

THE SIGN OF THE VIRGIN

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A friend of mine, a fellow pastor, recently posted a note on Facebook after observing a Christian he knows becoming indignant because someone wished them “Happy Holidays!” He wondered why some people get so worked up about it, since there are so many holidays celebrated by so many people at this time of the year. He concluded by suggesting, “We Christians need to be a little more confident that our faith is not going to crumble or lose its power because someone wishes us ‘Happy Holidays.’” Some Christians seem to feel like other religions are “muscling in” on what they deem *their* holiday season, while secularists are trying to eradicate all mention of Christ and Christmas. How do you feel about it when people wish you “Happy Holidays”? Do you think they mean you ill? Probably not.

Some of the holidays that are celebrated at the end of the year existed before the birth of Jesus, while others have come along later, seeking equal time and attention.

What concerns me most is the secularization of the season... among Christians. The birth of Jesus is relegated to church pageants, or a seasonal decor, or completely subsumed by family gatherings. Christmas is more than an excuse to get together with family and friends or do nice things for people. For Christians, celebration must come from some place higher than that. Without hype, I want to remind you that the danger of letting the things and the ways of the world supplant the things and the ways of our faith in the Son of God is real. We need to be on our guard. We need to be intentional in our celebrations, without ignoring or dismissing alternate views and faiths. We celebrate family at birthdays and anniversaries all year long. At Christmastime, we need to find ways to celebrate Jesus.

This month we will examine three of the ancient prophecies that anticipated the unique birth of Jesus Christ on the first Christmas day. The first one is found in Isaiah 7. But before we read the text, let me offer some historical background of the ancient Hebrews.

Saul was the first king appointed over God’s people, Israel, but apparently ruled only over a coalition of the northern tribes. The remaining tribes constituted Judah, which supported their native son, David of Jesse. When David was at last recognized as king of the Hebrew people, he united the northern and southern tribes under one banner, known as the “United Monarchy.” For forty years of peace and prosperity, all Israel was together as one nation. However, while firmly established as a political state, the people lost sight of the covenant ideals and became increasingly pagan.

Following the death of David’s son and successor, Solomon, about 922 B.C., the northern tribes (with the exception of Benjamin) refused to follow the Davidic successor, Rehoboam, and seceded. Jeroboam of Ephraim was acclaimed king of the northern kingdom, which retained the name Israel. Ruling from Shechem, he established royal shrines at Bethel and Dan as a substitute for the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the capital of Judah, the southern kingdom. At its center was the Temple of David and Solomon, where God said His presence would abide. Nevertheless, the Judeans had as much difficulty remaining faithful to Jehovah as their cousins to the north.

Ahaz became Judah’s twelfth king at the age of twenty. Ahaz began his reign as coregent with his father, Jotham, in 735 B.C. When his father died 3 years later, Ahaz became the sole ruler of Judah for the next 16 years.

The Bible portrays Ahaz as a spiritually unfaithful king who, unlike his ancestor, King David, made idols from molten metal, sacrificed his son as a burnt offering to appease the gods, and burned incense to pagan deities throughout Judah. As a result, God “brought Judah low” (2 Chronicles 28:19). In other words, the whole nation suffered decline and trouble because of their general unfaithfulness.

In his early years, while still a coregent with his father, Ahaz experienced political turmoil. Rezin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Remaliah of Israel, formed an alliance and began attacking Judah, probably in an attempt to coerce the people of Judah to join their anti-Assyrian alliance.

Isaiah 7:1-2

¹ *When Ahaz, son of Jotham and grandson of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Syria and Pekah son of Remaliah, the king of Israel, set out to attack Jerusalem. However, they were unable to carry out their plan.*

² *The news had come to the royal court of Judah: "Syria is allied with Israel against us!" So the hearts of the king and his people trembled with fear, like trees shaking in a storm.*

Have you ever received bad news that made your heart tremble with fear? Did you lose your composure? Say things you shouldn't? Do things you ordinarily wouldn't?

Israel and Syria had formed an alliance to fend off their threatening neighbor, Assyria. God knew what they were facing. He wasn't troubled, but He was prepared to turn it to their good. He had a plan. He sent a prophet to encourage Ahaz; even though he was an unfaithful leader, he was still the leader of God's people. God wanted to use Ahaz, because when God looks over His people, He sees more than those who are alive at that moment (or this); He sees all those who will come after them, too. God acts on behalf of the present generation *and* the ones that will follow. His plan is *big* and long range. In the same way, if you will listen to God today, even if you were unfaithful yesterday, He will be merciful and use you—for your sake and for the sake of those who will follow in your steps. That is why God never abandons us, but always invites us to return to Him through Jesus.

The people were afraid because of the news they heard. So, God sent them another kind of messenger to encourage them. He sent the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 7:3

³ *Then the Lord said to Isaiah, "Take your son Shear-jashub and go out to meet King Ahaz. You will find him at the end of the aqueduct that feeds water into the upper pool, near the road leading to the field where cloth is washed.*

The name of Isaiah's son, Shear-jashub, means "a remnant will return." His name was a warning to Ahaz (implying the captivity of God's people, which would happen as a result of Ahaz's resistance to God's help), but his name was also a promise, predicting the return of God's people—not only from captivity to their homeland, but eventually from apostasy to faith. That's why God instructed Isaiah to take his son along, as a witness to God's intent to punish disobedience and reward repentance.

Isaiah 7:4

⁴ *Tell him to stop worrying. Tell him he doesn't need to fear the fierce anger of those two burned-out embers, King Rezin of Syria and Pekah son of Remaliah.*

God's message to Ahaz was, "Stop worrying. The men you fear are burnt-out leaders—windbags—who speak swelling words but lack the power to fulfill them." Human leaders can be intimidating and human threats can be unnerving. However, when challenging God's purposes—whether or not that is their intention or their concern—any human leader is just a windbag, any human threat is futile. They may use their might to attack God's people, but they cannot dismantle God's plan.

Isaiah 7:5-6

⁵ *Yes, the kings of Syria and Israel are plotting against him, saying,* ⁶ *'We will attack Judah and capture it for ourselves. Then we will install the son of Tabeel as Judah's king.'*

Ahaz had heard what Syria and Israel had to say; now he would hear what God had to say.

Isaiah 7:7-9

⁷ *But this is what the Sovereign Lord says:*

"This invasion will never happen;

it will never take place;

⁸ *for Syria is no stronger than its capital, Damascus,*

*and Damascus is no stronger than its king, Rezin.
As for Israel, within sixty-five years
it will be crushed and completely destroyed.
⁹ Israel is no stronger than its capital, Samaria,
and Samaria is no stronger than its king, Pekah son of Remaliah.
Unless your faith is firm,
I cannot make you stand firm.”*

“It’s not going to happen.” In fact, according to 2 Kings 16:5, Rezin and Pekah did besiege the city of Jerusalem, but they could not penetrate or overcome it. As Isaiah wrote later (8:10): *“Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak the word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.”*

As the apostle Paul also wrote, *“If God is on our side, who can defeat us?”* (Romans 8:31)

Wonderful words! Reassuring words. But if they are not mixed with faith in the heart of the one who hears them, then they are just words—a nice saying for a greeting card. *“Unless your faith is firm, I cannot make you stand firm.”* God is not empowered by anyone’s faith, nor is He crippled by anyone’s lack of faith. But God is limited in what He can do *in you* if you will not trust Him and obey His instructions. If you will not personally trust in what God has said to you, you will not gain hope in the face of difficulty, you will not find courage to overcome your fears, and you will not have peace in the midst of turmoil—all of which God has promised. God’s words are words of life! But you must believe what He has said and act in that confidence, in order to release that life.

Regrettably, Ahaz did not do that. Overcome with fear, he refused to listen to Isaiah. So, God sent Isaiah a second time in an effort to show the king the sincerity of His promise.

Isaiah 7:10-12

¹⁰ *Later, the Lord sent this message to King Ahaz: ¹¹ “Ask the Lord your God for a sign of confirmation, Ahaz. Make it as difficult as you want—as high as heaven or as deep as the place of the dead.”*

¹² *But the king refused. “No,” he said, “I will not test the Lord like that.”*

It amazes me how religious we can be even when we are resisting God! Rebellion does not necessarily appear godless; religiousness can be a cloak for disobedience. But theology will not trump distrust. The king said with his mouth, “I will not test the Lord,” but in his heart it was, “I will not trust the Lord.”

Too many Christians quit praying for this same reason: if they ask God for a sign of confirmation, then they will have no excuse not to obey Him. So, they just stop talking with Him. Then (they imagine), they can just do what they want to do with impunity.

Disregarding God’s promise of victory, Ahaz instead sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, declaring himself to be Assyria’s slave and seeking their aid and protection. The help of Assyria, or the help of God? The protection of Assyria, or the protection of God? Before you get down on Ahaz, think about this... I know that you know what you *should* choose, but I wonder what you *would* choose, if you were in a similar predicament. How often do we choose what is visible and near to hand over what is invisible, even though promised by God?

Isaiah saw right through this scheme and his tone revealed his frustration. This reminds me of the chill in the air in the synagogue on the day when Jesus wanted to heal a man who had a crippled hand. The leaders there also took on a religious overtone, chiding Jesus for violating the rules of Sabbath. Their lack of compassion, cloaked in pre-tentious religion, angered the Son of God. The man, of course, was healed on the spot.

Isaiah 7:13-16

¹³ *Then Isaiah said, “Listen well, you royal family of David! Isn’t it enough to exhaust human patience? Must you exhaust the patience of my God as well? ¹⁴ All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’). ¹⁵ By the time this child is old enough to choose what is right and reject what is wrong, he will be eating curds and honey.*

¹⁶ *For before the child is that old, the lands of the two kings you fear so much will both be deserted.*

If you don't want to choose the sign, God will choose it for you. He *will* confirm His purpose. Before it is over, you *will* know that it was God whose voice you heard. You will see His hand, even if you will not enjoy His blessing.

Isaiah said there would be another son with another name that announces God's purpose. The miraculous sign that God chose to confirm to Ahaz His plan—a sign only God would even think of—was that a virgin would conceive and bear a son, whose name would be Immanuel, meaning “God is with us” or “God is on our side.”

While the meaning of this passage has been debated over the years, much of the debate has demonstrated the same dismissive attitude that Ahaz had: such as, following God may be useful at times, but it is seldom convenient and often unreliable in matters of the “real world.”

The sign was given, not only to Ahaz but also to the entire nation of Judah, for the word “give you” is in the plural form. Clearly, it was a sign that would command their attention, in spite of their inclination to ignore God and try to work things out on their own.

Whether the child born in Isaiah's day was also an immaculate conception we may never know this side of heaven, for there has been found no corroborating evidence one way or the other. What we do know is that seventy Jewish scholars (not followers of Jesus), who translated the Old Testament into the Greek language of the 2nd century B.C. (known as the Septuagint), chose to use the unambiguous term for an unmarried virgin to translate the Hebrew *al-mah*, because they recognized its use to mean just that.

Thus, it became a fitting foreshadowing of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who was to come, and Matthew, one of His biographers, made specific reference to this passage as a prediction that was fulfilled when Mary, a virgin of Nazareth, became pregnant by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:22-23) and gave birth to Jesus. He was God incarnate—God in human form.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ *This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

¹⁹ *Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.*

²⁰ *As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

²² *All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:*

²³ *“Look! The virgin will conceive a child!*

*She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which means ‘God is with us.’”*

²⁴ *When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.*

Isaiah had warned Ahaz of serious changes on the horizon. By the time this sign—this son—this prefigure of Messiah reached the age of accountability (usually 12), life as the Judeans then knew it would be dramatically altered. “Curds and honey” were the foods typical of wanderers who were living off the land, rather than farming the land. The kings of Israel and Syria would both be overthrown by Assyria in just over 10 years (just as Isaiah predicted). But Assyria would not stop there. In less than 75 years, Assyria would overwhelm the entire region.

The very power that Ahaz was courting would become the instrument of his own nation's devastation within a generation. Could the thing that you're trusting or pursuing instead of God actually become your undoing? Do you need to turn around today? Do you need to change your ways?

If so, fortunately for you (and me), Isaiah's words had a long term application, a complete fulfillment in the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth. His name means “God saves.” He is the Savior of the world, who takes away our sin—all that keeps us distant and separated from God.

A miracle has taken place. God has kept His promise to rescue us. Immanuel, God-With-Us, has come, and He is with us today. He said if we would trust Him and come to Him that He would come to us and give us newness of life, and then He would never leave us, never abandon us, always be on our side. What God has spoken he will perform. He has not spoken lightly. He is not teasing you. He loves you. If you only knew the gift God has for you and who was offering it to you right now, you would ask Him and He would give you life-giving water.

Make this Christmas—your Christmas—about Jesus. If you need and want to turn to Him, or return to Him, do it today. Do it now, in the presence of the Holy Spirit and God's people. Come to Jesus. He is waiting.

And by the way, Merry Christmas *and* Happy Holidays!