

THE MEANING OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Isaiah 7:1-14

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 23, 2012

Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Isa. 7:14).

Around the year 734 B.C., an event took place outside the city of Jerusalem that prompted one of the greatest prophecies of Christ's birth. The event was a meeting between the prophet Isaiah and Ahaz, the king of Judah. The purpose of the meeting was an attempt to deter Ahaz from an idolatrous alliance with the evil kingdom of Assyria. Ahaz had devised this alliance in order to protect himself from a pending invasion from Israel and Syria. Isaiah urged him instead to turn to the Lord for salvation. Isaiah said: "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" (Isa. 7:4). He summed up by urging Ahaz to faith: "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all" (Isa. 7:9).

To bolster the king, Isaiah offered to prove his claims with a sign from God: "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven" (Isa. 7:11). This sign was evidently the offer to perform a miracle by God's power: any righteous request for a supernatural sign would be fulfilled. The Lord had once given proof to Gideon by causing a fleece to be wet when there was no dew on the ground (Jud. 6:37), and he would give a sign to Ahaz' son, Hezekiah, by causing time to move backward on the dial (Isa. 38:8). Unlike his

faithful son, however, Ahaz refused the sign. The real reason was that he had already committed himself to idolatry with the Assyrians. He pretended, however, to be too pious to allow God to grant such a sign: “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test” (Isa. 7:12). Isaiah responded that a sign would be given anyway, to prove God’s salvation, though Ahaz would not live to see it. And what a remarkable sign he promised! “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14).

This is one of the great Old Testament prophecies of the birth of Christ. Matthew wrote of the virgin Mary’s conception: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Mt. 1:22-23). As we remember the birth of Jesus at Christmas, Isaiah’s interview with Ahaz provides us three important points. First, Ahaz shows us how to miss the meaning of Christmas. Second, Isaiah’s promise reveals what is the meaning of Christmas. Third, this passage shows us how to get the meaning of Christmas so as to be saved by the virgin-born child.

HOW TO MISS THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

There are a number of events in the Old Testament which I would dearly love to have witnessed: the passage of Israel through the the Red Sea, the collapse of Jericho at the blowing of Israel’s trumpets, and the felling of giant Goliath by young David’s stone, to name a few. I have to admit that another one of these events is Isaiah’s meeting with Ahaz, if only to see the look on the king’s face when the prophet promised a baby to be born. After all, Ahaz had great geopolitical matters on his mind. If a little religious compromise was needed, why did this religious fanatic Isaiah complain? And what possible relevance could a baby’s birth have to the war plans of great empires? What was the look on Ahaz’s face, I wonder? Was he exasperated? Was he angry? Was he amused? Was he completely puzzled? As we consider how King Ahaz missed the message of Christ’s birth, we also see ways that people – even church people – miss the message of Christmas today.

First, Ahaz forgot to remember the great acts of God in the past. We might compare him to Hezekiah, when his son faced a far more dire situation a generation later. When Hezekiah prayed for God's help, he recalled that the Lord "made heaven and earth" (Isa. 37:16). The God to whom he prayed is the Almighty Creator! No doubt, Hezekiah thought back to when God overthrew Pharaoh and rescued Israel from Egypt. He thought of God parting the Red Sea and David slaying the giant. The point is that Ahaz should have been most interested in a sign of God's mighty intervention. Isaiah urged him that he faced enemies who were only men, calling the rival kings "two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (Isa. 7:4). They were nothing compared to God, who saved his people so often before. So Ahaz should have been looking not for earthly aid but for divine help.

Do we make the same mistake as we face our challenges? The virgin birth of Jesus reminds us that God sees the needs of his people. He sent his own Son to be our Savior, and he will send whatever lesser help we need. When Mary learned of the child within her womb, she sang: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Lk. 1:68-69). She remembered God's promises and saw them fulfilled in the coming of Christ. As we remember what God has done to save, we should refuse worldly compromise but face our challenges with faith in God's Word.

Second, Ahaz missed the message of Christmas through his stubborn refusal to listen. "Let God give you sign," pleaded the prophet. "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test" (Isa. 7:12), the king answered, not in reverence but in hard-hearted pride. Ahaz wanted a salvation that would prove his diplomatic genius and enable him to gloat over his rivals. Little did he appreciate in his small wisdom the disaster he was launching. By agreeing to worship their evil gods, Ahaz secured the military aid of Assyria, but failed to appreciate how little he could trust such an ally. I mentioned earlier that Ahaz's son Hezekiah faced a graver danger. This was the onslaught of the very Assyrians Ahaz brought south, who in his son's time laid waste to Judah and besieged Jerusalem.

The reality is that we need a salvation that is higher than our wisdom and greater than our strength. Over and over, our generation proves that we do not have the answers for the great problems of our times.

In fact, the eutopian solutions of the last century have made our world far worse. What will we do with the breakdown of the family, the unleashing of violence in our schools, or a national debt that has our country racing over a cliff? The last answer people will accept is to repent of our sins and look to God. This is what Ahaz would not do because of his stubborn pride, as people today likewise refuse. Are you willing to turn to God and say, “Lord, I need your salvation. I need your power to change me. I need the wisdom of your Word to guide me”? The message of Christmas says that we need a divine Savior whom God graciously sent through the virgin womb of Mary.

Third, Ahaz missed the meaning of Christmas by misdiagnosing the problem. What good would a little baby be, he thought! He needed riches, armies, and diplomatic alliances. Similarly today, people think they need money, career success, or popularity. Isaiah’s promise shows us, however, that what we really need is a saving relationship with the true and living God. If we are right with God and have his blessing in our lives, we have all things. This is why Paul cried, “For me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). God promised the baby Jesus Christ and named him “Immanuel,” which is “God with us.” Those who realize that our true and great need is a relationship with God, through a Savior from above will rejoice at the message of Christmas.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS?

Isaiah’s prophecy raises a question as to the meaning of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. What did the prophet mean by telling King Ahaz about an event that would not take place for 700 years, the fulfillment of which was a virgin-born child? “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14). How are we to understand the meaning of this? We might summarize Isaiah’s message as follows: *our great need and God’s gracious provision is a Savior from heaven to deliver us from sin.* This is the message we believe and celebrate at Christmas, given by the prophet through the promise of the virgin birth.

The doctrine of the virgin birth came under intense attack during the twentieth century from liberal scholars determined to undermine the Bible. In seeking to remove all supernatural elements from our faith, the scholars took aim at the New Testament record of Christ’s virgin

birth. One way to attack the doctrine was to argue that the apostles misread Isaiah's prophecy. Scholars pointed out that Isaiah used the word *almah*, meaning *maiden*, rather than the more technical *bethulah*, for *virgin*. They argued that Isaiah never imagined the idea of a virgin birth, but that the apostles invented the doctrine to make Jesus seem to be divine.

Despite the trouble this argument caused in the last century, it presents no actual merit. It is true that Isaiah's word *almah* means a maiden, that is, an unmarried young woman. It is also true that in his culture a maiden was *de facto* a virgin. For this reason, *virgin* is a correct translation of this word. This is why the Jewish scholars who translated the Old Testament into Greek in the 3d century B.C. used the word *parthenos*, meaning *virgin*, to translate *almah*. Long before the apostles, the Jewish scholars interpreted Isaiah as speaking of a virgin, who would conceive and bear a child. The virgin birth was not a New Testament fiction but rather God's fulfillment of the Old Testament promise.

When we realize what Isaiah taught, we can see how remarkable was his Christmas promise: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). Isaiah first highlights not the virgin birth but the virgin conception. He envisions not a woman who is married as a virgin and then naturally has children, but rather a virgin woman who miraculously conceives and then gives birth while remaining a virgin, having never been with a man.

With this in mind, there are three key points made by the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. The first is that *the virgin birth shows a special, supernatural intervention by God*. Liberal scholars have complained that the virgin birth describes an event that is alien to our experience. This is precisely the point: God has acted supernaturally, intervening in our world in a unique way with divine power to save. King Ahaz faced a dire situation that required a drastic solution. But instead of sinfully allying with an evil, pagan empire, he should have turned to God for supernatural aid. This is what Isaiah meant by offering a "sign" to Ahaz: it would be a miracle that would prove God's power to act in our world with supernatural might.

Do you believe that God is both able and willing to act supernaturally in your life? The virgin birth is a sign to you that God sends mighty aid from heaven. This is how Mary understood the virgin birth, as proof that God does not abandon his needy people, but answers their prayers with saving power from on high. She sang: “my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (Lk. 1:47-49). Isaiah’s Christmas message therefore reminds you that things need not go on in the way that they have gone. God is able and willing to act in your life with divine power to help and to change, especially when you pray to him in faith.

The virgin birth tells not only of a special intervention by God but particularly of a special person whom God sent into our world. The child would be conceived without a human father because he is the eternal Son of God. The angel told Mary, “behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High” (Lk. 1:31-32). Mary understandably asked, “How will this be, since I am virgin?” The angel answered: “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” (Lk. 1:34-35).

The point was not that Jesus would be divine because he was born of a virgin, but rather that he would be born of a virgin because he was divine. Jesus was born without a human father because his father is God himself. Jesus was born of a virgin not because sex is sinful, since it is not, but to prove that he was not a merely human person. Robert Reymond explains: “The virginal conception is declared by Scripture as the *means* whereby the Son of God became man and thus entered into the world.”¹ This emphasis on the deity of the child who is born comes is fully expressed in Isaiah 9:6: “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.”

The virgin birth states that our need is so great that only God himself can meet it. According to the New Testament, Jesus came into the world not merely to answer earthly needs like military power, disease, or relationship problems. He came to deal with the great problem of

¹ Robert Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2003), 98.

Satan and his evil power at work in the world, with the terrible problem of death, and with the most dreadful problem of God's wrath on sinful mankind. Ahaz sought help against the raging armies on his border, but that danger only symbolized the true problem of evil and death in our world. God made the world, man rebelled against God by sin and unbelief, and only God can come and overcome our true enemies – Satan, sin, and death. The virgin birth declares that despite our sin against him, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).

Third, the virgin birth shows that God answers the problem of sin with a Savior who is both God and man. The virgin birth is a unique event, producing a unique person, who bears the unique status of being fully God and fully man in his own person. The virgin would “conceive and bear a son,” who thus would be a man. But since he was conceived by the Spirit of God, he would be called “Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”

There are a number of marvelous reasons why God's eternal Son took up a human nature in the virgin womb and entered our world as both God and Man. One reason was to reveal God in ways that we could best understand. The book of Hebrews notes that God spoke in many different ways by the prophets, “but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1-2). The invisible God clothes in the form of a man, so that men and women may know him. Jesus thus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). Moreover, God's Son became a man so that he could know us. God knows all things, but in the incarnation he came to know the plight of mankind experientially. Hebrews 4:15 says: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

Great as these reasons are for the incarnation, the chief reason why God became man was so that as man God might provide for the forgiveness of our sins. Sinful man owed God the payment of death for breaking God's law. Therefore, Jesus became man so that in his human nature he could pay the debt of sin that we owed but could never pay. As man he could suffer death while as God he could yet live. Francis Turretin wrote: “our mediator ought to be God-man to accomplish these things: man to suffer, God to overcome; man to

receive the punishment we deserved, God to endure and drink it to the dregs; man to acquire salvation for us by dying, God to apply it to us by overcoming... Man alone could die for men; God alone could vanquish death.”²

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign,” Isaiah foretold. “Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14). We celebrate on Christmas the fulfillment of this promise in the virgin birth of Christ. God has intervened supernaturally into history, showing his willingness to save his needy people. God’s Son came as a man, beginning a work in the incarnation that would be fulfilled only in his atoning death and victorious resurrection. The meaning of Christmas was thus fulfilled on Good Friday and Easter. The virgin gave birth to a Son who is Immanuel, “God with us,” so that he might die for our sins and enter us with him into eternal life.

HOW TO GET THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Turning back to Isaiah’s encounter with Ahaz, we might ask how the king could be expected to understand the message of Christmas through the promised sign of the virgin birth.

First, we ask *by what means* Ahaz was to receive the Christmas message. The answer is by revelation from God’s Word. In short, he needed to cease talking and arguing, instead listening to the clear message of salvation promised through God’s servant, Isaiah. If Ahaz was worried as Judah’s king about the future of his people and of the dynasty of the house of David, his answer was given clearly. Isaiah assured him that there would be a future, since in days to come the divine child would come from the house of David. God promised that the Messiah would come – a God-man from the womb of the virgin – so Ahaz could be sure that trusting God would bring salvation. Isaiah even promised how long it would be before his northern enemies were destroyed: “within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people” (Isa. 7:8). He stated that in the time that it takes for a child to come to adolescence, “the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted” (Isa. 7:16). All that Ahaz needed to know was communicated to him by the Word of God.

²Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 2:302-3

The same is true for us today. How can you receive and understand the message of Christ's birth? The first answer is by appealing to the Bible, where God speaks to us today with the same clarity that Isaiah spoke to king Ahaz of old. The Bible says that Jesus, born of the virgin to die for our sins, is the answer from God for our salvation. For instance, the apostle John wrote: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1:4-5). How can you know this is true of Jesus Christ? Because God has revealed it to you in the Bible.

Second, we ask *in what way* do we receive this message of Christ? The answer is through personal, saving faith. This was Isaiah's plea to king Ahaz: "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all" (Isa. 7:9). God has acted in history; Jesus has been born of the virgin and died on the cross. But will you benefit from God's saving gift? Ahaz did not, since he would not believe, wanting a salvation of his own making instead. The result was a disaster for him and the nation. Now you are the one challenged to believe God's message about his Son. Jesus said: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (Jn. 3:36). If you believe on Jesus Christ, the virgin born Immanuel, trusting his perfect life and sin-atonement death, then you will be saved from Satan, sin, and even death. Jesus said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).

Finally, we ask *to what end* do I receive the Christmas message of salvation? The answer is seen in all the Gospel accounts. The result of our faith is not only that we are saved and many others benefit from our life and witness. Most importantly, we receive God's Christmas message for the praise of his glory. God has met our need and graciously provided his Son to free us from sin! Mary thus sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk 1:46-47).

The angels at Bethlehem rejoiced, singing: "Glory to God in the highest!" (Lk. 2:14). Knowing that we have been saved through faith, we too are to lift our heads above the troubles of this world and glory in the child who is born, the son who is given. Make sure you take time this Christmas not only to read God's Word and believe it for

salvation, but then also to open your heart to glorify God for his marvelous gift in the incarnation. That is how Isaiah himself responded to the promise he had the privilege to give. He wrote:

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be made known in all the earth.
Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 12:5-6).