

## **An Ancient Christmas: The Coming of Jesus in the Old Testament — The Virgin**

Isaiah 7:1-25

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)

If you have Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Isaiah chapter 7. We're going to read the whole chapter tonight so that you have the context of the very famous verse, Isaiah 7:14, in mind as we explain it. This is the second of our series, "An Ancient Christmas: The Coming of Jesus in the Old Testament." And this prophecy dates from more than six hundred years before Christ would be born in Bethlehem. Let me tell you what I want to do tonight. I want to first explain to you the story that is recorded for us in Isaiah chapter 7, especially looking at 2 Kings chapter 16, a passage which describes the reign of Ahaz, the king who is mentioned here, and actually referencing a verse that David Felker read to us this morning from Jeremiah chapter 7. We didn't plan this, but in God's providence there is a verse in Jeremiah chapter 7 which speaks directly and specifically to the situation in Ahaz's reign with regard to his own immorality and ungodliness. And I want you to see that; it's another reminder of how all Scripture hangs together. So I want to tell the story and then I want to try to explain the significance of the story so that you appreciate the prophecy and the miraculous sign offer that is made by Isaiah the prophet at the instruction of God to Ahaz the wicked king.

Then, I want us to pause for just one moment and ask the question, "What does it mean, 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive'?" because in the last hundred years, many commentators, especially liberal commentators, have called into question the proper translation of that passage. And I want us to see, comparing Scripture to Scripture, how we are to understand what Isaiah says to Ahaz the king in Isaiah 7:14. Then, I want to apply this, of course, in the way that the gospels apply this passage, to the first Christmas, to the Lord Jesus Christ. So those are the four things I want to do. I want to look at the story, the significance, the virgin, and the application to Jesus Christ. Before we read God's Word, let's pray and ask for His help and blessing.

*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word. We ask that You would work it deep into our hearts as we study it, perhaps studying passages that are obscure to us, unfamiliar to us, or that it's been a long time since we've read. Maybe we've never ever studied these passages closely, but they're full of Your Spirit, they're full of Your truth, they're full of Your grace, they're full of practical instructions for us. So help us as we learn them together, in Jesus' name, amen.*

This is God's Word. Hear it, beginning in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 1:

In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. When the house of David was told, 'Syria is in league with Ephraim,' the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

And the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. And say to him, '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. Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, 'Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,' thus says the Lord God:

'It shall not stand,  
and it shall not come to pass.  
For the head of Syria is Damascus,  
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.  
And within sixty-five years  
Ephraim will be shattered from being a people.  
And the head of Ephraim is Samaria,  
and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.  
If you are not firm in faith,  
you will not be firm at all.'

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

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. And they will all

come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thorn bushes, and on all the pastures.

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.

In that day a man will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, 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.

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

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

This ancient Christmas prophecy begins with an invasion. Maybe the next time you hear the pieces from Handel's *Messiah* sung, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive," or "Oh thou that tellest good tidings to Zion," you might want to remember that this prophecy begins with an invasion, a failed invasion that tempts the king of Judah into an alliance which will be disastrous for the nation. It tempts the king of Judah who is wicked to the core, who has violated God's Word in dramatic ways to sail the people of God down the river in an attempt to hang onto his power. And as we look at this passage tonight I want you to understand something of that story, I want you to see the significance especially of what Isaiah is saying to Ahaz here in Isaiah 7, I want us to look very specifically at the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 about the virgin, and then I want us to see how this comes to home in the first Christmas in the person of Christ.

## **THE STORY**

Let's begin with the story. Aram and Israel, Syria and the northern kingdom, led by Rezin and Pekah, have invaded Judah, but have failed to conquer it. If you'll follow along with me, I'll show you exactly where this story is explained. If you'll look in verse 1 you'll see this. "They come up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but they could not yet mount an attack upon it." They failed in their attempt; they joined forces — the Arameans, the Syrians, and the armies of the northern kingdom, and they attacked Jerusalem and it fails. And then word comes that the league that had been established to bring the first attack against Ahaz still exists. They haven't given up; even though they failed, their plan is still to attack again.

You see that in verse 2. When the house of David — that's a way of talking about Ahaz. Ahaz is of the house of David; he is the king of Judah. When the house of David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," he is shaken and he fears his dynastic security.

He thinks that the succession of his kingship and the preservation of his nation is at stake because Syria and the northern kingdom have joined together against him and so he begins to hatch a plan. And this plan is more fully explained to us in 2 Kings chapter 16, but his plan is essentially this. Since he has the northern kingdom and the Syrians in league against him, he decides that he will get an even more powerful kingdom to join with him to protect him against them. And he sends emissaries now to Syria but to Assyria. Assyria is a massive middle eastern power in this time and he's going to make a league with them to protect his kingdom, his dynasty, and his nation against the incursion of these two kings who are in league in the north fighting against him. And Isaiah is sent to him by God to tell him, "Do not do that Ahaz. It will be the end of you, it will be the end of the northern kingdom, and ultimately it will be the end of your kingly line and of Judah itself. Don't do that."

So in verse 3, Isaiah is instructed to go to the aqueduct of the upper pool. Now why is he going there? Ahaz is up there securing his water supply. It's not a dumb thing to do; that's a good thing to do. If you think you're going to get attacked, it's a good thing to secure your water supply. If you think people may come against you and lay siege to you, you want to make sure you can hold out inside Jerusalem, have adequate water, have adequate food, and hold out against the siege. So Isaiah is told to go up to the aqueduct of the upper pool where Ahaz is securing his water supply and Isaiah is told to take his son when he goes to speak to Ahaz. And Isaiah's son has a very interesting name. My guess is that nobody in this room has a son or a grandson with this name - Shear-jashub. And the name means, "A remnant will return." Now the significance of Isaiah being told to take his son when he goes to speak to Ahaz is to press home this point. Destruction is coming to the people of God. The only question will be, "Will you be in the remnant because destruction is coming. There's nothing that you can do politically or militarily to stave off this destruction because this destruction is God's just judgment on a wicked nation. And therefore, Ahaz, for you, the only choice is whether you're going to be in the remnant or not, because there is going to be destruction, there is going to be exile, and it is certain that the remnant is going to survive and it is certain that the remnant is going to return, but Israel is about to face a very, very dark time." That's why Isaiah's son with that foreboding name is told by God to be brought along with Isaiah when he goes to meet Ahaz.

And here's God's message to Ahaz. And you'll see it in verses 4, 5, 6, and 7. Essentially, his message is, "Don't fear these two kings to the north of you; they are small fries." In fact, throughout this passage God does the equivalent of trash talking the king of Israel. He won't even call him by his name. He keeps calling

him, “the son of Remaliah.” It's almost like God is saying, “Yeah, watch out for the king of Syria and then, um, you know, um, old what's his name.” And throughout the passage He won't even call him by name. And it's a way of dismissing him, belittling him, saying, “Those are not your real problems, Ahaz. They're going to pass away.” And if you look especially at verses 5 and 6 the Lord says this. “Don't look to Assyria to spare yourself the plot of these two kings to overthrow you because your salvation is not going to come from politics, it's not going to come from an ungodly alliance” — remember, God had told the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah that they were not to enter into entangling alliances with pagan, foreign people because it would corrupt the people of God; and boy had it ever. You're going to find that out in the most graphic way when I read from 2 Kings 16. And God assures Ahaz that Aram and Israel - Aram just another name for Syria, the Arameans, the Syrians - are going to fail in their designs.

And then if you'll look especially at verse 9, God says this to Ahaz. “If you are not firm in the faith, you will not be firm at all.” In other words, “Ahaz, if you don't listen to God's Word, if you don't listen to what I'm saying, Isaiah, God's prophet, it won't matter anything else you do; you're going to fail. If you won't listen to God's Word, if you depend upon your wisdom, your strategies, your ideas, your plans, if you do that, you will fail. Your only hope is to listen to the Word of God.” But Ahaz is worried about the threat of these two northern kings against his kingdom and rule and so Isaiah goes an even further step at God's command and says to him, “Ahaz, pick a sign, any sign. You can ask for ask miraculous a sign as you want and I'll give it to you to emphasize to you that what I am saying is true.” And Ahaz says, “I'm not going to test the Lord.” Now understand that is not an act of faith. When God tells you, “You need a sign,” you need a sign! I know there are a lot of you who would love it if God would give you a sign as to what you're to do. And here, God, through the prophet Isaiah, is saying, “Ahaz, you can pick any sign that you want; I'll give it to you.” Now that's not piety. What is it? Ahaz has already made up his mind. He does not want some stupid preacher who doesn't know about politics and military telling him what he ought to do. He knows he's smarter than Isaiah. He knows how to protect his kingdom and so he's made up his mind he doesn't want a sign.

And Isaiah says, “Well, I'm going to give you a sign anyway.” And essentially the sign that he gives him is a sign that will be fulfilled in a short period of time that will demonstrate that in fact the real threat is not those two northern kings. So Ahaz wickedly refuses the sign, not out of piety but out of unbelief and ungodliness, not because he cares about God's Word but because he doesn't care about God's Word, and Isaiah boldly pronounces God's impatience with Ahaz's impertinence — you see that in verse 13 — and he says, “God's not going to be dealt with in that way.” And then in verse 14 he announces that the Lord is going to give him a sign anyway and it is the sign of this miraculous virgin birth. In verses 15 and 16, basically Isaiah says that within three or four years the king that Ahaz so fears, the two kings that he so fears are not going to be his problem.

They're going to be completely out of the picture. But then from verse 17 to the end of the chapter what Isaiah says is this. "But you're going to have a bigger problem then, and your bigger problem is going to be Assyria. And Assyria, with whom you have been flirting, is going to bring unparalleled destruction on your house."

Now turn back with me to 2 Kings chapter 16 because this will give you some sort of a moral overview of Ahaz. 2 Kings 16 verse 1:

In the seventeenth year of Pekah the son of Remaliah, [there's the name that the Lord won't even say; He won't even say the name of the son of Remaliah] Ahaz the son of Jotham, king of Judah, began to reign. Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his own son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree.

This king was an idolater who sacrificed his own son to a false god. Now we read about that this morning. Do you remember David Felker reading that to us? Turn over to Jeremiah chapter 7 very quickly. And in Jeremiah chapter, as Jeremiah is describing the evil that has been done in the land, look at what he says in verse 30. Jeremiah 7 verse 30:

For the sons of Judah have done evil in My sight, declares the LORD. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by My name, to defile it. And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My mind.

God is saying, "It has never entered My mind to ask you to sacrifice your children to Me by burning them alive in the fire!" And Ahaz has done that with his own son in following after false gods. Well if you turn back to 2 Kings chapter 16, not only did he pursue this alliance with Assyria, do you know what he did? Because he needed some money to secure this alliance with Assyria, he went into the house of the Lord, he went into the temple, and he went into the treasury of the house of the Lord and he took the gold and the silver of the house of the Lord and he sent it to the Assyrians. And when the Assyrians got it, do you know what they did? They said, "There must be more where that came from. I think we'll have some." And this brilliant plan that he had hatched to preserve his kingship, his dynasty, and his nation against the two threats to the north of him, turned out to be the very way that his kingship would end. Just look at the end of 2 Kings chapter 16. Who is it that attacks during Ahaz's reign? The Assyrians. Not Ephraim, not Syrian, but the Assyrians, the very one that he made league with.

Now do you see the significance of Isaiah saying to him, “If you will not stand firm in the faith, you will not stand firm at all”? If you will not listen to the Word of God you will not stand firm at all. And the very design of Ahaz himself becomes the trap that is sprung on him. That's always the way that sin works. The very thing you think is going to set you free is the trap for your destruction. And that's Ahaz's story. That's what's going on in Isaiah 7. You know, when you hear those “behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call His name, Immanuel, God with us,” I don't know if you're like me, I have the melody line of Handel's *Messiah* running through my mind when I hear those words. I can almost not detach those words from the beautiful melodies from Handel's *Messiah*. And it comes with a lot of sentiment and a lot of memories from Christmas, but this is a grim setting that those words are set in.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE**

Now what's the significance of that prophecy? It boils down to this. Isaiah's message to Ahaz and Israel is: You've got to believe in God and His Word; you must not believe in your own designs, your own strategies, your own plans. You've got to believe God. Hard times are coming for Israel one way or the other. Remember, he tells them it's going to be worse than when the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom were split in the first place. But you can survive, you will survive if you believe God's Word, but if you won't believe God's Word you will not stand firm. The great message is this. Isaiah is saying, “Trust in God, trust in His promises, not in man, not in his devices.” And that's the significance of the prophecy. “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call His name, Immanuel.” In other words, he's saying, “Ahaz, God is going to show you in this miracle that God is with you. Your job is to believe Him. Your job is to trust Him.” But Ahaz wouldn't, and it was his destruction and the destruction of his house.

There's a message for us today in that, because we can look at Ahaz and we can look down our noses and do a little spiritual condescension — “I just can't believe a man would offer up his own son for a sacrifice. I can't believe a man would go off and worship other gods. I can't believe a man would ignore the words of a prophet of God. I can't believe a man would ignore God Himself coming and speaking to him and guiding him.” But I know the temptations in my own heart to think that I know better than God. And there's a word for us here too. Isaiah is saying to us, “Believe God, trust God, trust His promises — not in man, not in his devices.”

## **THE VIRGIN BIRTH**

Now a quick aside — what about this prophecy of a virgin birth? There are many

liberal scholars, especially since the 19th century, have said the word used here is not the Hebrew word for “virgin,” it's the word, “alma,” which means young maiden. If Isaiah had wanted to indicate “virgin” he would have used another word, “betula,” which means, supposedly is a better translation for “virgin.” What do I say to that? Three things real quickly.

One, when the Septuagint translates this passage, that's the Greek translation of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, a couple of hundred years or more before Jesus comes, the Septuagint Greek translators render this passage “virgin.” They used the Greek word for “virgin.” Second, when this prophecy is quoted by Matthew, he quotes this passage using the same word that the Septuagint uses, “virgin.” Now you still may be tempted or even shaken by arguments that might go like this. “Well, the superstitious Greek translators and the superstitious authors of the New Testament misread the original Hebrew and if they only knew Hebrew a little bit better they wouldn't have translated that way.” Well, not so fast. Turn with me to Genesis chapter 24. I want to point you to an important passage here, because in Genesis 24, look especially at verses 14, 16, and 43. This is very important for understanding how the Hebrew words, “alma” and “betula” work together.

You remember how it goes. Abraham's servant prays for a girl, a young woman to marry Isaac — Genesis 24:14. And the approaching Rebekah, Genesis 24:16, is described in the passage as a young girl of marriageable age and single, or unmarried, or a virgin. She's a female of marriageable age and the word that is used for marriageable age is “betula.” And she is single, we are told — “no man has ever lain with her.” Now notice there that that word, “betula,” does not mean a virgin. It is qualified by the fact that she has not slept with any man. So she's a young female of marriageable age who is a virgin. And so that word is not sufficient by itself to denote virginity. It needs that explanatory qualification, “no man has ever lain with her.” Finally, in Genesis 24 verse 43, in light of the knowledge of Rebekah that the servant has accumulated, he describes her to his master as, guess what, an “alma,” just like in Isaiah 7:14 — an “alma” meaning, what? A young female of marriageable age who is a virgin. Now the best way, when you're wrestling with a Scripture passage, a word or a verse, is to test it against Scripture. And there's an indication that Matthew knew what he was doing and the Septuagint translators knew what they were doing when they rendered this passage, “virgin.”

## **THE CHRIST**

Well very quickly, how does this passage apply to Christ? Matthew teaches that the virgin birth reveals the divinity and Saviorhood of Jesus Christ. If you look with me at Matthew chapter 1 and especially verse 20, when Joseph is encountered by the angel of the Lord in the dream, he says to him, “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. She will bear a son and you will call His name Jesus for He will save His people from their sins. Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son and they shall call His name, Immanuel, which translated means God with us.'"

Not long after Ahaz's time there was no more kingdom of David, and even when the children of Israel came back from their captivity things were not like they were before. And so for more than five hundred years the people of God wondered, "How will God's promises that David will never lack a man to sit on the throne, that God will settle His people in the land, how can it be that those promises can be true or will come true?" And they had watched and they had waited for a Messiah-King. And when the angel comes to Joseph he says, "Joseph, the boy that your wife, Mary, will bear is the fulfillment of the prophecy that Isaiah gave to Ahaz over six hundred and twenty years ago, and His birth will not simply symbolize that God is with His people, His birth will mean that God is with His people in the flesh because He won't just be called Immanuel, 'God with us,' He will be, Immanuel, 'God with us.'" And so that ancient Christmas prophecy is fulfilled, says the angel, in Jesus, and that ancient Christmas prophecy is fulfilled, says Matthew, in Jesus, who is God with us. Now you see, in giving that fulfillment of that prophecy, God has given you all the more reason to trust His Word. Do you understand that you and I have more reason to trust God's Word than Ahaz did, because God has taken on our flesh for us, to keep His promises? I think we can trust Him. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for this Word to our weak and feeble and unbelieving hearts. Teach us to believe You, to trust You, to know that we live by faith and not by sight, to know that life is obtained not through our plans and strategies but by faith in Your Word, a lesson that almost all of us have to learn and relearn every day because we're so quick to forget that You're near and we're so quick to forget that You're true. By Your grace, by the work of Your Spirit in us, don't let us forget that. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

Would you stand for God's blessing?

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, until the daybreak and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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