

A pastor was preparing his sermon when his daughter came in and said, “Daddy, can you come and play with me?” Her father responded, “Honey, I need to finish my sermon, but give me an hour, and I will play with you.” “Okay,” said the girl, “and when you finish, I am going to give you a great big hug.”

So, the daughter started out of her dad’s office and then turned around and gave her dad a big hug. “I thought you were going to give me a hug when I was finished,” said her father, to which she replied, “Daddy, I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!”

The Old Testament is filled with “hugs from God” and by that, I mean that God has given many promises to His people to tell them what they have to look forward to.

This morning, we are going to spend a little time in the book of **Isaiah** to look at one of these hugs – one of these promises given to us by God to remind us of what Christmas is all about. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Isaiah 7** and I want to read **verse 14** to you. We are told by the prophet Isaiah,

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

My guess is that verse is very familiar to most of you, especially during this time of the year. It’s a promise from God – a prophetic promise that would ultimately come to pass some 700 years later when the **virgin** named Mary would deliver the Deliverer. In a Christmas miracle, God would come to us in the flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ with the purpose to demonstrate His love and to deliver His people from their sin.

Now on face value, the verse I just read seems fairly simple and straight-forward – and in all honesty, I tend to take it for granted as a statement fact, but there are those, even in the Christian community, like the Gnostics in the early church, who go to great lengths to deny the virgin birth of Jesus.

Back in 1985, there was this group that was formed called the “Jesus Seminar.” It was comprised of 50 liberal biblical scholars and 100 laymen who met under the guise to search for the historical Jesus and to determine the true words He spoke. They reviewed the Gospels and then they voted on the authenticity of the Lord’s sayings and teachings by using colored beads. Red beads indicated the voter believed Jesus actually said the quoted Bible passage. Pink beads indicated the

voter believed Jesus probably said something like the passage. Gray beads indicated the voter believed Jesus did not speak the actual words, but rather the Bible passage merely contained His ideas, and lastly, the black beads indicated the voter believed Jesus did not say the quoted passage, instead the passage likely came from later admirers or a different tradition.

They studied some 500 sayings and teachings from Jesus and concluded that only 18% were authentic or likely authentic.

Then in 1998, the Jesus Seminar denied the virgin birth, saying it was merely a legend without any historical validity. They determined that Mary must have had sex with Joseph or with another man before she became pregnant with Jesus.

While we may be tempted to shrug this off as the work of a few crazy liberals with fancy titles after their names – we ought to take this seriously. As Timothy George points out, behind the well-publicized Jesus Seminar stands an insidious theology that attacks the central truth of the Christian faith – that God became a man in the Person of Jesus Christ.

You see, it's only a short step from denying the virgin birth to denying the deity of Jesus Christ. First you attack the birth, then you attack the baby. First the miracle, then the man. Once you deny His miraculous entrance into this world, it's just a short jump to deny His deity as the Son of God who came in the flesh.

Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

Now, I have absolutely no problem believing the virgin birth of Jesus. I have no problem accepting this truth, for nothing is impossible with God – but I must admit that I do struggle with this verse largely because of its context, and let me explain.

I talk about the importance of context quite often with you, and for me, the context surrounding this verse is somewhat challenging. I know we just can't put this verse in a vacuum and let it stand alone – it needs to be understood in the framework of the passage around it, so with that said, we are going to look at the passage around it to hopefully understand this great promise from God.

In **Isaiah 7**, beginning with **verse 1** we are told,

¹Now it came about in the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Aram and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not conquer it. ²When it was reported to the house of David, saying, “The Arameans have camped in Ephraim,” his heart and the hearts of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind.

So, here’s the setting. It’s around 735 B.C. and the Assyrian Empire are the bullies on the block. They were conquering all the smaller nations around them with ease but Syria and Israel – referring to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom, joined forces to rebel against the Assyrians and they wanted Judah – the southern kingdom to join them in their rebellion. Well, King **Ahaz** – the king of Judah, didn’t want to rebel against the Assyrians, he would rather submit to them, and this greatly angered the kings of Syria and Israel.

We are told that King **Rezin** of Syria and King **Pekah** of Israel allied together to wage war against King Ahaz. Their intentions were to remove Ahaz as king and put their own king on the throne so that this puppet king would join in their rebellion against the Assyrian Empire. Judah was attacked and they suffered heavy losses, but they were not conquered. Then King Ahaz received word that Syria and Israel were once again gathering together with their combined forces to attack. Well, Judah couldn’t handle another attack – it looked like everything would be destroyed, and the kingdom and the line of David would be lost. Ahaz was frightened and so were the people of Judah.

Now, let me speak about Ahaz for a moment. Ahaz was 20 years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem for 16 years. Unlike his father, Ahaz was an evil and cowardly and superstitious king. He turned to false gods and he worshipped foreign idols, even sacrificed a son in a fiery pagan ritual. Ahaz was one of the worst kings that Judah ever had, and only good thing that came from Ahaz was another son named Hezekiah, who would later reign as a righteous king over Judah. I bring all that up to say this – in spite of the wickedness and weakness of Ahaz, amazingly, God still graciously continued to reach out to him so that he might repent, and God sent the prophet Isaiah to meet him. So, let’s pick up beginning with **verse 3**.

³Then the Lord said to Isaiah, “Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller’s field, ⁴and say to him, ‘Take care and be calm, have no fear and do not be fainthearted because of these two stubs of smoldering

firebrands, on account of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah.

God told Isaiah to go meet King Ahaz, and to bring along his son **Shear-jashub**, whose presence along with his father Isaiah would have some meaning to Ahaz. Together they would be a walking object lesson for the name Isaiah means “*the Lord is salvation*” and the name of his son means “*a remnant shall return.*” So, standing together, and presumably Ahaz knows the significance of their names, taken together, the message to him would be: *Let the Lord be his salvation and then at least a remnant would survive and return.* You see, God already knew how this would play out. God knew that instead of trusting Him, Ahaz would eventually put his trust in the Assyrian Empire to defeat his enemies and as a consequence the people of Judah would later be taken into captivity and only a remnant would return home.

Well, Isaiah and his son find King Ahaz on the highway to the fuller’s field inspecting the aqueduct system for Jerusalem’s water supply. Ahaz is fearful of a long draw out siege against the city, and instead of falling on his face for help from the Lord God Almighty, his efforts are focused on the apparent disaster which is coming their way.

We are told that Isaiah gives King Ahaz a word of assurance, explaining that God does not see the situation the way Ahaz does. Ahaz looked at the kings of Syria and Israel as a terrible threat, but God looked at them as nothing but **two stubs of smoldering firebrands** – which means, to God, they are like two cigarette butts tossed on the ground. That’s how God saw them, they are nothing to worry about, and Isaiah encourages Ahaz to trust God and take Him at His word. Isaiah continues and says to Ahaz beginning with **verse 5**,

⁵Because Aram, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has planned evil against you, saying, ⁶“Let us go up against Judah and terrorize it, and make for ourselves a breach in its walls and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,” ⁷ thus says the Lord God: “It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass. ⁸For the head of Aram is Damascus and the head of Damascus is Rezin (now within another 65 years Ephraim will be shattered, so that it is no longer a people), ⁹ and the head of Ephraim is Samaria and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you will not believe, you surely shall not last.””

Isaiah tells King Ahaz that God knows exactly what’s going on. God knows that Syria and Israel are plotting to come against Judah again. They want to attack

Jerusalem and knock down its walls. God knows these two kings want to set up a puppet king in the place of Ahaz. Their secret plans made in the dark are not hidden from God, and then God drops a bombshell on Ahaz and says that within 65 years, the alliance of his enemies will be shattered. The dreaded Assyrian Empire will come and they will defeat the king of Syria and the king of Israel – deporting their populations to foreign lands.

So, through Isaiah, God essentially says to King Ahaz, *“their plans will not succeed – it won’t happen – I’m in control – you can trust Me – if you believe Me, you will find relief, you will be stable,”* and then to take it one step further to increase the faith of Ahaz, God issues an unbelievable challenge and command – similar to a double dare. Let’s continue beginning with **verse 10**.

¹⁰ Then the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ “Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!”

Through Isaiah, God says to King Ahaz, *“What kind of sign do you need so you will trust Me?”* God wanted Ahaz to take Him at His word – to believe His promise and so he says, *“choose any sign you want, just name it, make it so outlandish that it requires a miracle from Me. I double dog dare you.”*

Putting God to the test is generally frowned up; however, when God invites us to put Him to the test, then we need to do it, and unfortunately, Ahaz – who tries to sound really spiritual, refuses. When you get down to it, it’s not God being put to the test – it’s Ahaz and he failed.

Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, because if he did, he would be obliged to trust God when the sign was fulfilled – and he just couldn’t do that. His rejection of the sign was a rejection of the Lord – he didn’t want God’s help, for he most likely had already made up his mind that he would put his trust in the Assyrian Empire, in fact, later he will strip the temple of the Lord of its gold and silver to buy their favor.

Well, since Ahaz refuses to trust God and ask for a sign, God selects a sign Himself – one of the greatest signs in all the Bible. Let’s continue beginning with **verse 13**.

¹³ Then he said, “Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?”

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

King Ahaz had tried the patience of God, so, instead of speaking only to the king, Isaiah now addresses the whole “**house of David**” and gives them God’s sign whose ultimate fulfillment would occur far beyond the lifetime of Ahaz.

Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

This is one of the most famous prophetic promises regarding the birth of Jesus in the Bible, and this might come as a surprise to you, but it’s also considered by some to be the most difficult to understand, and I think the difficulty largely comes from the context in which it is found and also from the nature of prophecy itself.

You may or may not know this, but some prophecy may have dual or double applications. Some prophecy may have a *near fulfillment* current to the time the prophecy is given – but at the same time, it can also point forward to a *farther or greater fulfillment* in the future – and that’s what I think we have here, so buckle up and bear with me as I try to explain it.

In the near fulfillment of this prophecy, this was a sign given by God that was to be relevant in some way to King Ahaz and to the house of David. It was a sign they were to recognize in their day.

In the time of Ahaz, we are told a **virgin will be with child**. In this Old Testament verse, the Hebrew word for **virgin** is “*almah*” which can also be translated to mean a *young woman of childbearing age*. There is another word that Isaiah could have used which only means *virgin*, but he was not led to use that word. Instead, he used the somewhat ambiguous word of “*almah*” which allows for the near fulfillment of this prophecy.

So, with that said, a young woman of childbearing age, likely known by the king – maybe she is from the royal court, was a virgin when Isaiah gave this prophecy – she will get married, she will become pregnant, she will give birth to a son, and she will give him the symbolic name of **Immanuel** which means “*God with us*” – all of which seems to serve as both a rebuke and a reminder. For King Ahaz, this sign will serve as a rebuke, as if saying to him, “*If God is with us, then why should you fear your enemies and why should you want to align yourself with the Assyrian Empire?*” To the house of David, this sign would serve as a reminder that God

was truly with them and the line of David would continue in spite of the hardship coming their way.

Now in the next few verses from the prophet Isaiah – verses that some seem to ignore, we are told that this son would eat curds and honey – a food of poverty, and before he can discern right from wrong – the alliance between these two enemy kings of Syria and Israel would be broken just as God had promised.

So, that was the near fulfillment of this prophecy, but in reality, it was only a shadow – a mere resemblance of a much greater and more literal fulfillment of this prophecy – the ultimate fulfillment that would occur some 700 years later.

Turn to **Matthew 1**, and we will begin with **verse 18**.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. ²⁰ But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of 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 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” ²⁴ And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, ²⁵ but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Matthew begins the story by telling us that Joseph was **betrothed** to Mary – meaning, in those days, they were legally pledged to one another, engaged to be married, and as was the Jewish custom, after the betrothal ceremony where their engagement became official, they were to separate for a year before their wedding. Mary returned to her parents’ home to prove she was not pregnant before the wedding, and Joseph went back to his father’s house and started to build an addition where he and Mary would eventually live one day as husband and wife.

Everything seemed to be going according to plan for these two, things are falling into place, but sometime after the betrothal ceremony, Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant. We are not told how Joseph found out – we are only told **she was found**

to be with child. Maybe Mary told Joseph about the visit from the angel Gabriel early on, or maybe Mary kept it to herself and Joseph learned she was pregnant when she started to show, but whatever the case, however it happened, Joseph found out about it, and more importantly – he knew he had nothing to do with it. Joseph knew the child that Mary was carrying was not his child.

Joseph logically assumed, just like we would, that Mary had been with another man, either voluntarily or maybe she was sexually assaulted, but her crazy made up story involving an angel didn't help matters and led him to assume the worst. Joseph loved Mary, but at this point, he could no longer imagine a life with her and he planned to break off the engagement and send her away secretly.

Then we are told an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that Mary has not been unfaithful. Yes, she has conceived, but not because she was unfaithful, but because she was faithful – she believed God, and as unbelievable as it may sound to you Joseph, the child has been conceived by the **Holy Spirit**, and as a way to explain this miracle to this Jewish man – the angel quotes **Isaiah 7:14**.

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.”

This is not the shadow that occurred in the days of King Ahaz, this is the real thing as evidenced in the careful use of words by Matthew. If you recall from what I said earlier, the Hebrew word used by Isaiah for **virgin** was “*almah*” which can also be translated as a *young woman*, but here, Matthew is led to use another word – a more precise and literal word when referring to Mary – it's the Greek word “*parthenos*” which always means “*virgin*” and with that, the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy is fully realized.

So, true to the promise of God given some 700 years earlier – Mary, specifically identified here as **the virgin**, conceived a child by the Holy Spirit, and she would deliver the Deliverer. His name will be Jesus, symbolically described by the title of **Immanuel** which means “**God with us.**”

God was true to His Word. God made the greatest promise He could make and He kept that promise, with ramifications both near and far, and whether it was King Ahaz who faced the unbearable or Joseph who faced the unbelievable – both were faced with the same question – **can I really trust God?**

King Ahaz refused to trust God who was graciously reaching out to him, but Joseph believed the unbelievable. He obeyed God, and took Mary as his wife, and on Christmas, God proved to the rest of the world that He is always faithful to His Word.

God can be trusted to keep His promises to us. God proved it by coming to us in the flesh – to be with us – just as He said He would, and He proved it on a cross to take away the sin of those who believe. So, I leave you with the same question that both King Ahaz and Joseph faced – **can I really trust God?** The Christmas miracle says you can and you should.

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