

Waiting for Immanuel

Isaiah 6:8 – 9:7

For years I've heard these words read at Christmas:

"Therefore the Lord Himself shall give to you a sign: Behold the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel" (literal) (Isa 7:14).

But when I read the rest of that section of Isaiah I became confused. I couldn't tell whether those words were about the future Messiah or an event that took place in Isaiah's time. So this year I asked God to help us understand this promise, to know for sure if it speaks of Jesus, and if it does, to let those beautiful words build our faith. This year, I believe the Lord has begun to answer that prayer. He has given me more understanding, so let's listen to Isaiah afresh. This wonderful man; this amazing prophet who was so accurate some people still can't believe he wrote it all; this fellow-believer who saw the birth of Jesus, the death of Jesus, and the return of Jesus, 750 years before our Lord was born; this preacher who can proclaim the gospel as clearly as any apostle in the New Testament deserves to be heard afresh this Christmas. So let's give him our full attention.

Isaiah's assignment (Isa 6:9-13)

When Isaiah was called to be a prophet he was warned that the people wouldn't listen to him, but he was also given a very special hope. As soon as he said, "Here am I. Send me!" (v8), the Lord said, "Go..." and then proceeded to tell him that his ministry would fail to prevent the coming judgment. His prophecies would only serve to harden people further, because they would refuse to repent (6:9, 10). In spite of all his efforts, the entire land of Israel would be devastated and much of the population resettled in other lands (6:11, 12).

Yet, because God was faithful to the promises He had made to earlier generations, a remnant would be preserved. Jerusalem would be spared. David's family would be left intact because "the holy seed is its stump." The "seed of the woman" (Ge 3:15), David's "seed" (2Sa 7:12), the Messiah who had not yet been born was in the genes, the DNA of that family (6:13). That future child who was in that family, in that city, in that tribe (of Judah) must be protected in order for God to fulfill His plan of salvation.

Confronting Ahaz (Isa 7:1-25)

When Syria and the ten northern tribes of Israel united to fight against the southern kingdom of Judah, Ahaz, the king of Judah, a man who worshipped idols (2Ki 16:4), was terrified (Isa 7:2). Isaiah was told by God to take his son whose name meant "a remnant will return" and confront the king as he was traveling on a certain road. He was to tell him that the enemies that planned to capture Jerusalem and replace him with a puppet king would not succeed. In fact, the Assyrian empire sent an army in about three years and crushed Syria. Then, about ten years after that, they attacked the northern kingdom, took the people out of the land, and resettled them in other nations.

Isaiah knew that King Ahaz had no faith, so he challenged him to ask God for a miraculous sign that would prove that this prophecy would be fulfilled (7:11). Ahaz refused, saying he had too much respect for God to ask Him to prove Himself (7:12). After he said that, Isaiah began to prophesy again. And this time he was only speaking to Ahaz as a physical representative of David's royal family. He told Ahaz that his refusal of God's offer was infuriating to God, and if God were not patient He would strike him for it. Then, he said if Ahaz wouldn't ask for a miraculous sign, God would give David's family a sign of His own choosing. And this was the sign: when the special son that had been promised to David (2Sa 7:4-17) was born, He would be a miracle, "...a virgin will conceive and bear a son and she will call His name Immanuel" (literal). In other words, the promised Messiah would in some way, be both human and divine. He would be "God with us."

In Isaiah's thinking that "Son of David" was already present in the sense that He was being carried within the family. And if that child had been born at that moment, then by the time he reached the age of moral accountability, which is somewhere between 12-14 years, then both kingdoms that Ahaz feared (Syria and Israel) would be ruined. In fact, this happened so literally that everything from the plain of Jezreel northward, especially the tribal areas of Zebulun and Naphtali (Isa 9:1) became almost completely Gentile.



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Ahaz's response (2Ki 16:5-18)

Ahaz did not listen to Isaiah. Instead he sent money from the temple treasury and his royal treasury to the king of Assyria, begging him to come and rescue Judah from these kingdoms that were attacking him. And the Assyrian king, Tiglath Pileser, came and immediately destroyed Syria and subjected the northern ten tribes. Part of the price Ahaz had to pay was that he himself became submitted to the Assyrian king and was forced to worship his god. He even built an altar to the god Ashur and placed it in the temple in Jerusalem. And as Judah declined, Egypt joined Assyria in the stripping the land of its resources (Isa 7:18).

About ten years later (Isa 8:1-8)

About ten years later, Isaiah's wife bore another son whom he named "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil" (vs1-3). The Lord said that by the time the child was about two years old (v4), the king of Assyria would attack the whole region again and only Jerusalem would be spared. God said the people had stopped turning to Him for their resource (waters of Shiloah) (v6) and were trusting in their political treaties, so Assyria would sweep into the region like a flood. Everything in Judah would fall except the city of Jerusalem because Immanuel, the seed of the Messiah, was there. God said He would shatter Assyria's plans, which He did during the reign of Ahaz's son, Hezekiah. When Assyria sieged Jerusalem, God caused the death of 185,000 soldiers in one night (Isa 37:26). Thus, Jerusalem was left standing alone, "like a watchman's hut in a cucumber field..." (Isa 1:8). That flood of Assyria swept through Judah and reached "even to the neck," but it didn't cover the head, Jerusalem. Why? Because Immanuel had to be born. In God's heart, all of Israel was already Immanuel's land (Isa 8:8).

Believing in Immanuel (Isa 8:11-18)

God told Isaiah not to doubt the word he had spoken, nor fear the criticism he was receiving. He must focus on pleasing God, and trust Him to do what He said He would do. That truth, that God would defend Immanuel at all costs, would test the hearts of those who heard it. Some would believe and seek shelter in Him, but others would not believe, and as a result would fall into deeper judgment. He would become a sanctuary to some, and a stumbling stone to others (Isa 8:14). He would again when He was born (Lk 2:34; 20:17, 18; 1Pe 2:8).

Isaiah responded by declaring that he wouldn't change a word that he had written, and that he would teach that truth to his followers. He told God he would wait patiently for Him to do what He promised, and said his children, with their prophetic names, would remind Israel of His prophecies.

Isaiah prophesied again (Isa 8:19-22)

Then Isaiah prophesied again with a fury, he was about to proclaim Immanuel with such clarity the world would never be the same. He began by addressing that generation that hadn't listened to him, to both the kingdom of Judah and the ten northern tribes. He scolded them for turning to mediums and spiritists, to try to discern their future. Instead, he said, God's Word should guide their decisions. Those who rejected the truths he was presenting, did so because they lacked revelation from God. They were living in deception, but whether they expected it or not Assyria would surely come, just as he prophesied. And predictably, when it did, he said they would look up and blame God rather than themselves. They would frantically look everywhere but God for relief, and find none.

A great light (Isa 9:1-5)

Then, as happened so often through Isaiah, after announcing judgment, God also announced hope. He said, Israel would not be destroyed. God would send Immanuel to deliver them from the darkness they had brought upon themselves, and He would set up God's kingdom on earth. He mentioned the area north of the Jezreel Valley, the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, which would be so devastated by the Assyrian invasion that they would become a Gentile region. He told those areas that when Immanuel came He would especially bring God's revelation to them. His presence would bring gladness to their hearts. He would deliver them from oppression; the first time He came, by bringing spiritual salvation; and at His return, He will destroy the nations assembled at the battle of Armageddon.



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Human and divine (Isa 9:6, 7)

Then, in words we read every Christmas, Isaiah announced to all who believe, “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest upon His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful (supernatural) Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father (our Source and loving Ruler), Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over His kingdom to establish it with justice, and righteousness from then on and forevermore” (Isa 9:6, 7).

The holy seed, Immanuel, the promised Son of David, will be a human son born to a member of David’s family. But He will be more than a very good man. He will have divine qualities, and His kingdom will last forever, always growing larger and becoming more peaceful. It will never come to an end because, forever, His rule will be just and righteous.

Isaiah closed this promise with this statement: “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.” This means, it is not a conditional promise based on what humans do or don’t do. It’s a sovereign commitment by God to send Immanuel, whether humans obey Him or not.

Immanuel arrives (Mt 1:18-25)

Matthew opens his gospel by showing us that Jesus is indeed the promised Immanuel. Just as Isaiah said He would be: He was born to a virgin, the Holy Spirit caused her to miraculously conceive, and He fulfilled the meaning of the name Immanuel. He is “God with us.” Though descended from David through Mary (Mt 1:6-16), His spirit came from heaven, so He is truly man and truly God’s divine Son.

Why?

Why was it necessary for God’s Son to become a man? Why couldn’t He just appear to be a man and then return to heaven? He’d done that before (Ge 18). The answer lies in God’s justice. He cannot ignore our sins; He must atone them. The weight of human sin is inconceivably huge. The appropriate payment for one sinful life is that person’s death (Ro 6:23), so who could pay the moral debt of the entire human race? Whose death could have enough merit, goodness, holiness to outweigh the sin that must be removed? No human, no matter how good, could come close to that. But God’s divine Son, dying on our behalf, would provide an infinite atonement. He, whose worth, purity, holiness and godliness are completely unmarred by sin is the only one possible. And for Him to do so, He had to leave heaven, become a man, endure temptation, remain sinless, and freely choose to endure the horrible process Isaiah also described in painful detail (Isa 49:1-53:12). To die, He must be human. To pay for our sins, He must be divine. He, and He alone, is both. There is no other Savior. There can’t be. God has only one begotten Son (Jn 1:18).

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14).

Isaiah believed in Him. He called Him Immanuel. We do to, but we call Him Jesus, because “He will save His people from their sins” (Mt 1:21).

Questions

- 1) If a small child asked you, “Who is Jesus?” what would you say?
- 2) Why did God call the coming Savior, “Immanuel”? What does that name mean? How did Jesus fulfill that name?
- 3) Is there a passage of Scripture you like to read on Christmas morning? What is it? Would you like to read it now?