

Author	Gary Johnson
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## Introduction

Some powerful people have been in the news lately. Just days ago, nearly 100 world leaders – heads of state – sat and stood beside one another while attending the memorial service for the late Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa. They were numbered among the nearly 100,000 people who filled the soccer stadium in Johannesburg.

Still more powerful people have been in the news. **Forbes** magazine just finished compiling their list of the world’s most powerful people. The list is comprised of seventy-two people, which would be one person for every 100 million people on earth. The list includes seventeen heads of state, who lead countries of the world with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of an estimated \$48 trillion. The list includes twenty-seven CEOs and twenty-eight billionaires. It is a pretty impressive list. How would we react if we were standing next to President Putin of Russia or our president? What if Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, came and sat down with us while having a cup of coffee?

Some years ago, I remember the story of a woman standing in an ice cream shop on a hot summer day, and after being handed her cone cream cone, she turned to leave the store, and there, next to her in line, stood Paul Newman! It took her breath away. Old blue eyes himself was standing next to her! He said, “Good afternoon” to her and all she could do was nod her head in agreement. Words just wouldn’t come out of her mouth. She walked out of the store and while getting into her car, she realized that she must have left her ice cream cone in the store. So, back into the store she went, just as Paul Newman was coming out. He asked her, “Looking for your cone?” Again, she just nodded yes. He then told her that she put it in her purse with her change! How would we respond if some powerful, well-known figure were standing right beside us? Hold that thought as we move into the message.

## Isaiah 7:1-14

*When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. Now the house of David was told, “Aram has allied itself with Ephraim”; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.*

*Then the Lord said to Isaiah, “Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Launderer’s Field. Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood – because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah’s son have plotted your ruin, saying, “Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.” Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says:*

*“It will not take place, it will not happen, for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah’s son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”*

*Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”*

*But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”*

*Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

## Context

Isaiah served God as a prophet for over forty years and during the reigns of four kings. He wrote his prophecy some 700 years before Jesus was born, and our text makes mention of the Messiah's birth. We typically look only at Isaiah 7:14, but there is much to gain by looking at the story in which that verse (i.e., prophecy) is a part.

The events of these fourteen verses describe a moment in the reign of Ahaz, who was king over Judah in Jerusalem. Ahaz was not committed to God. He was a wicked and evil person, who even killed his own son as a human sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3). There came a time in his reign when he was threatened by two kings who decided to ally themselves against Ahaz (read vs. 1-2). This great threat struck fear in the lives of the people living in Jerusalem, so much so that they were "shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind." The situation they were in and the circumstances looming before them appeared to be devastating. The two enemy kings were determined to kill and destroy the people of God, as they had "plotted" the ruin of Jerusalem and her inhabitants (read v. 5). No wonder the people were filled with angst!

Yet, God wanted to reassure King Ahaz, so He sent Isaiah, the prophet, with an encouraging and hope-filled message, telling him to: "Be careful. Keep calm and do not be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering wicks..." (read vs. 3-4). When God referred to them as "smoldering wicks," He pointed out that they were growing weaker and their power was nearly extinguished. Though they thought of themselves as powerful men and a great threat, there was Someone still stronger than they. God, the "Sovereign Lord," told them, "It will not take place, it will not happen..." (v. 7). The planned destruction would not come about. The invading army would not succeed IF Ahaz and his people had faith in God. "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (v. 9). God's people had to trust God. They had to anchor their faith in God, that He was stronger and more powerful than any number of kings of the earth combined.

Then, God even went a step further. Not only did He offer to protect Ahaz and the city of Jerusalem, but God offered to provide a sign as even further encouragement! This is one of those rare moments, but Ahaz refused to do so! He turned his back on God, saying that he would "not put the Lord his God to the test" (v. 12). To better understand what was going on in this moment, we need to see this same event as recorded in 2 Kings 16. In this parallel account (verses 5-9), Ahaz did not put his faith and trust in God. Instead, he teamed up with the king of Assyria, becoming his "vassal" and even paying for the military assistance with "silver and gold found in the temple of God." Ahaz depended on a mere man and not on Almighty God! What a hypocrite! Ahaz said that he would not sin by "putting the Lord to the test", but he certainly sinned by rejecting God!

God's response was swift and serious. Speaking through Isaiah (vs. 13-14), God had had enough of Ahaz. His patience with him had run out. So, in spite of the fact that Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, God provided him with one; a sign that would speak hope for ages to come: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel" (i.e., meaning God with us). Though these words are familiar to us, there may be something we've not yet understood about them.

"Immanuel" is not the first name of a child in this passage. Check out verse 3: "GO out, you and your son, Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz..." Why did God tell the prophet Isaiah to take his son with him to meet the king, and why do we see his name in the text? Names played a key role throughout the Bible. Names were given to represent the destiny of individuals. The name Moses means "drawn out," referring to him being rescued as an infant as he was "drawn out of the Nile River." The name Jesus means "He saves" referring to His death on the cross. Shear-Jashub means "a remnant will return." This is referring to the future remnant of Israelites who would return from having been carried off in exile. Isaiah's boy—standing there in front of King Ahaz—was a sign for the future: Judah will be carried off into exile and only a remnant will return. The child's name Immanuel was a proverbial slap in the face of Ahaz in that the king did not want God with him, but only a man—and that being the king of Assyria and not the King of kings! Yet, 700 hundred years later, the fullness of this prophecy was fulfilled as Matthew declared:

## Matthew 1:22-23

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

There came a time when God “put on flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). Jesus became flesh and blood, just like us and He moved into our world, into your neighborhood and mine. He is Immanuel, God with us.

### [segue]

There is an old – and true – phrase that we all know all too well: “History repeats itself,” and that is certainly true about this story.

### **The Repeating Pattern**

This passage today is all about war and conflict. King fighting king, army opposing army. Plots and schemes to destroy one another abound in the text. People taking sides with allies to become a stronger threat is evident. This story, which is a part of God’s greater story, is about war. Now then, history repeats itself and there is a repeating pattern in that we are at war. Scripture tells us that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but it is against rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world and against forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12). Just as the evil one went after Jesus and tempted Him for forty days in the wilderness, he does the same with us. Just as Herod was influenced by the evil one to kill all the baby boys in the vicinity of Bethlehem two years of age and younger, the evil one influences people to hurt one another today. As a result, there are those moments and seasons in life when we struggle with fear, “shaking as when trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.”

In any given year, 18 percent of Americans—or nearly one of every five—will suffer from an anxiety disorder, and when we add to that anyone who has experienced an anxiety disorder at any time in his or her lifetime, the number increases to nearly thirty percent. Something is wrong. According to psychologist Robert Leahy's book *Anxiety Free*, "The average American child today exhibits the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient did in the 1950s." People are becoming consumed with anxiety. They fear separation from extended family, the loss of friendships, uncertain employment, threats of terrorism, uncertain futures, high medical costs, and more. As psychologist Robert Leahy puts it, "We live in the Age of Anxiety .... We've become a nation of nervous wrecks." [Source: Robert L. Leahy *Anxiety Free*, Hay House, 2009, pp. 3-5] Not only is the pattern repeated, but it is picking up proverbial steam!

### **The Repeated Promise**

But, since “history repeats itself,” we need to see the repeated promise: Immanuel, God IS with us! You see, God doesn’t change. Since He is immutable, He still speaks and He speaks the same message: “Be careful, keep calm and do not be afraid.” Just as God was ready and willing to rescue Ahaz and the Israelites, He is willing and able to rescue us—and in His way, not necessarily in our way. Instead of calming the storm, He may choose to calm and strengthen us so that we make it through the storm. After all, there is a promise: “Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). Even after Jesus died on the cross, was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, God is still with us through His Holy Spirit. God sent His Spirit to be with us until the very end of time. The Apostle Paul wrote that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in us (1 Corinthians 6:19). Moreover, the Apostle John wrote that the Holy Spirit in us is greater than he (the evil one) who is in this world. Just as God said the two attacking kings were nothing more than “smoldering wicks,” growing weaker and nearly extinguished; the same is true for Satan. He is weak compared to God in our skin, the Holy Spirit!

Paco Amodar, a pastor in Little Village on Chicago's west side, lives in a neighborhood filled with gang violence. He tells the following story about being invited to lead a prayer vigil for a young man who had been gunned down by a rival gang. “When I arrived at the vigil, a large crowd of young people – including many known gang members – had already gathered around the sidewalk where I would be praying. I wondered, ‘What should I do? What should I say? I felt fearful and inadequate. Yet I also knew that they had gathered for this prayer vigil. So amid my fears, I prayed silently, asking Jesus what He would want me to do here. As I looked out over the crowd, I realized most of these scary-looking gang members were just kids, mostly in their mid or late teens, with some in their twenties. I was old enough to be their father. They had surely been told repeatedly by authority figures how wrong their actions were and how foolish gang activity was. But as I looked at these hurting teenagers, I wondered, ‘What would Jesus say to these young people?’ So I asked permission to speak from my heart. Then I said, ‘Since most of you are half my age, I am the age of your fathers. Would you allow me to address you on behalf of your fathers? I know you have heard plenty of times that this back and forth

violence in our neighborhood is complete nonsense. You've been told how destructive gang behavior is. But today, on behalf of your dads, I want to say to you what should have been said a long time ago. My son, my daughter, would you forgive me for not being there for you when you were little? Will you forgive me for not being there when you took your first steps? Will you forgive me for not being there to play catch with you when you were young? Will you forgive me for leaving you when you most needed me?' As the words poured from my lips, I could not control myself. Tears ran freely down my cheeks. To my surprise, many of them started to weep with me. Something special happened in that moment. Following the gathering they started to trust me even though I had no credibility in their world. I hadn't shared their life, but I had shared their pain." [Source: Paco Amador, "Weeping on Heaven's Door," *Leadership Journal* November 2013]

Jesus Christ is Immanuel, God with us. He does share our lives and He shares our pain. He has moved into your neighborhood and mine; your life and mine. There is a promise that keeps repeating, "I will never leave you. I will never forsake you."

### **The Repeating Problem**

Yet, we have to admit something. Since history repeats itself, there is a repeating problem: we do not stand in faith. We do not trust God to come through. Instead, like King Ahaz, we trust in someone or something other than in God. When we do that time after time, will God lose patience with us as He did with Ahaz? When will we stop trying to do life with all of its struggles in our own strength? How can we break the cycle of having little or no faith in God?

Dying at the young age of forty, the late actor Paul Walker was killed just a few weeks ago in a car accident. Famous for his roles in the successful *Fast and Furious* movie series, the actor and his friend died when the red Porsche Carrera GT spun out of control, struck a tree and burst into flames. What many people do not know about Paul Walker is that he was a committed Christian. He was a decent, good-hearted person whose personal life was not a train wreck. He was quoted as saying, "Some people say that you should go to all the parties, to the nightclubs...and I look at them and say, 'You don't want to have contacts with those people. If you get caught up in that, it ruins you. Hollywood is garbage.'" Walker boldly professed to being a Christian. He mentioned that when he went snowboarding or surfing, he could not help but to see the reality of God in creation. Most stars in Hollywood are star-struck with themselves. They see little need for God in their lives. But, from time to time, some star comes along – like Paul Walker – who decides to surrender his life to Christ, in both a humble and timely way.

### **Closing**

Yes, powerful people have been in the news lately. Yet, if every head of state, if every person of royalty, if every military leader of every military force, if every billionaire were all assembled in one place; they would pale in significance to Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the risen Son of God. He is the person of power and authority that we would want standing beside us!

Four weeks ago, we began a journey in the Word. In one text after another, we discovered that if we change the way we THINK about Christmas, we will change the way we SPEAK about Christmas. If we change the way we THINK and SPEAK about Christmas, we will change the way we ACT when it comes to observing Christmas. Yet, at the heart of this season, we can change the way we EXPERIENCE Christmas because at the heart of Christmas is Jesus Christ; who is Immanuel, God with us. When this happens, Christmas this year will be both *new and improved!*

Advent is a time of waiting. For centuries, they prayed for the Messiah to come—and He did. Now, it is our turn to pray for the Messiah to come AGAIN, and He will.

[Post Message: Lead people through the 'prayer card' exercise]

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### **Resources Consulted**

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