



Prophets Foreshadow Messiah's Birth

December 13, 2009

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

ISAIAH 7:13–17; LUKE 1:26–38

PRINTED TEXT:

ISAIAH 7:13–17; LUKE 1:30–38

The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

—Isaiah 7:14

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

ISAIAH 7:13–17; LUKE 1:30–38 (NIV)

7¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?"¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.¹⁵ He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right.¹⁶ But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.¹⁷ The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."

1³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month.³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God."³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Introduction

A. Futurists vs. Prophets

In 1771, the French author Louis-Sébastien Mercier published his utopian novel *L'An 2440* (translation: *The Year 2440*). Many previous authors had written about imaginary utopian societies. What made Mercier's work different was his projection of this one into the future. Earlier authors had placed their utopias in the forgotten past or in remote, undiscovered corners of the world. Mercier wrote as the dynamics that led to the French Revolution were gaining steam, finally to explode in 1789. He told of a philosopher who fell asleep and awoke to Paris of nearly 700 years in Mercier's future. In so doing, Mercier used his observations of trends in society to create a vision of the future. This technique has been widely applied by other futurists, such as Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and George Orwell.

It is amazing to see how often such authors give accurate predictions of the future. For example, the 24/7 surveillance society of Orwell's *1984* seems to be more of a reality every day! Yet when we read these works many years after their original publication, it is also startling how much they got wrong.

If we think about it, though, such errors should not surprise us. Human projections about the future are no more than guesswork. Some may be highly informed and skillful, but it is still guessing. Consider that weather predictions of even a few days in the future are often wrong despite sophisticated technology. The authors of the Bible make predictions of the future too. But these authors are not like modern-day futurists. The Bible authors have been given insights by the one who knows and controls the future: God. Such predictions are prophetic and can be understood only as something supernatural and miraculous. The prophets of the Bible were not merely good guessers; they were God's instruments to proclaim his plans.

Many prophecies in the Old Testament were fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus, God's prophesied Messiah. Isaiah, the greatest of the prophets, made beautiful predictions about Jesus over 700 years before his birth. This week's lesson will examine some of these prophecies and their fulfillment.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

The seventh chapter of Isaiah is set in the reign of King Ahaz of Judah, the father of King Hezekiah. Ahaz came to power around 740 BC. His reign was overshadowed by the growing threat of invasion by the mighty Assyrian empire to the north. The Assyrian armies eventually conquered the northern kingdom of Israel (also called *Ephraim*; see Isaiah 7:8, 9, 17) in 722 BC. The threat to the southern kingdom of Judah must have been terrifying.

Before this move by the Assyrians, the kings of Ephraim and Syria (also called *Aram*) formed an alliance to protect themselves. They brought military pressure on Ahaz to join them (2 Kings 16:5; Isaiah 7:1). To relieve the pressure, Ahaz pledged himself to Assyria and appeased the Assyrian king with gold looted from the temple (2 Kings 16:7-9).

This high-stakes political intrigue meant that Judah had aligned herself with the Assyrians against Israel/Ephraim and Syria/Aram. This is the backdrop for Isaiah 7-12. This section of Isaiah sometimes is called the Book of Immanuel. In this section, Isaiah confronted faithless King Ahaz because he trusted in an alliance with the Assyrians rather than trusting in God.

The term *Immanuel* (or *Emmanuel*) occurs four times in the Bible. It is a straightforward combination of words that mean "with us [is] God." The only place it occurs in the New Testament is Matthew 1:23, where the author quotes Isaiah to show how the birth of Jesus fulfilled prophecy. The other three places are all in Isaiah. One of these (Isaiah 7:14) is in today's

lesson text and will be discussed below. The two other occurrences are in Isaiah 8, in obvious close proximity to 7:14.

In Isaiah 8, the prophet depicts the coming invasion of the Assyrians in terms of a catastrophic flood. The waters of this flood were to reach up to the neck of Judah (Isaiah 8:8), meaning they would be highly damaging but not fatal. In the midst of this horror, Judah would still be able to cry, "O Immanuel" (again, 8:8), in this case a plea of "May God be with us!"

Isaiah goes on to say that the plans of nations are tiny and futile against the ultimate plan of God, for truly "God is with us" (= "Immanuel," 8:10). Isaiah's point is that the people should not fear the Assyrians. They should fear the Lord and only him (8:13). At the same time, they should not trust the Assyrians (as Ahaz did), for only the Lord could provide them with safety (8:14).

I. Ancient Insight (Isaiah 7:13–17)

A. SUBTLE SIGN (vv. 13, 14)

13. Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?"

House of David is a way of referring to the king, namely Ahaz (Isaiah 7:10, 12). Isaiah has just challenged the king to ask for a sign from the Lord. Ahaz's refusal of the request is what draws Isaiah's ire in this verse.

Isaiah's response uncovers the illogic and duplicity behind Ahaz's actions. The king's secret alliance with the Assyrians has been a perversion of truth to his nation (*try the patience of men*). Does he think he can lie to God also (*try the patience of my God*)? To ask the question is to provide the answer. There is no such thing as duplicity with God, for we cannot deceive him. To attempt to hide the truth from God is delusional thinking.

14. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Although King Ahaz has refused to ask for a *sign*, Isaiah announces that a sign will be provided anyway. The king's stubbornness does not thwart God's plan.

The sign to come has three parts, and each is significant. The first one is the most astounding: the pregnancy of a *virgin*. There

has been discussion as to whether or not the translation of this term should be softened to "young woman" or "unmarried woman." To do so may be technically possible from the standpoint of the original Hebrew. But the Greek translation made more than two centuries before Christ uses the distinct word for *virgin*.

Also, to use "young woman" would distort the clear intention of the text. This *sign* from *the Lord* will not be an ordinary event, but something extraordinary, miraculous. Young women become pregnant all the time, sometimes when they are unmarried. Furthermore, there is no possibility in understanding this as anything less than *virgin* when we read Matthew's quotation (Matthew 1:23). The Greek word used by Matthew always means "virgin."

The two other signs are easier to understand. The child will be male, *a son*. The child will be called *Immanuel*. This does not mean that just any baby boy named Immanuel is a fulfillment of this sign. In this case the giving of a certain name is less important than what the name means. *Immanuel* means "God is with us" (see the Lesson Background). The marvelous birth of a child with no natural father can be interpreted only as a sign of the presence of God.

This leads to two very important questions we should ask. First, why a virgin birth? Isaiah does not really explain it, but

Matthew, writing over 700 years later, does. The Messiah is born of a virgin so that prophecy might be fulfilled. It is a striking way of confirming the activity and presence of God in a historical event. It is worth noting that neither Matthew nor Isaiah gives any hint that a virgin birth is necessary to escape the curse of original sin, as is often proposed. It is a sign, a prophecy fulfilled.

The second question is more difficult: What does this sign mean to King Ahaz? Should he expect some young woman in Jerusalem to announce that she has become miraculously pregnant? Does it point to the birth of one of Ahaz's sons or even to the birth of Isaiah's son (Isaiah 8:3), as some have suggested? These ideas don't work, because none of those conceptions was virginal. Ultimately, we must understand this as God's way of reminding Ahaz to trust in him, for God is with his people and has not abandoned them.

B. COMING CATASTROPHE (vv. 15–17)

15–17, 16. *“He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.*

Curds sweetened with *honey* is baby food in a wealthy household. This is a message directly aimed at King Ahaz. In the time it takes a baby to be able to eat semisolid food and learn to behave, disaster will have fallen on the *two kings* to the north. Parents know that this sort of development varies from child to child. But by the second birthday a child normally will be weaned and begin to respond to a parent's teaching of the basics of what is *wrong* and what is *right*.

King Pekah of Israel/Ephraim reigns for 20 years (2 Kings 15:27). King Ahaz begins to reign in Judah in Pekah's seventeenth year (2 Kings 16:1). If the prophecy of Isaiah came to Ahaz in the second or third year of his reign, we can see how the

prophecy of Pekah's demise is fulfilled quickly. Pekah is killed by a usurper, namely Hoshea (2 Kings 15:30). Although exact information about the king of Syria/Aram is harder to put together, we know that King Rezin of Damascus (the capital of Syria) is killed by the Assyrians at about this time (see 2 Kings 16:9).

17. *“The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”*

The complete fulfillment of this part of the prophecy is a few years off, to occur in 722 BC. In that year, the ruthless armies of the Assyrians destroy the northern kingdom of Israel/Ephraim (see 2 Kings 17:5, 6). *A time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah*, which happened back in about 930 BC, is Isaiah's reminder to Ahaz of the devastating division of the kingdom of Solomon. What is coming will be much worse.

The northern kingdom ceases to exist in 722 BC. Ahaz dies at about age 36, in about 728 BC (2 Kings 16:2). It falls to his son, the godly Hezekiah, to live through the terror of another Assyrian invasion in 701 BC. This time, however, God delivers Judah by killing 185,000 men in the army of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib (see 2 Kings 19:35, 36; Isaiah 37:36, 37). The saving intervention offered to Ahaz is realized in the reign of Hezekiah.

II. Dynamic Enactment (Luke 1:30–38)

A. NO FEARS (vv. 30–33)

30–33. *But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.*

The appearance of an *angel* would be an awe-inspiring event for anyone. Although details of the angel's appearance are not given, *Mary* is not left to wonder, “Is this

really an angel?" In Luke, God's angels begin their visits by telling the people involved *do not be afraid* (compare Luke 1:13; 2:10). They have nothing to fear from this powerful, supernatural being, for they have been chosen to receive a message from God.

The idea of Mary being chosen is expressed as *favor with God*. The word translated *favor* is often translated as *grace* elsewhere in the Bible (example: Acts 14:3). To find grace with God in this sense means that God has determined to use a person in a dynamic way. The angel's expression echoes what was said about the one whom God chose to preserve the human race from a cataclysmic flood: "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8).

31. "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus."

The news for Mary must be truly shocking. She, a young unmarried girl still living in her father's house, is to be pregnant and give birth to *a son*. This is disturbing, for it has the potential of ruining her marriage prospects and any chance for a normal life in that culture.

The *name* for the boy helps to explain this, however. His name will be *Jesus*, the New Testament version of the famous Israelite name Joshua. Joshua means "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh will save."

32, 33. "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

The significance of the boy's name is explained by the angel. He is to be a new king in the line of *David*, the fulfillment of the promise to David of an eternal *kingdom* (see 2 Samuel 7:16; compare Isaiah 9:7; Daniel 7:14; Micah 4:7). He is to be God's instrument of salvation as promised to the

people of Israel. What is misunderstood by Israel is that the kingdom of this Jesus/Joshua is to be a spiritual kingdom and that his salvation is to be from sin, not from the Romans (see Matthew 1:21).

B. NO DOUBTS (vv. 34–37)

34–37. "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

Mary is very young, perhaps only 15 or 16. Yet she understands the facts of life. Pregnancy is not self-induced. She can say without pretense that there has been no sexual contact in her life. We should not understand this to be a lack of faith on Mary's part (as if she were saying "No way!"), but a desire to understand better ("How?").

35. The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

The *angel* makes it clear that this is not some sordid, embarrassing affair. This is a *holy* undertaking, a provision of God himself. It is also plain that there is to be no physical contact between God and Mary. God is not assuming a human guise in order to impregnate Mary, such as the fictional Greek gods might have been expected to do. Mythology abounds with such stories, which amount to little more than the rape of human women by gods in human bodies. Mary's pregnancy is to be through the *Holy Spirit*. As such, it will be a miraculous event, unexplainable by the normal laws of nature.

36. "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month."

Mary's surprises are not over. The angel reveals that her elderly *relative* named *Elizabeth* has also been blessed with a miraculous (although in a different way) pregnancy. Despite her age and history of barrenness, Elizabeth is now two-thirds through her term, *a child* growing in her

womb (Luke 1:24). This serves to confirm to Mary even more strongly that God is moving in a powerful and providential way, and that she is a key player in his plan.

37. "For nothing is impossible with God."

This is a core statement of faith, yet one that we often neglect. If there are things that are *impossible* for *God*, then is he really God? This issue comes up later in Luke concerning salvation, for Jesus teaches that salvation is not the result of human effort. Salvation is possible for the God for whom nothing is impossible (see Luke 18:25–27; compare Genesis 18:14).

C. NO WAVERING (v. 38)

38. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

At this point, we cannot help but marvel at the faith of Mary, a mere teenager. Without a doubt, she does not understand all that is happening to her. Yet she freely submits to the will of God. She makes no demand for some kind of equal partnership with God, but offers herself as his *servant*, meaning his "handmaiden" or "slave." Her acceptance is a sign of great faith.

CONCLUSION

One of the ongoing promises of the Old Testament is found when God proclaims, "I will be with you." God gave this promise to Jacob as he returned to his homeland (Genesis 31:3). A similar promise was given to Moses when he was called to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 3:12). Joshua and the people received the assurance as they entered the promised land (Joshua 1:5). Today this promise is reflected in one of the traditional blessings of the church: "The Lord be with you." A great part of the coming of God's Messiah was the prophecy of Isaiah that the promised one would be Immanuel. God is with us and will be with us eternally.

When we combine the prophecy of Isaiah with the story of Mary, we should realize that God is always "with" his people. This "with-ness" is more than an aspect of God's ever-presence, however. It means that God is behind his people, working with them and using them to accomplish his plans and fulfill his will. Ahaz, a king of Israel, did not understand this. Mary, a teenage peasant girl, did.

The church today, as God's people, retains this promise. God is with us. He will never abandon us. He will use us if we have the heart of submission to his will that we see in Mary. We may not be visited by angels, but we too need not be afraid. God is with us.

SAYING GOOD-BYE AND HELLO

"You know something is wrong when you enter a room and no one says 'Hello,' but when you leave, everyone says 'Good-bye!'" This joking remark is intended to be teasingly humorous, but it could be unbearably hurtful if it actually happened to someone.

Of course, this comment is taking the term *good-bye* in the way that we commonly use it: as a simple way to say, "Oh, I see that you are leaving." Yet many of us know that the term *good-bye* is a contracted form of the old wish, "God be with you." Were we to use it consciously in that way, *good-bye* would be a blessing on someone we care about, since the term then would be a request or desire for God's presence to be with that person until we see him or her again.

As a result of Judah's sin, God eventually sent that nation into exile. This dismissal was a *good-bye* in that God promised to be with the exiles during this time of punishment (Jeremiah 30:11; 46:27, 28). But that *good-bye* is not the subject of today's study. Instead, Isaiah foretold a

hello—the most marvelous *hello* in history! He spoke of the time when God himself would say “hello” to the human race in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In that event God became “with us” (Immanuel) in a way he never had been before. May that fact of history inspire us to anticipate Jesus’ second coming, when he will be with us in a marvelously permanent way.

SIXTEEN, UNMARRIED, AND PREGNANT

Juno was one of the most highly acclaimed movies of 2007. It was the story of fictional Juno MacGuff, an unmarried 16-year-old girl who had become pregnant. Critics who were proud of their own sophistication gave the movie high praise for not being a “hand-wringing, moralizing melodrama,” as one reviewer put it.

The film does deserve praise for not promoting abortion as the solution to an uncomfortable dilemma that too many young women find themselves in these days. Spurning the advice of her parents and friends, Juno decides not to have an abortion. Rather, she seeks out a married couple to adopt her child and provide the kind of home she cannot provide. The film is presented as a comedy, perhaps an acknowledgment of our culture’s inability to recognize the tragedy of sin and its consequences.

Mary was different from Juno. She seriously accepted her role in God’s plan rather than seeing it as an opportunity for joking. But then again, her culture was not as indifferent about such things as ours is. Mary would grow up quickly and rear her son as the Son of God, with all the gravity that that responsibility entailed.

LET’S TALK IT OVER

1. How do the signs and wonders of Scripture increase your faith? Why would it be dangerous to base your faith on the expectation of modern-day miracles?

2. Do you think there are some prophecies (such as the ones in Revelation) that will never be understood fully until after they’re fulfilled? If so, then why are they included in the Scripture?

3. What level of confidence did the angel display even before hearing Mary’s response? Would the angel have this same level of confidence if announcing that God had a unique task for you? Why, or why not?

4. What is it about Mary’s question that sets an example for us in how we can ask questions of God?

5. What was a time when a friend or relative was going through a life situation similar to that of your own? How were you able to strengthen each other spiritually during such a time?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. How do the signs and wonders of Scripture increase your faith? Why would it be dangerous to base your faith on the expectation of modern-day miracles?

John 14:11 establishes the importance of Jesus' miracles for our faith. The Scriptures are clear that God used miracles to demonstrate His authority over creation. Sometimes He gave wonders and signs to His spokesmen so that their messages would have supernatural credibility (2 Corinthians 12:12). But even with all these miracles, people sometimes didn't believe; in their skepticism they sometimes expected even more miracles (Matthew 12:24; Mark 8:11, 12; 1 Corinthians 1:22).

Although the biblical miracles are vital, we should not condition our faith on the expectation of modern-day miracles. What if such an expectation goes unfulfilled? Then we would be left doubting our faith. Instead, we place our faith in the miracle-maker and leave it up to Him as to how He will demonstrate His power in our lives.

2. Do you think there are some prophecies (such as the ones in Revelation) that will never be understood fully until after they're fulfilled? If so, then why are they included in the Scripture?

Isaiah's prophecy about a virgin giving birth is understandable in light of the virgin birth of Christ centuries later. Yet we wonder how many people really understood it at the time it was given! Jesus' disciples knew about the prophecy regarding Elijah in Malachi 4:5, but they didn't know it had been fulfilled until Jesus explained it to them (Lesson 12 of this quarter).

All this should serve as a caution. Some yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecies are so rich in symbolism that it seems impossible to come to a consensus regarding their interpretation. Some of the prophecies about Jesus were incomprehensible to many of the original hearers. The fact that we can read about prophecies that were fulfilled in every detail gives us confidence that God will fulfill all remaining prophecies. Our trust in that fact results in glorifying Him as the Lord over all of history.

3. What level of confidence did the angel display even before hearing Mary's response? Would the angel have this same level of confidence if announcing that God had a unique task for you? Why, or why not?

When we count the number of times *shall* and *shalt* appear in Luke 1:30–38, we conclude that the angel's level of confidence was as high as it could be! Knowing Mary's character, the angel was certain she would accept God's will for her life, even if she may have reacted initially with some fear and a request for more information. When God has a task for us, His confidence is based much more on our character than on our abilities. Thus we dare not hesitate merely because we perceive a weakness in our skills and talents. Remember that God delights in working through human weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9, 10; 13:4; Hebrews 11:34).

4. What is it about Mary's question that sets an example for us in how we can ask questions of God?

Mary's concerns were legitimate and not long-winded. She had just been told by an angel that she would soon bear a child, but Mary had never been with a man. So her "how" is understandable. What matters is that she was willing to obey God, immediately and without condition, even though there were information gaps yet to be filled. That's a model for us. We demonstrate lack of faith when we are willing to proceed only when we have all the information (contrast Luke 1:18–20).

5. What was a time when a friend or relative was going through a life situation similar to that of your own? How were you able to strengthen each other spiritually during such a time?

Mary was about to go through a significant personal and social ordeal. Her fiancé, who probably adored her, would find out about her condition eventually. Mary perhaps had no idea that Joseph too would receive divine communication, but she had to move forward and act on the only information God had provided to her.

PRAYER

Holy God, as you chose and used Mary, may you choose and use us according to your will. Make us sensitive to your leading so that our response will not be that of King Ahaz, but will be that of humble Mary. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.