

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Isaiah chapter 8. This is a stand-alone sermon which, Lord willing, I'll preach at each campus of The Orchard over the next several weekends. I've chosen this passage because I believe it contains an important word from the Lord for us today. And to help you see the relevance of these verses, let me begin by painting a brief picture of the context, and tell you what was going on among God's people when Isaiah wrote these words.

It's around 730 BC, and the people of God are living in a divided nation, with flawed leaders and some serious threats. Well, right out of the gate we know that we can relate to that. And yet, their situation was unique to their place and their time. The divided nation was Israel, split into two kingdoms—one in the north and the south—and increasingly hostile toward one another. The flawed leaders included Ahaz, who reigned over the southern kingdom in Jerusalem. Ahaz is introduced in 2 Kings 16 with these words: *He did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD* (2 Kings 16:2).

And when you read about his life, that feels like a bit of an understatement. He was an awful king. Ahaz was an idolatrous ruler, worshipping the false gods of the surrounding nations, and he even participated in their most despicable practice: offering up his own son as a burnt offering. And on top of all of this, war is on the horizon. The northern kingdom has formed an alliance with the nation of Syria. These two powers have joined forces to fight against King Ahaz and Jerusalem. They are planning to lay siege to the city and destroy it. And Isaiah 7:2 tells us: *When the house of David was told, 'Syria is in league with Ephraim,' the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind* (Isaiah 7:2).

These are dark days for God's people. Their nation is divided, their leaders are flawed, and they are facing a very serious threat. No wonder the people's hearts shook with fear! Now think about our context, think about our world, globally, nationally, locally, personally. We see the division, we know the flaws, we feel the threats. And sometimes our hearts can begin to shake with fear like trees in the wind. But in our passage this morning, as one commentator puts it, God tells his people how they can "display unanxious peace... [and] face the uncertain and cloudy future with calm and certain expectation." Don't you want that? I do!

So how is it possible? Well, according to these verses, it's possible if we will:

- Fear the Lord.
- Listen to the Lord.
- And wait for the Lord.

Let's take those one at a time, considering what that meant for God's people in Isaiah's day, and what they mean for each of us.

1. Fear the Lord

Look with me at Isaiah 8:11-12. The prophet says, *For the LORD spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread"* (Isaiah 8:11-12).

Again, with the northern kingdom in league with Syria threatening their destruction, the people are terrified. They are full of fear. And as often happens in times of dreaded danger, conspiracy theories are on the rise. But God is saying, “Don’t go there, don’t let the breaking news with all the alarming analysis sweep you away into anxiety.” Instead, look at verse 13: *But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread* (Isaiah 8:13).

God is telling Isaiah, and he is telling us, that the way to fight fear, is with fear. That we fight the fear of whatever terrifies us in this world by fostering a proper fear of the Lord. Now how does that work? Well, take the situation here in Isaiah 8. The people are afraid of the armies that are around them. So, God chooses his words carefully. He calls himself “the LORD of hosts.” Which can also be translated, “The Lord of armies!” He is reminding his people that all the armies, from all the nations, are ultimately under his authority. In fact, in Isaiah 7 God says he will protect his people by bringing another nation, the Assyrians, to destroy the nations threatening Jerusalem. And he uses this amazing image in Isaiah 7:20, saying he will whistle for the Assyrians the way an owner whistles to his dog, and they will come running. Only, instead of a dog, he calls the Assyrian army a bee, a little bug in comparison to his almighty power, a bee he can send flying wherever he wants.

Church, this is our God. He is the Lord of hosts! The Lord of armies! Isaiah 40:15 says that compared to God the nations of this world are like a drop in a bucket, a few specks of dust. And he is totally sovereign, totally in control of them all. So, if you’re going to fear anything or anyone, fear him!

“But,” someone might ask, “Isn’t that just trading one negative experience for another? Isn’t fear inherently bad?” No! Look at verse 13 again: *But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread* (Isaiah 8:13). Notice the Lord is holy. Holiness is a magnificent thing. This reminds us that God is spotless, pure, and blameless in all his ways. And while the words fear and dread can refer to a negative experience, those words can also refer to the experience we might call fearful awe, which can be very positive.

In college, I worked at a summer camp in Wisconsin, and a few times a year, we would see some epic thunderstorms. I remember once we were driving through the cornfields one night, and in the distance, we could see these massive clouds flashing with lightning like a strobe light and clapping with thunder that rattled the earth. It was simultaneously terrifying and amazing. And that’s what God is like. As the preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, “Standing in a thunderstorm, watching, as best you can, the flashes of lightning, and listening to the thunder of [the Lord’s] voice, have you not often shrunk into yourself, and said, ‘Great God, how terrible art thou!’—not afraid, but full of delight, like a child who rejoices to see his father’s... power—happy, and at home, but feeling oh, so little!”

That’s the fear of the Lord! We see something of his holiness, his power, and his glory. And we feel very little. But also, very safe. Because we remember that he is our God! That we are his people! And if he is on our side, we have nothing to fear! That’s verse 14. Let God be your fear and let him be your dread. *And he will become a sanctuary...* (Isaiah 8:14). He will become a shelter, a hiding place, from everything that scares you in this world. Friends, this is the way to fight fear. As Ray Ortlund puts it, when you are afraid, “Dare to treat God as God. Don’t respond

to life in a way that makes God look helpless and weak.” Fear him. Stand in awe of him. And he will become a sanctuary for you.

Now, there’s an alternative. Many people have a different response to the Lord. Look at the rest of verse 14 through verse 15. *And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken* (Isaiah 8:14-15).

In every generation there are those who find their sanctuary in the fear of the Lord. But there are also those who are offended by the Lord, who stumble over him, and sometimes this happens because they do not want to fear him! That was certainly the case with Bertrand Russell, one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, who once gave an address titled *Why I Am Not a Christian*. Listen to Russell’s main reason for rejecting Christianity, and all religions for that matter. Russell said, “Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear... Fear is the basis of the whole thing—fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death...” In Russell’s opinion, the fear of the Lord was entirely negative, a shackle to be cast off. And Russell had high hopes that if society at large would reject religion along with him, things would get better, and our fears would be alleviated.

He went on to say, “I think our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look round for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the sky, but rather to look to our own efforts here below to make this world a fit place to live in.” Russell gave that address in 1927. And over the past 100 years more and more people have embraced his vision. We have listened to what our own hearts can teach us. We have looked to our own efforts to fix the world. But how’s it going? Are we less fearful? I don’t think so. If anything, we are more fearful than ever before. So, what will help us? Where can we find calm in this restless world? By learning to fear the Lord. And second, by learning to...

2. Listen to the Lord

Look at verse 19: *And when they say to you, “Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter,” should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?* (Isaiah 8:19).

What’s going on here? Well, in the ancient world, it was a common pagan practice to try and tap into the spiritual realm by communicating with the dead to gain special knowledge about the present or the future. A medium or a necromancer was a person who could supposedly help you do this. Now, why would God’s people be tempted in this way? Because, when we are afraid, we crave information that will put our hearts at ease.

You can picture people in Jerusalem in this dangerous situation, desperate to know how things will work out, turning to these mediums and necromancers in hopes of hearing something good. It’s the same reason people continue to visit psychics today! But, before we let ourselves off the hook, thinking this verse doesn’t apply to us because we don’t read tarot cards, palms, or crystal balls, are we sure we don’t do the same thing in different ways? For example, is it possible that

fear lies behind some of our endless searching and scrolling? Could it be that sometimes, along with the desire for entertainment and distraction, we're looking for something that will put our anxious hearts at ease? Some special knowledge that will alleviate our concerns about violence or economic turmoil or disease? Some insider info that will guarantee us safety, wealth, and health?

I'll confess that during the pandemic, I spent way too much time online thinking if I could just understand the virus I wouldn't have to fear it. And sure, scrolling the internet is better than visiting a necromancer, but not if our heart is running to the wrong source for truth and hope and peace. When that's what we're looking for, there's only one place to go. Again, verse 19 says, *Should not a people inquire of their God?* (Isaiah 8:19). And how do we do that? Verse 20: *To the teaching and to the testimony!* (Isaiah 8:20). Verse 20 is a summons to run to the Word of God when you are afraid, to go to the Scriptures when you are longing for truth, hope, and peace, to inquire of our God and to listen to his voice. Church, God has given us everything we need to calm our anxious hearts in his teaching, in his testimony, in his Word. Don't neglect it. If you do, you are setting yourself up for disaster.

Look at the rest of verse 20: *If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn* (Isaiah 8:20). In other words, if they will not speak and think and act in a way that accords with this word, with God's teaching and testimony, there is no dawn. There is no light. There is only darkness. As Alec Motyer puts it, "To reject the word of the Lord is to embrace hopelessness." And here's what will happen. *They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward* (Isaiah 8:21).

Those who ignore God's Word will face the future on their own, which will lead to sorrow and longing, and ironically, even anger at the God they have rejected. They will look up to heaven and curse him. But when they look down at this world, they will find no hope. *And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness* (Isaiah 8:22). Friend, don't let that be your story. Run to the teaching and the testimony! God's word will be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path. Fear the Lord. Listen to the Lord. And lastly...

3. Wait for the Lord

Back in verse 17, Isaiah said something very profound: *I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him* (Isaiah 8:17).

Notice he doesn't sugarcoat the difficulty of the situation. At this time in history in this divided nation with flawed leaders and serious threats, it feels like God is hiding his face. But still, Isaiah says, I will wait for him, and I will hope in him. And what's he waiting for? Ultimately, what God promises in chapter 9. Chapter 8 ended with a picture of gloom and darkness but listen to how chapter 9 begins: *But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations* (Isaiah 9:1).

There's gloom now, but something glorious is coming, something from Galilee! What is it? A light in the darkness! Look at verse 2: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone* (Isaiah 9:2). So, what is the light? Better question: Who is the light? *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6). There's a divine King coming!

Isaiah goes on to describe how this King will rule with justice and righteousness forever and ever. The ultimate hope for Isaiah and the people of his day was not temporary deliverance from the armies that surrounded them, even though God did give them that grace. The ultimate hope for Isaiah and the people of his day was the eternal deliverance from all evil, and the immeasurable riches of grace that God would give them in his Son. When Isaiah declares, "I will wait for the Lord," he was waiting for Jesus! And so are we. We have the benefit of waiting on the other side of his first coming, knowing him as our crucified, risen, and reigning Savior, the one who has delivered us from all our sin and all our fears! And the one who is coming again soon to usher in the fullness of his kingdom, so we might dwell in the perfections of his presence, forever and ever.

Brothers and sisters, we can find peace in this anxious age, as we confidently anticipate the age to come! In their song, "Wasteland," NEEDTOBREATHE repeats this line:

*In this wasteland where I'm livin'
There is a crack in the door filled with light
And it's all that I need to get by*

In so many ways, this world is a wasteland, full of darkness. But there's a crack in the door filled with light. And one day, the door will open! Jesus... the light of the world... will come again. And that hope is all that we need to get by. Believe in him and wait for him.

Conclusion

Isaiah and his people were living in some dark days, and so are we. But God is telling us that it is possible to "display unanxious peace... [and] face the uncertain and cloudy future with calm and certain expectation." It is possible, if we fear the Lord, listen to the Lord, and wait for the Lord. And church, if we take this to heart, and live accordingly, this will diminish our worry and strengthen our witness.

Let's think about worry and witness with our last moment today. The next time worry floods your life, the next time your heart begins to shake like a tree in wind, because of some national tragedy or some personal trial or whatever it may be. Remember these three words: fear, listen, and wait.

Ask God to help your fear of him eclipse all other fears, so that you might be able to speak with a sort of holy defiance into the darkness, the way Isaiah does in verses 9-10 of chapter 8. Look at those words: *Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered; give ear all you far countries; strap*

on your armor and be shattered... Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us (Isaiah 8:9-10).

Do you hear what he's saying? World, do your worst! Whatever threats you muster up will come to nothing in the end, for God is with us! And how does he know that? Because he's been listening to God's Word! He's been running to the teaching and the testimony! We can do this too. And as we do, we will find our sights lifted to the One whom all the Scriptures proclaim, our Mighty God and Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. We will find our hearts welling up with hope as we wait for him. And our confidence, and our calm, will be a witness to this anxious world that Jesus truly is the Prince of Peace.

Let's pray that God might make us these kinds of people.