

## ***1 The Amen of faith (Is. 7:9)***

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It was a time of national crisis. Judah, under King Ahaz, was under attack from the king of Israel and the king of Aram (Is. 7:1). The two kings had attacked Jerusalem but failed to overcome its defences (Is. 7:1, 2 Kings 16:5). But the king of Aram attacked the southern areas of Judah and took the strategic port city of Elath (2 Kings 16:6), one of the main sources of Solomon's wealth. Not only that, the king of Israel inflicted a devastating defeat upon Ahaz, in which thousands were slain and many more taken hostage (2 Chron. 28:1-15). The Edomites and Philistines took advantage of Judah's weakness to attack them from the east and the west (2 Chron. 28:17-18), taking further territory and hostages. Now the forces of Israel and Aram united again for one last push against the capital (Is. 7:2). The situation could not be more dire. When it was reported that a further attack was imminent, Isaiah records that the hearts of the king and of the people "*shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind*" (verse 2). God told Isaiah to meet Ahaz on the way to the fuller's field (verse 3), and there to deliver the message that this attack would come to nothing (verses 4-7). He pointed out (verses 8-9) that God would surely destroy these enemy kings, and that Israel would be shattered as a people within sixty-five years (a prophecy fulfilled when Israel was overcome by the Assyrians exactly sixty-five years later). At the end of his address, Isaiah spoke these words to Ahaz: "*If you will not have faith, you surely will not be established*" (verse 9).

The challenge of the prophet is based on a play on words involving the Hebrew verb *aman*. The root meaning of this word is to be firm, secure, reliable, established, lasting, foundational or having substance. The Hebrew language is very economical with words, using one word in a variety of different forms to express various meanings. The same word in another form is used in Is. 33:6, "*He is the sure foundation for your times.*" Here God Himself is pictured as the foundation. Isaiah uses two forms of the word *aman* here in addressing Ahaz. The first thing he says is this: "*If you will not have faith.*" The meaning of this verb is to hold fast or to have a secure hold. It is *what you do with* what is reliable or foundational. God and His Word are the foundation and the substance. You take what is firm, reliable, foundational and substantial – the truth of God's Word – and you hold fast to it. You thus attach yourself to or place yourself upon a foundation which is firm and unbreakable, something which has substance. And so the basic meaning of faith in Hebrew is to take hold of what is utterly and completely secure, firm and established and to build your life upon it. The Jews did not see faith as a weak and unreliable alternative to the visible foundation of our own abilities or strength. They saw it as just the opposite! Faith in God, even though it involves placing our trust in what we cannot see or touch with our senses, is the only way to build our lives on a true and firm foundation. Faith involves a judgment in who or what deserves our confidence. We can have faith in many things – not only other gods or religions, but money, physical strength, intellectual abilities, health, appearance, personality, institutions of men, armies, nations or even in other people around us. In each case, we make a judgment as to what will prove to be the firmest possible foundation for our lives. Faith in God makes the judgment that the strongest foundation is found in the invisible world rather than the things most people put their trust in, the things they can access by their five senses. How foolish we are to take what is weak and feeble, what is grounded in mere human

strength, and substitute that for the power and security of Almighty God and the truth of His Word! Isaiah's declaration – or more accurately, challenge – to Ahaz involved where he was to find a foundation, a substance, a rock on which he could build the security of his life and his kingdom.

Now comes the second part of the word play. Isaiah finishes his sentence: *“If you will not have faith, you will not be established.”* The second verb is a different form of the first, but both are based on the original root *aman*. To “have faith” means to *have a secure hold*, but to “be established” means to *be or prove to be securely held*. The meaning is this: if you do not have a secure hold (on God), you will not be securely held (by God). If you do not find God as the substantial foundation on which you build your life, then your life will lose its security and foundation, and it will not be established. Literally, the ground will come out from under your feet. And that was both the challenge and the warning to the wicked king. If he does not turn to God and start to build his life and kingdom on the firm foundation of God and His Word, then both he and his kingdom will be literally swept away from under him.

The same words were spoken to Israel by the righteous king Jehoshaphat, when on the eve of another seemingly hopeless battle, he told them that if they put their faith in the Lord, they would be established (2 Chron. 20:20). Jehoshaphat was a man of faith, and knew that, even when the situation seemed hopeless, the Lord would deliver His people if their hearts were right with Him. In the end, Israel never had to fight, for when they arrived at the battle site, the enemy had disappeared. The Lord had fought the battle for them. Jehoshaphat's declaration of faith had set him free from dependency on his own limited resources, and released the infinite power of God to fight the battle on his behalf. Ahaz, however, was a different kind of man. He was not interested in taking Isaiah up on his challenge to step out in faith. And the reason is clear, for the account shows us that his faith was placed somewhere else: *“So Ahaz sent messengers to the king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son; come up and deliver me from the hand of the king of Aram, and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are rising up against me.’ And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house, and sent a present to the king of Assyria”* (2 Kings 16:8). Yet God, knowing all that was in the heart of Ahaz, still chose to extend His offer of grace by telling Ahaz to ask for a sign (Is. 7:10). A sign was a miraculous occurrence which served as a proof or pledge of the certainty of something else God had promised: Gideon's fleece was the sign pledging his victory over Midian (Judges 6:36-40), and the shadow going backwards was the sign of Hezekiah's healing (2 Kings 20:8-11). The sign would make up for what was lacking in Ahaz' own faith. Perhaps God was moved to mercy by the fate of His people.

Ahaz replied that he would not test the Lord (Is. 7:12). His apparently pious words referred to Moses' command in Deut. 6:16, *“You shall not put the Lord your God to the test”*. The words sounded full of religious sincerity, but served only as a cloak for Ahaz' hypocrisy, for he had already determined to find his salvation elsewhere. No wonder Isaiah responded in anger, *“Listen now, O house of David! Is it too light a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?”* (Is. 7:13). Therefore, Isaiah continued (verse 14), the Lord would give him a sign whether he liked it or not. The virgin would be with child and give birth to a son, and would call him Immanuel (verse 14). There is no doubt this refers to the Messiah, for Isaiah speaks of the same child in 9:6 as *“Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of*

*Peace*”, and in 11:1-16 prophesies that he will judge the nations of the world in the last days. The virgin mother is given the extraordinary dignity, against Jewish custom, of naming her own child – as indeed Mary did, according to the angel’s instruction (Luke 1:31). Yet Isaiah sees a double fulfilment. The Immanuel to come will be a miraculous sign, in that He Himself will be God, and will eventually bring in God’s everlasting kingdom. Yet there is also a child to be born in the years of Isaiah’s own life, and this Immanuel will become a sign not of God’s promise but of God’s judgment, and of both Israel and Judah’s destruction. By the time of his coming of age (verse 14), he would be eating only curds and honey, the reference being to the fact that thickened milk and honey, the food of the desert, would be the only food left in the land at that time. This disaster would be preceded by three separate events: the destruction of Aram and of Israel, and the devastation of Judah, all by the hand of the king of Assyria (verses 16-17). Within less than twenty years, Israel was laid waste twice by the Assyrians and eventually carried off into exile (2 Kings 15:29, 16:3-6, 18:9-12), and Aram also lay in ruins (2 Kings 16:9). Seven years later Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, having devastated Judah, had reached the gates of Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:13-17). The very king to whom Ahaz had appealed would bring Judah to the edge of destruction. And even though, through the faith of Hezekiah and the miraculous intervention of God, Judah survived that siege, the attack of the Assyrians laid the foundation for the eventual overthrow of Judah by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar.

In his decision to turn to Assyria instead of the Lord, Ahaz brought upon himself and his nation the consequence pronounced by God: “*you will not be established.*” Only a few years later, the forces of Assyria would stand in the same fuller’s field where Isaiah came to Ahaz (verse 3), demanding the surrender of Jerusalem (Is. 36:2). Ahaz purchased the cooperation of the Assyrians at the expense both of his nation’s independence and its reliance on God. Thus he laid the foundation for the eventual destruction of the nation. The pivotal event in all this was the encounter between Ahaz and Isaiah. At that moment, Ahaz was given the choice of placing his faith in God or his faith in men, and he made the wrong choice. As a result, in that hour of encounter between these two men, the fate of Jerusalem was sealed for over two thousand five hundred years, for not until sixty years ago did Israel again become a sovereign nation. This served only as proof of what God spoke to Isaiah in his commissioning, saying that by his preaching he would render the hearts of the people insensitive until the cities were devastated and the land desolate (Is. 6:9-11).

Why is it that, when we use the word “faith”, we think of something lacking proof or substance, unreliable or fickle? Yet we think nothing of basing our life and security on all sorts of extremely unreliable things – money, political leaders, financial markets, personal relationships, job security, what people think of us, our state of health or our physical appearance. As the slogan at the bank says, “Take care of money, and it will take care of you.” As we look about, we see people frequently and bitterly disappointed when the people or things they have trusted fail them. Hebrews 11:1 teaches that all the substance and proof we need to build our lives upon are found in one place and one place only – faith in God, His Word and His promises. Isaiah attempts to teach Ahaz the same thing. If you build your life upon the rock of God, the prophet fearlessly tells the king, that rock will carry you, but if you build it on anything else, even (as was his plan) the most powerful army of the known world, it will prove to be quicksand by comparison. Faith in God is the most powerful, real and tangible foundation that exists for life and success in this world.

From the same word Isaiah uses here, we get our word “Amen”. Amen means, “Let it be established, let it be firm, let it be secure!” We are greatly mistaken if we think this word is nothing more than the way to end a prayer in a ceremonially proper manner – though unfortunately that is the way we often use it. In fact, it is a powerful and dynamic declaration we make at the end of every prayer that what we have prayed in faith – the establishment of the will of God – is going to happen. Our declaration of “amen” is an acknowledgment that God is supernaturally and powerfully at work bringing what we have prayed – what we have faith for – from the invisible into the visible realm. How the purpose of God is established through faith is what Isaiah reveals to Ahaz, and the tragedy is he failed to listen. By his failure to obey and his decision to base his fortunes on the most tangible thing the world of that day had to offer – the armies of Assyria – Ahaz determined the fate of his nation for almost two thousand seven hundred years.

Our decisions have consequences, and none have more consequences than our determination either to act on faith or to reject it. Stepping out in faith can seem the most dangerous thing you could ever do, and that’s why many of us fail to do it. Through our disobedience, we are cheating not only ourselves but the generations of those who come after us. The mediocre state of the church in the western world is the result, in large part, of the small number of believers radical enough to base their lives on what we tragically fail to see is the truest and most reliable foundation they could ever have. The only way we can begin to change this world is by the exercise of faith. It’s time to start doing it.