



## When the Camel's Back Breaks

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How has your week been? How was Christmas? Was it good? Was it hard? Did you have fun or were you stressed out? Most of us move through Christmas and into the New Year with a mixture of the good, the hard, the fun and the stressful. Life usually comes at us that way as well - it's a mixture.

Stress is almost always a part of our lives. I usually know what's causing me stress by what wakes me up at 1:00 A.M. in the morning. It's the thing I can't get out of my head. It's the reruns I keep playing in my mind. It's the thing that keeps me from focusing in on what I need to do to stay effective. All of us know what it's like to live with nagging concern and gnawing worry that takes it's toll on our sleep and keeps us from concentrating.

There are also times in life when circumstances pound at us with both fists. Our worst fears are realized. Life pummels us and we're shaken to the core.

In the late 1980's Lynn and I were living in Foster City. We had just moved here from Denver. Although the Bay Area was home to us, Foster City and CPC were new to us. Our second daughter was born just after we moved. After renting a home for a year we scraped together a down payment to buy our own home. It was a good time for us but it was a stressful time. New job. New home. New baby. Big house payment.

In January of 1990 I was teaching a class when I received the news that my mother had just collapsed and died of a heart attack. I was told to meet my dad immediately at the hospital to help him make arrangements. Within an hour I stood with my dad beside her lifeless body and we cried. My own grief was compounded by my father's progressing alcoholism.

A couple of months later I was out mowing my lawn when I inadvertently reached down to move something out of the way. I came just a little too close to the mower and chopped off the end of my finger. It certainly could have been worse, but it was kind of the straw that broke the camel's back for me. A new home, a new job, a new baby, a tragedy in an increasingly dysfunctional family, and now a mangled finger. You might say the roof had caved in.

I know that as I stand here this morning that I'm not alone in facing this level of stress. I know that many of you have been through as much or more. You've stood at the graveside of a wife or husband, perhaps even a son or

daughter. Some of you have lost your job and perhaps your home. Some of you just live with the everyday stress of a debilitating illness or difficult marriage. We all live with everyday stresses, but times come for all of us when the camel's back finally breaks. What do we do in those times? How do we make it? How do we manage?

### Ahaz's Stressful Situation

There is an interesting story buried in a part of the Bible many of us never get around to reading. In Isaiah 7 we see a case study in how one man handled some major stress in his life. His name was Ahaz. Ahaz was the King of Judah, which was really a small kingdom that consisted of just two Israelite tribes, Judah and Benjamin. About 200 years earlier ten of the twelve tribes had split off and become a separate nation, and the two tribes in the south became the nation of Judah. Ahaz became king of Judah around 735 B.C.

The story opens in v. 1. A year after becoming King, Ahaz faces a desperate situation when two kings - Rezin from Syria and Pekah from the northern tribes of Israel - have come together to conquer Judah. They march right up to Jerusalem with the intention of waging war.

You can imagine how Ahaz and the people of his tiny kingdom reacted. Verse 2 says their hearts "**shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind.**" That's called major stress. Ahaz is shaking in his royal sandals. The situation seems hopeless.

How do you handle a situation like that? Several years ago some researchers published the results on how people manage stress<sup>1</sup>. They found that Americans tend to handle stress in one of three ways.

Some of us handle major stress by trying to change the situation. If you can't make the house payments, you sell the house and get into something you can afford. If you can't make the marriage work, you move out and perhaps get a divorce. If your job is causing stress, you find another one. It's not always the right way to handle it, but that's what we do. You do what you have to do to change the situation. The problem is that it's not always possible to do that. Some situations, like my mother's death, are beyond our control. In this case, Ahaz can't change the situation - he doesn't have the resources.

A second way that we handle stress is we change the

way we feel about the situation; we try to manage our emotions. We convince ourselves that we really shouldn't be sad or angry or scared. We deny our feelings and bury them deep enough that we no longer have to deal with them on a conscious level. The problem is that it takes an enormous amount of emotional energy to do that, and the results are not always good. Though we may not consciously feel them, those emotions have a way of wreaking havoc in our lives. I don't think Ahaz could change how he felt about this. It was just too close to home.

The third way we cope with major stress, according to these researchers, is by changing the meaning of the situation. What's that all about? As we'll see, this is how God wants Ahaz to cope with his stress.

### **God's Promise to Ahaz**

In vv. 3-6 God speaks to the prophet Isaiah, who was one of the inhabitants of Judah, and gives him a message to be delivered to Ahaz. Look what the Lord says.

**"Then the LORD said to Isaiah, 'Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller's field, and say to him, 'Take care and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted because of these two stubs of smoldering firebrands, on account of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah.' Because Aram, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has planned evil against you, saying, 'Let us go up against Judah and terrorize it, and make for ourselves a breach in its walls and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,'"**

It almost sounds as if God is telling Ahaz to somehow manage his emotions about this crisis. He says to be careful, be calm, have no fear. Imagine hearing the prophet Isaiah say that to you. How would you feel? "Yeah, right. Keep stay calm. Just relax. We're about to become dust and you tell me to have no fear. Maybe prophets can do that, but I can't."

But that's not all God said. He goes on and says in vv. 7-9.

**"thus says the Lord GOD: 'It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass. "For the head of Aram is Damascus and the head of Damascus is Rezin (now within another 65 years Ephraim will be shattered, so that it is no longer a people), and the head of Ephraim is Samaria and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you will not**

**believe, you surely shall not last.'"**

This was good news for the king. In essence, God offers Ahaz the opportunity to change the meaning of his stress. God promised that these two kings would not prevail over Judah. He says their plans "shall not stand or come to pass." He says these two kings are not as powerful as they look. He says both of these nations are led by mere men. As my coach used to say, "They put their pants on one leg at a time." Not only that, Israel, which is referred to here as Ephraim, will become dust; they'll no longer even be a people. But notice there is one condition which Ahaz must meet; one requirement. God says, *"If you will not believe, you surely will not last."* Another translation says, *"If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all"* (NIV).

We're not told what Ahaz did as a result of those words, but from what comes next we can make a good guess. Look at vv. 10-11. **"Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, 'Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven.'"**

It's pretty clear that Ahaz was having a tough time believing the Lord's message. But the Lord was patient with Ahaz. And so he encourages Ahaz to name his terms. He could ask God for whatever proof he wanted to show the message was true. He could say, "God, spell it out for me in the clouds." Have you ever wanted a sign from God? "God, just show me that you're for real. Just show me that I can really trust you. Let me just win the lottery and then I'll know you're for real."

But notice how Ahaz responds in v. 12. **"But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!'"** That sounds good; that sounds very spiritual. But sometimes we talk like that to mask what is really unbelief. To ask for a sign was not testing the Lord because the Lord had invited him to do it. But Ahaz refused the invitation. It seems to me THAT was testing the Lord!

God might have had a lot of patience, but Isaiah was running out of it. You can hear his frustration as he says to Ahaz in vv. 13-14.

**"Then he said, 'Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.'"**

Isaiah says, "Okay, partner. If you won't ask for a sign, you're going to get one anyway. Here is what you will get: 'A virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and you will call him Immanuel.'" God's sign to a fear-filled and faithless king was a miracle child named Immanuel, which means "God with us." Ahaz faced a crisis of massive implications. His stress level was off the charts. He couldn't change the situation. He couldn't change how he

felt about the situation. But God offered him the chance to change the meaning of the situation: God is with us. God is not absent. God is here. Immanuel.

What difference would that make for Ahaz? Two powerful kings were knocking on the door of Jerusalem. The Lord says they're just men; they're nothing to worry about. He changes the meaning of the situation. He says, "Here is a miracle. God is with you. God is with us. What more do you need to get things in perspective?"

You and I can't always change our situations, but Immanuel makes it possible to change the meaning of our situation - any situation. A central truth of the Bible is that our God is sovereign. He created the heavens and the earth and he still holds it all together. He has a plan for history, and his plan extends even to the details of our lives. He's powerful. He's the Almighty God. He has a purpose for his people and he uses his power to accomplish that purpose. Knowing that can change the meaning of even our greatest stresses. And in the midst of it all, he's with us. Before Jesus ascended into heaven he promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Israel should have known. They had known stress. They had been in bondage for 400 years. They were nothing compared to Egypt. But God called a shepherd named Moses to confront the most powerful man on earth. Moses asked the Lord, "Who shall I say sent me?" God said, "I Am. Tell him that I Am sent you." That can mean a lot of things, but one of the things it means is that God IS present. God IS with us. Immanuel.

Israel's greatest king, David, knew stress. He lost two children to death. One of them had rebelled against him and taken his throne. He was betrayed by a close friend. He was misunderstood and chased by a jealous king for ten long years. Yet David, who might have been totally incapacitated by stress, wrote the great affirmation in Psalm 23, "**Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.**" On another occasion he declared, "**Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken**" (Psalm 16:8). There it is again. Immanuel. God with us.

Ahaz knew all of this. He had heard all the stories of how God led his people through the Red Sea. How he caused the sun to stand still in the heavens so Joshua could defeat the five kings of the Amorites. How he had delivered a shepherd boy with sling shot from the Philistine giant. That same God was with Ahaz. How would he change the meaning of his situation? What would HE need to do?

God told him, "**if you don't stand firm in your faith, you won't stand at all.**" If Ahaz didn't believe, if he didn't trust the promise, he would miss the opportunity to change the meaning of his situation.

## The Sign of Immanuel

But you and I cannot miss it. As followers of Jesus Christ who just celebrated Christmas, how could we miss God's sign? How could we miss it when we read the same words again in Matthew 1:23, "**Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, 'God with us.'**"

Seven hundred years after Ahaz, Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled once again in the birth of another baby, the Lord Jesus Christ. Once again, the people were under great stress. Rome occupied and ruled their land. Israel was oppressed and beaten down. It had been 400 years since they had heard the voice of a prophet in Israel. Even the religious leaders had become petty and selfish. What could it have meant to a first century Jew that a miracle baby was born, a baby named Immanuel, God with us? Could that change the meaning of their situation?

The apostle John tells us that it didn't. He said of Jesus, "**He came to his own, but his own received him not**" (John 1:18). He came to his own. They knew the stories. They read the Scriptures. They heard the prophecies. They had Isaiah 7:14. But they didn't receive him. They didn't believe. They didn't stand firm in their faith. They missed the opportunity to change the meaning of their situation.

How about us? We're heading into a New Year. Let's be realistic. There are so many things might happen that could shake us to the core. Another 9-11? A spot on an MRI? The economy back in the tank? Is there a word of hope and promise for US just as there was for a faithless king or a faithless people more than 2,000 years ago? John gives us some hope. He wrote, "**He came to his own, but his own received him not.**" Yet then he added, "**But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believed in his name.**" If you and I will receive him; if you and I will be joined to his family by faith, if you and I will continue to trust him, this promise is for us. God is with us. Don't miss that sign! That can change the meaning of every situation, if we stand in our faith. Faith in him. Faith in Immanuel. God with us. That's still what God requires. When stress beats us; when the camel's back has broken; when everything looks hopeless - then faith in Immanuel can make the difference. It may not change the situation, your emotions may still waver, but it does change the meaning of it. No situation is ever the same when you believe that God is with you in it.

I arrived home from Albania on Tuesday night. The next morning I came up to the church to catch up on a few things. I checked my e-mail and there I found some tragic news about an old friend from college. Bob Gaddini was a pastor who actually came here to CPC and filled in for me one Sunday about 10 years ago. In the last few years he and his wife and two daughters were living down in Palm Desert where he worked at a Christian school. On the morning of December 15 Bob went out on his morning bike ride and he was hit by a car. The driver of that car left him there to die. I couldn't believe what I was reading, but it was true. I have to be honest, I have had a hard time getting the picture out of my mind of Bob being left to die alone on the side of the road at 5:15 A.M. in the morning. I keep thinking about the pain his wife Chris and his two daughters are feeling during these holidays. And I've prayed a lot for them. I've prayed that somehow the truth of Immanuel would be real to them, more real even than their pain, and I believe it will. I've prayed that even as Bob lay on the roadside he would have known that Immanuel, God with us, was there by his side, and I choose to believe that he did, for Scripture says, "**Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his godly ones.**" Even in death, God is with us.

## CONCLUSION

I really don't know what 2004 holds for us. We'll surely have some good times; some real blessings to thank God for. But we'll have at least a few stresses to deal with as well. And for some us, perhaps like Ahaz or the Gaddini family, we might get shaken to the core. But I know one thing for sure; if we believe the promise of Immanuel, if we stand firm in our faith that God is not just with us, but God is with ME, and he is with me always and in everything, then we surely will stand.

I would like to acknowledge Alice Matthews and her sermon, "What To Do When the Roof Caves In," for this information and many of her insights into this text which I have borrowed for this sermon. Her sermon can be found in "The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative," by Steven Matthewson (Baker Books).

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