

Isaiah 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 8. Then the Lord said to me, Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters belonging to Meher Shalal Hashbaz, and I will get reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberakiah, to attest for me. And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said to me, Call his name Meher Shalal Hashbaz, for before the boy knows how to cry, My father or my mother, the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria. The Lord spoke to me again, Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently and rejoice over reason the son of Remaliah, therefore behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the river, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory, and it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on into Judah. It will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel. Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered. Give ear, all you far countries. Strap on your armour and be shattered. Strap on your armour and be shattered. Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing. Speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us. For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honour as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offence, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of

Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken. They shall be snared and taken. Bind up the testimony. Seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. And when they say to you, Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching, and to the testimony, if they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged, and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward.

And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish, and they will be thrust into thick darkness. Isaiah chapter 8 comes in the context of the Syro-Ephraimite War, and the threat of the alliance of Rezin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the king of Israel.

These kings have come up against Judah and against Jerusalem to attack King Ahaz, to replace him with a puppet king that will fight on their side in their anti-Assyrian alliance. Already in the preceding chapter, we had two sons with significant names, Shear-Jeshub, a remnant will return, and Emmanuel, God with us. Within chapter 8, we have another child that will serve as a prophetic sign. Isaiah is instructed to perform a prophetic sign act, as other prophets such as Jeremiah or Ezekiel. He is charged to write belonging to Meher Shalal Hashbaz on a large tablet, likely a piece of wood or metal.

[3 : 42] Joseph Blenkinsop notes that this was probably a placard designed for public display. The name Meher Shalal Hashbaz means speed the plunder, hasten the spoil. Although once Isaiah's son was born, the writing would have the sense of belonging to Meher Shalal Hashbaz, at this point in the prophetic sign, it isn't clear that the writing is of a name, and rather than belonging to, it might have been understood as concerning. Isaiah was accompanied by two respectable witnesses who could testify to his action. This seems to be one of several examples of prophetic signs that were multi-stage, with the actions that they involved and the meaning of them being revealed over a period of time.

Having performed this act, Isaiah had relations with the prophetess, although we are not told that this was done in response to a divine instruction. The prophetess, presumably his wife, although commentators differ on that question, may have been a prophetess in her own right, along with several other women in the Old and New Testaments.

Or perhaps she's just referred to as the prophetess on account of her union with Isaiah the prophet. Considering that the sign is primarily being performed through and by her in burying the child, we could at the least understand her being called the prophetess in that sense. However, if she was also known as a prophetess in her own right, the sign might have had more force.

There are pronounced similarities between this account and that of Emmanuel in Isaiah chapter 7 verses 14 to 17. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria. Blenkinsop notes the parallels. In both cases there are significant names given.

The young woman parallels with the prophetess. The virgin shall conceive and bear a son parallels with the prophetess conceived and bore a son. She shall call his name Emmanuel parallels with call his name Meher Shalal Hashbaz. Before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good parallels with before the boy knows how to cry my father or my mother. Both prophecies also end with a reference to the king of Assyria. Considering these parallels, the problem of fitting two supposedly successive children and the processes of their development in a short period of time, and the references to Emmanuel in chapter 8, many commentators, Blenkinsop and John Oswald being two examples, argue that what we have here are two accounts of a single sign. As John Watts recognises, however, there is a difference between the age at which an infant can cry, my father or my mother, and the age at which he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

[6 : 37] Also, as Alec Machia points out, Emmanuel's name, connected with the child of chapter 9, is one that means blessing, whereas Meher Shalal Hashbaz's name signifies judgment.

It seems more likely to me that we have two different children as two witnesses to the Lord's promise, the first, Emmanuel, being Hezekiah, who is born to the young queen of Ahaz, and the second being the son of Isaiah and his wife, the prophetess. We could perhaps see this as similar to the paired births of John the Baptist and Jesus at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke.

In naming his own child as his prophecy, and attaching the fulfilment of the prophecy to an early event in the child's development, Isaiah was, apart from anything else, really committing himself to his message. The prophecy would shortly be fulfilled, even against appearances.

The king of Assyria would come upon Syria and Israel, and Reason and Pekah's invasion of Judah would be halted. In 734 BC, Tiglath-Pileser cut off the support of Egypt to the anti-Assyrian alliance. In the next two years, he took extensive territory from Israel, in Galilee and the Transjordan, and he defeated Damascus in 732 BC. In verse 5, we seem to move forward in time.

Tiglath-Pileser III has forced Pekah, king of Israel, and Reason, king of Syria, to withdraw, abandoning their invasion of Judah. Their lands were now being ravaged by the Assyrians.

[7 : 59] The people of Judah and Jerusalem were rejoicing over the downfall of their enemies, although the phrase is difficult to interpret. However, they had rejected the gentle stream of Shiloah, the waters diverted from the Sihon Spring, in the conduits that irrigated the city's pools.

This image of the gentle waters near the city is an image of the aid and the sustenance that the Lord provides to his people. Judah had turned to Assyria, against whom they would later rebel, rather than trusting in the Lord. At this point in time, they were presumably congratulating themselves on their canny foreign policy. Ahaz's shrewdness in allying with Assyria seemed to have saved them in their hour of need. However, as they rejected the Lord, the mighty waters of the Euphrates, the great river, would be brought against them, representing the king of Assyria and all of his forces.

The waters of the Euphrates, the power of Assyria, would overflow its banks and the region would be deluged. Judah would be largely overwhelmed and the waters would come up to the very neck of Jerusalem.

Meher Shalal Hashbaz's name would be fulfilled against them. The land is described as Emmanuel's land, which perhaps adds weight to the idea that Emmanuel is a royal child. Yet with the description of the land as Emmanuel's, the tone of the prophecy shifts. The Assyrians will come up against and overwhelm the land of Judah, but they will be shattered, failing in their design. Ultimately, their purposes will not stand because of the promise of Emmanuel. God is with us.

The second half of the chapter sums up many of the themes of the section. The prophet is called to be a messenger, a sign, and a model to the people in difficult days. In faithfully holding to the word of the Lord, he sets a pattern for others. He's warned against following the behavior and adopting the attitudes of his compatriots. In chapter 6, Isaiah described himself as a man of unclean lips, dwelling among a people of unclean lips. Here he is given instructions in how to stand apart from his contemporaries. The meaning of conspiracies in verse 12 is difficult to determine. Perhaps it's a reference to an alliance between Judah and Assyria, initially created out of fear of Israel and Syria, and then later developed out of fear of Assyria's dominance within the region. Alternatively, maybe there are dark rumors of a fifth column in Judah, or speculations and intrigue about Ahaz's government and their dark purposes. Oswald suggests, along with a number of other commentators, that rather than focus upon a particular conspiracy, this likely refers to a general approach to the explanation of events, especially unpleasant events. The danger in times of uncertainty and instability is to become paranoid and to turn to conspiracy theories, believing that the world is primarily controlled by shadowy human powers. Isaiah's message, however, is that man is but flesh, his life is as fleeting as the breath in his nostrils. Conspiracy theories can be a sort of false doctrine of providence, where fear of shadowy human agencies and the assumption that they wield vast powers and control can take the place of confidence in the Lord. Such a confidence in the Lord will greatly demystify and deflate our view of human powers. Late in Isaiah, idols, which hold people in their thrall, are deconstructed by the prophet, broken down to their component elements and the processes of their construction. One might see the Lord as engaging in something similar with human powers and authorities here. As we saw in the preceding chapter, for instance, when you consider

[11:30] Israel and Syria, they have two cities, Samaria and Damascus at their hearts, and two weak men as their kings, Pekah and Rezan. What initially looks like an irresistible force is demystified and broken down to size. When you fear the Lord and honour him above all, you are unlikely to have exaggerated views of the scope, scale and effectiveness of human power, knowledge and will, and conspiracy theories can become a lot less persuasive. By failing to trust the Lord and thinking in terms of human conspiracies, when the chips were down, Judah had turned to political machinations and intrigue, trusting in human power, which would ultimately bring ruin upon them. In verses 14 and 15, we see that the Lord would simultaneously be a sanctuary and a stone of offence. Those who trusted in the Lord would find security and safety under his protection. But those who lost their nerve and turned to conspiracy theories and human powers and intrigue, rather than to the Lord, would stumble and be broken or snared. Those who did not base their lives and purposes upon the Lord would find that he was their great obstacle, the one frustrating their designs at every step. In verses 16 to 18, it seems likely that Isaiah withdrew from his public participation in the discourse surrounding the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. He bound and sealed his testimony concerning the future and committed it to the charge of his disciples. The disciples of Isaiah need not be considered as a school around him, but this does suggest that he had some followers.

His words could have been produced by them in the future, at the time when they were vindicated. The time would come when the Lord would no longer hide his face from Judah, and when Isaiah's words and the signs of his own actions and the names of his sons would be fulfilled. Brother Charles writes of this particular passage. In this confession of Isaiah, one can also discern the beginnings of a sense of canon consciousness. By this is meant the prophetic witness that was not received when first proclaimed has been collected and preserved in faith for another generation. These collected testimonies retain their truth and authority in spite of the passing of time and continue to serve as God's word for a future age. Where the Lord's word is not heard, the temptation is to turn to divination and other forms of pagan practices, to the dark words of soothsayers, mediums, and those who spoke to the dead, instead of the clarity of the word of the Lord. Against such occult practices, Isaiah directs people to the teaching and the testimony of the Lord. These are the touchstone of all truth. Any who rejects such words will grope in the darkness, starved of knowledge and guidance, distressed in their fear, resentful and bitter in their suffering, stumbling further and further into the gloom.

A question to consider. In this chapter we see two contrasting fears, the fear of the Lord and the fear of human powers and agencies. Reflecting more closely upon this passage and elsewhere in scripture, how can the fear of the Lord release us from the fear of human powers?

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