

Messianic Passages

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What Is Man?--Psalm 8

Introduction

There are a few historical events that leave an indelible mark on the minds of people. All of us remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001 when we heard the horrifying news of the terrorist attacks on New York City. For those of us who are approaching, or are above the half century mark, we remember where we were and what we were doing on Sunday, July 20, 1969 when the lunar module "Eagle" landed on the moon. We recall astronaut Neil Armstrong's comment as he set foot on the lunar surface and said, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

How people perceived the moon landing and the events surrounding it were very interesting. Prior to the launch, Esquire magazine (July 1969) asked 50 people what should be the first words spoken from the moon. The most Biblical response came from, of all people, the longhaired singer with the ukulele, Tiny Tim. He suggested the astronauts say, "Praise the Lord through Christ that we landed well and safely." (Not bad for somebody who likes to tiptoe through the tulips!). He then went on to suggest they leave a Bible. The reason given, however, was "so we can give our new acquaintances some idea of what life is like down here." Apparently he was smoking too many tulips and believed in little green men running around the moon!

On the other hand, Dr. Owen Chamberlain, a Nobel Prize winner in physics said the Apollo 11 spaceflight "shows

that mankind can be in charge of his own destiny.” However, Edwin Aldren, the second man to set foot on the lunar surface, on the return flight from the moon, put everything in a Biblical perspective. He quoted Psalm 8:3,4, “When I consider Your heavens, the works of Your fingers, the moon and stars, which You have ordained, What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visited him?” “Buzz” Aldrin understood Who controlled the universe and what our place was in that universe.

The Title of the Psalm

Psalm 8 begins with the superscription, “To the chief musician. On the instrument of Gath. A psalm of David.” One student of the Bible has suggested that the first two parts of this superscription belongs to the end of Psalm 7 and “A psalm of David” actually begins this psalm. I would agree with his observation. He went on to suggest that the beginning of the superscription of Psalm 9 actually belongs to the ends of Psalm 8. It says, “To the chief musician. To the tune of ‘Death of the Son’.” The Hebrew text actually says, “Al muth ha-ben.” Some translations have supplied the word “tune”, however, it was probably the title of the psalm, “Death of the Son.”

Peter, during his first sermon after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, was preaching to the Jerusalemites and pilgrims that had come up to Jerusalem for Shavuot (Pentecost) and after quoting part of Psalm 16, called David a prophet (Acts 2:30). Under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, the prophet David understood the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ in this Psalm 16. As we will see later, he understood the same in Psalm 8 and thus the title, “Death of the Son.”

The Historical Setting of the Psalm

Permit me to use my sanctified imagination for a minute. Let's go back 3,000 years in history to Jerusalem.

Perhaps David composed Psalm 8 while he was on the roof of his palace above the old city of Jebus, which was called Jerusalem in his day, or the City of David. It was a Friday night and all was quiet below because of Shabbat. As he looked down toward the City of David, he could see in the moon-lite night, the hohel (tent) that housed the Ark of the Covenant that he had moved up from Kirath Jearim with great fanfare (2 Sam. 6:12-23; 1 Chron. 15:1-16:3). In the cool, crisp, dry air he lifted his eyes toward the heavens and could see myriads of stars twinkling above him. His mind went back to Genesis 1-3 as he contemplated the Creation of the moon and stars and the first human, Adam. Then he meditated on the Fall of our first parents and the implications that had for all humanity. As he became overwhelmed with the significance of these thoughts, he took out his harp and started to pluck some notes. As he did, the Spirit of God impressed upon his heart some words. As he formulated these thoughts, he sang:

O LORD, our Lord,

How excellent is Your name in all the earth,

Who have set Your glory above the heavens!

Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants

You have ordained strength,

Because of Your enemies,

That You may silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I consider Your heavens,

The works of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars,
Which You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?
For You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.
You have made him to have
Dominion over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,
All sheep and oxen –
Even the beasts of the field,
The birds of the air,
And the fish of the sea
That pass through the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Lord,
How excellent is Your name on all the earth!
(NKJV)

It is a pity he did not remember this psalm years later when he looked over the same parapet surrounding the roof of his palace to observe Bathsheba bathing herself down below (2 Sam. 11). It might have prevented him from sinning against the Lord by his adultery with her and the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite (Ps 119:11, cf. Ps. 51).

The Theme Verse

David composed this psalm when he was king of Israel and leading God's covenant people in corporate worship. He began the psalm, "O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth." Note the word "our". He is leading the people in worship. This is a position he had, I believe, only when he was king.

David opens and closes the psalm with the theme statement. He sings, "How excellent is Your name in all the earth." The theme of the psalm is: the Lord's name is excellent in all the earth. Between these two statements he demonstrates why the Lord's name is excellent or majestic.

First, in considering the concept of the Lord's name, we should ask the question, what is the Lord's name? In most Bibles, the most common of the Lord's names is capitalized LORD. This is God's personal name, Jehovah or Yahweh. The second thing we need to consider is the meaning of His name. You will recall the account in Exodus 3 when God revealed His name for the first time. Moses had spent 40 years in Midian avoiding the Egyptian pharaoh who was trying to kill him. When he heard that Pharaoh had died, he decided to take some of his father-in-law's sheep and head back toward Egypt. Outside the land of Egypt, he got as close as he dared using the sheep as cover. He waited for a caravan or an individual who had left Egypt in order to find out what was going on with the Hebrew people.

While hanging out at Mt. Horeb, the Angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a burning bush. The bush was on fire but was not being consumed. Notice the words in the text. Verse 2 says, "The Angel of the LORD appeared

to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush.” In verse 4 it says, “God (Elohim) called to him from the midst of the bush.” The implication of these verses is that the Angel of the LORD is God Himself. I believe that the Angel of the LORD is a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

God proceeded to have a conversation with Moses in which He told Moses he had heard the pleas of the Hebrew people. He went on to say he would deliver them from Egypt because He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He had made a covenant with these three patriarchs to bring His covenant people into the Land that He had promised them, to make them a great nation and to bless all people with the Seed (the Messiah) who would come from the Tribe of Judah (Gal. 3:6-9).

God instructed Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Hebrews go. Moses started making excuses not to go, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh?” God then told Moses to go to the Children of Israel and tell them that God had sent Moses to them. Moses balked and said that the people would ask him what the Lord’s name was. The Lord replied, “I AM WHO I AM” (3:14).

God’s name is derived from the simple verb “to be”, “Being, I Am who I Am.” There are three aspects to His name. First, God is self-existent. As Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God.” Second, God is immutable or unchanging. The book of Hebrews states: Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever. And finally, God is eternal. God had no beginning and will have no end. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is nothing like the

gods of the Egyptians or any other god made in the image of sinful humanity.

Interestingly, Jesus picks up this name for Himself on several occasions during His public ministry. At His trial before the Sanhedrin, the high priest asked Him if he was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? Jesus responded, "I AM. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61,62; note also John 18:5-9).

It is this God that David sang, "How excellent, or majestic, is your name in all the earth." Notice two things in this verse. First, His name is excellent or majestic. The word has the idea of impressive power. The power of God was manifested in His creation of the universe. His power was also manifested at the Red Sea soon after He revealed His name to Moses. In the song of Moses, the Israelites sang, "Your right hand, O LORD, has become glorious in power; Your right hand, O LORD, has dashed the enemy in pieces. And in the greatness of Your excellence You have overthrown those who rose against You; You sent forth Your wrath; It consumed them like stubble" (Ex. 15:6,7). The second thing to notice is the extent of His name, to "all the earth." YHWH was not some local tribal god who only went up to the border of the nation and no further. He was the God of all the earth.

Not only was He God of all the earth, David goes on to say that He set his glory above the heavens. David recalls the very first words in the book of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1). The word "heavens" is plural. In the Bible there are three heavens. The first is the atmosphere

above us where the birds fly (Gen. 1:8). The second heaven is where the sun, moon and stars are (Gen. 1:3). The third heaven is the abode of God (2 Cor. 12:2). The glory of God was above the second heaven: the sun, moon and stars. It was the third heaven that the Lord Jesus left from in order to humble Himself and become obedient unto the death of the cross (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5-8).

God's name is excellent because He has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty - 8:2

As we go through this psalm, we will see three reasons why God's name is excellent in all the earth. The first reason is found in verse 2. God's name is excellent because He has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27).

Let's go back to the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites were permitted to take anything from Egypt, except the weapons (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 2: 321, 349; LCL 4: 305, 317, 319). They took gold, silver, clothing, livestock, food, and other such things. After they left Egypt, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his chariot forces after the former Hebrew slaves. When the Israelites saw the chariots coming, they were greatly afraid. They had no weapons to defend themselves with and fight back. What does Moses do? He said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. ... The LORD will fight for you, and you will hold your peace" (Ex. 14:1-14). God showed His strength in their weakness.

The apostle Paul received an abundance of revelations from the Lord. In order to keep him humble, the Lord afflicted him with a “thorn in the flesh.” What it was, we do not know. Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to remove it, but the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Paul acknowledged this and realized when he was weak, then he was strong (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

During the last week of His public ministry, the Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He went into the Temple and threw out the moneychangers for a second time. He healed the blind and the lame. The children cried out, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The priests were indignant and asked Jesus to do something about it. Jesus responded by quoting from Psalm 8:2. Here He quotes from the LXX, “Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise.”

David was ever mindful of a principle set forth in the Mosaic Law. “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19, cf. Deut. 32:35). The apostle Paul expands on this when he says, “Repay no one evil for evil. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:17,21).

God’s name is excellent because He has created the heavens for a purpose - 8:3

The second reason God’s name is excellent in all the earth is found in verse 3. God’s name is excellent because He has created the heavens for a purpose. As David looked skyward, he marveled as he pondered the vastness of the heavens. He imagines God as an artist - One who would make the sun, moon and stars with His

fingers and throw them out into space without even breaking a sweat.

Yet this artwork had a purpose. David could have recalled the many times watching the moonrise over the Mount of Olives and observing each phase of the moon. When there was a new moon, it was a new month. When he saw certain constellations in the sky, it meant a new season of the year. David's mind went back to the first chapter of Genesis. He recalled on the fourth day of creation God made the sun, moon and stars for "signs and seasons, and for days and years" (Gen. 1:14, cf. Ps. 104:9; 136:4-9).

David also could have marveled at the enduring nature of the universe. Every night when there were no clouds in the sky, David would observe the phases of the moon. He could look off into the northern sky and see the North Star at a fixed point in the sky. He would observe the constellations in the sky. The Patriarch Job mentioned several of them by name, the Bear, Orion and Pleiades (Job 9:9; 38:31). They still existed in David's day. Yet David asked himself, "Where was Job?" He had died and returned to dust; yet the universe endures. These thoughts lead David to the third reason God's name was excellent.

God's name is excellent because He has shown grace to finite human beings - 8:4-8

The third reason God's name is excellent in all the earth is found in verses 4-8. God's name is excellent because He has shown grace to finite human beings.

David asks God a question, "What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit

him?" (8:4). In this question, he uses two different words for man. The first is the Hebrew word *enosh* which carries the idea of frail, weak, mortal human beings. The second term, son of man, is *adam*. The word is derived from *adamah*, or from the earth. David recalls that the first human being was made from the dust of the earth.

David has set up an astounding contrast. In verse 3 he has marveled at the creative power and artwork of the Lord. Yet in verse 4, the Creator of this vast universe has shown grace to frail human beings by being mindful of them and visiting them.

The two Hebrew words are very instructive. The first word, "mindful" has its root *zkr*, to remember. God did not just make the universe and walk away from it. He is directly involved in the affairs of human history. He knows everything that we, frail, weak human beings are going through. The second word, "visit" has as its root *pkd*. The word is used in a variety of contexts. Sometimes it is used of deliverance and blessing.

Let us return to that conversation God had with Moses at the burning bush. After telling Moses what His name was, He instructed Moses to tell the people of Israel, "I have surely visited you and seen what is done to you in Egypt" (Ex. 3:16). In the book of Ruth, there was a famine in the Land of Judah for ten years. While Naomi was in Moab, she heard that the LORD had "visited His people by giving them bread" (1:6). Sometimes the word is used of God visiting His wayward people in order to chasten them and bring them back to Himself. Sometimes the word refers to Him coming to His people with blessings.

David goes on to point out in verses 5 and 6, four things God did when he made the first human being. First, "You have made him a little lower than the angels." Second, "You crowned him with glory and honor." Third, "You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands." And finally, "You have put all thing under his feet." All this was true of Adam as soon as he was created. David, however, in his meditation remembered Genesis 3, the disobedience of Adam to the revealed Word of God and his fall into sin. Adam was still a little lower than the angels, but he lost his crown, dominion and not everything was under his feet.

David, being a prophet, realized there would be a Second Adam (Man). The apostle Paul gives the divine commentary on these thought. He contrasts the First Adam with the Second Man, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:45-49) and sees the consummation of all things when death is finally defeated (1 Cor. 15:26,27).

The Spirit of God, in the book of Hebrews, gives us another divine commentary on Psalm 8:4-6. After the passage is quoted, it says, "For in that He (Jesus) put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him" (Heb. 2:8). What is being said is this: nothing has changed since Adam. However, the passage goes on to tell how Jesus has become the Second Adam and the fulfillment of Psalm 8. "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone" (2:9). Please notice five words that are not in Psalm 8, "for the suffering of death."

David, being a prophet, understood what the death of Christ would accomplish. One day the Lord Jesus, the Second Adam, would establish His throne in Jerusalem and would be crowned with honor and glory, have dominion over the earth, and all things, including death, would be put under His feet. That is why David could entitle this psalm, "The death of the Son." The death of the Lord Jesus is the key to understanding this psalm.

There is a day coming when the Lord Jesus will be crowned King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19: 16) and He will sit on David's throne in Jerusalem (Isa. 2; Zech. 14). At this time He will have dominion as the Son of God and the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13,14) and restore the earth to its Adamic condition (Isa. 11:6-9). The earth will be a Paradise.

One side note before we move on. The place of human beings in God's creation is "a little lower than the angels." Here we have a clash of worldviews. According to the evolutionary / humanistic worldview, human beings have evolved just a little higher than the primates. However, there is no firm scientific evidence for such a claim. There are no intermediary or transitional fossils between primates and human beings. Man is unique, created in the image of God.

In verses 7 and 8, David lists the creatures that will be put under the feet of the Lord Jesus. He starts with the domestic animals, sheep and oxen. Then he moves to the wild creatures, beasts of the fields. The next classification is the birds of the air and finally the fish of the sea. Regarding the fish of the sea, he notes, they pass through the paths of the sea. This is a reference to the sea currents in the Mediterranean Sea. It was

something King David knew about from talking with the Phoenician sea captains in the navy of his friend Hiram, king of Tyre. Today we know the water of the Mediterranean Sea enters from the Atlantic Ocean at the Straits of Gibraltar. In antiquities it was known as the Pillars of Hercules. It flows in a counter clockwise motion and takes about 100 years before it exits to the Atlantic Ocean again.

It was only within the last two hundred years that this verse was taken seriously as a scientific statement. In 1841 a devote Christian, Commander Matthew Maury (1806-1873) of the US Navy, read this passage in his Bible and thought, there must be “paths” in the sea. He spent the next twenty years of his life investigating and charting the sea currents and winds in the Atlantic Ocean. He was able to document the Gulf Stream and the Labrador currents. He became known as the “Pathfinder of the Sea.” He was one of the pioneers of hydrography and oceanography. His tombstone at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland bears the phrase, “... whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.”

The Theme Repeated

As David concluded this psalm on his harp, perhaps he went one octave higher. He sang, “O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth.” He reiterated the theme he began with in the first verse as if to drive home the point. The Lord’s name is excellent in all the earth, and here is the proof. First, He has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty. Second, He has created the

heavens for a purpose. Finally, He has shown grace to finite human beings.

Applications

So what does this all mean to me? There are at least five questions we need to ask ourselves as we examine our hearts and lives.

First, can we join in corporate worship because we are God's covenant people? God is dealing with the Church today, made up of all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you trusted Him as your Savior, as the One who died for all your sins and rose again from the dead? If you have, you have been born into God's family (John 1:12).

Second, do we realize that our weaknesses are God's opportunities for Him to show His strength through us? Someone once said, "God is not looking for great men and women, but rather, men and women who will prove the greatness of God." We show God's greatness when we move out of the way in humility and allow Him to work on our behalf.

Third, do we realize the God who created the universe is the same God who dwells inside of us? The same God who created the universe also raised His Son, the Lord Jesus, from the dead. The apostle Paul expressed his passion to the believers at the church in Philippi in these words, "that I might know Him and the power of His resurrection" (Phil. 3:10). Is that our passion and prayer?

Fourth, do we realize the grace of God in our lives? We are frail human beings that God remembers and watches out for. When we realize that we were dead in our

trespasses and sin, and that God has saved us by His matchless grace, made us alive in Christ, and raised us up to sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that realization should change the way we live today (Eph. 2:1-9). Paul encouraged the believers in Ephesus by saying they were God's workmanship and they should be doing good works, not to be saved, but because they already are saved (Eph. 2:10).

Finally, do we understand God's plan and program for our lives and how we fit into the "big picture"? The Lord Jesus was our Forerunner. He was made a little lower than the angels to taste death for us. He is now crowned with glory and honor and will have dominion when all things are put under His feet. Are we living a life that will be rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ so that we too can reign with Him?

December 2005

Who Is Immanuel?

What is one of the greatest proofs of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures?

I believe that fulfillment of Bible prophecy is one of the greatest proofs that the Bible is true. Over and over again the Old Testament prophets predicted certain events in the Life of the Lord Jesus hundreds of years before they happened. For example, Daniel foretold the time of his death (9:26), Micah predicted he would be born in Bethlehem (5:2), Psalm 22 described His crucifixion, Psalm 16 his resurrection and Isaiah 53 gave the reason for His death, to pay for all our sins.

Does the Bible predict His virgin birth?

Yes, Matthew records the fulfillment of that in his first chapter where he quotes Isaiah 7:14, “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, ‘God with us’” (vs. 23).

Some have charged Matthew with “proof-texting” because he has taken that verse out of its historical context. Is that the case?

No, quite the contrary. If one understands the historical context of the entire chapter it only enhances the identity of Immanuel as the Lord Jesus Christ.

King Ahaz, whom Isaiah is addressing, reigned in Judah during the second half of the 8th century BC. What would be the historical context be and how would this relate to the Lord Jesus?

The events of the life of King Ahaz are recorded in II Kings 16 and 2 Chron. 28 as well as Isaiah 7:1 to 14:28. Around 734/733 BC, Ahaz was having problems with his neighbors to the north. Israel, with its capital in Samaria and ruled by Pekah, and Syria, with its capital in Damascus and ruled by Rezin, wanted Ahaz to join a coalition of nations to fight the “super power” of that day, Assyria, ruled by Tiglath-pileser III. Ahaz was not a godly or spiritual man, but he was politically smart. He knew that this coalition could not stand up against the mighty Assyrian army, so he declined the invitation.

In order to get Judah to join the coalition, Pekah and Rezin hatched a plot to overthrow Ahaz and put a “puppet king”, one of the sons of Tabeel, on the throne. In order to carry out this coup d’etat, Syria deployed troops in Samaria. Ahaz got wind of this plot and began to “shake in his boots.” He started to make secret overtures to the Assyrian king to get Pekah and Rezin off his back. His trust was in Tiglath-pileser III and not the Lord.

The Lord sent Isaiah and his son to meet Ahaz and to encourage him to rely only upon the Lord in this time of distress. The Lord instructed Isaiah to say that Pekah and Rezin are “two stubs of smoking firebrands”, in other words, they are nothing but “hot air”! I’m sure that this instruction did not sit well with Ahaz, so the Lord, through Isaiah, predicted that in 65 years, Samaria would be broken (cf. Ezra 4:2). At the end, he warns Ahaz that if he does not trust the Lord, “surely you shall not be established.” This summary depicts the historical context of Isaiah 7:1-9.

That was helpful, but what does that last phrase “surely you shall not be established” mean?

The answer to that question lies in the Davidic Covenant. The phrase “shall not be established” refers back to this covenant recorded in 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chron. 17. God promised David, in an unconditional covenant, that one of his descendants would sit upon the throne of David forever in Jerusalem. At the end of the covenant, God says “And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you, Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16).

The prophecy of Isaiah 7 was based on the Davidic covenant. If Pekah and Rezin successfully overthrew Ahaz and the House of David and placed one of the sons of Tabeel on the throne, the Davidic line would be wiped out and God could not fulfill His promise to David, i.e. the Lord Jesus would never have been born. But God is faithful to His promises. The angel Gabriel had this covenant in mind when he announced the conception of the Lord Jesus to a virgin named Mary. He said, “And behold, you shall conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31-33).

The Lord seems to imply that Ahaz is a believer in verse 11 when He challenges him to “Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God”, a sign that could strengthen his faith in the Lord. But Ahaz responds piously, using the language of Scripture that he would not (vs. 12). He reasoned thus, if he saw the sign, he would have to

respond in a positive way to the Word of God. He would have to trust the LORD and not Tiglath-pileser III, something he did not want to do. Ahaz had a very high opinion of himself. He thought he was indispensable to the plan of God.

Was he?

No, Isaiah said he was not. In verse 13 and 14, Isaiah turns to the House of David and says, "Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign." The word "you" in verse 14 is second person plural. In other words, he is no longer talking to Ahaz, but the whole House of David. As I understand the chronology of this period, the teen-age, Prince Hezekiah, is alive and well in the courts of the House of David. The sign of the virgin born son, Immanuel, was directed primarily toward him in order to encourage him to trust the Lord. A few years later, when he came to the throne, he had a great revival in that first year. His trust was only in the Lord.

What is the Hebrew meaning of the word "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14?

The Hebrew word for virgin is "bethulah"; however, Isaiah uses the word "almah" in this passage. The word "almah" is never used in the Hebrew Scriptures of married women, but is used of a young woman of marriageable age. Within the Israelite culture, one who is a virgin at the time of marriage is understood.

Interestingly, in the third century BC, seventy Jewish scholars got together in Alexandria, Egypt, and translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek language. This translation, called the Septuagint, was for those

Jewish people living in the Diaspora, or outside the Land of Israel, who spoke only Greek. When they came to the word “almah”, they translated it “parthenos” which is at the root of the word “parthenogenesis” that means “development of an egg without fertilization”. They understood the word to mean a virgin.

In the New Testament, Dr. Luke, describes the miraculous conception of the Lord Jesus in the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit in Luke 1:27,34-38. Matthew also records the conception by the Holy Spirit in Matthew 1:18-25. He follows the Septuagint when he quotes Isaiah 7:14 and uses the Greek word “parthenos”.

Does Isaiah say anything more about Immanuel in this passage?

Yes, he goes on to say, “Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good” (7:15). In this passage he is pointing out the sinless nature of the Lord Jesus. Unlike us, who by nature are sinful human beings that choose evil and refuse the good. The Lord Jesus, by His sinless nature, refused evil.

He continues, “For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good” [that is, before He was born], “the land that you dread (Samaria) will be forsaken by both her kings” (7:16). To put it another way, after the defeat of Pekah and Rezin, Immanuel would be born. How much time after that time, Isaiah did not know. He did not have a prophecy chart in front of him with an arrow pointing to May 14, 6 BC to mark the birth of Immanuel. Yet he believed Immanuel would be born.

Why is the virgin birth of Immanuel and His sinless nature important for us at this time of Christmas?

The Incarnation is at the heart of the Christmas message. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh...” (1 Tim. 3:16). The only way the Second Person of the triune God could take on human flesh without being tainted by Adam’s sin was to be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. He possessed two natures, perfect humanity and absolute Deity. As God manifest in human flesh, He could not sin; He would not sin, and did not sin.

As the perfect, spotless, sinless Lamb of God, He could die in our place and pay for all of our sins. As a result of that sacrifice, He could offer any and all who would trust Him, the free gift of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and a home in heaven. The Bible says that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.

Christmas is a time of gift-giving. We should not forget the greatest gift that God gave to the world and the gift that He gives to all that trust Him. The Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus, “For God so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Have you accepted the free gift of eternal life as found only in the Lord Jesus Christ?

The Ultimate Sign, Isaiah 7

Introduction

As we go through life, sometimes we experience distressing times. We may lose our job, have a financial set back, have marital problems, or our health might deteriorate. During these times of distress, the believer in the Lord Jesus needs to examine his/her own life and ask these questions: Is this problem in my life self-inflicted? Are my sins the reason for this trouble? If so, what will I do about it? Can I rely on the promises of God? Finally, what lessons can I learn from this experience?

In the Eighth Century BC there was a king of Judah named Ahaz. He had heard about a planned coup d'état by two other kings that wanted to overthrow him and replace him with a puppet king. Ahaz was a believer in the Lord but was living in sin, sadly it was gross sin. He had an arrogant spiritual attitude because he thought he was indispensable to the plan, program, and purposes of God. In his thinking, God needed him more than he needed to walk with God and let Him work in his life. That is a dangerous attitude to have, especially when you are dealing with the Living God.

In Isaiah chapter 7, God demonstrates His faithfulness to a promise that He made with King David concerning the Davidic dynasty by giving the ultimate sign to the House of David. The sign would be a virgin born Son named Immanuel, God with us. As we examine this passage carefully, we will see from the historical context that Matthew is not taking verse 14 out of context in

order to “proof-text” the virgin birth of Jesus (1:22, 23). Moreover, the context is clearly pointing to the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus as the fulfillment of this passage in Isaiah 7. The Lord Jesus Christ is the sinless Immanuel and God manifest in human flesh.

Historical Background

The events of the reign of King Ahaz are recorded in II Kings 16 and II Chronicles 28. The summary statement of his spiritual walk with the Lord is very alarming. It states: “and he did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD, as his father David had done. For he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made molded images for the Baals. He burned incense in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and burned his children in the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel. And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, on the hills, and under every green tree” (II Chron. 28:1b-4). Yet apparently he had trusted the Lord at one time in his life for his eternal salvation. The Bible seems to indicate that he had a relationship with God (not a great one, but a relationship none the less). In II Kings 16:2 it says he did not walk in the sight of the LORD his God. II Chronicles 28:5 says that “the LORD his God delivered him into the hand of the king of Syria.” Even the LORD Himself said to Ahaz, “Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God” (Isa. 7:11). Yahweh was his God, yet Ahaz was terribly unfaithful to Him (II Chron. 28:22). King Ahaz is not a person we should hold up as a role model, except as a warning to those believers in the Lord Jesus who are unfaithful to the Lord and have gotten away from Him (I Cor. 10:6).

The event and conversations recorded in Isaiah 7 took place in the year 734/733 BC. It was a time when Ahaz was having problems with his neighbors to the north. Israel, with its capital in Samaria and ruled by Pekah, and Syria, with its capital in Damascus and ruled by Rezin, wanted Ahaz to join a coalition of nations to fight against the “super power” of the day, Assyria, ruled by Tiglath-Pileser III. Ahaz was not a godly or spiritual man, but he was politically smart. He knew that the coalition could not stand up against the mighty Assyrian army, so he declined the invitation. This brought about the second Syro-Ephraimite incursion against Judah. Syria and Ephraim joined forces again to try and overthrow King Ahaz.

In order to get Judah to join the coalition, Pekah and Rezin hatched a plot to overthrow Ahaz and put a “puppet king” on the throne that would bring Judah into the coalition. To back up their conspiracy, Syria deployed troops in Samaria. Ahaz got wind of this plot and began to “shake in his boots.” He started to make secret overtures to the Assyrian king to get Pekah and Rezin off his back (II Kings 16:7, 8). His trust was in Tiglath-Pileser III and not the LORD.

In this chapter, Isaiah reminded Ahaz that God had made a covenant with David and promised him that a Davidic ruler would one day sit upon the throne of David forever (II Sam. 7:12-17).

The Distress in the House of David because of Rezin and Pekah - 7:1, 2

The first two verses give us the historical setting for this chapter. The events recorded take place in the “days of King Ahaz of Judah.” It was during this time that Rezin,

the Syrian king whose throne was in Damascus brought his army up to Ephraim because he had an alliance with Pekah, the king of Israel. In verse one, the verb “went up” (to Jerusalem) is singular and seems to indicate that Rezin was the instigator of the plot to overthrow Ahaz and he was dragging Pekah along with him as his co-conspirator (7:1; cf. 10:27-32).

A few years earlier, Ephraim and Damascus had invaded Judah and killed 120,000 Judean soldiers in one day because the Judeans had forsaken the LORD. Also, 200,000 women and children were taken captives to Samaria, but were later released at the urging of the prophet Oded (II Chron. 28:5-15).

Their main objective, however, was not met, so they prepared a second incursion against Judah in which to overthrow King Ahaz. Judean intelligence was aware of the Syrian troop movements and informed the House of David: “Syria’s forces are deployed in Ephraim.” This was not good news for Ahaz. He, like all the rest of Judah, was “shaking in his boots” (to use an American slang). The Judean equivalent was used by Isaiah: “The heart(s) of his [Ahaz] people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind” (7:2). One of the members of the House of David was a young teen-age boy named Hezekiah. At this time, he was probably 15 years old. As this chapter unfolds, we will see that he was the primary recipient of one of the most astounding prophecies given to the nation of Judah.

The Planned Destruction of the House of David by Rezin and Pekah - 7:3-9

The Judean intelligence service was aware of the troop movements in the north, but God’s intelligence service

would reveal the true intentions of the kings of Syria and Israel.

The LORD instructed Isaiah and his son, Shear-Yashuv, to meet Ahaz at the “end of the aqueduct from the upper pool, on the highway to the Fuller’s field”¹ (7:3). Ahaz was probably there because he was checking out the water system to see if any damage had been done when the city was first besieged by the Syro-Ephraimite confederacy (II Kings 16:5).

God instructed Isaiah to take his son because they were a sign to Israel and Judah (Isa. 8:18). The name Shear-Yashuv means “A remnant shall return.” This son was born after the call of Isaiah, in the year King Uzziah died (6:13). He was brought to meet Ahaz, a believer in the LORD (cf. 7:11), with the intent that this would be an encouragement for him to return to the Lord (6:10, 13).

Underlying this whole passage is the unconditional promise made by the Lord to David in the Davidic Covenant. This covenant promised David that one of his sons (or descendants) would sit upon the throne of David, in Jerusalem, forever and ever (II Sam. 7: 12-17; I Chron. 17: 11-15; I Kings 8:25; 2:3, 4; 9:5).

Ahaz was “trembling in his boots” at this point, but God instructs Isaiah to give him two positive and two negative commands in order to show him that he has nothing to fear. Isaiah says, “Take heed, and be quiet,” the two positive commands. Then he says, “do not fear or be fainthearted,” the negative commands. Then Isaiah gives the reason why he has nothing to fear and also reveals the plot of the Syro-Ephraimite confederacy. He calls Rezin and Pekah “two stubs of smoking firebrands” (7:4). In essence he is saying they are

nothing but “hot air,” there is no fire in them. They are smoldering embers and their strength is gone. Perhaps Isaiah called King Ahaz’s attention to another promise of God: “Do not be afraid of sudden terror, nor of trouble from the wicked when it comes; for the LORD will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from being caught.” Faith and fear are contrary to one another (Prov. 3:25, 26).

Isaiah then reveals the ultimate goal of the Syro-Ephraimite confederacy which was to replace King Ahaz with a puppet king, identified as one of the “sons of Tabeel.”² This individual would then bring Judah into the coalition against Assyria.

There are far reaching implications for this plot to overthrow King Ahaz. If Pekah and Rezin successfully overthrew Ahaz and the House of David and placed one of the sons of Tabeel on the throne, the Davidic line would be wiped out³ and God could not fulfill His promise to David, i.e. the Lord Jesus would never have been born! But God is faithful to His promises.

You will recall the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary when he appeared to her in Nazareth: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:30-33). If the Davidic dynasty was overthrown, and the Messianic line eliminated, God would not be faithful to His promise to David. In the “conflict of the ages” between God and

Satan, Satan would be victorious because there would be no Davidic Messiah to sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem.

In verses 7-9, the LORD God gives two prophetic assurances and one warning to Ahaz. The first prophetic assurance is that this plot will not stand, nor will not come to pass (7:7). In other words, “It ain’t gawna happen, and it didn’t.” The second prophetic assurance is that within 65 years Ephraim will be broken (7:8). The warning that the Lord gives to Ahaz is that if he does not trust the Lord, his kingdom shall not be established (7:9). In other words, he will be removed from the throne.

The second prophetic assurance was fulfilled during the reign of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria (680-669 BC). Hugh Williamson’s comments on Ezra 4:2 might be helpful. He has observed: “Nowhere else in the OT are we told that Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, was responsible for settling foreigners in Israel. The major tradition, as found in 2 Kings 17, suggests a much earlier settlement by Sargon II” (1985:49). He goes on to say: “Support for its historicity comes first from Isa. 7:8, whose reference to sixty-five years may well bring us to the reign of Esarhaddon, and second from the historical texts of Esarhaddon’s reign, which testify to his successful campaign in the west and which thus suggest a plausible setting for a policy of resettlement” (1985:49, 50). The Assyrian resettlement policy would have finally broken Ephraim.

The warning that was given to Ahaz was that he would be removed from the throne if he did not trust the LORD God: “If you will not believe, surely you shall not be

established" (7:9). The important word of this warning is "establish." In the Hebrew, this warning is a word play: "eem lo ta-a-mee-noo, key lo tey-a-may-noo" It is difficult to translate this Hebrew word play into English, but the NIV made an attempt. They translated it as: "if you do not stand firm, you will not stand at all." In essence, what this verse is saying is this: If you insist on trusting Tiglath-Pileser III and not the LORD in this situation, it will not be Rezin and Pekah that remove you from your throne, but rather the Lord will remove you as king, yet He will still be faithful to His promises to David.

The words of this warning go back to the Davidic Covenant. God promised David that his kingdom would be established forever (II Sam. 7:16; I Chron. 17:23, 24; Ps. 78:70; Ps. 89). Of David's son, Solomon, and by implication all the other descendants, God, acting as a loving Father, would chasten them if they are disobedient to the Word of God. But His mercy would never depart from the House of David (II Sam. 7:13-15).

Ahaz did not want to trust the Lord in this situation, but rather, he bribed Tiglath-Pileser III to save him from Pekah and Rezin (II Kings 16:7, 8; II Chron. 28:16-25). The Chronicler recounts that "in the time of his distress King Ahaz became increasingly unfaithful to the LORD" (II Chron. 28:22). His trust was in Tiglath-Pileser III and not the Lord in this situation. He also thought he was indispensable for the program of God. Yet God, not Rezin and Pekah, would remove Ahaz from his throne.

This same principle is seen in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, uses athletic terminology to describe the Christian life (I Cor. 9:24-27). He states: "But I discipline my body and bring

it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (9:27). Paul is not talking about losing one's salvation because a believer in the Lord Jesus is eternally secure in Christ (John 5:24; 6:39, 40; 19:28, 29; Rom. 8:38, 39; I Tim. 1:12; I John 5:9-13). He is, however, saying that it is possible for a believer to be disqualified from the race of the Christian life and not be used of the Lord anymore. The sad results will be that the believer will be "ashamed" at the return of the Lord Jesus and "suffer loss" of rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ (I John 2:28; II Cor. 5:10; I Cor. 3:12-15).

These words of assurance and warning should encourage the House of David. When they saw the near fulfillment come to pass in 65 years, they could be confident that the next prophetic oracle that God would give would be accomplished as well, even if it was hundreds of years later.

The Declaration to the House of David - 7:10-17

In verses 10-12, the Lord confronts Ahaz. The LORD seems to imply that Ahaz is a believer in verse 11 when he challenges him to "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God", a sign that could strengthen his faith in the Lord (cf. Isa. 38). But Ahaz responded piously, using the language of Scripture that he would not (7:12). He reasoned that if he saw the sign, he would have to respond in a positive way to the Word of God. He would have to trust the LORD and not Tiglath-Pileser III, something he did not want to do. Ahaz was using the language of faith because he knew the Word of God, but he was in rebellion to the Lord (cf. Jonah 2:1-9; 4:1-3).

Ahaz had a very high opinion of himself. He thought he was indispensable to the plan of God.

In verses 13-17, the LORD comforts the House of David. Isaiah turns his attention to the House of David.

Apparently he was in the royal court with members of the Davidic family. Most likely Prince Hezekiah would have been there. At this point in time, he was a teenager, about 15 years old. The warning had been given to Ahaz that he would be set aside (disqualified) from ruling. He would not be “established”, but the House of David was reassured that the Davidic dynasty would still be established.

Isaiah stated: “Therefore the Lord (Adoni) Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and shall call his name Immanuel” (7:14). The word “you” in verse 14 is plural. In other words, he is no longer talking to Ahaz, but the whole house of David. The sign of the virgin born son, Immanuel, was directed primarily toward Hezekiah in order to encourage him to trust the Lord. A few years later, when he came to the throne, he instituted a great revival in that first year. His trust was only in the Lord.

The Hebrew word for “virgin” in verse 14 is “almah.” This word is never used in the Hebrew Scriptures of a married woman, but is used of a young woman of marriageable age (Gen. 24:43; Ex. 2:8; Ps. 68:26; Song of Sol. 1:3; 6:8; Prov. 30:18). Within the Israelite culture, one who is a virgin at the time of marriage is understood. There is another Hebrew word, “betula” that specifically means a virgin.

Interestingly, in the third century BC, seventy Jewish scholars got together in Alexandria, Egypt, and

translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek language. The translation, called the Septuagint (LXX), was for those Jewish people living in the Diaspora, or outside the Land of Israel, who spoke only Greek. When they came to the word “almah”, they translated it with the Greek word “parthenos” which is at the root of the word “parthenogenesis” that means “development of an egg without fertilization”. These translators understood the word to mean virgin in the technical sense of the word.

In the New Testament, Dr. Luke, describes the miraculous conception of the Lord Jesus in the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit in Luke 1:27, 34-38. Matthew also records the conception by the Holy Spirit in Matthew 1:18-25. In verse 23, Matthew follows the Septuagint when he quotes Isaiah 7:14 and uses the Greek word “parthenos”.

Some evangelical expositors have sought a dual fulfillment of this passage and try to identify Immanuel with either Hezekiah or the child of the prophetess who was Isaiah’s wife (8:3), and then also Jesus. These two suggested identification collapse on historical and theological grounds. First, Hezekiah was already born and was one of those in the royal court hearing this prophecy. Second, Immanuel could not be the son of the prophetess because she had already given birth to Shear-Yashub (7:3), thus she was not a virgin. The name Immanuel, “God with us” indicates that the Child will be God manifested in human flesh. Two chapters later, Isaiah would call Him the “Mighty God” (Isa. 9:6). There was One, and only one Person, who could fulfill this passage and that was the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are actually three aspects to the nature of this Child. First, He would be virgin born. Second, He would have a humble beginning. And third, He would have a sinless nature, thus divine. The first part of verse 15 states: "Curds and honey He shall eat." These are the food of the poor, not a symbol of a royal diet (contra Young 1992:I:291). The sign to shepherds was that He would be born in poor circumstances (Luke 2:10-12), not royal surroundings. When Mary dedicated her first-born in the Temple, she offered two turtle doves, the offering of the poor (Luke 2:22-24; cf. Lev. 12:8). The wise men did not arrive until a year, to a year and a half after the birth of the Lord Jesus, before they presented Jesus with gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Verse 15 goes on to say, "that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good." In this passage Isaiah is pointing out the sinless nature of the Child. Unlike us (and Hezekiah and Isaiah's children), who by nature are sinful human beings that choose evil and refuse the good (Rom. 1-3), this Child will have a sinless nature as demonstrated by the fact that He chooses good and refuses evil.

Isaiah takes this prophecy and applies the time frame of the Child to the present situation. He continues: "For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good" [that is, before He was born], "the land that you dread [Samaria] will be forsaken by both her kings" (7:16). To put it another way, after the defeat of Pekah and Rezin, Immanuel would be born. How much time after, Isaiah did not know (cf. I Pet. 1:10, 11). He did not have a prophecy chart in front of him with an arrow pointing to May 14, 6 BC to mark the birth of

Immanuel. Yet he believed Immanuel would one day be born.

It would be helpful to tell “the rest of the story.” Isaiah had admonished Ahaz to trust the Lord only, yet Ahaz wanted to trust Tiglath-Pileser III to take care of his foreign policy problems. Ahaz goes to Damascus to pay tribute and homage to Tiglath-Pileser III who, at this time, was not only king of Assyria, but Babylon as well (II Kings 16:9, 10). Isaiah warns Ahaz again about trusting Tiglath-Pileser III (Isa. 14:3-21) and reveals the king’s true intentions to Ahaz. The king of Assyria and Babylon wanted to “sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north” (Isa. 14:13; cf. Ps. 48:1-3). His intentions were to conquer Jerusalem! Ahaz would not believe this. In apparently what was the “straw that broke the camel’s back”, Ahaz made a plan of the altar that he saw in Damascus and sent it back to Jerusalem to be constructed. When he got back to Jerusalem, he offered sacrifices on this unbiblical altar (II Kings 16:10-18). God’s patience and long-suffering ran out and Ahaz dies soon after in 727 BC (Isa. 14:28).

Prince Hezekiah had apparently paid attention to Isaiah’s warnings as he saw what transpired in his father’s life because in the first year of King Hezekiah’s reign, there is a great revival. He reinstituted the Passover and Biblical worship in the Temple in Jerusalem and got rid of the idolatry taking place in the Kingdom of Judah (II Chron. 32:29-31; II Kings 18:2-5). Judah had been heading for destruction because of Ahaz’s idolatry, but Hezekiah brought the people back to the Lord and the Lord, in mercy, intervened. Tiglath-Pileser III was struck down in Damascus the same year that Ahaz died and judgment from God was averted on

Jerusalem. The prophet Micah also predicted the impending judgment on Jerusalem but because Hezekiah brought the people back to the Lord, the Lord did not carry out His planned judgment (Micah 3:12; cf. Jer. 26:16-19).

For the first time in the book of Isaiah, the Assyrians are mentioned by name as an instrument of God's judgment (7:17; cf. Isa. 10:5). Judgment was stayed in the first year of Hezekiah's reign, but they would come back at least two more times during Hezekiah's lifetime (Franz 1987). The most devastating invasion would be in the year 701 BC. At this time, most of Judah was destroyed, but Jerusalem and the House of David was spared because Hezekiah trusted the LORD.

The Near Destruction of the Land of the House of David - 7:18-25

In graphic poetic language, verses 18-26 predict the Assyrian invasion of Judah in the year 701 BC. The focus of this prophecy is the land (of Judah), and not Jerusalem and the House of David (7:22, 24). Elsewhere, Isaiah predicted Jerusalem and the House of David would be spared.

In this section, Isaiah begins by describing an infestation of insects to the land of Judah: flies from the "farthest part of the river of Egypt" and bees from Assyria. Some have taken this to be a literal infestation; others have suggested this is figurative language to describe the armies of the Ethiopians under Tirhakah (II Kings 19:9; Isa. 37:9), and the Assyrians under Sennacherib and his Rabshakeh in 701 BC. Most likely, Isaiah is using the insects in a figurative sense.

In the year 701 BC, Sennacherib recounts his invasion of Judah and says he destroyed 48 cities and took a number of Judeans captive. Verse 20 describes the humiliation of these Judeans by the Assyrians when they shaved their heads and beards.

The Assyrians wreaked havoc on the Land of Judah. They had taken most of the livestock as booty and left only a few people (7:21, 22, 25). Isaiah describes the remnant as having one young cow and two sheep that thrived in the uncultivated land so they could eat “curds and honey.” The phrase “curds and honey” (7:21, 22) is another form of the saying “milk and honey.” The founder of Naot Kedumim, the Biblical Gardens in Israel, Nogah Hareuveni has observed: “The phrase ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’ describes uncultivated areas covered with wild vegetation and a profusion of flowers. It is a positive and alluring description to the Israelites while they were still shepherds. However, after they settled the land of Israel by clearing the ‘milk and honey’ areas for cultivation, the same phrase became a frightening description associated with the destruction of productive farmland” (1980:22).

Isaiah goes on to describe the vineyards as reverting back to briars and thorns because they were uncultivated and now dangerous because they were inhabited by wild animals (7:23-25).

Hezekiah remembers these remarks from when he was a teenager. In order to avoid the impending destruction, in the first year of his reign, he was prompted to trust the Lord only. “He trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor who were before him” (II Kings 18:5).

Applications

There are two important theological truths being presented in this passage: first, the importance of the virgin birth for the Incarnation, and second, God's dealing with wayward believers.

The Incarnation is at the heart of the Christian message. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh ..." (I Tim. 3:16). The only way the Second Person of the triune God could take on human flesh without being tainted by Adam's sin was to be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. He possessed two natures, perfect humanity and absolute Deity. As God manifest in human flesh, He could not sin, He would not sin, and did not sin.

As the perfect, spotless, sinless Lamb of God, He could die in our place and pay for all our sins. As a result of that sacrifice, He could offer any and all who would trust Him, the free gift of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and a home in Heaven. The Bible says that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone and not by any works that we do, or merits of our own (John 3:16; Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8,9; Phil. 3:9; I John 5:13).

The second issue this passage addresses is how God deals with His wayward children. Sometimes, I might dare say many times, our distressing problems are self-inflicted and caused by sins in our lives and not being obedient to the Word of God. If that is the case, we need to examine our lives and confess our sins to the Lord and forsake those sins (I John 1:9; James 5:13-16).

The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in the church at Corinth about examples from the Hebrew Scriptures

showing God's chastening of His people during the Wilderness Wanderings (I Cor. 10:1-10). He concluded that section by saying: "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry" (I Cor. 10:11-14). If the Apostle Paul had expanded his list of examples of God's chastening of His children, he could have included King Ahaz and the messages by Isaiah and Micah about the way of escape.

The idolatrous King Ahaz had the attitude that God needed him more than he needed God. His idolatry and arrogant attitude was inconsistent with a close walk with the Lord. He should have heeded the words of the prophet Micah who stated, "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8). Ahaz did not, and God "disqualified" him and his kingdom was not established. Interestingly, the Apostle Paul identifies covetousness as idolatry (Col. 3:5).

On the other hand, we can learn some lessons from young Prince Hezekiah. He had observed what was going on in the kingdom and saw the consequences of his father's sin of idolatry. After his father died, Hezekiah was crowned king and instituted one of the greatest revivals in the history of the nation of Israel. His revival began by getting rid of the high places and

idols in the Kingdom of Judah and calling people back to Biblical worship in the Temple in Jerusalem (II Kings 18:4-6; II Chron. 29). Hezekiah saw the consequences of his father's sin and applied and practiced the principles revealed in the Word of God. Thus his kingdom was established.

We have the assurance of eternal life, but not the assurance of reigning with Christ. The apostle Paul includes one of the hymns of the early church in his epistle to Timothy. He states in II Tim. 2:11-13:

This is a faithful saying:

For if we died with Him,

We shall also live with Him.

If we endure,

We shall also reign with Him.

If we deny Him,

He also will deny us.

If we are faithless,

He remains faithful;

He cannot deny Himself.

The opening line of this hymn is true of all believers in the Lord Jesus. We have died with Christ (Gal. 2:20) and we shall also live with Him in resurrected glory. The second line would be addressed to the "overcomers", those who endure to the end of the Christian life. For those who are faithful, they will have the privilege of reigning with the Lord Jesus in the Millennial Kingdom. The third line, "if we deny Him, He also will deny us." In the context, He will deny us the privilege of ruling and

reigning with Him in the Kingdom. He is not talking about denying us salvation and eternal life if we deny Him, because the last line gives believers the assurance of salvation and the promise of eternal security. "If we are faithless (like King Ahaz was), He [Jesus] remains faithful; He [Jesus] cannot deny Himself." Even if we turn our backs on the Lord, He remains faithful to us because He cannot deny Himself (For a full discussion of this passage, see McCoy 1988). The Lord Jesus promised: "And I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hands. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one" (John 10:28-30). Talk about double (eternal) security - Jesus holds on to us and the Father holds on to us; and no one, not even Satan, can snatch us out of either hand!

There is an old hymn entitled "Trust and Obey." King Ahaz did not trust the Lord, nor did he obey God's Word and he was not established, God removed him from the throne. On the other hand, King Hezekiah did trust the Lord and obey His Word, thus the ultimate sign, the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus, was fulfilled.

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1 Two possibilities have been suggested as to this meeting location. The first is north of Damascus Gate at what was known as the Serpents Pools. These pools are now covered over by the Damascus Gate parking lot (Barkay 1985: 63-65, 3*). The second possibility is by the Pools of Bethesda (Bahat 1989: 28, 33). In the year 701 BC this would be the meeting place of three of Hezekiah's court officials with the Rabshakeh, the commander of the Assyrian army, who was besieging Jerusalem (Isa. 36:2; II Kings 18:17).

2 Several suggestions, based on Assyrian records, have been made in the scholarly literature as to who this son of Tabeel might be.

The first suggestion was made by William Foxwell Albright based on a cuneiform tablet that was excavated at Nimrud in 1952 by Professor Max Mallowan, the husband of Agatha Christie. Albright gave his translation of line 4-7 of Tablet XIV as: "The messenger of Ayanir, the Tab'elite, Ezazu by name, is bringing a sealed document with him to the palace" (1955:34). He suggested that the land of Tab'el is in northeastern Palestine or southeastern Syria and that the son of Tab'el "was presumably the son of Uzziah or Jothan by a princess of Tab'el" (1955:35). Albright's reading of Tab'elite is contrary to the original reading of the epigrapher who translated the text, H. W. F. Saggs. He translates it as "Dabilite" and identified it as "a place in or near Moab" (1955:132). One should be cautious about accepting Albright's identification and interpretation.

The second suggestion was made based on a vassal list on a stele of Tiglath-Pileser III that was found in western Iran and is now in the Royal Ontario Museum (Levine 1972a). In the year 737 BC, Tiglath-Pileser III campaigned in the west and made various kings vassals, including Resin of Damascus, Menahem of Samaria and a certain Tubail of Tyre (1972b: 41). It has been suggested that the “son of Tabeel” was a prince of the king of Tyre whose father was named Tabal, or Tabail. According to this suggestion, Pekah and Rezin promised the king of Tyre the throne of Judah if he would join the coalition (Hayes and Irvine 1987: 127).

The final suggestion was set forth by Professor Benjamin Mazar (1957: 137-145; 229-238). He contends that: “It is likely that this Ben-Tab’el was the descendant of a noble Judean family, perhaps even a relation of the house of David, who had many supporters among Ahaz’ enemies in Jerusalem and was closely connected with the kings of Israel and Aram” (1957: 236). He places their land holdings in Transjordan in general and Gilead in specific (1957: 237-238). Most likely Professor Mazar is correct.

3 It was the practice in Israel (the Northern Kingdom) to exterminate entire dynasties. This is seen by the elimination of the House of Jeroboam I (I Kings 14:7-11; 15:27-29), the House of Baasha (I Kings 16:1-4, 11, 12), the Omride Dynasty (II Kings 10:8-11) and the House of Jeroboam II (Amos 7:9; Hosea 1:3; II Kings 15:16). One would assume that they would be planning to exterminate the entire House of David.