

Isaiah's Virgin Birth Prophecy

Isaiah 7:14
Frank Walker, Ph.D.

Having looked at *where* and *when* Jesus would be born, we turn now to *how*. This was the first question the Lord answered. When Adam sinned, he promised to redeem man through the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). Since women don't have seed — that's part of the definition of a woman — something unusual would have to happen. The Lord made this more explicit many years later when Isaiah wrote this evening's text: *Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*

The New Testament leaves no doubt that this verse predicted the virgin conception and birth of Jesus Christ. It's unfortunate, though, that liberals deny this and have forced conservatives to spend so much time defending it.

The Historical Situation

The seventh chapter of Isaiah records events that occurred in the days of King Ahaz, who reigned in Judah from 735 to 715 BC. This man did nothing but provoke the Lord to anger. He even sacrificed his son in a pagan ritual. As punishment for his disobedience, the Lord sent two armies against him. Rezin, king of Syria, made the first assault in which he took captives and demolished the land. Shortly afterward, Pekah, king of Israel, did the same. And if this wasn't enough, these two kings, either of whom alone could have taken Ahaz, had come together for a combined assault against Jerusalem.

By this time, there wasn't much left of Judah. Isaiah wrote, *Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city* (vv. 7–8). It's no wonder that Ahaz, upon hearing of the conspiracy of his two enemies, trembled. So did everyone else. Verse 2 says that the heart of every man was *moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind.*

But the Lord had something else planned for his people. He would guard them despite the king's monstrous sins. But why? Why not chasten Ahaz? It's because he was more interested in protecting David's family than punishing one of his sons. The two confederate kings, according to verse 6, were threatening to dethrone Ahaz and replace him with the son of Tabeal, which would

overthrow the entire program of salvation. So, twice, the Lord recounted his promise to David. He did this in verses 2 and 13.

To convey this to the king, Isaiah and his son Shearjashub were to meet him at the end of the aqueduct of the upper pool (v. 3) and tell him that Rezin and Pekah were nothing but two tails of smoking firebrands, two barely burning sticks, or, as the paraphrase known as *The Message* says, “two burnt-out cases.” Because God’s people had suffered at the hands of these kings in the not-too-distant past, they naturally saw them as burning and unquenchable infernos. But in reality, they were on the verge of being tossed into the trash can of history. Later in the chapter, Isaiah made it clear that both kings would be dead within three years, and their kingdoms wouldn’t outlive them by much. There was nothing to fear.

Interestingly, though, Isaiah’s son didn’t say or do anything. He didn’t have to. The Lord told Isaiah to take him because his name means “a remnant shall return.” His presence reminded Ahaz that God had already rescued the captives Pekah had taken and reassured him that he would continue to protect his people. Shearjashub’s name meant God was in control.

The Lord’s Sign

To confirm his plan, the Lord commanded Ahaz to ask for a sign. The choices were almost unlimited. Verse 11 says that he could *ask it either in the depth, or in the height above*.

But Ahaz refused to do so. He claimed he was too pious to tempt the Lord. Of course, it would be extremely impious for any man to demand a sign from God. But that’s not what happened. When God commands someone to ask for a sign, as he did with Ahaz, the greatest impiety is to refuse. Ahaz directly disobeyed God’s Word.

Our text doesn’t say why Ahaz refused to obey, but 2 Kings 16:7–9 does. Ahaz had already formed an alliance with the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III. He thought that another pagan king could protect him better than God.

Ahaz looked to an up-and-coming world power for help, thinking that the answer to his problem was a massive, well-trained army. But when he refused to ask for a sign, Isaiah gave him something else — a baby. And the child wasn’t even someone respectable. He would be a virgin’s son, the child of an unmarried woman. But who was really stronger — the Assyrian king or the virgin’s son? Which one had the power to deliver and protect God’s people?

What a rebuke to Ahaz! Look at the change of pronouns. In verse 11, Isaiah instructed Ahaz to ask for *a sign of the LORD thy God*. But when Ahaz refused to comply, and thus revealed the condition

of his heart, the prophet excluded him from God's fellowship. He asked whether Ahaz thought it was a small thing to *weary my God also* — not *thy God* or even our God, but *my God*. Even the promise of a virgin's son wasn't for Ahaz. The word *you* in *Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign* is plural. The sign was for believers within the covenant people.

The fulfillment of this sign came many years later when the long-awaited deliverer arrived.

The Meaning of the Sign

The problem with this is that Ahaz lived seven centuries before Jesus was born. If the virgin birth prophecy refers only to him, how could it have been a sign to Ahaz?

Commentators resort to all kinds of wild explanations to explain this. Some say that Hezekiah was the virgin's son. Others say it was Isaiah's second son, mentioned in chapter 8. They say that his mother was a virgin when Isaiah gave the prophecy, but Isaiah married her later and had a son with her. Still others resort to the idea of a double fulfillment. Either Hezekiah or Isaiah's son was a sign to Ahaz, but its ultimate fulfillment came with the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

I don't believe any of these interpretations work. Hezekiah couldn't have been the virgin's son because he was already born when Isaiah gave the prophecy. Nor could Isaiah's son have been the subject of his prophecy. The way it's worded in Hebrew indicates that the mother of the child would still be a virgin when she gave birth. No one claims that Isaiah's second wife remained a virgin. But the most difficult problem is the child's name — Immanuel or "God with us." It's simply too much, if understood in its most exalted form, to be given to any mere boy. And there's no need for a double fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. A single fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ does just fine.

But the problem remains. How could something that wouldn't take place until the first century be a sign to those who lived seven hundred years earlier? Part of the answer is that Isaiah focused heavily on the time element. Even if a virgin were suddenly to find herself with child, that child wouldn't be born for another nine months and he wouldn't be able to discern good from evil for a few years after that. The process Isaiah described would take at least three years. That's how long it would take until the land that Ahaz abhorred, viz., Syria and Israel, would *be forsaken of both her kings* (v. 16). Rezin and Pekah had approximately three years left. They were already dead, just waiting to be taken away.

The virgin birth prophecy didn't have to be fulfilled in Ahaz' day for him to understand this much. Yet, the prophecy, which would be fulfilled in seven hundred years, assured God's people that there was no real threat against David's throne.

The fulfillment of the virgin prophecy took place when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, who conceived in her womb and brought forth the Lord Jesus Christ. And there should be no doubt that Mary was a virgin.

Over the years, there's been a lot of talk about whether the Hebrew word in our text means 'virgin' or just 'young woman.' Of course, a son born to a young woman isn't much of a sign, since young women give birth to sons all the time. But a son born to a virgin is another matter. The Jews knew what Isaiah meant. The Septuagint uses a word that can only mean virgin, a woman who has never known a man. And of course, the New Testament settles the controversy once and for all. Mary said that she had never known a man. And when Joseph was about to put her away because he knew the child was not his, Gabriel reassured him that her child was a direct product of the Holy Spirit. Matthew explained that this was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14.

People today are a lot like Ahaz. Ahaz had been oppressed by foreign nations, but we have an even greater enemy. Our enemy is sin. Men look for remedies for their sin (education, environment, psychology), but in the end there are only two choices — the same choices Ahaz had: we can either trust in the Lord or find help somewhere else. If we look elsewhere for help, we'll find that our savior is a smoking firebrand, a burnt-up stick. But if we trust the Lord's deliverer, the virgin-born Messiah, we'll have real salvation and an almighty deliverance.

How unlike Ahaz are those whom the Spirit of God moves to find salvation solely in Jesus Christ! The virgin mother herself is a good example of what I mean. When the angel first appeared to her, she was doubtless afraid. She had never seen one. But after hearing Gabriel's comforting words, she rejoiced that God was about to keep his Word. She didn't deserve his favor any more than Ahaz did, but she embraced the angelic promise of mercy. She exclaimed, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word* (Luke 1:38).

Mary's song in the first chapter of Luke is an amazing expression of a believer's confidence in the God who saves his people. She said,

My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever (vv. 46–55).

Mary's betrothed husband Joseph had the same faith. When he first heard Mary was with child, he wanted to put her away for what seemed an obvious case of adultery. But when the angel

appeared to him, he rejoiced in the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Matthew 1:24 says that Joseph *did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him*.

And it teaches you to find your comfort in God's Word as well. Question 35 of our catechism asks, "What is the meaning of 'conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary'? Ans. That the eternal Son of God, who is and continues true and eternal God, took upon Himself the very nature of man, of the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, by the operation of the Holy Ghost; so that He might also be the true seed of David, like unto His brethren in all things, except for sin." The Son of God accomplished your deliverance from sin.

Christmas gives those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ an opportunity to take comfort in God's provision of salvation. The world exchanges presents, throws parties and enjoys fancy dinners. We can enjoy these things, too. There's nothing wrong with them. But our celebration of Christmas should highlight God's gift to his people in the person of Jesus Christ, the seed of David according to the flesh. Our parties and dinners must complement the fellowship that we already have in him.

Let's never neglect the greatest gift of all. Let's not have a secular Christmas, as many do, avoiding the name of Jesus as if it were a contagion. This is what Ahaz did. His trust was misplaced. Rather, let's rejoice in God's redemption through his virgin-born Son. Amen.