

God with Us: Isaiah 7:1-17
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Sunday, December 21st

This morning, as we're just a few days away from Christmas, we're going to look at a powerful prophecy in the Old Testament that points to the birth of Jesus. It's the very famous prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, which says, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." It's such an amazing thing to see God's sovereign control over history, that He would inspire a prophet to speak a clear word from God that would ultimately be fulfilled more than 700 years later. And it's also astounding to see how God chooses to display His power, that He would ordain for the Messiah to be born to a virgin. We serve an awesome God! We serve a powerful God! We serve a God who will not be defined by any box we might try to put Him in. He does as He pleases, and it pleases Him to show off His glory and beauty and might. He shows us very clearly and boldly that He is the King of the universe. And He has put together all the details of the story of redemption so that Christ is magnified, so that a spotlight shines on His gracious plan to save sinners. That's what all of this is about—prophecies hundreds of years beforehand, supernatural signs—it's all about drawing attention to the wonder of the Gospel. It's about highlighting what is supremely valuable in the universe. Many are blind to these precious realities. Many do not have ears to hear this amazing news. But for those who have spiritual eyes and ears, let us marvel at what God has done in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And it's my prayer that as we marvel together at these things, that the blind and deaf will be changed. If you're here this morning and you have not seen the beauty of the Gospel, you have not heard in your heart the Good News of Jesus Christ, it's my hope and prayer that God will do a sovereign work in you today and allow you to experience for the first time what Christmas is all about, what life is all about, what this universe is all about.

Many of you are probably familiar with this prophecy in Isaiah 7, but let's begin this morning by looking at the historical context of the prophecy, which is fascinating, and then the double fulfillment of the prophecy, and finally we'll look at the significance of the prophecy—the theological significance of the virgin birth.

Historical Context of the Prophecy

The historical context of this prophecy takes us into some devastating events in the history of Israel and Judah. You may remember that after the reign of Solomon, the kingdom divided.

The tribes of Benjamin and Judah formed the Southern kingdom, known as Judah, with Jerusalem as their capital. And the other ten tribes formed the Northern kingdom, known as Israel, or in this passage it's also called Ephraim, and their capital was Samaria. From the time the kingdom divided, we now fast forward about 200 years to about 735 B. C. when Ahaz was the king of the Judah and Pekah was king of Israel / Ephraim. Look at the situation in verses 1-2. Syria and Israel are joining forces to attack Judah. Syria, which is to the north of Israel, is moving south along with Israel to wage war against Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. And the response in verse 2 is fear and trembling. It says that Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. This is a sign of their unbelief. They are failing to trust in the Lord's provision and protection. They are looking into the face of trials rather than looking to the One who is sovereign over every trial. And therefore they shake with fear.

In verse 3 the Lord instructs Isaiah, the prophet, to go and meet Ahaz, and the Lord tells Isaiah to take along with him his son, Shear-jashub, whose name means "a remnant shall return." God knew exactly where Ahaz was at that moment, and told Isaiah to meet him at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. And here's the message that Isaiah was to deliver to Ahaz, in verse 4, "Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah." God's message here is that Ahaz and the people of Judah must not fear what man fears. Do you think Syria and Ephraim are to be feared? Not with God on your side. God is saying, Trust Me! Trust Me! Don't fear man. They're just smoldering stumps of firebrands. They may look like fire, but they can't do any harm to you.

Verses 5-6 go on to explain what Syria and Ephraim were up to. They wanted to conquer Judah so they could set up the son of Tabeel as king. And this launches us into the wider political scene of the day. Assyria was a growing force in the east, and Syria and Ephraim had formed an alliance in the hope of being able to defend themselves against Assyria. Ahaz, though, had refused to be part of the Syria – Ephraim alliance, and that is most likely the reason for the attack. Syria and Ephraim wanted to get rid of Ahaz and put another king in his place who would cooperate with them in defending themselves against Assyria. Ahaz's strategy was to try to be Assyria's friend. If they're too powerful to withstand, then run to them for help. We read of this in 2 Kings 16. It says that "Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, 'I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of

the king of Israel, who are attacking me” (2 Kings 16:7). And it goes on to tell of the silver and gold that Ahaz sent to the king of Assyria. Are you beginning to see Ahaz’s heart? He is a picture of unbelief. He will not trust God. Rather, he fears man and runs to man for help. He fears Syria and Israel, so he runs to Assyria for help.

Our passage continues, and in verses 7-9 God responds to what Syria and Ephraim were desiring to do. God says that their evil purpose will not stand. It won’t happen. And, in fact, within 65 years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. Of course, it all happened just as God said it would. It was not long after this that Assyria defeated Syria and then defeated Israel, and by the time 65 years had elapsed, so many people had been deported from Israel and foreign settlers had been imported, that Ephraim was effectively shattered from being a people. The statement in verse 9 sums up the call to Ahaz and the people, “If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” Ahaz must trust in the Lord, or everything will fall apart.

Now we come to the section in which the prophecy is found. The Lord does something amazing for Ahaz here. He offers a sign, and He instructs Ahaz to request whatever sign he may desire. Verse 10, “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” Ahaz’s response is the ultimate cop-out. He tries to sound pious by saying that he will not put the Lord to the test. But what’s really going on is that he is refusing to believe. He is so hard-hearted that he won’t even consider the possibility that God can save him. His heart is set on pursuing salvation through human strength.

Notice that in verse 10 Isaiah refers to “the Lord *your* God,” as he speaks to Ahaz. But now in verse 13 he says to the whole house of David, “Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary *my* God also?” You see, in verse 10 God is still being patient with Ahaz. He is being extremely patient with him, even offering him a sign. But Ahaz refuses to be firm in faith, so he will not be firm at all. God will not be his support. God has been patient, but He is now becoming weary, and the offer of grace is going to turn into judgment.

Verse 14 says, “the Lord himself will give you a sign.” Ahaz won’t ask for a sign, as the Lord instructed him to, so the Lord will choose the sign for him. And it turns out to be a sign that will signify judgment upon Ahaz and the people of Judah, but it will also point into the distant future to God’s ultimate plan of salvation for His people.

The Double-Fulfillment of the Prophecy

So now let's look at the double fulfillment of this prophecy in verse 14. "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." This is a famous verse, a very important verse, and it's also a much-debated verse. And much of the debate centers on the Hebrew word for virgin that is used here. Some think it simply means "young woman," while others say that it also implies virginity. It is interesting that the translators of the Septuagint, who were translating the Old Testament into Greek about 200 years before the birth of Christ, used here the Greek word that specifically means "virgin." And that's a strong indication that the Hebrew word clearly implied that, even if it seemed mysterious and vague when the prophecy was first announced. Isaiah's words pointed to something that even he could not fully comprehend. And we'll look at that glorious fulfillment in just a moment.

But first we have to see that the prophecy also had an initial and partial fulfillment in the immediate context. Verses 15-17 tell of this child. Verse 16 says, "For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted." This means that before the boy has matured into manhood, both Syria and Israel will be defeated by Assyria. And this is exactly what happened. Within only 3 years Syria fell. And within 13 years Israel also was defeated. This is another word of hope, like verse 4 that said Syria and Israel are just "two smoldering stumps of firebrands," and verses 7-9 which promise that their plans will not prevail. But this word of hope turns into a word of judgment because of where Ahaz is putting his trust. Remember, Ahaz is not trusting in God, but in the king of Assyria. And because of this, the fact that Syria and Israel will soon fall is not good news for the kingdom of Judah. It may sound like good news in the short term, but it is bad news in the long term. Verse 17, "The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria." He's comparing what is about to happen to when the kingdom divided after the reign of Solomon. You haven't seen anything this bad since then. And it's the king of Assyria, whom you're looking to for salvation, who is actually going to bring bad things upon you. This all reinforces the foolishness of unbelief—the foolishness of trusting in human powers rather than God's power.

Next, we ask who this boy is, who is the immediate, although partial, fulfillment of the prophecy. Again, these matters are debated, but it seems to make the most sense to understand this child to be Maher-shalal-hash-baz, Isaiah's second son, who is

mentioned in 8:1-4. See the similarity between the wording of 8:4 and 7:16. In 8:4, this is referring to when Assyria captured Syria and also significant portions of northern Israel, which happened only a couple of years after the baby would have been born, before the baby would have been speaking clearly.

As with Isaiah's first son, Shear-Jashub, this son's name is also important. You'll see in the notes of your English Bible that Maher-shalal-hash-baz means something like "The spoil speeds, the prey hastens," which doesn't sound like an encouraging message. And it's not. The sign for Ahaz's generation was a sign of judgment. Assyria was not only going to devour Syria and Israel, but they would also later attack Judah. And although they didn't defeat Judah, this was all part of Judah's demise. Because of their unbelief—because they were trusting in Assyria, who was actually their enemy, rather than God, who was offering to be their ally—they would fall apart. Because they were not firm in faith, they would not be firm at all. Chapter 8:5-8 further describe what is going to happen. They will almost be destroyed. But there's still a word of hope in verses 9-10. The enemies of God's people will not ultimately triumph.

So this was the sign for Ahaz's day: a boy born to the prophetess, not named Immanuel, but named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, a sign of Judah's quickening downfall. But, of course, the end of the kingdom of Judah was not the end of God's plans for His people. And while this was a sign of judgment upon the contemporary generation, it is also a sign of great hope for all who see its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

This is something that should amaze us about God's Word. An immediate and partial fulfillment of this prophecy occurred in Isaiah's own day, but the prophecy pointed far beyond that. As we see in chapter 9, it pointed to a child who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. It pointed to a boy who would be born 700 years later to the virgin Mary. Look at how Matthew 1:18-25 explicitly connects the birth of Jesus with the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.

Notice how Matthew translates Immanuel. He wants to be sure that his readers realize that this child is God with us. God has come down and become one of us. Also notice how Matthew goes out of his way to make clear that Mary was a virgin. Verse 18, "before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." In verse 20 the angel tells Joseph, "that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Then Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14. And in verse 25, Joseph "knew her not until she had given birth to a son."

What a miracle this was! No baby has ever been conceived in this manner, before or since. It was an utterly unique and

supernatural work of God, as His way of sending His own Son into the world.

The Significance of the Prophecy

So far we've looked at the historical context of Isaiah's prophecy, and it's double fulfillment. Finally, I want to look at the significance of the prophecy for our understanding of who Jesus Christ is. What is the significance of the virgin birth for how we understand the Gospel? Some would say that it is of little importance. Why don't we just focus on our relationship with Christ, and not worry about the boring and confining details of doctrine. Sadly, there are many pastors and churches these days that are de-emphasizing and denying many biblical truths, like the virgin birth. They want to emphasize relationship, but it's at the expense of truth. And what we have to realize is that the two have to go together. Yes, Christianity is about a relationship with Christ, but that relationship is based on the truth of who God is, and who we are, and how God has chosen to save sinners. So let's look at three ways in which the virgin birth is essential to the Gospel. It is not a throw-away doctrine.

First of all, as we just read in Matthew 1, God's Word clearly teaches that Jesus was born of a virgin. And therefore, to deny the virgin birth is to deny the absolute truthfulness of the Bible. Millard Erickson writes, "If we do not hold to the virgin birth despite the fact that the Bible asserts it, then we have compromised the authority of the Bible and there is in principle no reason why we should hold to its other teachings. Thus, rejecting the virgin birth has implications reaching far beyond the doctrine itself" (*Christian Theology*, 771).

We can't pick and choose as we read through the Bible. You may feel inclined to deny something like the virgin birth because it sounds like the stuff of legend and myth. It's something that we've never seen happen, and so we might think that it could never happen. But that's just an anti-supernatural bias that has unfortunately gripped the minds of many. In response to that, we must say that it is not at all unreasonable that the God of the universe would reveal Himself to His people in supernatural ways. Unbelievers will find various excuses for not believing these things. But when God opens our eyes to see the truth of the Gospel, and the truth of His Word, then we can embrace the truth of every miraculous event recorded in this Book. And we need not feel like we're checking our brains at the door or stepping out on some kind of blind faith, because there is good reason to believe these things. I would challenge you, if you are doubtful of any of these supernatural occurrences, to search it out for yourself, because the Bible can certainly withstand the weight of any

questions you may bring to it. The virgin birth is important, first of all, because God's Word clearly affirms it.

Secondly, it is significant because it helps us see how Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human. This is a fundamental truth of the Christian faith because it is so crucial to the Gospel. Only the infinite God can atone for sin, and therefore Jesus had to be fully God. And we see in the virgin birth that God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, came into the world by divine means. He was not conceived through the union of two human parents, but rather the Holy Spirit worked in a unique way to bring our Savior into the world. Immanuel, *God with us*.

In order to atone for sin, Jesus had to be fully God. And in order to atone for *our* sin, He had to become like us. He had to be, not only fully God, but also fully human. And so He was born of a woman. He has a human body, a human mind, human emotions, and a human will. He is Immanuel, God *with us*. He became like us in every way, except without sin.

And this leads us to a third aspect of Jesus' life that relates to the virgin birth, and that is his sinlessness. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, every human being is born with an inherited guilt. We are all sinners, not only because of our personal sins, but also because of our identification with our forefather Adam. We have inherited his guilt. Jesus Christ is the one exception to this rule. Not only did Jesus remain perfectly sinless in His actions and thoughts and attitudes, but He was also sinless in His nature due to the way He was conceived. He did not inherit Adam's guilt, because He did not descend from Adam in the way the rest of us do. He did have a human mother. But as the angel told Mary in Luke 1:35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."

Jesus' sinlessness, along with His full deity and humanity, is another attribute that makes Him the only One able to atone for our sin. He is the sinless Lamb of God. And as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus, who knew no sin, went to the cross to bear the penalty for our sin, so that by faith we can be united to Him and counted righteous in Him. Our sin becomes His, and His righteousness becomes ours. And this is the Gospel we hold so dear.

My hope and prayer for all of us this Christmas is that we will marvel at the amazing miracle of the virgin birth. Not only that it was a unique and creative miracle that was prophesied 700 years beforehand, but also that it demonstrates Christ's full deity and His full humanity, as well as His absolute sinlessness. This

baby came into the world to save sinners, and He is the Only One who can save us. He is our only hope. He is Immanuel, God with Us. He is called Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).