

Immanuel

What's the story behind that name?

The story behind *Immanuel* is based around three little boys, whose names were meant to give courage to a young man scared out of his wits. The young man in the story had just been crowned King of the Jews - and he was only 20 years old too - so it must have been terrifying for him when news came through soon after his coronation that two other kings had banded together to attack his country, and were already killing thousands of his fellow Jews and carting off thousands more as prisoners (2 Chronicles 28).

The name of our young Jewish king was Ahaz, whose royal blood could be traced back nearly 300 years to King David, and traced forward 750 years to the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:9). So this vicious and sudden attack on his country was a direct threat to Jesus himself being born. If Ahaz and his family died in the coming conflict it would bring an end to the prophecy in **Jeremiah 33:17** that there would always be a king from the dynasty of David on the throne of Israel, which would one day include Jesus.

No wonder Ahaz was scared. The future of an entire dynasty was at stake here. But what made things worse was **who** was attacking him, because one of the two kings invading his country was the king of the ten tribes of Israel, a fellow Israelite. So why on earth was a brother Israelite banding together with this other king, the King of Syria, who was neither Israelite nor Jew? The King of Syria was an Aramaean, with no interest in God, Israel, or the Jews. His only interest was in raiding Jewish towns, so he could drag the Jews off as slaves and settle his own people into the towns to make them Syrian towns instead.

But both kings had found legitimate excuse for attacking Ahaz, because the Jews had refused to join them in their alliance against the growing threat of the mighty Assyria. The two kings were so angry they wanted to eradicate the Jews all together. And they had the power to do it too, because in a previous attack against the Jews they'd reached the walls of Jerusalem. On that occasion, however, they "could not overpower it," **Isaiah 7:1**, but in **verse 2**, Jerusalem is about to be besieged again, and this time it really does feel like the end is near, because the young king and his people "are shaking like trees in the wind" (2).

It's in response to their panic that God tells Isaiah to talk to king Ahaz (verse 3). And this is where **the first of the three little boys enters the story**, because God also has Isaiah take along his son to meet the king too. The little chap doesn't actually say or do anything in the story, but that's because what he's there for has already been done in preparation for this moment.

It's all in the boy's **name**, which must have been decided by God originally, because who would normally name his son **Shear-Jashub** (Shee'ar-Yashub)? But names meant something in that culture, and oftentimes God was involved in the naming of a child too, which seems to be the case here, because Ahaz is in a terrible state but here comes Isaiah with little his son Shear-Jashub, which in Hebrew means **A Remnant Will Return**.

Isaiah obviously has to explain to the king why he's brought his son along as well, so he says to Ahaz, "This is my son, his name is 'A Remnant Will Return'." So when Ahaz looks down at the little chap, does it dawn on him that the child is there with a name like that because God is obviously sending him a message that's perfectly designed for him? If so, then stop trembling like a scared rabbit, Ahaz, and think to yourself, "A remnant will return, eh?" and get a grip on what that means.

It means, Ahaz, that things are not as bad as they seem. From your point of view it certainly looks like there's no way out of this and no good conclusion. It looks like you're all going to die or be dragged off as prisoners into another country never to return, right? But what does 'a remnant will return' mean? It means a promise from God to you **as your people's king**, Ahaz, that even if your people **are** all dragged off as prisoners, God will make sure that some of them will be released from their captivity, and they will come back here to settle and rebuild. You have his guarantee through the name of this child, therefore, that you and your people are not doomed forever.

But why get that message to Ahaz through a child? Because at age 20 Ahaz is little more than a child himself, and here he is at his tender age facing the worst crisis possible. His entire nation is depending on his leadership and courage, and he has no Dad alive to guide him or calm him down either. But God knows all this, so he sends Ahaz a fatherly figure in the person of Isaiah, and a little lad too, to remind Ahaz he can trust God like a child trusts his father. God is being ever so gentle here, in taking this shattered young king from shaking like a leaf to being a confident, fearless leader for his people.

So it's in a most fatherly way that Isaiah then tells Ahaz in **Isaiah 7:4**, "Stay calm and don't be frightened, and don't you be the least bit intimidated by those two bullies, because to God they're just a couple of 'smouldering stubs of firewood'. They're all smoke and no flame, all bark and no bite. So they can strut and spout all they like about tearing Judah apart piece by piece and dividing the spoils among them (verse 6), but God says it's all just hot air from a couple of pompous windbags, and what they're threatening to do will never happen (verse 7). So chin up and shoulders back, Ahaz, because," **verse 9**, "if you don't stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

And there you have the theme of the story: God wants Ahaz to trust him, because without trust what has Ahaz got? He's got nothing. He "will not stand at all." And that's bad because he's the king, so he needs to stand firm and strong for his people. But right now fear has reduced him to a curled up ball of misery and self-pity, and his mind can think of nothing but hopelessness and doom, which makes him totally useless to his people.

But trusting God is a tough call for such a young man, because he's never had to trust God like this before. The survival of a dynasty and a nation is at stake, and it totally depends on what he, their leader, does next. But what on earth is he supposed to do when he has no previous proof that God will step in and save them? He's only got God's word for it. And Isaiah may think there's nothing to worry about, but in the real world of human emotion this was totally daunting.

But God clearly takes this into account too, because in **verse 11** he makes a startling offer to Ahaz: He offers Ahaz "**A SIGN**" - of Ahaz's very own choosing too - and it can be anything "in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." Did you get that, Ahaz? God is offering you the chance to utterly prove he is real - so get a grip on yourself and take God up on his offer. Ask for anything you want, and make it as extreme or as personal as you like, so you know when it happens that God is real, and he cares.

And to whom in the entire Old Testament had God made an offer like that? He hadn't. So why offer it to Ahaz of all people? Well, as we've covered already, the kingly line of David was at stake here, and its survival at this point in time was in the hands of a hopelessly unhinged young man who hadn't a clue what to do, and he was so scared he just stood there quaking in his boots. So, what better way of getting through to a scared young man with such huge responsibility for others and no personal experience of God yet, than offering him something spectacular?

And God was all for it too. He didn't mind one bit being asked to do something spectacular when it meant giving a young man the chance to prove he's real, so he can stand tall for his people. So what did Ahaz come up with to ask God for? Well, **nothing** as it turns out, because Ahaz says to Isaiah in **verse 12**, "No, I'm not going to ask God for a sign - I can't make demands like that on God."

But how could Ahaz call it a "demand" when God was happily and willingly offering it to him? Ahaz wouldn't be pestering God at all asking for a sign. God was more than happy to prove to Ahaz he was real, to scatter Ahaz's fears to the winds so he could stand fearless before his people.

We could go on berating Ahaz for his bone-headed stupidity, but how did we Christians react when faced with our OWN evil, scary enemy in World War 2? Did we also think it was too demanding to ask God for a sign to show us we had nothing to fear? It certainly looks like it, because, like Ahaz in **2 Kings 16:7-9** we turned to human power instead. Ahaz thought it was a much more practical idea to strip God's temple and the palace treasury of all their gold and silver and send it all to Tiglath-Pileser, king of the mighty empire of Assyria, to seek an alliance with him. It was a terrible idea, because the Assyrians used that alliance for their own vicious ends later (Isaiah 7 and 8). But Christian Britain did the same thing in 1941, when it made an alliance with Russia, an equally risky power, which Russia also used for its own vicious ends later. So what makes even Christians turn to risky human powers and not God's power? Is it because, like Ahaz, we too feel we can't make demands on God, like asking him for signs?

But the reason God offered Ahaz a sign was to prove he was real to a man who desperately needed to trust him for the sake of his people, so that **they** could see they could trust God too. I'm so glad, then, that I've taken up God's offer of signs to prove he's real in my life, because it gave me what my daughter needed when she could not cope any longer. She'd given her life to people who depended on her, but in the process completely drained herself, which really scared her, because if she collapsed what would happen to the people who so desperately needed her? So I asked her if she wanted me to ask God to help her. She said, "Yes," and then added, "ask him to throw me a bone."

But can I do that? I asked myself. Can I really ask God to drop a little something on her that would lift her spirits and strengthen her for those who needed her? Well, she did ask - and for the right reason too. Was this the right moment, then, for God to begin the process of helping **her** learn that he's real?

The answer came a few days later when my daughter phoned to say, in her own words, "I not only got a bone - I got the whole carcass." And what a story she had to tell. It reminded me of Shear-Jashub and God promising a remnant will return, because for many of us Christian parents it's been horrible watching the world snatch our kids away from God and cart them off as prisoners. But that little spark of life, that little remnant of God and church, is still there in their heads, and God is keeping it alive for just the right moment, when he dusts off the cobwebs, and through their own situations and personalities he sends a little sign to our kids, ever so gently just like he did with Ahaz, to start the ball rolling in their minds too, that he's real, he cares, and he will prove it.

And hopefully they will then cotton on too, that God loves showing them that he's intimately involved in their lives. Life as a Christian, therefore, is not grim obedience, it's an unparalleled adventure into the unknown where God resides, ready to "do an Ahaz" for us any time we need it.

And to show how much God wants us to enter that world, Isaiah lets loose on Ahaz for **refusing** the offer of a sign - and he includes the whole "house of David" in his tirade too in **verses 13-14** - when he yells, "You people are enough to tire anyone out, but must that include tiring God out too? Well, God's going to give you a sign anyway, and here it is: A young woman will become pregnant and she will give birth to a baby boy and call him *Immanuel, God with us.*"

And this is where **the second little boy comes into the story**, and again it's in the boy's **name** that there's a message for Ahaz. But how could a young lass having a baby named Immanuel be a sign so spectacular that Ahaz would feel like God had 'thrown him the whole carcass' too?

And it was 'the whole carcass' too, because we know from Matthew 1:9 that this little lad Immanuel also foretold the birth of Jesus - but why mention it here in Isaiah 7 of all places? Why did God choose this moment and the circumstances Ahaz and the Jews were facing as the backdrop to Jesus being born?

Well, the circumstances they were facing were no different to what we're facing today as Christians. We too are up against a deadly enemy that likes to scare the wits out of us so we end up like Ahaz, all curled up in a ball of self-pity and doom. But we know from the New Testament that God sent Jesus to defeat our enemy, so we have nothing to fear anymore. But **it's here in the story of Ahaz that we see so clearly this is what God sent Jesus for.**

In that name *Immanuel* God told Ahaz, and now tells us, that he will be with us in the most remarkable and personal and practical ways to lift us out of our gloom and feelings of hopelessness and doom, so we can be of service to those who look to us and need us. This is what he was offering Ahaz, the chance to be transformed from a scared rabbit into a man of strength, courage and calm, because this is what his people needed him to be, and God was more than willing to help him become that man. **And think of the people in our lives who need us to be that way too.**

So that's two little boys now with a message for scaredy cats like us and brother Ahaz, to show us that God is all for giving us signs that prove he is real, because it then gives us something real and tangible to offer others. God wants us having great stories to tell that prove **the sign of Immanuel is just as real for us as it was Ahaz**, by answering our worries and fears in the same practical ways he answered Ahaz's worries and fears, as we read in **Isaiah 7:16**, when Isaiah also predicted that "before the boy Immanuel knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste." Before the boy is two years old, then, God will have solved the problem, and Ahaz won't even have to lift a finger to solve it himself.

So Immanuel was a sign backed up with practical answers from God. And those practical answers were predicted too, in the name of a **third little boy**, a lad called *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*, (Marher-shallal-hash-baz), Isaiah's second son, mentioned in **Isaiah 8:3**. And this boy's name was clearly chosen by God too, because it meant, "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil," referring to Assyria stripping Israel and Syria of all their wealth so they were no longer a threat to the Jews (verse 4). In that little boy's name too, then, was another real, live 'bone' from God assuring Ahaz and his people that he truly was real and he cared.

So that's three little boys now, whose names all clearly meant that Ahaz had nothing to fear. The key question now was, "Would Ahaz believe it?" There was still that nagging warning back in **Isaiah 7:9**, that "If you do not stand firm in your faith, Ahaz, you will not stand at all." But there's no indication in the story that Ahaz saw any significance in the names of these three boys - and the rest of his miserable 16 year long reign proved it, because he was an awful king and totally useless to his people. So why would God, knowing Ahaz would totally miss what he was getting at, go to all that trouble of having three children named as signs for Ahaz to lift him out of his doom? If this entire story didn't mean anything to Ahaz, what was the point of it?

But God didn't remove this story from Scripture, did he? He left it in, because one day that name *Immanuel* would appear again, and **that's when this story would come alive.**

And to help it come alive God left us another little clue in the story. It's in the **location** where God had Isaiah meet Ahaz, and it was so specific in its detail that God clearly had some meaning in it too. In **Isaiah 7:3** God told Isaiah to meet Ahaz "at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool on the road to the Fuller's Field." So why meet at that spot in particular?

Well, the Hebrew meaning of words comes to our aid again here, because "Upper Pool" in Hebrew also means ***The blessing of the Most High*** - 'Upper' meaning 'most high', and 'Pool' meaning 'blessing'.

So what we've got now is 'the blessing of the Most High' flowing down a channel to the Fuller's Field where the fullers used the water to clean, bleach (to 'full' means to 'whiten') and give fullness and thickness to their woolen cloth. The significance of that to a man like Ahaz, who knew all about Hebrew meanings, was obvious. God had directed Isaiah to meet him at that very spot, because it was God's gentle way of telling Ahaz he would pour out a blessing on him - like the water flowing down from the Upper Pool - and it would have the same cleansing, whitening and filling effect on Ahaz as the fullers had on their cloth.

There was no "I get it" from Ahaz, however, so is there something here that's meant to come alive for us instead?

Well, how about the words of **our** Immanuel when he yelled out to the crowd at the temple in **John 7:38-39**, "Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit." The parallel with Isaiah 7 is interesting, in that belief in Jesus, who really was 'the blessing of the Most High', creates "streams of living water" flowing out from within people because of the work of the Holy Spirit in them, just like the fullers turned woolen cloth into something practical and lovely to wear from the stream of water flowing down from the Upper Pool.

And God would have done that for Ahaz too. He would have clothed Ahaz with something practical and lovely for his people, with faith, hope and courage that would have enabled him to stand tall and unafraid before them, inspiring them to be the same.

But Ahaz never related anything that God was showing him to what his people needed. God was offering Ahaz obvious proof that he was real and intimately involved in his life, SO THAT Ahaz could then stand before his people and say, “I know God exists, and he will throw us a bone to strengthen and help us, because he did the same for me. He gave me all sorts of hints, and signs, and assurances to lift me out of my doom, and they were so eye-opening and personal that I knew they came from him. I know, then, that he will do the same for you.”

And wouldn't you love that same confidence when talking to others who doubt God's existence, where you can't stop yourself telling people that God will 'throw them a bone' because of all the bones he's thrown to you? Well, this is what God offered Ahaz and what he's now offering us. He will show us too that he is Immanuel, God with us, and in such a way that, as Jesus said in **John 7:38**, “streams of living water flow **from within us**.” Streams of living faith, hope and courage flow out from us to others to encourage and inspire them. That was God's purpose in all these hints and signs for Ahaz, and it's now God's purpose in all the signs and hints he gives us too.

This, then, is what brings the story of Immanuel in Isaiah 7 alive. It's in God repeating it in our experience today - and we get to experience what Ahaz missed. He never got to experience what trusting God would give him for others. We can, though, when we understand **God's given us the sign of Immanuel too**, that God is with us to willingly give us endless proof he's real and he cares - and especially in our scary moments - so we can say, as I said to my daughter, “I know God exists. I know he's real, because of the clear and obvious signs of his existence he's given me. So trust him, and yes, he will throw you a bone too.”

Because in reality what have we got to offer people if we haven't got that? If I have no story to tell that God is real, what have I got? Like Ahaz, I have nothing. I am just another typical human being who gets all stressed out and feeling sorry for myself, and I'll be looking to worldly methods for coping, none of which will give me, or the people I care for, the peace that only God can give.

What we all need to hear at Christmas-time, then, is the story of Ahaz. That's the real “fireside Christmas story.” It's the story of what was behind that sign of **Immanuel**, because it's just as much a sign for us as it was for Ahaz. Hopefully, then, unlike Ahaz, **we do get a grip** on what it means, that we really **can** ask God for clear proof that he is real, AND that he'll **happily** give it to us, so we can be an inspiration and a fearless strength to others. And then, perhaps, they'll realize what Immanuel can do for them too.