

“The Greatest Sign Possible”
Isaiah 7:10-25
by Pastoral Jason Van Bommel

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: 11 “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” 12 But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” 13 And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. 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!”

18 In that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. 19 And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thornbushes, and on all the pastures.

20 In that day the Lord will shave with a razor that is hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will sweep away the beard also.

21 In that day a man will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, 22 and because of the abundance of milk that they give, he will eat curds, for everyone who is left in the land will eat curds and honey.

23 In that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. 24 With bow and arrows a man will come there, for all the land will be briers and thorns. 25 And as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not come there for fear of briers and thorns, but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread.

- Isaiah 7:10-25, ESV

Don't You Miss Christmas? Is This Really a Christmas Verse?

I have a question for you this morning: It's January 15th. Do you miss Christmas yet? I know I do. I'm a bit of a stickler for not rushing into the celebration of Christmas

too early – no Christmas music until the day after Thanksgiving. No Advent and Christmas carols in church until the first Sunday in December. We've traditionally gotten our Christmas tree on the first Saturday in December. But I also believe in remembering and celebrating in some way the 12 Days of Christmas. We don't make a big deal of it in our family, but the tree always stays up until after Epiphany officially ends Christmas on January 6th. I'm not really a church calendar guy, but I like waiting to start celebrating Christmas so we can linger a bit in our celebration of Christmas and then I do miss Christmas almost as soon as it's over. It was sad packing up our tree on January 7th.

But here we are on January 15th, and Christmas is definitely over. Well, except I was reading that in Europe, they used to keep up the Christmas decorations until February 1st. Luke's account of Christmas ends with the dedication of Jesus in the Temple, which was 40 days after His birth, so maybe early February . . . Nah! It's over.

So, we find ourselves doing something unusual: We're looking at Isaiah 7:14 outside of the Christmas season and in the broader context of Isaiah 7, and that may prompt a question: Hearing Isaiah 7:10-25 as a whole, did you wonder whether it's right to think of Isaiah 7:14 as a Christmas verse at all? Did you scratch your head and wonder if the context of this verse justifies taking it as a predictive prophecy of the birth of Jesus Christ?

When we just focus our attention on verse 14, the verse seems very clearly to predict the virgin birth of Jesus, but the true meaning of every Bible verse is only found by paying careful attention to its context. In this case, verses 15-16 seem to indicate that the child promised by the Immanuel promise in verse 14 will be someone born in Ahaz's lifetime, someone in the immediate future whose birth will signal the coming defeat of Israel and Syria, who have joined forces against King Ahaz and God's people in Judah.

So, we're going to have to take seriously this context and do a little thinking before we can see the full beauty and glory of Immanuel.

I. A Stubborn and Hypocritical King: Background

We saw last week that King Ahaz of Judah was facing a seemingly impossible situation in Isaiah 7: Two nations, Israel and Syria, each of which was more powerful

than Judah on its own and had already defeated Judah in battle, had now joined forces in an alliance against Judah and were threatening to completely overthrow the rule of David's line in Jerusalem and set another king over Judah, who would go along with their plans. Through Isaiah, God was calling wicked King Ahaz to stop being afraid of these powerful nations and instead to trust in Him.

King Ahaz had no intention of trusting in God. He was already sending a team of government officials with gold and silver from the Temple and from his personal treasury to bribe the still-more-powerful King of Assyria to come to his help against Syria and Israel. But King Ahaz wanted to play both sides. He wanted to keep up appearances of being a worshiper of YaHWeH and supportive of the Temple and the prophets. He also likely wanted to keep his plan to bribe Assyria somewhat secret. So, he didn't just dismiss Isaiah out-of-hand. Rather, he put on a mask of hypocritical religiosity:

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: ¹¹ "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." (vv. 10-12)

Ahaz knew that the Law of God in Deuteronomy 6:16 forbade putting God to the test. So, he used the Law as a way of trying to escape from having to obey the Lord. This is similar to the way Satan quoted the Scripture manipulatively to tempt Jesus. Isaiah sees right through this hypocritical manipulative misuse of Scripture. God had commanded Ahaz to ask for a sign, and he was masking his disobedience behind a false piety. And so, Isaiah responds -

"Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? (v. 13)

By addressing Ahaz as "O house of David," Isaiah is dramatically emphasizing how far the house of David has fallen since David's day. David was a man after God's own heart. Ahaz is an idolatrous, calculating, hypocritical politician.

II. An Immediate Sign of Sovereignty & Judgment

And so, God gives Ahaz a sign anyway, even though he doesn't ask for one. The immediate word of judgment is that a child is going to be born, and that by the time that child is of the age to be able to reliably distinguish between good and evil, the lands of Ephraim (or Israel) and Syria will be vanquished, and the Lord will bring on

Judah an enemy so fierce and so devastating that no enemy like this will have been seen in all the years of the divided kingdom. And who might this fearsome foe and crushing conqueror be? The King of Assyria, the very one Ahaz is sending gold and silver to as tribute in hopes that he will be their deliverer.

You might be a bit confused by the expression “*He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.*” Curds and honey sound pretty good. They almost sound like “*a land flowing with milk and honey,*” and yet if you read further down in the chapter, you’ll see that this is actually a sign of devastation: The child eats curds and honey because all of the crops have been destroyed, and so wheat and grapes are unavailable.

Look at verses 20-23:

20 In that day the Lord will shave with a razor that is hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will sweep away the beard also.

21 In that day a man will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, 22 and because of the abundance of milk that they give, he will eat curds, for everyone who is left in the land will eat curds and honey.

23 In that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briars and thorns. (ESV)

So, there’s no more vines in the land, only briars and thorns, and without crops, the only food available are curds and honey, which is stored up in cities for eating in time of siege.

It seems pretty clear that the bulk of what is said in this passage in Isaiah 7 is a message of sovereign judgment against the unbelief and unfaithfulness of Ahaz. We can learn much from the Lord’s message to Ahaz-

If we will not trust in the Lord but will instead look to earthly political solutions and worldly resources, we will be unfaithful to the Lord, and the very things of this world that we trust in for our salvations will, in the end, destroy us.

In this morning’s Bible reading and devotional from Mike in Mark 4, we read the Parable of the Four Soils, and of the seed that fell among thorns: “*others are the ones*

sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” – Mark 4:18-19, ESV

The man who neglects the Lord and his family and instead lives for his job and career, thinking that work and career and money are the way to provide for his family will end up seeing his family harmed by the job he works so hard at in order to provide for them.

The woman who laments the lack of romance in her marriage and turns to romance novels and *The Bachelor* or other trash TV shows will only have her heart drawn away by these trashy things to resent her husband more and more, which will kill whatever romance was left in the marriage.

The family that chooses sports over church because they're wanting to spend time with their kids and invest in them will lament when their kids walk away from the Lord, having never really known Him because they never made the worship of God a priority for their family.

The church that fears losing its influence in society and which reaches out for political influence instead of Gospel influence as a way to remain relevant and protect their rights will watch as their political activism undermines their Gospel witness to their neighbors and destroys their spiritual unity in Christ.

III. A Sign Fulfilled by No One But Jesus

And so, if the main message in this passage seems to be for Ahaz and a sign of sovereign judgment at the hands of the Assyrians, is Isaiah 7:14 a sign of the coming birth of Jesus by the young virgin maiden, Mary of Nazareth? Is this legitimately a Messianic passage and a Christmas verse?

Yes, it absolutely is, because while the main point of this passage seems to be a timely message of sovereign judgment against King Ahaz, the truth is that the central focus of all of Scripture is ultimately fulfilled in no one else but Jesus. While I do believe that a child was born in partial fulfillment of the sign, most likely another son born to Isaiah, as we will see next week in chapter 8, that child could never be the true fulfillment of this sign the Lord gives in verse 14. And so, Matthew was right when he quoted Isaiah 7:14 in his narrative of the birth of Jesus:

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

*23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"*

(which means, God with us).

- Matthew 1:18-23, ESV

If we look carefully at Isaiah 7:14, we will see that the sign the Lord gives is, in fact, far greater than a sign that's only relevant for King Ahaz and his political situation. God had told Ahaz to ask for a great sign, the greatest sign he could think of, something as high as heaven above or as deep as Sheol. And the sign God then gives is actually the greatest sign that could ever be given, and is it both a sign of judgment and a great sign of hope and salvation.

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

First of all, the set-up for this sign tells us how significant it is. God challenges Ahaz to think of the greatest possible sign he can think of, and when Ahaz refuses, God declares that He Himself will give a sign. So, this has to be something huge, and the ordinary birth of an ordinary baby to Isaiah does not fit the category of a great sign.

Secondly, despite many scholars saying differently, the Hebrew word translated "virgin" means a virgin, a young woman of marriageable age who is not yet married, and so has not yet known a man. For a virgin to conceive requires divine intervention, which is what makes this a divine sign.

But the real significance of this sign is not in the bare fact of the virgin conception and birth. God can create an ordinary human baby in the womb of a virgin by His

miraculous power, and it would be a sign, but it wouldn't necessarily be the greatest sign. No, the true greatness of this sign is found in the identity of the child – His name is *Immanuel* – *God with us!*

The purpose of the Virgin Birth is to be a sign to show us that the One born of a virgin is, in fact, God incarnate, God with us. It is possible to believe in the Virgin Birth and miss the reality of who Jesus really is. Islam teaches that Jesus was a great prophet who was born of a virgin, but they do not believe that He is God with us, that God takes on our human nature in Jesus.

So, what we have here in the sign of Immanuel is a promise that has a partial fulfillment and a limited relevance in the days of King Ahaz, but has its fullest and truest fulfillment in Jesus, who alone was born of a virgin and who alone is true Immanuel, God with us.

For King Ahaz, the sign of Immanuel was a sign that told him that he was wrong to look to Assyria for help against his two great enemies. He needed to trust the LORD, who was on their side, and who would crush Israel and Syria. However, because Ahaz did not believe that God would or could deliver them, they would suffer the greater consequence of judgment at the hands of a greater enemy, Assyria.

IV. What Immanuel Means for Us

But what does Immanuel mean for us? The ultimate meaning of Immanuel for all of God's people is not separate from the limited meaning it had for Ahaz. God gives this sign in this context because the full meaning is found represented here in this context.

King Ahaz faced two enemies greater than he was, two enemies he could not defeat on his own one at a time, much less when they combined forces against him. We face two even deadlier and more powerful enemies, and they have combined forces against us. Our two great enemies are sin and death. Sin ensnares us and uses the power of the Law of God to condemn us to death.

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. – I Corinthians 15:56-57, ESV

This is the true message of the sign of Immanuel. That's why the birth name of Immanuel is *"Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."* God became one of us to identify with us and overcome sin and death for us, freeing us from our greatest enemies and our greatest, eternal danger.

Hebrews 2:14-15 says, *"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."*

Just as Ahaz needed to trust the Lord to deliver him from his enemies and not try to take things into his own hands, so we need to trust in the Lord and in the sign of Immanuel, in the Lord Jesus Christ, to save us from sin and death and not try to take things into our own hands.

Whenever we think that we can do something to save ourselves from sin and death, we are acting like Ahaz sending an envoy to bribe the King of Assyria to rescue him from Israel and Syria instead of trusting in God's promise of deliverance and the provision of Immanuel. Only Immanuel can save us from sin and death, not our good works or our intelligence or our religiosity. Ahaz masked his self-reliance with a hypocritical mask of piety. Do we do the same?

When Ahaz rejected God's promise, God delivered him into the hands of a greater enemy than Israel and Syria. If we reject God's promise of Immanuel, we condemn ourselves to a life of slavery to Satan who holds us hostage by our fear of death and then to the eternal death of hell.

But just as Ahaz could have been delivered if he had only trusted God's promise instead of his own scheming, so also, we can be assured of definite and eternal salvation from sin and death and an eternal place of abundance and peace with God in His house if we will trust in Immanuel, if we will believe in and cast ourselves on the goodness of our only Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

To defeat the enemy of sin, we need a true and perfect righteousness, which Jesus alone can give us in Himself. To defeat the enemy of death, we need eternal life, resurrection power that overcomes death forever. Jesus has done this and gives His eternal resurrected life to us. What we must do is trust in Him and not ourselves. What we must do is give ourselves to Him and rest in Him alone.