD says: It will not happen; it will not occur.

The words **this is what ... says** (“thus saith,” KJV; “thus says,” ESV) often introduce a prophetic oracle in the Old Testament. The phrase emphasizes that the prophet spoke with divine authority. Furthermore, the message spoken was not the prophet's opinion but rather was a revealed word from the Lord Himself. The phrase **the Lord GOD** (“the Sovereign LORD,” NIV) renders a combined form of the Hebrew word *Adonai* [ad oh NIGH], meaning “lord,” and the sacred covenant name Yahweh [YAH weh], the name usually rendered in English Bibles as “the LORD.” Literally translated, the phrase would read “Lord the LORD,” thus some translations substitute the name GOD (note the small capital letters) for the covenant name Yahweh. By using

this combined name, Isaiah stressed to King Ahaz that he could believe the prophetic message as divine truth with no hesitation.

What was the prophet's message of truth? Isaiah declared that the rebel coalition's plan to conquer Judah, install a puppet ruler, and thereby force Judah to join their rebellion against Assyria would **not happen** ("it shall not stand," KJV; ESV). Ahaz's situation might have looked bleak at the moment, but the Lord God had a greater plan at work that would snuff out the coalition's plan like dousing a smoldering stick under water (see 7:4; 8:6-7). Ahaz had to choose whether he would trust God's promises or let his circumstances guide his decision-making.

Both in Isaiah's day and today, the life of faith includes living with the tension between what our circumstances suggest and what God promises. The Lord God calls us to believe His promises no matter what our circumstances might be. He is faithful, and He calls us to be faithful to Him.

VERSES 8-9

The chief city of Aram is Damascus, the chief of Damascus is Rezin (within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people), the chief city of Ephraim is Samaria, and the chief of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you do not stand firm in your faith, then you will not stand at all.

It is unlikely that King Ahaz needed to be told the names of Aram's capital city and ruler, much less the names of Israel's capital and king. One view of what Isaiah meant in 7:8-9 by identifying the capitals and rulers of the two rebellious kingdoms emphasizes the Lord's sovereign control over nations and history. That is, the prophet was assuring Ahaz that while God had placed **Rezin** [REE zin] in power over Aram and **the son of Remaliah** [REM uh LIGH uh] over Israel, He had not given those kings rule over Judah.

An alternate view suggests that Isaiah specifically named the capital cities and rulers of the two kingdoms because these names symbolized the heights of human power in those kingdoms. Yet, the coalition's reliance on human power alone would end in utter disaster soon enough. Isaiah prophesied that **within sixty-five years Ephraim** (the Northern Kingdom of Israel) would be **too shattered to be a people** ("be broken ... be not a people," KJV; "be shattered from being a people," ESV). Likewise, **Damascus** (Aram/Syria) and its king would be destroyed by the military tsunami that was the Assyrian Empire (see Isa. 8:6-7; 2 Kings 16:9). Indeed, the two kingdoms of the rebellious coalition were already in Assyria's sights. Damascus was conquered and Rezin was put to death by the Assyrian king in 732 BC, just three years after Isaiah's prophetic warning. At the same time, the Northern Kingdom

of Israel lost control over much of its territory as well. The capital city of Samaria managed to survive a decade longer. However, in 722 BC the Assyrian army conquered Samaria after a three-year siege, captured Israel's king, and deported many of the surviving people into exile in Assyria (see 2 Kings 17:3-6). The Northern Kingdom was then no longer a nation.

Isaiah warned King Ahaz of Judah that if he and the people did not **stand firm in ... faith** in the Lord, then Judah, like Aram (Syria) and Israel would **not stand** as a nation **at all**. The pronoun **you** is a plural form in both instances, indicating that Isaiah intended his prophetic warning not only for the king but also for the people. The Hebrew verb rendered *stand* ("believe ... be established," KJV; "firm ... be firm," ESV) appears in two forms and comprises a play on words. The term means "to confirm or support" and comes over into the English language in the word *amen*, meaning "let it be so." Isaiah urged the king and people of Judah to confirm in their hearts the certainty of God's promises. If they chose to trust in human power and threats rather than in the Lord and His plan, their defeat as a nation was certain.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Sovereignty of God" on pages 1494–1495 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What encouragement do we receive as believers when we recognize that God is sovereign over all nations? What impact does belief in God's sovereignty have on the way you live day by day?

GOD EXPECTS (Isa. 7:10-13)

VERSE 10

Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz:

This short verse emphasizes two important truths. First, it underscores the true prophet's authority to speak. It was as though the Lord Himself was speaking audibly to Judah's king. Second, the verse emphasizes God's merciful nature. Judah's circumstances looked grim, but the king was given an opportunity to trust in the Lord and stand firm on the Lord's promises.

VERSE 11

"Ask for a sign from the LORD your God—it can be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven."

The Lord invited Ahaz to **ask for a sign** that would serve to bolster the king's faith. In the Scriptures, a sign typically refers to an event—miraculous or otherwise—that demonstrates God's activity and confirms His sovereign rule over His creation. For example, the phrase "signs and wonders" (Ex. 7:3) describes the ten plagues God sent on the land of Egypt to force Pharaoh to release the Hebrew people from slavery. In Samuel's day, the elderly priest Eli was given a sign that God would hold his priestly house accountable for the wicked actions of his two sons. The sign was that both sons would die on the same day (1 Sam. 2:34).

The New Testament also reports God's use of signs. On the night of Christ's birth, an angel told a group of shepherds that the confirming sign of the Messiah's appearance was that the shepherds would "find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). On the other hand, Jesus once rebuked people who demanded to see miraculous signs yet never intended to believe and act on those signs (Matt. 12:38-42). What was true about signs in Jesus' day was also true in Isaiah's day. God graciously offered His people signs as means to strengthen their faith in Him. Those who were given signs were expected to recognize the signs and act on them.

The Lord offered Ahaz an opportunity not only to receive a faith-building sign but also to name the sign. There were virtually no limits on what the king could ask; the sign could be **as deep as Sheol** [SHEE ohl] **or as high as heaven**. The term *Sheol* could refer literally to the grave, to death, or figuratively to the holding place of the dead, especially the spirits of the unrighteous. In this instance, the term serves with the word *heaven* to signify the farthest boundaries of thought and existence. Whatever Ahaz could conceive of, he could ask for it as a sign. What an amazing gift the Lord offered to Judah's king! Sadly, Ahaz refused the gift.

VERSE 12

But Ahaz replied, "I will not ask. I will not test the LORD."

King Ahaz responded to the Lord's offer of a sign by rejecting it. The words **I will not test the LORD** reflect that Ahaz was trying to paint a veneer of false piety over his unbelief. He had already decided not to listen to the prophet's call to faith. In Ahaz's thinking, the situation demanded more warriors and firepower, not more faith in God. Ironically, by claiming that he would not put the Lord to the test, Ahaz was, in fact, doing just that!

Second Kings 16:7-16 provides additional information on Ahaz's unwillingness to trust the Lord or even ask for a sign. The king had sent a tribute bribe and a plea for protection to the Assyrian monarch, Tiglath-pileser [TIG lath-pih LEE zuhr]. Ahaz was willing to make Judah a vassal state of Assyria and to introduce a pagan altar into the Jerusalem temple

in order to gain Assyria's military help against Aram and Israel. In so doing, the king squandered his opportunity to see the Lord God do a great work of salvation on behalf of Judah.

VERSE 13

Isaiah said, “Listen, house of David! Is it not enough for you to try the patience of men? Will you also try the patience of my God?”

Isaiah confronted King Ahaz's unbelief and false humility. The phrase **house of David** could refer solely to Ahaz as the reigning descendant of King David, to the king as the symbol of the entire tribe of Judah (King David's tribe), or to the royal administration—some members of which may have been present when Isaiah addressed the king. In any case, the prophet's choice of words emphasized that the nation of Judah as a whole would suffer the consequences of Ahaz's refusal to trust God's promises. The two uses of the plural pronoun **you** are possible further evidence that Isaiah was addressing not only the king but also others in his administration that were present.

The phrase rendered **try the patience** (“weary,” KJV; ESV) literally is “cause to be weary, frustrated, or exhausted.” Clearly Isaiah had reached a point of extreme frustration with the king and his advisers—perhaps also with the people in general. The king might try to fend off a pesky prophet with false piety, but such tactics would not fool God. Trying the patience of God was far more dangerous than resisting the threats of two rebellious kingdoms. Ahaz was inviting God's judgment both on himself and the nation of Judah.

Some Bible scholars have noted a significant shift in Isaiah's language from 7:11 to 7:13. In 7:11, Isaiah spoke of “the LORD your God” in addressing Ahaz. In 7:13, the prophet referred to **the patience of my God**. Perhaps Isaiah, deeply frustrated by the king's hypocrisy, emphasized that Ahaz was demonstrating that he had no real relationship with the covenant God of Israel. The prophet could not imagine a more wearying situation for the people of God!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Sign” on pages 1470–1471 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some things that have served as signs to you regarding God's presence and faithfulness? Why do you think Jesus warned against demanding signs from God in order to believe Him?

GOD ANNOUNCES (Isa. 7:14-15)

VERSE 14

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel.

Isaiah exposed King Ahaz's unbelief. The king did not want to hear about or trust in God's plan; he already had a scheme of his own in play—submitting to Assyria's ruler and false gods to buy protection (2 Kings 16:7-16). However, Ahaz's hypocritical refusal to ask for a sign would not hinder or change God's sovereign plan in the least. Isaiah declared that **the Lord himself** would **give** Ahaz and the people of Judah a sign of His choosing. The sign would be unmistakable evidence of God's sovereign rule over human history. It would have significance not only for Isaiah's day but also for God's ultimate plan of redeeming His creation from sin's curse.

Isaiah then announced God's sign: **the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel**. Bible scholars have long debated the way in which the Lord fulfilled this sign. One view is that the sign only had a New Testament fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ to the virgin Mary. Matthew 1:22-23 clearly confirms that Jesus' birth fulfilled the Immanuel prophecy. Luke 1:26-38 does not refer directly to Isaiah 7:14, yet this New Testament passage also confirms that Mary was a virgin when the Holy Spirit empowered her to conceive and give birth to Jesus, the promised Messiah.

An alternate view suggests that the sign had an initial fulfillment in Isaiah's day, while its ultimate fulfillment came in the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus Christ. In this second view, the initial fulfillment of the sign in Isaiah's day was not precisely the same kind of miraculous birth as took place in the case of the unique conception and birth of Jesus, the Son of God. The woman in Isaiah's day may have been a virgin when the sign was announced but later gave birth to the boy who became known as *Immanuel* in order to remind Ahaz and the people of Israel that God was with them. In fact, some Bible scholars point to the sign's possible initial fulfillment in the birth of Isaiah's son with his wife, "the prophetess" (see Isa. 8:1-10). To be sure, proponents of both views readily affirm that the prophecy's ultimate fulfillment came in the miraculous virgin birth of the true Immanuel, Jesus Christ.

The name *Immanuel* means "God [is] with us." Ahaz and the people of Judah needed to realize that God was with them. If they trusted in the Lord and not in Assyria, they would find that they had no reason to fear the coalition's threats. Eventually, however, all the world's people needed (and still need) to realize that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God miraculously took on human flesh by being born of a virgin. Christ literally became "God with us" so that He might save us from our sins.

VERSE 15

By the time he learns to reject what is bad and choose what is good, he will be eating curds and honey.

With this verse, Isaiah explained that the historical significance of the child's birth and naming would become clear in a matter of only a few years. He may have been referring to the time of the son's bar mitzvah—usually at around twelve or thirteen years of age—when he was recognized as “a son of the commandment” and was held accountable to the covenant law. Isaiah's point was that the Immanuel prophecy was certain to happen.

The words **he will be eating curds and honey** are difficult to understand. On one hand, the phrase *curds and honey* could refer to a situation of deprivation. These were foods on which poorer people might have to subsist. On the other hand, the phrase could also describe the continuation of Judah's ability to provide food for its children despite the threats of invasion and occupation by the Aram-Israel coalition. This understanding seems to better connect with the conclusion that Isaiah declared in the subsequent verse.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Immanuel” on page 793 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are ways that believers today can know that God is with us? In what sense is Jesus Christ the ultimate fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy?

GOD JUDGES (Isa. 7:16-17)

VERSE 16

For before the boy knows to reject what is bad and choose what is good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.

Isaiah essentially repeated the line from 7:15 describing the prophesied boy's coming of age. In verse 15, however, the prophet's conclusion concerned what the child's diet would be at that time. In verse 16, Isaiah's conclusion focused on the real-time threat that Judah faced from the Aram-Israel coalition. Before the prophesied child even came of age, **the land of the two kings** threatening Judah would **be abandoned** (“shall be forsaken,” KJV; “will be deserted,” ESV; “will be laid waste,” NIV).

Isaiah's prophetic words proved true. By 722 BC, the Assyrians had demolished the capital city of Samaria, occupied the entire nation,

arrested Israel's king, and taken many surviving Israelites into captivity (see 2 Kings 17:3-6).

VERSE 17

The LORD will bring on you, your people, and your father's house such a time as has never been since Ephraim separated from Judah: He will bring the king of Assyria."

Even though Ahaz had made an alliance with Assyria for protection, the Lord intended to use Assyria as an instrument of His judgment. The phrase rendered **you, your people, and your father's house** emphasizes the thoroughness of God's coming judgment. Ahaz's unbelief and foolish decisions would have dire consequences for all the people of Judah.

The phrase **since Ephraim separated from Judah** refers to the division of united Israel into two kingdoms (Israel in the north, Judah in the south) after Solomon's death around 930 BC (see 1 Kings 12:12-17). Because of Ahaz's refusal to trust in the Lord and determination to trust in human power and schemes, the covenant people of God in Judah would experience disaster to the extent the nation had not seen in almost two hundred years!

The Lord God is sovereign over the nations, and Isaiah reminded Judah's king that it was the Lord, not Ahaz, who would **bring the king of Assyria** into the promised land. The destroyer would come not for Ahaz's purposes or even for his own; he would come in fulfillment of the prophetic promises of God.

This session has focused on the theme that since God is sovereign, His people can trust His promises. Those promises may well include assurance that the Lord will not allow His people to live in disobedience without facing His disciplinary judgment (see Heb. 12:7-11). At the same time, for those who trust in Him and faithfully follow Him in all situations, the Lord's promises of deliverance never fail. Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy is a great case in point. Not only did this prophecy provide hope in Isaiah's day, but it also foreshadowed the ultimate promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. May the Lord give us all the grace to trust His promises, for our faith will grow as we do!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Reflect on the promises of God in Scripture that are especially important to you at this time. What are those promises? Why do they hold such significance for your life now?