

## **COUNT THE BLESSINGS OF YOUR GOD** **(Isaiah 7:1-9:7)**

I am going to ask a couple of questions. You can answer by raising your hand.

**Question #1: How many of you want to be happy in life?** There is nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. I do think there are some other words that are better targets to shoot for: blessed, content, joyful, but happiness is a perfectly legitimate goal.

**Question #2: How many of you want to be healthy in life?** Some are healthy and want to maintain it. Others have lost their health and want to regain it. That is why we go the doctor, take supplements, use our medication as directed, and do a host of other things.

I have a third question that you can't answer with a raised hand. I want you to answer it in the quietness of your own heart. We can't make ourselves be happy, and we can't make ourselves be healthy, but there are some things we can do to make those things more likely. There are some actions we can take to nurture those two goals. **Question #3: Are you willing to make a habit of doing one thing the Bible commands us to do and that medical science has proven will help you become happier and healthier?**

That one thing is cultivating gratefulness. Study after study has shown that grateful people are happier and healthier than your average grumbler.

Harvard Medical School published an article in the summer of 2021 that claimed:

Gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.

Now, I am not calling upon you to be grateful because Harvard Medical School and numerous studies boast of the benefits of gratitude. We should be a grateful people because that is what God calls upon us to be.

Gratefulness shows up in three ways. When we look back on what God has done, we can be thankful. When we look around at what God is doing, we can be appreciative. When we look forward to what God is going to do, we can be optimistic. All three of those—thankfulness, appreciation, and optimism—are expressions of this grace we call gratitude.

We have begun studying the OT prophecy of Isaiah. We return to Isaiah today, but this will be a different message. Whereas I normally take a small section of Scripture and base the sermon on the message of that text, today I am going to take a larger section of Scripture and draw truths from that longer section that may not relate directly to the overall message of that section.

In other words, the biblical passage we are going to focus upon is admittedly not primarily about thankfulness; yet, as we get into this passage, we are going to discover things about which we should and can be grateful to our God. There are two truths about God that are repeatedly emphasized in our text. First, our God is the One who speaks to us. Second, our God is the one who stands with us. As a result, we can rely on His

promises, and we can rely upon His presence.

Let me quickly rehearse those two ideas as they show up in the text. We will begin with the fact that our God is the One who speaks to us. Look at 7:3, 7, 10, 18. God not only speaks to prophets and kings, He also whispers to flies and bees. Here, he is not speaking of literal flies and bees. Those terms are used symbolically of foreign troops and soldiers that will come flooding into the land. Notice also 8:1, 5, 11.

Our text also communicates the glorious truth that our God is the One who stands with us. There are three times and only three times that the name *Immanuel* shows up in the Bible. The last time it is used is when Matthew quotes it in chapter 1 of his gospel. He does so just after relating the dream Joseph had in which an angel told him to take Mary as his wife because the baby she was carrying was of the Holy Spirit. The angel also informed Joseph that boy was going to save His people from their sins. Matthew then explained, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet," and then he quoted from our text. Look at 7:14. The only other time the name *Immanuel* shows up in the Bible is in Isaiah 8:8.

Our God is with us. He is with us in joyful times. He is with us in frightening times. He is with us even when we are threatened and foes assemble against us. In 8:9-11, God speaks to Israel's enemies. Finally, in chapter 9 we find a clear prophecy of the Messiah. Look at the familiar verses of 9:6-7. In the coming of Jesus, our God came to stand with us.

Whereas Isaiah gives us the prophecy of the Messiah's coming, and whereas Luke gives us the historical account of Jesus' birth, John provides us with the theology of Jesus' incarnation. He wrote in John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The word *dwelt* literally means that Jesus pitched His tent amongst ours. Our God came to stand with us.

Based on the promises of God and the presence of God, I am going to give you five blessings you can count and on which you can count. All five come from Isaiah 7:1-9:6. We only have time for the first three. At the end of the message, I'm simply going to mention that last two blessings.

### **Blessing #1: God Lessens Our Fear.**

Let's look at the frightening the scene before us in 7:1-2. Uzziah was a godly king, but his grandson Ahaz, not so much. The chronicler told us in 2 Chronicles 28 that Ahaz "did not do what was right in the eyes of YHWH." He promoted the worship of Baal, and he even sacrificed his infant sons to Baal. Evil leadership has dreadful consequences according to 2 Chronicles 28:19, "For YHWH humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to YHWH."

When King Ahaz and the people of Judah learned that the combined forces of Syria and Israel to the north (that is what is meant by Ephraim) were marching against them, the hearts of the king and his people shook with fear.

God chose to reassure them. He sent Isaiah to the king along with Isaiah's son, Shear-jashub. When Isaiah and Mrs. Isaiah had children, they didn't consult a baby name book.

They didn't choose a family name. No. Isaiah gave each child a name that served to move forward the messages God gave him. *Shear-jashub* literally meant, "a remnant shall return." This name was both a message of judgment and of hope. As to judgment, his name meant the people of Judah are going to be taken captive. They will be exiled. As to hope, the name meant, at some point, a remnant of the people will return to their homeland, not all, but at least some—a remnant.

In v. 3, God gave Isaiah instructions as to where he would find Ahaz. God didn't tell Isaiah where Ahaz was at that very moment. He told Isaiah where Ahaz would be when Isaiah arrived. That tells me that God is so powerful, He can hit a moving target.

It takes incredible skill to hit a fast ball that is coming in your direction at 98 MPH. It takes unbelievable ability to throw a ball towards a receiver who is moving away from you. You can't throw the ball to where the receiver is. You must throw it to where he will be so that he can catch it in stride. If you can do that while 300 lb. lineman are closing in on you, you can make millions of dollars.

God has the supernatural ability to hit moving targets. God knows not only where you are; He knows where you are going to be, and He can cross your path with a right message at the right time.

Look at the message God gave Isaiah to give to Ahaz. We find it in vv. 4-7.

What is it that you fear the most? What causes your heart to shake like leaves in the wind? What is it that makes you lay awake at night unable to find the peace of sleep? Imagine if you will, God standing above you saying to you, "Dear Child, do not fear for that thing you fear will not stand; it shall not come to pass." Do you fear death? You might think that death comes to all. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25).

Yes. Your body is mortal, but we must throw off this mortal body so that we can clothed with immortality.

Do you fear not having enough? King David wrote, "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread." Let the words of David that have become words of Scripture allay your fear.

Do you fear being alone? We read in Deuteronomy 31:8, "It is YHWH who goes before you. He will be with you; He will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

Again and again, we are commanded, "Do not fear." I have not personally counted how many times that command appears in Scripture, but I have read that it shows up 365 times. Regardless, I do know it is the most oft-repeated command in the Bible.

As you are counting your blessings, thank God for lessening your fear. I say lessen rather than remove because we are frail creatures, and I do not think we will ever be completely fear-free this side of heaven.

Before we move on to another blessing, I want to point out another instance in which God commands, "Do not fear." This time the command is addressed to Isaiah. God told His prophet that eventually Assyria would invade the land of Judah. Foolish King Ahaz appealed to the King of Assyria for help against Syria and Israel. Assyria would attempt

to do what Syria and Israel could not do, but God would repel that attack, too. Notice what God tells Isaiah in 8:11-13.

I think v. 12 is an appropriate message for us today. I admit that I walk among conservative circles. I have noticed that many conservatives see conspiracies here, and there, and everywhere. I believe there are some conspiracies but not everything that is said to be a conspiracy really is one. God's word to Isaiah was, "Don't fear what they fear." Just maybe, we need to take that message to heart. Don't fear what everyone else is fearing. We need to remember that God sits upon a throne. He has ultimate control, and He knows those who are His.

He tells His prophet, "If you are going to fear anything, fear Me. We need to fear and honor and reverence God.

Back in the 90's there was a popular t-shirt many people wore. There were only two words on the t-shirt. Those words were "No Fear." I think those who wore those t-shirts were guilty of false advertising. All of us struggle with fear of one thing or another. As we take God's word and apply it to our fear, we can find victory.

That brings us to another blessing we are to count.

## **Blessing #2: God Strengthens Our Faith.**

Let us continue with the message Isaiah was to deliver to King Ahaz. Look at 7:7-9. You and I need a firmness to our faith. That is what James called for in his letter. Listen to his words of warning. After encouraging his readers to pray for wisdom, he adds, "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6-8).

God wanted to solidify whatever faith Ahaz might have had. Through his prophet, God told Ahaz to ask for a sign. He was telling the king, "Ask me to do something so that when I do it, you will know you can trust Me."

Should we ask for a sign? Feel free to ask God for a sign whenever He tells you to ask for a sign because when you ask for a sign. Otherwise, we just need to trust God and trust the word He has already given us.

God offered the king a signed, blank check. The king, however, refused to fill it out and cash it in.

In his commentary on Isaiah, Geoffrey Grogan wrote, "Ahaz made his plans, and they did not include God or His will. Ahaz's reply was a monumental piece of hypocrisy." The king might have known enough of God's word to know that Moses commanded, "You shall not put YHWH your God to the test" (Deuteronomy 6:16). Grogan went on to write, "It is not testing God to do what He says!"

Since the king would not ask for a sign, God chose one for him. Look at 7:14. A great deal of ink has been spilled attempting to explain v. 14. We said earlier that Matthew quoted this in chapter 1 of his gospel account. Matthew believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of this prophecy. We might ask, "How would Ahaz benefit from a prophecy

that would not be fulfilled for another 700 plus years?”

I believe that some prophecies have an immediate fulfillment and an ultimate fulfillment. I do not believe that a virgin gave birth in the days of Ahaz. Rather, at the time Ahaz was given this announcement, there was a young, unmarried lady who at the time of the prophecy was a virgin. Shortly, thereafter, she became pregnant in the usual way and gave birth to a son. This son was a sign that God was with His people. Then 700 plus years later, an actual virgin gave birth to a Son that signified God truly is with His people. The birth of Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy, but there was an immediate fulfillment in the days of Ahaz.

While it became apparent that Ahaz had no faith to bolster, there were others who heard this prophecy, and their faith was strengthened.

It has always been the case that God establishes and strengthens our faith in Him through His word. The Apostle Paul believed that to be so. He wrote in Romans 10:17, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” The more you interact with this Book, the stronger your faith will become. By the same token, the more you ignore and overlook and avoid this Book, the weaker and flabbier and more anemic your faith will become.

The past month and a half, the Sunday School lessons have all been on how we are to act towards the Bible. We are to hear it, read it, study it, meditate upon it, memorize it, obey it, and communicate it to others. We neglect this Book to our peril. God has given this Book to us as a great gift, and if we will give ourselves to it, our faith will be strengthened.

### **Blessing #3: God Ignites Our Hope.**

Hear the words of Isaiah. They are found in 8:16-17. Isaiah testified, “I will wait for YHWH . . . and I will hope in Him.” Between those two declarations, there is one cause for concern. We are told that God is hiding His face from the house of Jacob.

Have you ever felt that God was hiding His face from you? Maybe you have felt that God was being silent. You speak and cry out to Him, but there is no reply. You wonder if your prayers are getting above the ceiling. He does not seem to be answering you. You wonder where He has gone.

A week or two ago, I saw a Facebook post that caught my attention. I don’t remember the exact words, but it was meant to remind us that when you are taking an exam, the teacher remains silent. To that, I would add, when you are taking a test, the Teacher doesn’t leave the room.

Likewise, God may be silent as you are undergoing that trial or test, but He hasn’t left the building. In fact, He is still by your side.

When I was in school, my favorite kind of test was the open book test. If you knew your textbook well, if you read and digested the material, you knew where to look when you came across a question to which you didn’t immediately know the answer.

I have good news. All the tests God will give to you are open book tests. All the answers are right here. Not only that, His tests also allow for class participation. If you

don't know the answer and don't know where to find it, you can phone a friend. You can call upon a fellow student, maybe even someone who has already taken this test.

Isaiah was content with and intent upon waiting for God. Notice the contrast between Isaiah and others among his people who went elsewhere looking for answers. Let me read to you v. 19 out of the NLT:

Someone may say to you, "Let's ask the mediums and those who consult the spirits of the dead. With their whisperings and mutterings, they will tell us what to do." But shouldn't people ask God for guidance? Should the living seek guidance from the dead?

Where do you go looking for answers? You are not going to find them in your horoscope. You are not going to find truth by consulting the Internet.

Isaiah tells us where to go. In my mind, there is a strong connection between verses 16 and 20. Let me also read those verses from the NLT:

<sup>16</sup>I will write down all these things as a testimony of what YHWH will do. I will entrust it to my disciples who will pass it down to future generations.

<sup>20</sup>Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict His word are completely in the dark.

Let's wait on God. Let's place our hope in Him. In His good timing, He will act on our behalf.

Recently, I learned about a preacher who was born in 1577 and died in 1635. He ministered in the Church of England, but he was a through-going Puritan. He had a deep affection for the Lord and for the people he served. His name was Richard Sibbes. He was tender in both his preaching and his writing. His most famous quote was: "There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us." Isn't that a great thought?

In preparing this message, I came across something Sibbes said in a sermon. The interesting thing is that the sermon was a collection of things Sibbes had said in various sermons, and these words were put together and printed by some of his disciples or students. They didn't want the words of their teacher to be forgotten.

Toward the end of this message, he quotes Isaiah 8:17. He says:

Lastly, because that God often takes a long day for performance of the promise, thou shalt find herein the doctrine of waiting upon God excellently handled. A duty which we earnestly commend unto thy practice, as suitable to these sad times.

I don't think that the days in which we live are any less sad than the days of Richard Sibbes. It is still a good practice to wait upon God.

Time doesn't permit to move into chapter 9 where we find at least two more blessings we could count.

**Blessing #4: God Provides Us Light.** Look at 9:2.

**Blessing #5: God Fosters Our Joy.** Look at 9:3.

Here, we come back to where we started. If you want joy or happiness, you need to be grateful for what you have.

All these blessings come from His promises and His presence.

One of the great actors of our day is Denzel Washington. He has appeared in at least 60 movies between 1977 and today. He has starred in many of them and has earned two Academy Awards among a host of other awards.

Washington is a committed Christian. He says he reads the Bible every day. He also admitted that earlier in his life he struggled as to whether he should become a preacher. I think that could have been his greatest role.

In November of 2015 he spoke at a church banquet. He said these words and with these words I close:

Give thanks for blessings every day. Every day. Embrace gratitude. Encourage others. It is impossible to be grateful and hateful at the same time. I pray that you put your slippers way under your bed at night, so that when you wake in the morning you have to start on your knees to find them. And while you're down there, say "thank you." A bad attitude is like a flat tire. Until you change it, you're not going anywhere.