

Isaiah 7:10-14

“I just wish God would give me a sign.” Have you ever heard that? Have you ever said that? So have I, and I don’t blame you. When we are in pain, when it seems like God doesn’t care or is unable to get us through something difficult, in those moments, it is absolutely natural to desire some sort of evidence or proof that God is as good as he says he is. The problem isn’t that we desire signs. The problem is that when God does show his people signs that he is truthful and powerful and loving, they often don’t listen. The signs are ignored because they aren’t the right signs, and really, because God isn’t the right God. Today we have a prime example: God offers to give someone a sign and he rejects it. But in his infinite mercy, God still gives the ultimate sign- something miraculous and true and beautiful and powerful that we can look to and see proof that God is truly good and powerful and trustworthy: **The Incarnation- Jesus becoming a human being- is God’s ultimate Sign.** Today I’d like to dig into two questions with you- **Why did Ahaz reject it? And, Why can we trust it?**

### 1. **Why did Ahaz reject it?**

If you remember, last week we talked about how Israel had split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north, Judah in the south. At this point, the king of the southern kingdom, Judah, was Ahaz, and he’s considered one of the most corrupt, godless, evil kings to ever take David’s throne. Politically, what’s happened is Israel, the northern kingdom, the brothers of the southern kingdom, have allied with other smaller nations to attack and dominate Judah. Ahaz was obviously afraid, and what he does is he makes an agreement with the Assyrian Empire- yes, the ones that would ravage Israel and attempt to attack Judah as well. This is a big deal because it shows that Ahaz did not trust God’s promises, even a little bit. We know from Scripture that Ahaz was *not* a believer in the true God- he led Israel to worship false gods, ones whose worship involved temple prostitution and human sacrifices, one sacrifice Ahaz offered was his own child. And yet, God still attempts to call him to faith, call him to trust him instead of his false gods, and he does so through Isaiah. Isaiah goes to Ahaz and tells him that God is not going to let his enemies take him over, that all he needs to do is trust. And then, as we see in the opening line of our text, God even offers Ahaz proof- a sign that he can be trusted. God says through Isaiah, “Ask for whatever you want, tell me what you want me to do and I’ll do it to prove to you that I can be trusted, that I can be worshiped, that I’m worth getting rid of all your idols.” *Ahaz says, “no thanks.”*

In fact, Ahaz twists Scripture and quotes from Deuteronomy, saying he wouldn’t put God to the test- just to sound extra pious and religious. He might as well have spat in God’s face. God graciously and lovingly sends his servant to Ahaz with undeserved promises and grace, and even offers to give him any kind of sign that he wants so he can be fully sure it’s real and true, and he uses God’s own words against him. Any person with even a shred of respect or love for God would have jumped at the opportunity to see a sign. But not Ahaz. Why? What could make Ahaz *not* want definitive proof that his God is above all gods? *Because that would force Ahaz to*

*worship God alone.* If God proves to him that he is all-powerful and on his side, he will have no excuse- he will have to leave behind his false gods and admit to his entire nation that God is the protector and sustainer of the nation, not him. And he would rather not do that. He would rather live in his delusion and convince himself that it's his politically savvy moves, his strength, his religious practices toward other gods that are the salvation of Judah, not God.

Too bad. God is going to give the sign anyway: The virgin is going to miraculously conceive, and she is going to give birth to a son, and he will be Immanu-El: God with us. Obviously, this is referring to Mary, who would give birth to Jesus, who is true God and now also truly a human being. But why would God choose to say this to Ahaz? This wouldn't happen for at least 700 years. God is saying to Ahaz, and all who doubt him, "You are not going to be able to live your life in the delusion of willful doubt. You and all who doubt me will have no excuse. Because I'm coming in a way so powerful, so miraculous, so undeniable that if you choose not to believe in me, it is only because you don't want to." Ahaz wants a god who lets him worship who he wants, have sex with who he wants, rule how he wants, who comes when called, who is there when it's convenient, but doesn't require repentance or exclusive worship. And the incarnation of Christ, Christmas itself, proves that God is not that kind of god. This is deeply relevant for today because Ahaz's spiritual cowardice and hypocrisy still runs rampant in our culture.

Richard Dawkins is a well known militant atheist who routinely ridicules Christians for being gullible, stupid, unrefined, childish, and blind for believing in something so silly an all-powerful creator of the universe, in creation, in Jesus and his miracles. During an interview, someone actually pushed him a bit on his beliefs and asked him, so if there is no creator, all of the universe is just an accident, where did it come from? He said, "I don't know." And when the interviewer asked, "you say all of this is random, but the complexity of even the most simple cells seems to be evidence that someone incredibly intelligent designed life." He answered, "Yes, you're right. Perhaps another race of intelligent beings from another place in the universe created life on this planet." Aliens. That's his, and plenty of other people's solution. Is there any evidence for this idea? Absolutely not. So why would Dawkins and those like him rather believe in aliens than an all powerful God? It has nothing to do with evidence. The answer, I contend, is this. Aliens don't tell you what to do, demand worship, or call you to repent. We as a culture do this too, especially around this time of year. We turn Christmas into a sentimental nostalgia-fest where we sing cute songs and have warm cozy feelings and say, "oh, look at baby Jesus, he's so cute" without actually considering why he came in the first place- and I think to some degree, we do it on purpose. Because when we really consider the implications of Jesus' birth and why we had to come, we have to admit some things about ourselves.

Consider this: If next week one of you came to me with a gift and said, "Merry Christmas, Pastor," and I opened it and it was a book called, "Preaching for dummies," and I said, "thank you so much! I needed this," what would I be admitting? That I need help preaching. When we

celebrate Jesus' coming down to earth, what are we admitting? That God is not a god of "good enough." We are admitting that we are all moral failures, and each of us is lost and deserves nothing but to burn in Hell forever. We are admitting that we are so bad that only someone as holy and perfect as God could redeem us from the mess we've made. We are admitting that we are nothing, deserve nothing, can do nothing to please God and we need him to come to us in mercy and grace to save us. And that is terrifying.

## **2. Why can we do that?**

Why can we place our trust in the God who came down to Bethlehem knowing that it means letting go of all moral pride and sense of self righteousness, and letting go of all notions that I'm in control of my life and the master of my fate? Because the Incarnation of Christ is *also* the unique, undeniable sign of just how greatly this infinite, powerful, just, God loves you. Consider the weight of what "Immanuel" really means. He who is unknowable, incomprehensible, untouchable, invincible, becomes a baby that sinful humans can know, touch, wound and kill. He who holds the universe itself in his hands lowers himself so low that he has to be held in the arms of an impoverished, shamed, young woman named Mary. He who hears and answers prayer lowers himself so that he has to ask God the Father, his equal, for everything, to depend on him for everything, the one who is the ultimate provider now has to rely on someone he has created to feed, and clean, change, and protect, and take care of him. He who knows all things, is the source of knowledge itself lowers himself so low that he has to learn how to crawl, walk, talk. He who is praised in Heaven by angels and saints surrounding his throne in perfect glory and beauty and majesty leaves it all behind- why? Why would he do this? Why would he lower himself so low? Why would he be willingly humiliated as a low-class carpenter's son from Nazareth? Why would he abandon heaven's throne for a feed trough in a barn? Why would he willingly not make use of his divine majesty and glory and power? Why would he willingly enter this broken sinful world? Why? *Because he wanted you.*

You just sang it: "*Why lies he in such mean estate where oxen now are feeding? Good Christian, fear, for sinners here, the silent Word is pleading. Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross he bore for me, fore you.*" You see, if God were just a nice guy who was okay with whatever you want to do, however you live your life, he would have never come down. The incarnation is a sign that proves that you and I are lost sinners. At the same time, if God were just holy, only a harsh judge, he wouldn't have come down either- he would just let us die in our sins and he would have every right to do that. But he didn't- he came down. He became human so that he could, in the place of all humans, live the perfect human life that we should have lived- that's what that means- Jesus was pleading for his Father to have mercy on you already as he was living the perfect life in your place, and then suffer the punishment that we deserved- so that we could all be accepted. The mighty God of Heaven and Earth was humbled, so we could be exalted. Christ was punished and rejected, so we could be accepted. Christ was sold for nothing,

became nothing, because we were worth everything to him, and are now because of his sacrifice infinitely valuable, beautiful, and perfect in God's eyes. .

That's really what Christmas is all about. My friends, during this next week, don't settle for a sentimental Christmas. Sure, enjoy the nostalgia and warm fuzzies, but don't be Ahaz- don't keep God at a distance so you don't have to face hard, beautiful realities. Embrace the sign, the wonder, the proof that God has given you- Christ's incarnation means you were lost, but it also means you were, and are, worth everything to him, and he was willing to suffer Hell itself, just so he could have you. Amen.