

The Sign

Isaiah 7:14 | Dec. 22, 2019 | Bryce Beale

What is prophecy?

It is a declaration of things to come. It is not a guess or wise prediction that any mortal might make, but a statement of what will really be. In the natural terms we're familiar with, there can be no prophecy. We can by natural means learn about what *has* happened, but we have no normal way to know what *will*. Prophecy must involve something more than natural—it must be born in the supernatural.

But once we bring the supernatural into our discussion, we should expect things to become more complicated. We can write textbooks about the natural world because we can observe the natural world with our eyes, touch it with our hands, hear it with our ears. But how do we access the supernatural realm? We could make things up—many do, trusting that since you can't see or touch or hear the supernatural world, you cannot debunk their claims.

But if we just make things up, then we are left in the end with the nothing that we have invented, and no more.

No, we may write the textbooks in the natural realm, but we don't write the textbooks in the supernatural. God alone can compose that text, and it belongs to us humbly to read what he has written.

Prophecy then is not as simple as we may imagine it. If we were writing the story, we might have prophecy function like this: A prophet says what will happen, and it happens.

But if God were writing the story, it would be much more interesting than that. God has written the story; it is much more interesting than that.

This morning we will remember the birth of our Lord, always the subject of Christmas-time. But I want to consider the story through a prophecy made seven hundred years before that birth occurred. It is a prophecy you probably know: "Behold," the prophet Isaiah declares, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and shall call his name Immanuel.”¹ Matthew in the first chapter of his gospel repeats the prophecy and claims that it was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

This seems straight-forward enough: Isaiah said a virgin would bear a son, and seven hundred years afterward the virgin Mary bore a son. That’s how our story would go.

But that is not how God crafted his story. This morning we must put aside our simplistic expectations, and sit at the feet of our Lord to learn from him. The result will be, I think you’ll find, more remarkable than anything man or woman can contrive.

Let’s begin then in the passage from Isaiah, some seven hundred years before the time of Jesus. Later we will cross those seven hundred years to see the highest fulfillment of the prophecy in Jesus’ birth.

ISAIAH 7:1-14

This passage centers on one man: Ahaz. In his day, in the 700’s BC, God’s people Israel existed in two parts, as two separate nations. There was the northern part, usually just called Israel, though in our text dubbed Ephraim, its chief tribe, or Samaria, its chief city. The king of that half was Pekah.

Then there was the southern part, usually just called Judah, for it was really only that one tribe, Judah, of the twelve tribes that made up God’s people. Jerusalem is the great city of the southern half, and Ahaz is king of this southern part, ruling in Jerusalem. Most important of all, Jerusalem was the city of Israel’s greatest king, King David, and those kings who sat on her throne including Ahaz were David’s descendants.

Now, if you were to travel north from Judah and come to Israel, and then were to travel north just a bit further, you would arrive in Syria. Syria’s king was Rezin.

Thus we can reread the setting of our passage in its first four verses and better understand them:

In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah [the southern part of God’s people], Rezin the king of Syria [foreigners in the far north] and Pekah the

¹ ESV.

son of Remaliah the king of Israel [the northern part of God's people] came up to Jerusalem [in Judah in the south, where Ahaz was] to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. When the house of David [that is, Ahaz and his relatives, the kingly household] was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim [that is, Israel, the northern part]," the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

Israel in the north had joined with its neighbor Syria to attack Judah in the south. That is the setting of our passage.

And that is why we turn our attention to Ahaz. He is the southern king and he is struck with fear to hear of Israel's alliance with Syria. Pekah and Rezin intend to sweep down and dethrone Ahaz, and they may just have the force to do it.

You perhaps know from your studies of the kings of Judah and of Israel that usually a king would be either a good king who follows the Lord, or a bad one who rejects him. So what was Ahaz? Was he good, or was he bad?

Hear what Scripture says in 2 Kings 16:

[Ahaz] did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God, as his [fore]father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his 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.²

Ahaz was a bad king.

All of this is necessary background for you to see the complexity of God's purposes, the beauty of his prophecy concerning Jesus. Who here would immerse a prophecy in such a rich and dense history? We are simpler than that. But God is not. He ties the prophecy of Jesus to a particular time in history, so as to make its fulfillment all the more miraculous.

² Vv. 2-4.

Now you are set to understand what happens in verses 10 and on, leading up to the prophecy. God had told Ahaz through Isaiah that his two northern neighbors, Israel and Syria, who intend to overtake him, will themselves be destroyed and fail in their plan. Isaiah ends this declaration with a call to faith, in verse 9: “If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”

Ahaz and his house were not firm in faith. He did not believe that God would deliver him. In fact, we know from elsewhere that Ahaz was actively working to secure his own salvation. He had sent to Assyria, another nation far north, asking them to come deliver him. Ahaz was not a believer in Yahweh; he was a believer in the strength of man, not of God.

In that light see the interaction beginning in verse 10:

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: “Ask a sign of the LORD your God [to prove that he will deliver you, as he has said]; 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 [Isaiah] said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?”³

If you only had this passage, you might wonder at God’s anger. Ahaz seems to act nobly—he refuses, in his own words, to put God to the test. But it is all a cover. Ahaz doesn’t believe God can or will deliver him anyways. His trust is in Assyria; so he refuses to do what God has commanded him. God offers to strengthen Ahaz’s faith by means of an amazing sign, to show the king that he is certainly involved. But Ahaz has no faith. He doesn’t want to trust in God. He refuses God’s command.

Thus the Lord is displeased, and it is here that we come to the prophecy we are considering. But see how rich the texture all around this prophecy! We do not here have a one-line Christmas greeting card to offer us vague encouragement; we have a whole history manipulated by the hand of God, interwoven with the promise of Christ’s coming. This is not a frail, thin prophecy like we might make—this is a thick, dense, intricate prophecy fresh from the forge of God’s infinite wisdom.

Isaiah offers the prophecy in these words, in 7:14: “Therefore [since you, Ahaz, refuse to choose what sign should be given] the

³ Vv. 10-13.

Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." That is in Hebrew, "God with us."

Now things get interesting. For we have in these words not a direct prophecy, but a kind of prophecy that we call a type. A type is a picture played out in real life, that leaves us with a lingering sense that it is only a picture of something more, something greater yet to come.

Let me show you this from the text.

Look at what is said about the boy to be born in verse 16: "For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted." Before this boy born to the virgin is old enough to discern good from evil, Pekah and Rezin, the two kings of the north, will no longer be a threat to Ahaz. Their land will be deserted. And since this will happen by God's hand, this boy shall be described by the name "God with us," for God will show himself to be with Judah.

And this happened in history. A virgin, a young woman, did conceive and bear this son. We see it in chapter 8, starting in verse 3:

And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, "Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz; for before the boy knows how to cry "My father" or "My mother," the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria."⁴

Here is Isaiah's second son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and he fits the prophecy of the chapter before. While he is still quite young, the two northern kings will be defeated.

But this is not, cannot be the story's end. For there is at least one great problem with Isaiah's son fulfilling the prophecy. And that is, if God meant only that a young woman would have a child by normal means, then how would that be a sign? Isaiah knows his wife, and Maher-shalal-hash-baz is born. Where is the sign in this?

⁴ Vv. 3-4.

As amazing as it is that mankind can reproduce, it is no miraculous sign. It is commonplace.

Why should God have said, “I myself will give you a sign,” and then disappoint us with something that is not a miracle, not a sign or confirmation of his promised deliverance? “A young woman will conceive and have a child.” That is no sign worthy to be introduced by, “The LORD himself will give you a sign.”

Furthermore Isaiah is adamant that even his child, this Maher-shalal-hash-baz, is a sign pointing to something other than himself. Isaiah says so in verse 18: “Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts.” Isaiah’s son cannot be the full fulfillment of the prophecy, for that son himself is just a sign pointing elsewhere.

He is what we call a type. He is a pattern, a picture, that foreshadows something greater to come. That is why if someone tries to see Maher-shalal-hash-baz as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, that person will be left with an unsettled and unsatisfied sense that there must be more. Where is the sign? Where is the mighty intervention of God in this?

For this reason some interpreters have said that the prophecy is not about Isaiah’s son, but about Ahaz’s son, Hezekiah, the future ruler of Judah. Hezekiah will prove to be a godly king, and in his day when Assyria, the nation that defeats the two northern powers, comes down to try taking Jerusalem, God sends an angel who strikes down the Assyrian army. Thus Hezekiah’s life would be well represented by that title, “God is with us.” God was with him and with the people of Judah in his day, to deliver them.

Seeing Hezekiah in the prophecy also makes sense of something said in chapter 9, in verses 6 and 7. “For to us,” declares Isaiah, “a child is born.” And since we have just heard in chapter 7 of this child to be born, this Immanuel, it makes sense to take this prophecy in chapter 9 to refer to the same individual as the prophecy of chapter 7.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.

Since none of these things could be said of Isaiah's son, some see in our original prophecy the promise of a future king, Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz.

Yet this puts us in the same predicament as before. How would Hezekiah's birth, by natural means, be a sign or miracle? And even more, though Hezekiah would sit on the throne of David and would rule over his kingdom, no one can say that he would introduce a never-ending peace into the nation. In fact, Hezekiah's own son, Manasseh, would prove to be one of the most wicked ever to ascend the throne, and would lead Judah down a path toward destruction.

You can see how all these prophecies seem almost to be fulfilled in their day, either by Isaiah's son or by Ahaz's, and yet they leave you with a sense of loose ends. If you quite fervently do not want these prophecies to mean anything more, then you can make yourself settle for their immediate fulfillments. This is what the Jewish people do to this day.

But the irony is that before Jesus came, before a single Christian existed, the Jewish people themselves felt this sense of unfinished business quite strongly. There was a conviction among the Jews, developed before Jesus' birth, based on prophecies just like these, that God intended to do something greater. They saw David as a type, a pattern, a picture of a greater David to come, a king to sit upon his throne and of whom it might be said, "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end."

Christians did not invent types. The Jewish people felt them before we ever did, because this unsettled feeling is the very one God meant to give to the readers of the Old Testament. Surely there will be something more; surely there will be a greater fulfillment, a true sign.

Because it is too normal for a young woman to marry, to know her husband, and then to bear a child. But what if a young woman

bore a child without ever knowing a man? What if she was not just a “young woman,” as the Hebrew word could have it, but a “virgin,” which is not beyond the word’s range. *That* would be a sign, for who has ever heard of such a thing? Storytellers of the ancient world here and there invented fables of a virgin birth, but when had it ever actually happened. If it did, that would be a satisfying sign.

And what if this child to be born were a king, not like Hezekiah who died, but one who lives and reigns forever, who will establish a kingdom that knows no end? That would be a worthy object of the sign!

And—here is the final mystery—what if that title, “Immanuel,” was not just a statement about God’s presence with his people, but was a description of the child to be born? What if the child would be God with us? That would astound us all! That would make sense of Isaiah 9, which says he will be called Mighty God and Everlasting Father. That would not leave us with a sense of longing or of emptiness, but of a satisfying conclusion to all the types and patterns and prophecies before. That would be a rich conclusion to the thick history God had crafted throughout earth’s earlier years.

What if all these types before were just a red carpet rolled out down the corridors of time, preparing the world for the main event, the primary protagonist of history: God himself, as a man.

It is with this exciting expectation that we can now read the Christmas story anew, or that short part of it described in Matthew 1:18-23. Move forward seven hundred years, long after Isaiah has died, and Ahaz has been buried with the kings of Judah, long after Assyria is no more and the political events that consumed the day have become mere memories, and you will find these words:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the

Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us).

Friends, we will all be reading the same Christmas story this year’s end. But we will not all see the same richness, the density, the glory that is there to be seen by the eyes of faith.

Ahaz was a man much like we are prone to be, caught up in the worries of this life, shaking before his fears of the future, and dependent upon this world for his happiness. His trust was in Assyria, that she would deliver him. A magnificent sign was put before him, but he didn’t see it. He didn’t want to see it. So God obliged.

And what do you want to see this Christmas? If you want to see the gifts under the tree and the happy memories with friends and family, if you want to see the dinner spread and the sporting events, and that is all you want to see, then that is all you will see. It will be a thin, frail sight, and afterward you will be left with a lingering sense of incompleteness, but you will have your wish.

If on the other hand you refuse to settle for mere shadows—if you appeal to God for eyes to see the substance, to follow the signs to that greater thing they point to, then you will have your wish too. You will see the gifts, the food, the family and friends as mere textures, mere materials that composite become part of the rich story which points to the one great thing, that Son of David, that eternal King born of the virgin Mary, truly man but truly God as well, living and then dying in the place of his people, to save them from their sins—to save you, if you truly believe, from yours.

You will see not Maher-shalal-hash-baz, not Hezekiah, not the imposing kings of the north nor the looming threat of Assyria—but you will see the child that all of history past and present has been made to announce: Jesus, son of Mary, Savior of the world, and God with us.