

# **CHALLENGE TO TRUST GOD**

## **Teaching-Learning Resources**

### **BAPTIST LEADER**

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Background Scripture: 2 Kings 16; Isaiah 7–8

Key Passage: Isaiah 8:10–20

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This is the third lesson in Part III on “Appeals to Recommitment Rejected.” This study, “Challenge to Trust God,” concerns Isaiah’s attempt to steer King Ahaz of Judah away from a defense policy that would make Judah a vassal state of Assyria. Isaiah advocated a policy of trust in Yahweh that demanded no military activity or political maneuvering. His message on this occasion was summed up in these words: “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint” (Isaiah 7:4).

To the royal court at Jerusalem this message seemed like the senseless talk of a pacifist romantic who was out of touch with the harsh realities facing the nation. The king of Judah thought he needed something more than idealistic platitudes from the prophet, for the situation was so serious that the Davidic dynasty was at stake.

### **The Historical Situation**

Judah’s two northern neighbors, Israel and Syria (the former is also identified as Samaria or Ephraim or by the name of King Pekah, the son of Remaliah; the latter is also identified as Damascus or by the king’s name, Rezin), independently or in conspiracy arrayed themselves against Judah since Judah would not enter into an anti-Assyrian conspiracy. Three different accounts of this threat to Judah survive in the

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biblical tradition, namely, 2 Chronicles 28:5–15; 2 Kings 16:5–10; and Isaiah 7:5–6.

According to the prophetic tradition, Israel and, Syria were only making threats against Judah, particularly against the Davidic monarch whom they wanted to dethrone and replace with a sympathetic non-Davidic puppet king: “Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it” (Isaiah 7:6).

But according to the chronicler (2 Chronicles 28:5), King Ahaz faced more than a threat; he was twice attacked—first by Syria, then by Israel. The consequences for Judah were devastating. Syria captured a great number of Judeans and carried them captive to Damascus. Israel is alleged to have killed 120,000 Judeans in one day, including the king’s son and the second-in-command in Judah, and taken 200,000 people captive. Through the intercession of the prophet Oded, the captives taken by Israel were released and returned to Jericho. But the good news of the release of the captives did not erase the reality of defeat. The figures given in 2 Chronicles 28:6–8 (120,000 and 200,000) need not be taken literally since the Hebrew word for “thousand” was also a technical term for a fixed unit of unknown quantity, but certainly less than one thousand. But even a reduced number of casualties and captives would confirm a devastating defeat.

The record of Second Kings concurs with Isaiah, namely, that the city of Jerusalem was not conquered by Israel or Syria: “Then Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, came up to wage war on Jerusalem, and they besieged Ahaz but could not conquer him” (2 Kings 16:5).

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These variant traditions probably reflect events at different periods of time, the earliest account being that of Isaiah 7:5–6, which reflects the threatening stance of Syria and Israel. This could have been followed by the unsuccessful attempt of Rezin and Pekah to besiege Jerusalem and dethrone Ahaz. Their initial failure, recorded in Second Kings, was followed by another successful effort, recorded in Second Chronicles. None of the three accounts is a complete history of what happened. The full picture can be seen only by making a composite account out of the three narratives.

One must appreciate the perilous situation in which Ahaz found himself. Jerusalem was threatened, and despite the military preparations made about twenty years earlier under King Uzziah, Judah under Ahaz was not strong enough to resist the anticipated attacks. Since Assyria was the common enemy of Syria and Israel, Assyria was the likely candidate to become the saving ally of Judah. Ahaz may have been aware of the ancient Semitic proverb, “My enemy’s enemy is my friend.” For King Ahaz the safety of Judah was dependent upon sufficient military power to withstand the presumed Syro-Ephraimitic coalition. Foreign assistance would compensate for local national deficiencies. The Assyrians would gladly accept an invitation by Judah to crush political conspiracy and rebellion in the newly formed western provinces of the Assyrian empire.

Two other factors must have forced Ahaz to embark on his program to become a vassal state of Assyria. Two prophetic statements had been made concerning the house of David. The prophet Nathan had announced to David: (1) “Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house,” and (2) “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for

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ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Samuel 12:10 and 7:16, respectively). [page 31]

King Ahaz had no way of knowing which of these statements would be verified during his reign. Unless he acted to frustrate the designs of his enemies to put the non-Davidic son of Tabeel on the throne, the promise of an everlasting Davidic monarchy would come to nought because of his failure. Furthermore, the end of the Davidic monarchy could come about by his own death, for the sword was destined to strike again, and the heir to the throne of David was not immune to murder and assassination.

The final factor determining Ahaz’s course of action was a modified doctrine of holy war. This doctrine was one of the major tenets of the prevailing orthodoxy of Ahaz’s faith: “Take up arms, for God will fight on our side!” There were many warlords and military experts in Israel’s hall of fame: Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, and Uzziah. The model of excellence, obedience, and faith was the military model. There were few problems that could not be solved by a military solution. The demands of prophets like Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah for justice, righteousness, love, and peace were too new and radical to be attractive, especially in a time of crisis. Difficult times called for traditional and proven answers. Judah’s salvation demanded a military solution. Therefore, Judah would ask Assyria to fight the battles for Yahweh, which the Judeans could not fight. The Assyrians would tolerate an obedient Davidic monarch on the throne in Jerusalem. The rod of Assyria would be Yahweh’s instrument in holy war to save Jerusalem and punish the arrogance and sin of the northern kingdoms of Israel and Syria.

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The proposed solution for Jerusalem's crisis was logical and convincing to almost everyone but the prophet Isaiah. For him it made no sense! If Ahaz were to invite the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III, to become the overlord of Judah, Ahaz would need to deny the absolute overlordship of Yahweh as the God and King of Judah. The covenant between Yahweh and Judah demanded complete loyalty and faithfulness on the part of Judah. The enthroned heir to the Davidic crown was the "son" of Yahweh (Psalm 2:7). The father-son relationship between the king of Judah and Yahweh could not tolerate the intrusion of an outsider. No nation could serve two masters—one could not be a willing vassal to Assyria and the chosen people of Yahweh at the same time. As the anointed of Yahweh, Ahaz advocated a policy that would demand his betrayal of Yahweh and his service to Tiglath-pileser III and his gods. This was not salvation but damnation.

In the end Ahaz and the citizens of Judah seem to have lost to all three foreign powers. Recognizing the historical merits of the account in 2 Chronicles 28, Judah fell victim to Israel, Syria, and Assyria. The peace program of Isaiah was not adopted. Even though Isaiah had given the royal court at Jerusalem the sign of Immanuel, King Ahaz invited Tiglath-pileser III to become the overlord of Judah: "I am your servant and your son. Come up, and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me" (2 Kings 16:7). The "son" of Yahweh had adopted himself out as the "son" of the Assyrian king.

It is important to note that the statement containing Ahaz's invitation to Tiglath-pileser comes from the Book of Second Kings. According to Second Kings, Ahaz was besieged by Syrian and Israelite forces, but he was not defeated by them.

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Without defeat, he turned away from the advice of Isaiah and looked to Assyria for salvation. The loss of the port city of Elath to the Edomites, not the siege on Jerusalem, was the catalyst sending Ahaz to Tiglath-pileser (2 Kings 16:6–7). Had the record of this submission to the Assyrian king come from the account in 2 Chronicles 28, which states that Judah was defeated, one could have assumed that Ahaz tried Isaiah’s peace policy first, and because it did not work, as a last resort he was forced to take the more drastic act of turning away from the prophet of Yahweh to the king of Assyria. But both Isaiah 7 and 2 Kings 16 note clearly that Ahaz embarked on his program of alliance with Assyria prior to defeat. Therefore, Isaiah’s words were never considered practical or realistic enough to be tried.

The advice which Isaiah gave was not his personal opinion. He gave it with the full conviction that it was the word of God. The radical idea expressed by Isaiah—“Take heed, be quiet [‘at peace’], do not fear” (7:4)—is repeated emphatically in Isaiah 30:15:

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness [i.e., in peacefulness] and in trust shall be your strength.”

But Judah and the royal court at Jerusalem could not abandon their commitment to the military model. Instead of listening to Isaiah, they shouted the military slogans, “We will ride upon swift steeds!” and “A thousand [of the enemy] shall flee at the threat of one [Judean]” (see Isaiah 30:15–17). In response to these slogans Isaiah was forced to announce, “Your pursuers shall be swift . . . at the threat of five [of the enemy] you [Judah] shall flee!” Isaiah had the unpleasant task of announcing to Judah that Assyria would not take the place

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of Yahweh as the king and absolute overlord of Judah. Rather, Assyria would become the instrument of Yahweh by which he would punish his rebellious people so that they would return to him in repentance and obedience. The “rod of Assyria” would strike Jerusalem, but neither Syria nor Israel would survive long enough to do permanent damage to Jerusalem or to the Davidic crown. Assyria was the real enemy. God would use her to execute judgment. Judah would suffer, but a remnant would survive the attack (Isaiah 3:25–4:6).

### **Interpreting the Biblical Lesson**

The verses printed in this lesson are taken from four independent literary units. Isaiah 8:10 is part of a two-verse poetic unit, which affirms the reality that God is with Judah: “Immanuel, God is with us!” Isaiah 8:11–15 is a longer poetic unit, warning against unrealistic political fears. The other two units are prose statements: 8:16–18 is a statement explaining how the names [page 32] of the prophet’s children are symbolic indications of God’s intentions for Judah, and 8:19–20 is part of a four-verse denunciation of the occult sciences. To treat these eleven verses as a literary unit would be to misinterpret the text. Each unit has an integrity of its own.

**Isaiah 8:10— “Take counsel together, but it will come to nought; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.”**

This affirmation of confidence is addressed “to whom it may concern” of the foreign powers who had hostile ambitions against Judah. The specific enemies of Judah are not clearly identified. In 8:9 they are called simply “peoples . . . [of] far countries,” and the word “peoples” could also be

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translated “armies.” The literary motifs used here by Isaiah, coupled with the idea of Ahaz becoming the “son” of Tiglath-pileser (2 Kings 16:7), may be influenced by the words of Psalm 2:1, 7:

Why do the nations conspire,  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
. . . “You are my son,  
today I have begotten you.”

Isaiah was as confident as the psalmist that Jerusalem could not be destroyed by the enemies of Judah. He asserted, “Immanuel, God is with us!” whereas the psalmist noted, “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill” (Psalm 2:6). Even if the king failed, Yahweh was still in Jerusalem to frustrate the destructive goals of Assyria, Syria, or Israel.

**Isaiah 8:12—“Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear. . . .”**

Second Chronicles 28:5 states that the hostile activities of Syria and Israel against Judah were independent actions of those two nations against Ahaz. The attack by Syria preceded the attack by Israel, and they were unrelated. Over against this fact was the unconfirmed but widely accepted view of the royal court in Jerusalem that there was an anti-Jerusalem conspiracy on the part of Syria and Israel. (Second Kings 16:5 could be read to support either position: a conspiracy existed, or a conspiracy did not exist.) Isaiah spoke against the view of a conspiracy.

The conspiracy syndrome may be evidence of nothing more than a paranoia which is out of touch with reality. The political and social ills that result from a paranoid monarch or a conspiracy-conscious citizenry can be devastating. Imagi-



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nary enemies are always greater than the real enemy, and the temptation to overact or overreact escalates the real dangers. The conspiracy-minded paranoid becomes one's own worst enemy. Ahaz is a classic example of a political leader ruling his people out of fear of foreign conspiracy. His cure for the presumed Syro-Ephraimitic conspiracy was worse than the potential danger itself.

Instead of remaining quiet and at peace, Ahaz invited Assyria to be his overlord. This escalated the threat to Syria and Israel and resulted, evidently, in their retaliation on Judah by a successful siege against Jerusalem. Ahaz ended up temporarily defeated by his northern neighbors and rather permanently the slave of an Assyrian master. Isaiah was not a party to the conspiracy mania that directed Judean politics. The only fear which Isaiah acknowledged was the fear of Yahweh: “. . . let him be your fear, and let him be your dread” (Isaiah 8:13).

**Isaiah 8:14—“And he [Yahweh] will become . . . a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”**

The inhabitants of Judah were so preoccupied with their potential earthly enemies and military savior that they forgot about Yahweh and his demands for their religious, social, and political activities. Consequently, the God whom they had abandoned would bring them to judgment. It would appear as though he had abandoned them. But his snare and trap were not designed for destruction but for redemption. Man's political decisions which could result in self-destruction would be frustrated. God would intervene and painfully transform tragedy into blessing. Tragedy would come, but it would not be final.

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**Isaiah 8:19—“And when they say to you, ‘Consult the mediums and the wizards who chirp . . .’”**

It may well be that Ahaz was receiving “intelligence reports,” which supported his theory of a grand conspiracy, from the occult artists, the wizards and fortune tellers who consulted with the spirits of the dead. Isaiah was well aware of the results of necromancy, and King Saul may have been his case study. When Saul talked with the dead, he shortly thereafter walked with the dead. Truth for the living could not be found in the occult arts. Truth for the living was to be found in the words of Yahweh communicated through his prophet (Isaiah 8:18).

**Applying the Lesson to Life**

The Joe McCarthy era was for America what the Ahaz era was for Judah. Real problems of racial and social justice begged for attention and a solution in the land which promised “liberty and justice for all,” but the quest to uncover conspirators almost destroyed whatever freedom flourished in the nation. The shadows of Ahaz and Joe McCarthy linger on in the suspicions of foreign conspiracy in the assassinations of our national leaders. Fear of conspiracy can be as devastating to a community as the work of any real conspirator. Fear can ruin us all unless it is the fear of God.