

Testing the Lord?

Isaiah 7:1-14

The situation couldn't be worse for the nation of Judah. Its neighbor Edom got renewed strength and recaptured some cities that were long ago under Judah's kingdom. The few Jews that lived there were deported. Furthermore, Jerusalem, the last stronghold standing, was besieged by an alliance between Syria and the north Kingdom of Israel. It seemed like Judah was about to disappear. King Ahaz and Judah's people "*were shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by [a strong] wind.*" (7:2)

Questions:

When have you been in the middle of a situation where everything seemed lost? How did you feel? What were your fears? Did your relationship with God and others change? Why?

Under those circumstances young King Ahaz conceived a plan. He made an alliance with Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, to overcome the forthcoming attack. To seal this favor, the king of Judah, Ahaz, *took the silver and gold from the temple of the Lord and the royal palace and sent it as a gift to the king of Assyria* (2 Kings 16:8). After visiting with the king of Assyria, Ahaz asked the priest Uriah to build an altar like the one in Damascus. The temple of God was transformed in an extension of the pagan temple of Assyria. The priest would burn offerings each morning and evening, as well as seek guidance for the king. In addition, he protected the city water supplies. It looked like he had all things under control.

Questions:

Have you tried Plan A, and it didn't work out, then went to plan B expecting a good outcome for your goals? What was your motivation to keep trying out different plans or ideas? Do you think age influences the way we make plans to endure and overcome difficulties? What might have been Ahaz's motivation to call on the king of Assyria instead of negotiating with the king of Israel (Israel and Judah were brothers)? In your experience, is it more difficult to keep good relationships with relatives or with those whom we are not related? Why?

At the end of the aqueduct of the upper pool, Isaiah met King Ahaz to deliver a message from the Lord. The message had several components. The first directive was "Take heed" meaning be careful! The second directive was "'be quiet.'" The Lord was suggesting that the men keep calm. The third directive was "do not fear." The last directive was to not 'lose heart.'

Questions:

Why do you think King Ahaz needed all those words of encouragement? Did King Ahaz deserve such a gracious treat from God after all the damage he caused to Judah's faith? [History reveals that King Ahaz was the worst king ever for the kingdom of Judah. He sacrificed some of his children to pagan gods and led his people to worship those gods. (2 Chronicles 28:5-21)]. Why do you think King Ahaz did all those horrible things? Do you think he was a desperate leader? Why or why not? Do you know of someone who turned away from God and placed their faith and confidence in a person, a job, a possession, etc.? If you are comfortable, share your story.

In order to call Ahaz back to exclusive faith in the Lord, Isaiah brought along his son, Shear-jashub, whose name meant, "A remnant will return." The Lord also gave Isaiah a beautiful poem expressing that God gave to Judah's enemies a timeline of 65 years to exist. After



those years Jerusalem would still remain as fortified city; the kingdom of Judah wouldn't come to an end. Isaiah's son would remain until those days, while the sons of his enemies would pass away.

Questions:

What promises from God have you kept close to your heart throughout the years? Describe how those promises help you, your family, church, or community to stand firmly in faith?

As a confirmation of Jerusalem standing for the 65 more years, God spoke to Ahaz through Isaiah: "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest highs." (Isaiah 7:10) The truth was that God wanted to show his commitment to Judah despite the atrocious apostasy they endured. God wanted to reclaim his people's faith even though the Lord wasn't the one who failed.

Questions:

If you were in Ahaz's shoes, what would be your answer to God's request? What would you say to a person or group who has been waiting a long time for a respite from some difficulty in their lives?

God said to the king, "If you don't stand firm in your faith, you won't stand at all." (7:9) We don't know Ahaz's thoughts at that moment. Maybe the king was confident hiding the water supplies of Jerusalem from its enemies. Maybe he thought that the pagan gods from the dominating nations were more powerful than the Lord. Maybe that's why he made an alliance with a mighty and conquering nation like Assyria. Apparently its gods had shown amazing results. At the same time, Ahaz wasn't discarding the God of his ancestors. It wouldn't be politically correct. On the contrary, discarding God would be offensive and discouraging for the entire nation of Judah. So he decided to use his diplomatic skills with the prophet and responded politely, "I won't put the Lord to the test." (7:12) Sadly, Ahaz refused to ask God for a sign.

Questions:

Why did Ahaz not ask for a sign? Have you tried to ask God for a sign? Why? What were the results? Have you used diplomatic skills to refuse God's call in your life?

God was very upset with Ahaz's unfaithfulness. Even though the perverse king didn't ask for a sign, God gave him one. God told him that a child, who would be born of a virgin, would be a sign. Those Ahaz never valued would be the hope for the nation. The child, Emmanuel, "God with us," would be a vision of what was to come for those who loved God.

Questions:

If children are a sign of God's presence among us, what should be our attitude and behavior toward them? How does our society sacrifice children to vain causes? What activities are you involved in that promote the welfare of children? Contact the Discipleship Ministry Team to learn more about creating "Safe Sanctuary." The 183rd General Assembly said, "All congregations, presbyteries, synods, and denominational facilities, camps, events, etc. have a plan to keep everyone safe." (ministrycouncil.cumberland.org/safesanctuary)

Prayer

Patient and merciful Father, we often try to organize our own lives, trusting more in our plans than in you alone. Forgive our indecision and "diplomatic skills" when we relate to you. Help us to follow the sign provided in your Son, Jesus Christ, in order to minister to our children as sign of your presence with us today. Amen.