

Faith Conquers Fear

Isaiah 7:10-15; Matt. 1:18-25

The message today will walk us through two stories. The first is the story of a wicked king named Ahaz who failed in every way a king can fail. The second is the story of a carpenter named Joseph who succeeded in making a faith-prompted decision with very little information. ***How did the carpenter succeed where the king failed?***

I want to spend more time on Joseph, but to understand the promise of Immanuel from Isaiah 7 that is fulfilled in Matthew 1 we need to delve into the grim details of this king named Ahaz.

Ahaz was the son of a good king named Jotham and the grandson of Uzziah (also called Azariah) who started out faithful to God but his success made him arrogant and his pride led to his downfall. Uzziah followed the Lord for decades and as he followed God, the Lord blessed him so that he expanded the territory of Judah, fortified Jerusalem and accepted tribute from the neighboring nations who trembled in the face of his 300,000 man army.

But even early in Uzziah's reign there is a little line that foreshadowed his grandson's failure: ***"He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD... Nevertheless, the high places were not taken away." 2 Kings 15:3-4***

The small compromise of one generation may become the full-blown idolatry of another. It simply wasn't a priority to Uzziah to tear down the high places. He didn't worship the local deities himself, but he tolerated some idol worship among the people and let them keep the high places they loved. This was the snare Ahaz walked right into and it reminds us that our choices have a huge ripple effect.

What might start small will get bigger – if not for you, then maybe for those around you. A father's once in a while beer can become a son's alcoholism. A mom's over-commitment to exercise can become her daughter's anorexia. A dad's workaholicism can become a son's wholesale devotion to success in the world. A mom's periodic shopping habit can become a daughter's worship of the latest fashions. And so on.

That's what happened with Ahaz. His grandfather and father's small compromise became his idolatry. ***What his fathers tolerated, he worshiped.***

Sadly, Ahaz didn't learn from his grandfather's mistakes. Uzziah started well but finished poorly. He was one of Israel's most powerful and successful kings, but his pride led to his fall when he decided to take the role of the priests and burn incense in the Holy Place of the Temple. God struck Uzziah with leprosy and he lived as an outcast for the rest of his life. Surely Ahaz knew this story, but he did not learn from it.

A challenge was that he became King at the age of 20. That doesn't lend itself to humility or clear reasoning. Everyone knows that 20 year old men are the pinnacle of wisdom and discretion. That's why it's so affordable to buy car insurance for them! So here's an idea: let's take a 20 year old and make him King! What could go wrong?

And so, the young King Ahaz walked right into the trap that was left there for him by his father and grandfather. The high places they had not demolished, he immediately began to use for idolatrous worship. ***His father's compromise became his idolatry.***

“He did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering... And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree.” 2 Kings 16:2-4

Here are five reasons King Ahaz failed to trust and obey God.

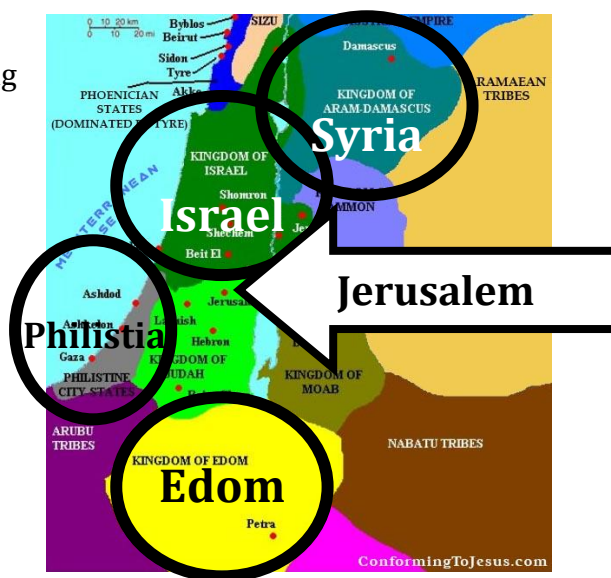
First, **He let fear cloud his judgment**. Look at Isaiah 7.

“In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it... the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” Isaiah 7:1-2

2 Chronicles 28 gives more background on Ahaz, detailing how before this joint attack ***Ahaz had already been defeated by Syria***, his neighbor to the east, losing 120,000 soldiers in one day – including his own son, his main general and his prime minister.

He had also lost in battle to Israel, his neighbor to the north, losing 200,000 captives. And he had lost in battle to the Philistines in the west and the Edomites in the south.

No wonder his heart shook like a tree in the wind. Now, we know why these things were happening, because Scripture tells us:



“For the Lord humbled Judah because of Ahaz King of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to the LORD.” 2 Chronicles 28:19

But Ahaz wanted a different explanation that deflected the blame from him. So he decided the gods of the other nations must be more powerful than the God of Israel. In other words, it was God's fault – not his. So Ahaz placed his bet on the gods of Syria – the most powerful force he had so far met.

“He sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, ‘Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me.’ But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel.” 2 Chronicles 28:23

With fear clouding his judgment, Ahaz made his second mistake –
2. He Followed the World instead of the Word.

“He sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, ‘Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me.’ But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel.” 2 Chronicles 28:23

As the king of Israel, with God-worshiping parents and grandparents, Ahaz had full access to the scrolls and priests of the Lord. Isaiah the prophet even approached him directly as we see in Isaiah 7. But in spite of this clear revelation from God, Ahaz chose the way of the world instead of the way of God.

Then he took his third step toward failure: **he appealed to earthly powers for help instead of to God.**

Though his grandfather Uzziah had ACCEPTED tribute from all of his neighbors, Ahaz GAVE tribute to his neighbors. He literally chopped up the bronze altar and stripped the Lord’s temple to send gold and silver to the king of Assyria – clearly concluding that Assyria was the up and comer so its gods must be the most powerful of all. And when the King of Assyria did bail him out – crushing Syria and Israel (which was exactly what God said would happen through Isaiah) – Ahaz visited Tiglath-Pileaser and came back with a copy of the huge altar the Assyrians used to worship their gods and ordered that be built in place of the one built according to the Law of Moses.

Thus, he took his fourth step into darkness:

4. He worshiped idols instead of the One true God.

“In every city of Judah he made high place to make offerings to other gods, provoking to anger the LORD, the God of his fathers.” 2 Chronicles 28:25

This is exactly what the Bible predicts will happen as people get caught up in the cycle of sin. They refuse to respond to the light they’ve been given, so God gives them over to their sin and their hearts and minds grow darker. Then they plunge further into slavery to sin, devoting themselves in worship to their own sinful desires, and God gives them over to what they have chosen to love.

All of this explains his response to Isaiah in chapter 7

“Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: ‘Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.’ But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.’” Isaiah 7:10-12

By this time Ahaz was so embedded in the worship of other gods he made his final, fatal choice: **he hardened his heart when given another chance.** This refusal to ask for a sign was his last chance to repent and place his faith in the Lord, the God of Israel, instead of all the other gods he had followed for his tragic 16 year reign, stumbling from one failure to the next. But instead of humbly admitting his pride and foolishness, his rebellion and failure; instead of acknowledging how much his sin had cost the whole kingdom of Judah he doubled down on his idolatry – he hardened his heart.

So God spoke a prophetic word through Isaiah to this faithless, evil and unrepentant king – a ***word of judgment that was mixed with hope.***

“And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.” Isaiah 7:13-15

Here is ***a miraculous sign*** – a virgin who will conceive. Here is ***a mysterious prophecy*** of a son who would be called Immanuel – which, Matthew explains, means God with us in Hebrew. And this child will eat curds and honey – signs of blessing and bounty – by the time he is old enough to choose good over evil.

Isaiah and his wife lived out the initial fulfillment of this prophecy – becoming a ***“pattern of fulfillment”*** as my OT professor called them. Isaiah’s wife was not a virgin at this time, they already had a son. But the Hebrew word for virgin can simply mean “young woman,” or “maiden.” That is certainly what it means when applied in the initial fulfillment of the prophecy. That doesn’t need to confuse the matter related to the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy in Mary. There is a range of meaning for the Hebrew word *Almah*, similar to our word “maiden.”

Isaiah’s wife was a young woman. Mary was a virgin. Isaiah’s wife was the rough pattern, Mary was the clear fulfillment. Just as Moses was the rough pattern of a true prophet and Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment. David was the rough pattern of an ideal King and Jesus is the clear fulfillment. Some details like this in Scripture are pointed out as mistakes or errors and anyone who argues along those lines just shows that they don’t understand how to interpret different kinds of Biblical passages. Prophecies are a tricky business and the details don’t have to line up like a C.S. Lewis allegory when they are more like a J.R.R. Tolkien typology. Aslan is not the same kind of symbol as Gandalf but they both point to Jesus in different ways.

The emphasis of the prophecy in Isaiah 7 is on the judgment and mercy of God. Before Isaiah’s son was old enough to make his own choices, he would be eating curds and honey – symbols of God’s blessing and provision – of His mercy. The point is that Syria and Israel – the immediate threats in front of Ahaz – would not conquer him. He simply needed to stand firm in his faith as Isaiah 7:9 says, ***“If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”***

Boy was that true of Ahaz. He was not firm in his faith and so he was not firm AT ALL. So here is:

How A King Failed:

- 1. He let Fear cloud his Judgment**
- 2. He Followed the World instead of the Word**
- 3. He Appealed to Earthly powers for help instead of to God**
- 4. He Worshiped Idols instead of the One True God**
- 5. He Hardened his Heart when given Another Chance**

And so what could have been a way out for Ahaz – a chance to repent and start over – became his final step toward failure. He hardened his heart and refused to trust God. Nevertheless, God still delivered Jerusalem from Syria and Israel - fulfilling the promise so that Isaiah’s son was eating curds and honey just a few years later. The northern kingdom of Israel was carried off into exile by the Assyrians and the southern kingdom was spared exile for another 140 years or so.

But Ahaz attributed this victory not to the sovereignty of God, whistling for a fly from Assyria, but to the power of Tiglath-Pileaser's gods – and so Ahaz devoted himself to those gods, refusing to trust and obey the God of his fathers. He did not stand firm in his faith and so he did not stand firm at all.

That is how a king failed. Now let's look at **how a carpenter succeeded**. It was very simple.

- 1. His Faith was Firmly Rooted in the Covenant God of Israel.**
- 2. He Obeyed even though it didn't Make Sense.**

He trusted God and therefore obeyed God. Trust and obey. It really is that simple. Lack of obedience reveals lack of trust. The proof of faith is obedience, even in the face of fear and confusion. And Joseph had plenty of both!

Put yourself in his place. You are a faithful Jew and an established carpenter, probably 30 years old. You are betrothed to a young Hebrew girl who was probably no older than 15 or 16 – the common age for marriage. You both trace your heritage back to David, which may well be why the marriage was arranged – and probably indicates a sincere faith and devotion to the Lord in both of these families.

And since they were sincere Jewish worshipers of God, both families would have been utterly broken and scandalized to find out that Mary was pregnant. Think of it. 16 years old. Engaged to a fine Jewish carpenter of the line of David. Now pregnant – and not by Joseph (which would have been scandalous enough).

By Jewish law, she could have been stoned. From Joseph's perspective she had broken their marriage covenant and committed adultery with another man. He certainly couldn't marry such a defiled woman. And it was well within his rights to drag her into the public square, accuse her of unfaithfulness and have the Jews in town oversee her execution.

But Matthew tells us that

"Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame resolved to divorce her quietly." Matthew 1:19

This was the most righteous and gracious thing Joseph could have done: a quiet arrangement just between the two families. But it was at this moment that God stepped in and that Joseph's faith was truly tested. Would he let fear cloud his judgment? Would he follow the world instead of the Word of God? Would he appeal to earthly powers for help instead of to God? Or ***would his faith move him to obey?***

"But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'" Matthew 1:20

Here are two reasons Joseph succeeded where Ahaz failed.

- 1. His Faith was Firmly Rooted in the Covenant God of Israel.**
- 2. He Obeyed even though it didn't Make Sense.**

First let's look at his faith and then we'll study his obedience. The key to Joseph's faith – as with all true faith – was in the OBJECT of his faith, not the AMOUNT of his faith. ***Joseph's faith was firmly rooted in the character of God*** – the God of the covenant. Joseph held fast to four characteristics he knew to be true of God.

First, this is **The God who makes His will known.**

“But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.” Matthew 1:20

God's general will was clear in the Bible Joseph had – the Old Testament. “Purge the evil from among you.” “Be holy for the Lord your God is holy.” Joseph's move to divorce Mary quietly was the right blend of justice and mercy – upholding the holiness of a faithful Jew along with the spirit of mercy and compassion for the woman he loved. But then God added a direct and personal message when “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.”

Again, Joseph knew his Bible, so he knew God was capable of this kind of revelation in dreams – as He had with Joseph with the sheaves and cows; as He had with the boy Samuel who would one day be a prophet and priest; as He had with Daniel with the statues and beasts. ***The Lord of Israel is the God who has spoken*** – the God who makes His will known. So, like Samuel, Joseph essentially said, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

And the angel addressed Joseph as a “son of David,” which would have reminded Joseph of God's second characteristic – **He is the God who keeps His promises.**

“Joseph, son of David, Do not fear to take Mary home as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 1:20

God promised to send a prophet like Moses and ***a King like David***. The Mosaic Law established the covenant of Law. The Davidic Covenant promised the day when a descendant of David would reign over Israel FOREVER. There had not been a king in the Davidic line reigning in Jerusalem for hundreds of years, nor had there been a prophet in the land, for that matter.

But still Joseph knew that God would keep His promises. Hearing his name and his lineage would have raised this question for Joseph – ***do you believe the old promises?*** Do you trust in the God of the covenant? Well, then: “Do not fear to take Mary home as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

How is that for a test of fear vs. faith? What would my parents think? What would the neighbors think? Will we be disowned by our families, by everyone? What would this mean for business? Will we be allowed to worship in the synagogue? Will we be accepted at the Temple in Jerusalem? Will we be outcasts? Will we have to live among Gentiles?

But Joseph believed in a God who could make His will known and a God who kept His promises. So the next attribute of God was also familiar to him: **He is the God who saves sinners.**

“Do not fear to take Mary home as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew 1:20-21

Is it possible that Joseph thought immediately of Isaiah 53? Could it be that this baby Mary is carrying is not only the long awaited Davidic King, but he is also the suffering servant of Isaiah – who would be pierced for our iniquities and crushed for our sins...? How could both be true of one child – both a King who would reign forever and a sacrificial Savior who would give his life to save sinners?

Joseph held on to what he knew – the God he worshiped was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. The sacrifice system showed He was a God who covered sin to remain in relationship with a sinful and rebellious people. Psalm 103 said:

“He does not deal with us according to our sins, or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” Psalm 103:10-12

He is the God who saves sinners: the God of grace and mercy. And finally – what must have been the most stunning revelation, even more hard to swallow than a virgin carrying a child – this God, the God of Israel **is the God who came near.**

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” Matthew 1:22-23

God was known to be close to Israel compared to the other nations, but ***even to a faithful Jew God remained at a distance.*** Only the priests could minister in the Temple. Only the High Priest could dare to enter the Holy of Holies – the most Holy Place where the presence of God was housed. This was the lesson Ahaz’s grandfather learned the hard way when he tried to offer incense in the temple and was struck with leprosy for his presumption. You could not just stroll into the presence of God – even if you were the king!

Plus, the Ark of the Covenant that rested in the Holy of Holies had been lost for hundreds of years – and would remain so until Indiana Jones would find it almost 2,000 years later. So we know it’s in a top secret government warehouse somewhere but Joseph only knew that it was missing and with it, the presence of God had withdrawn from the people of God.

Even when the second temple had been completed and even after King Herod had renovated it so that its beauty rivaled that of Solomon’s Temple, there was no shekinah glory dwelling there. The glorious presence of God never came back to fill the Holy of Holies. God was no longer close to the nation of Israel as the old stories told.

But now Isaiah 7 was being fulfilled and Mary and Joseph’s son will be called Immanuel, for he will bring the presence of God to the people of God in unforeseen and utterly unprecedented ways. This is ***what Christmas is about in its essence: that God came near.***

The holy God of heaven, the Almighty Creator, the righteous Giver of the Law, the One that no human can see and live, the Designer of the Tabernacle and the Temple that delineate how to approach His unapproachable glory... This God has arrived. This is what Joseph had to process as his dream registered in reality the next morning.

Immanuel. God WITH US. **God has arrived** – not in blazing fire or blinding light; not in fearful judgment but in the humblest of all forms; not to condemn sinners but to save sinners. The God of heaven has become a member of the earthly race. God is here!

Imagine Joseph sitting up awake, the night still dark around him. He starts pacing around the room, considering what he has just seen and heard. ***What should I do?*** Would fear control him or would his faith in the covenant God of his fathers enable him to overcome his fear? Would his lack of understanding prevent him from moving forward in faith?

The carpenter succeeded where the king had failed because ***his faith was fixed on the faithfulness of God*** – the God who makes His will known; who keeps His promises; who saves sinners and who comes near to His people.

Do you know God like this? Is your faith firmly rooted in the covenant keeping God of the Bible? If your faith wavers in times of uncertainty and challenge, this is the place to come. Come back to the truth you know about God – who He is and what He has done. Above all, consider what God has done in Christ and **the fact that Jesus came**. He is not far off. He came near.

Wherever you are today, whatever you have done, however you have failed or strayed from Him – God HAS come near to you in Christ. He is not far off. He is not uncaring. He is present, reaching out to you in love. Will you respond to him in faith like Joseph or turn away from him like Ahaz?

Now, look at ***how Joseph's faith moved him to obey*** in direct contrast to how Ahaz's lack of faith moved him to disobey. Here is: **How a Carpenter Succeeded:**

- 1. His Faith was Firmly Rooted in the Covenant God of Israel**
- 2. He Obeyed even though it didn't Make Sense.**

Joseph obeyed God all the way, right away, even though it didn't make sense. It couldn't have made sense. It took the church fathers 325 years to hammer out the Nicene Creed and articulate the Trinitarian formula. We still puzzle over the mystery of the Trinity today in spite of geniuses like Wayne Grudem and C.S. Lewis. Father, Son and Holy Spirit – One God in three persons; a Unity, yet each distinct from the others; a beautiful, eternal dance of self-giving love.

All Joseph knew was that God had spoken to Him and his choices were very simple: to obey or to disobey. Ahaz rejected the clear direction of God. He hardened his heart even when given a second and third and fourth chance to repent. But Joseph responded **right away**.

“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”
Matthew 1:24-25

As soon as he woke up, he obeyed. He followed the clear direction of the Lord and took Mary as his wife. He went straight to her father's house and changed his plans to divorce her quietly, saying he would claim the child as his own, absorbing the inevitable shame and disgrace upon himself, whatever might come of it.

He obeyed right away. And he obeyed all the way. “He knew her not until she had given birth to a son.” Now Mary was not just his betrothed, but she was his wife. And she was already pregnant – so what did they have to lose, really?

It’s like the two Canadian brothers who were driving a van at top speed down a high hill only to discover that the brakes had been cut. The brother who was driving threw up his hands, letting go of the steering wheel, and crossed his arms saying, “No point steering now!”



Joseph could have taken that approach and many lesser men would have. But Joseph knew that what was happening between him and Mary was a holy and sacred thing. There could be no risk of dishonoring the miraculous work of God.

Shouldn’t that still be our view of sexual purity? Each woman God has placed on this planet is a special treasure – a miraculous work of God – how dare we to defile what God has created? How can we

compromise when God has made His will so clear to us about the need to fight for holiness, as Joseph did – to obey the Lord all the way, right away, every time?

Joseph absorbed the cost of obedience – restraining his own desires and accepting the dishonor that would have fallen on Mary. And the reason he did all of this was **because of his faith**. He held fast to what he knew to be true about God and that faith moved him to obey. Let’s pray for this same kind of faith to grow in us throughout this Christmas season, moving us to obey the Lord all the way, right away, as He leads us!