



Be Not Afraid When Panic Attacks

Advent Series #1

Isaiah 7

David Sunday

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“No, I really don’t have any fears,” a man said to his counselor. Then he went on to explain this: “Well, when I have to fly, I get sweaty palms, and I usually think about how difficult it’s going to be for that plane to get off the ground. When my kids are out, I notice all the police and ambulance sirens. I can’t stand thinking about the possibility of my wife dying before me. I worry about money all the time, and how I might die when my time comes. But no, I’m not a fearful person.”

Maybe that’s how you think of yourself. If you really think, “I’m not a very fearful person,” you might not deeply appreciate how many times the Bible tells us, “Be not afraid.” That is our theme for this Advent season, based on one of the most often-repeated commands in the Bible. This precious promise runs throughout God’s Word: “Fear not, for I am with you.” It is central to the Christmas story.

I want you to think about what can cause panic to attack you. Is it things related to your health? Perhaps you’re wondering how the end is going to come for you and worrying about things like Alzheimer’s or cancer. Or you’re wondering, “Will I be all alone? Will I have enough money to handle life in my retirement years?” Maybe it’s fears about having a meaningless life right now. You take stock of everything you’re doing, and you’re wondering, “Is it really amounting to anything? Am I wasting my life?”

Maybe you are afraid of being alone and having no one who loves you. Or, maybe you’re afraid of being in love and wondering if you’ll get hurt. Many of us fear losing things that are precious to us, like our physique or our hair or our boyfriend or our girlfriend or our youthfulness or our mind or our money—or our faith. It goes on and on and on. When you think about all the things there are to be afraid of, you can sympathize with Charlie Brown, who said, “I have a new philosophy: I only dread one day at a time.”

Thankfully, at the heart of God’s Word, this command is repeated often enough to sustain us one day at a time: “Do not be afraid.” Today we’re going to look at Isaiah 7. It’s the story of King Ahaz, who is the king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the period of Israel’s history

when the kingdom had been divided between the north and the south. The North is sometimes called Israel or Ephraim, and it is ruled by a man named Pekah, the son of Remaliah. The South is ruled by Ahaz, and his headquarters are in Jerusalem.

Then there's another king named Rezin, who is king of Syria, which is to the north of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Then off to the east is this great kingdom of Assyria. The most powerful of these kings is Rezin in Assyria. Assyria is breathing down everyone's necks, wanting to take control of their land. So Pekah, the king of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and Rezin, the king of Syria up north all wanted to make an alliance with Ahaz, the King of Judah so the three of them together could form a formidable block against the king of Assyria.

But Ahaz down in Judah is holding out. He doesn't want to join with Pekah and Rezin. Instead, he's thinking, "It might be safer for me to align with Assyria and find my protection from the king of Assyria." So when Pekah and Rezin, the two kings to the north, realize that Ahaz is not going to join with them, and instead might align with the king of Assyria, they become threatened. So they think, "We've got to go after Ahaz."

That's where we find ourselves in verse one. These two kings—Rezin and Pekah—come to Jerusalem to wage war, but could not yet mount an attack against it. For some reason Judah is being protected, and its enemies are not allowed to succeed in their desire to attack. Then in verse two, Ahaz—who's the head of the house of David—is told Syria is in league with Ephraim, the Northern Kingdom. And when he hears that these two kingdoms are coming together against him, it says, "*The heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.*"

We can identify with that in November, because we've seen powerful winds come through and rip the leaves off the trees. That's the situation that is confronting Ahaz right now. He's not trusting in God. He's shaking in his boots. He's wringing his hands. He's frantically thinking, "How can I save myself from this threat?" But God is still present with Ahaz in his crisis. Even though Ahaz has been a singularly wicked king, even offering his own sons as sacrifices to idols, God shows him mercy by sending him His word through the prophet Isaiah.

The setting is in verse three. "*And the Lord said to Isaiah, 'Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son.'*" Even in the name of Isaiah's son, Shear-jashub, there is a promise of grace. It means, "A remnant shall return." Through the presence of Isaiah's son, God is saying to Ahaz, "No matter what happens, Ahaz, a remnant of God's people is going to return in victory." That alone should have indicated to Ahaz that he didn't need to be shaking as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

But the Lord sends Isaiah and his son to find Ahaz “*at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field*” (verse three). The water supply for Jerusalem was external, outside the city, and it would have been an easy object of attack. So Ahaz is out there examining his fortifications and the water supply to make sure the people are going to be okay during a potential threat.

As he’s out there looking at all his resources and considering how he’s going to protect himself and his people, God speaks to him through Isaiah. Verse four: “*Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.*” Be careful. Be quiet. Do not fear. Do not let your heart be faint.

Back in World War II, the British government printed up a few posters with a message for the people of Britain. You’ve seen it: “Keep calm and carry on.” They actually didn’t make that many posters, but in recent years someone discovered one and it became a phenomenon. Now you might get a coffee mug or t-shirt at Christmas with this on it. You see it all over the place. “Keep calm and carry on.” That’s what God is saying to Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah. “Be careful. Be quiet. Do not fear. Do not let your heart be faint.” Or as it says in the NIV, “*Be careful, keep calm, and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart.*”



Sometimes in His Word God tells us, “Don’t just stand there—do something. Don’t just talk about your faith—put it into action.” But at other times God says the opposite to us. He says, “Don’t just do something—stand there. Don’t be fretting about trying to take care of everything—stand there. Trust in Me, and see what I’m about to do.” We hear words like this in the Old Testament, like in 2 Chronicles 20:17: “*You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.*”

“Stand firm. I’m going to act for you,” God says. And that’s what God is telling King Ahaz. He’s confronting Ahaz with this central crisis of every person’s life, and it’s a crisis that confronts us day in and day out. You don’t just make this decision once. You’ve got to make it again and again and again in your life as a follower of Jesus: “Whom will I trust? In whom will I find my security? When I am tempted to panic, where will I go?”

The chief crisis of your life and mine is summarized in how we fill in the blank to this statement. “When I am afraid, I will _____.” It’s not, “Will I ever be afraid?” You will be afraid. God acknowledges that you will be afraid. There are things to fear in this world. The question is

not whether or not you'll be afraid. The question is where will you go when you are afraid? How will you respond? What will you do when panic attacks?

I found this quote by John Calvin so convicting, because I think of all the times when I have needlessly worried and been anxious about things that never materialize. I wonder if years would be added to my life if I had never worried about some of the things I've worried about. John Calvin said this: "There is always a difference between the fear of the godly and of the ungodly. The ungodly find no way to calm their minds. The godly immediately turn to God, in Whom they know they have a safe harbor."

That's what the godly do. When we're confronted with things that stir up panic, we immediately turn to God in Whom we have a safe harbor, an anchor. "So even though they are harassed, they stay calm," Calvin says. So I'm not completely godly yet, because I don't always stay calm when I'm harassed. But this is the path of wisdom: "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You, O God."

The folly of not trusting God

I want us to consider the folly of not trusting in God. We see it in this tragic story of Ahaz, and it speaks to us about how we respond to the things that alarm us and cause us panic.

The first reason it is foolish not to trust in God is because God knows and controls the outcome of everything we fear. None of it takes God by surprise. We see God's perspective on our enemies and the way He speaks of these two kings, Rezin and Pekah, in verse four as "*two smouldering stumps of firebands.*" Or as Ray Ortlund puts it, "They're just burnt-out cigarette butts." They're just smouldering stumps that are going to amount to nothing. They're already spent. The things we fear are already spent. God knows what they're made of and He knows the outcome.

When we're afraid of different things, we need to ask, "God, what is Your perspective on what I'm afraid of right now? Do You think, God, that this is something I should be worried about? Is this something that is outside Your control? Or is this a burden I can cast on You, knowing that You care for me?" Why do you think God would tell us to do that if He can't handle the things we're afraid of?

Notice that God does not deny the severity of the evil that threatens us. God is not calling us to a Pollyanna-like vision here. He's not saying, "Be naïve." He's not saying, "Oh, there are really no big problems in life." Look at verse five. God states it very clearly: "*Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you.*" God is very aware of the evil that is planned against us.

But God also says, “*No weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment*” (Isaiah 54:17). “I know how to handle these evil threats.” God acknowledges the evil. He acknowledges the terror we feel. In Isaiah 7:6 He quotes the two kings as saying, “*Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it.*” But He assures us He is in ultimate control of our safety and security. And He knows the outcome. Look at verse seven: “*Thus says the Lord God: It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass.*” “All these plots, Ahaz—I’m telling you, you do not need to worry about them. They’re not going to come to pass. They will not stand. Trust Me. Trust what I am telling you here.”

I love how Alec Motyer, a British seminary professor, describes faith. He says, “Faith is not a leap in the dark. It is a leap into the light, a decision on the basis of evidence.” God’s not asking us to leap into the dark. God says to us wonderful things in His Word, just as He has to Ahaz here: “It shall not stand. It shall not come to pass.” God is saying, “Leap into the light of what I’ve promised here. Don’t stay in the darkness of doubt and fear. Trust in what I’ve revealed. I am in control.”

The second reason why it is utter folly to not trust in God is because God is the only support on which we can rely. Look at verse nine. After mocking these enemies in verses eight and nine, God says this wonderful and challenging truth: “*If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.*” It’s like what we sing in the hymn, “On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.” If I’m not standing firm on what God has revealed and on Who Jesus is, and if I’m not trusting in Him, then I’m just standing on quicksand. I have no footing. There’s no solid rock on which my anchor can fasten. My hope is insecure.

If I do not trust in what God has revealed, I have no basis to be established at all. The King James Bible says, “*If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established.*” You will not have anything to hold you firm. Someone has paraphrased it like this: “Hold God in doubt and you’ll not hold out. Unsure? You’re insecure. If there is no belief, you will find no relief.” We have nowhere else to turn. So it’s folly to not trust in God. He is the only One Who can establish us. He is the only One Who can hold us firm.

The third reason why it’s folly not to trust Him is because He has proven Himself trustworthy over and over and over again. We sing in an old hymn, “Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him. How I’ve proved Him o’er and o’er.” Whenever we trust Him in His promises, He proves Himself trustworthy.

God does not normally make it difficult to trust in Him. We see that in Ahaz’s experience here in verse ten. He knows Ahaz is struggling to trust in Him. He knows Ahaz thinks that the

king of Assyria looks like a better refuge right now. So God says to him, “*Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven*” (verse 11). In other words, “Ahaz, what do you need Me to do to show you that you can trust in Me? How can I help you here? How can I confirm your faith? What do you want Me to do for you? I’ll do it. I’m ready to move heaven and earth right now to show you that I’m trustworthy. Just ask for a sign, and I will do it. Nothing is too difficult for Me.”

But Ahaz is so super-spiritual here in verse 12. He’s so cocky. He says, “*I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.*” He wants us to think he’s really a godly guy. “How dare I ask God for a sign?” That is really hypocrisy. It’s presumptuous to ask God for a sign if God has already spoken clearly in His Word and He doesn’t need to tell us anything else. But if God comes to us and says, “Ask Me for a sign,” and we say, “No God, I wouldn’t dare do that,” we’re just fooling ourselves in our hypocrisy.

Ahaz has already determined in his heart, “God, I’m not going to trust in You. I’m going to trust in the king of Assyria. That’s where I’m running. I know who my savior is going to be, and it’s not going to be You, God. I’m not going to put my trust in You.” Nothing Isaiah could say or do is going to make Ahaz believe that God could deliver him. Ahaz has determined that he is going to put his hope elsewhere. But he gives a diplomatic answer. He hypocritically covers his unbelief with his pious words.

Friends, face it. When we don’t trust in God, the fault is never with God. It’s never because God has not given us sufficient reason to trust in Him. We don’t trust in God sometimes because we don’t want to trust in God.

That leads us to the last reason it’s folly not to trust in Him: unbelief is costly. Sometimes unbelief seems like a short-term solution. Sometimes it seems like there’s an easier way than to trust in God and His Word. But the short-term solutions of unbelief always lead to long-term misery. It’s going to be costly for Ahaz.

Look at verse 13. After Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign, Isaiah says, “*Hear then, O house of David!*” Ahaz reigns in the lineage of David. “*Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?*” Notice what Isaiah had said to Ahaz in verse 11: “*Ask a sign of the Lord your God...*” “He’s your God, Ahaz, if you’ll trust Him. If you’ll put your hope in Him, He will prove to be God to you.” But when Ahaz refuses to trust in Him, Isaiah says, “You’re wearying my God.” In other words, “You’ve aligned yourself apart from God, and my God is going to give you a sign, although you don’t even want it.”

And what is that sign? Look at these famous words starting in verse 14:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. 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.

Sure enough, this happens. If you look at chapter eight for just a minute, you'll notice in verse three that Isaiah went to the prophetess, his wife, and she conceived and bore a son. By the way, here's a great name if you're expecting in the next few weeks. *"The Lord said to me, 'Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz.'" Wow. Which means, "The spoil speeds; the prey hastens."* Through the birth of this son, before he's old enough *"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"* (8:4).

In other words, "These guys you're so afraid of right now, that I've told you not to be afraid of, that I've told you they're not going to be able to do you any harm—very soon they are going to be destroyed. And they're going to be destroyed by Assyria. So if you think, Ahaz, that Assyria's going to help you, you're going to be like the little mouse who was surrounded by rats, who asked the cat to come and deliver him. The cat will get rid of the rats for you just fine. But then he'll eat you for dessert." And that's exactly what happens to Ahaz for trusting in Assyria.

But we know from the rest of the Bible that Isaiah 7:14 isn't just referring to a little boy who is born to the prophet Isaiah in Ahaz's time. We know it's looking forward to a greater King. I like this quote by Tim Chester, a British pastor: "Ahaz thinks he can manage without God. But it's God Who can manage without Ahaz." And God can manage without you and me. We can't manage without Him, but He can manage without us. God is able to raise up a king from a virgin. *"The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel."*

We turn to Matthew 1, and we hear the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream, saying:

"Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)."

Friends, it's a miracle that God devised salvation in such a way as our Savior being born in the womb of a virgin—fully God and fully Man. In His virgin conception and birth, He delivers us from our mightiest enemies. He delivers us from sin, death and hell. God saves us in the most improbable, mysterious, miraculous way through the virgin birth of a Savior-King. This is our God. And we who trust in Him are trusting Him to deliver us from these great enemies of ours. He saves us from our sins—only God can do that. He saves us from death—only God can conquer the grave. He saves us from hell—only God can deliver us from Satan. This is our God!

I've found that my greatest problem is not that I can't trust Him in the really big things. Kate and I found that God gave us almost supernatural grace to trust Him when she had stage-four cancer. It was almost not an effort to trust Him in that situation and to trust Him over and over again. But a few weeks ago, when the closing on our house was falling through, for some reason that caused a little panic to rise in my heart. It was harder to trust God in that little thing than it was in the big things.

If God is able to deliver us from the big things that we're trusting Him for, can't we trust Him to take care of our financial problems? Can't we trust Him to secure our future? Can't we trust Him to take care of our children, our physical needs—all the little things that rise up and cause panic in our hearts?

I'm going to invite you now to take those things that frustrate and fluster and frazzle you to the Lord. Maybe you're worried right now with, "How am I going to make sure everyone has a happy Christmas? How am I going to buy enough gifts for all my kids? How are we going to keep everyone together?" Whatever it is that rises up in your heart causing panic and fear and alarm, I invite you right now—I exhort you right now—to cast that burden on the Lord. Then say to God, "Lord, I believe. Help Thou my unbelief." (Mark 9:24).

Let's ask God to do just that. Quietly, right now, take the cares and concerns and burdens and fears—whatever you're tempted to panic about right now—and let the peace of God that passes all understanding guard your heart and mind as you give that burden over to the Lord (Philippians 4:7).

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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