

The sign that the Lord gave

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[0:00] Right, so I'll tell you what my plan is this evening, such as it is. I'll tell you something else.

Tomorrow, let's look at the wise men, God willing. But what I'd like us to do this evening is to dip back into this business of fulfillment because, as we saw this morning, this is a big theme in Matthew's Gospel and it deserves actually to be looked at more thoroughly and carefully.

And I haven't got a sermonic form for you this evening, but a sort of meditative form that we can look at together in the matter of the birth of Jesus' fulfillment.

So moving from something which is not full, perhaps is smaller or just in embryo, as it were, to something that's full or filled or as full as it possibly could be.

And you remember that the particular things in this part of Matthew's Gospel that he says are fulfillment. He says, verse 22, all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophets.

[1:20] That's chapter 1, verse 22. And chapter 2, verse 15, where he says, And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, Out of Egypt I call my son.

And chapter 2, verse 17, Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. A voice is heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children.

And chapter 2, verse 23, So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, He will be called a Nazarene.

Now, each of those is, it sort of starts a thread that you, that really ought to be followed. And the following is not a trivial exercise.

There's sort of a lot to explore. My picture for it was of a progress from the empty glass to the full one with some mind behind it saying, this is the purpose that is going to be fulfilled.

[2:26] And that was the text that we looked at this morning. Now, the thing that we have to get clear in our minds is that this text, he just quotes that amount of it.

And we might think that texts like that are like jokes and Christmas crackers. Jokes and Christmas crackers, they're just that long.

Sometimes they're funny. Not always. But they don't sort of fit together. When we were at the thing with Dean the other day, you might have compared notes.

Did you open your cracker? And there's usually questions about penguins and things like that. But they're just a little thing, and then another little thing that's completely separate, and another little thing that's completely separate.

And that's how jokes are in crackers, Christmas crackers. But these texts, although they might look like that, because he only quotes that much of them, they're actually connected to whole loads of other text.

[3:34] He's just picking out a bit that's part of a sweep of a narrative, or a sweep of a picture that's being painted.

And that's the bit that means that when we go back, we've got to actually look at quite a bit of what he's saying. And so, for example, in Bethlehem in Judea, chapter 2, verse 5, you Bethlehem in the land of Judah, by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

I mean, that would be well worth dipping into and seeing where that leads, because it leads a long way, actually. But what I thought we would do this evening is look at this particular quotation about the Virgin will conceive and the Emmanuel.

So may we go back and find out where it's been quoted from. So that's the plan for this evening. We'll look at that together. And I'd like to look at it in some detail.

In a sense, it wouldn't be suitable for a carol service where there were visitors who were not used to the Bible, but on the assumption that we've got enough stamina to read a bit of Bible and not get too baffled by it, let's look at Isaiah chapter 7 and to look at the whole thing.

[4:55] So would you mind if I read you chapter 7 and it sort of demands to be taken over in chapter 8 as well. So would you have the patience to sit and listen as we read the whole chapter?

Well, I'm going to anyway. So Isaiah 7. So we're now back 700 years before Christ in the time of the kings when the southern kingdom and the northern kingdom had split and were enemies.

I'll give you a map in a minute. But this is Ahaz the king. And the question is, you've got enemies to the north. You've got big enemies.

You've got, what are you going to do in this highly pressured situation? When Ahaz, son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king in Judah, King Rezin from Aram and Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel, marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

Now the house of David was told, Aram has allied itself with Ephraim. So the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

[6:07] Then the Lord said to Isaiah, Go out, you and your son, Shea Yashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the upper pool on the road to the washerman's field.

Say to him, be careful, keep calm, don't be afraid, don't lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood, because of the fierce anger of Rezin of Aram and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.

Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah, and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, let us invade Judah, let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves and make the son of Tabael king over it. Yet this is what the sovereign Lord says, it will not take place, it will not happen. The head of Aram is Damascus. The head of Damascus is only Rezin.

Within 65 years, Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. The head of Ephraim is Samaria. The head of Samaria is only Ramaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

[7:20] Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights. But Ahaz said, I will not ask.

I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said, Here now, you house of David, is it not enough to try the patience of men?

Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.

He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father time, unlike any, since Ephraim broke away from Judah. He will bring the king of Assyria.

[8:23] In that day, the Lord will whistle for flies from the distant streams of Egypt and bees from the land of Assyria. They will all come and settle in the steep ravines and the crevices in the rocks and on the thorn bushes and at all the water holes.

In that day, the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the river, the king of Assyria, to shave your head and the hair of your legs to take off your beards also.

In that day, a man will keep alive a young cow and two goats and because of the abundance of the milk they give, he will have curds to eat and all who remain in the land will eat curds and honey.

In that day, in every place where there are a thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels, there will be only briars and thorns. Men will go there with bow and arrow for the land will be covered with briars and thorns and as for the hills once cultivated by the hoe, you will no longer go there for fear of the briars and thorns.

They will become places where cattle are turned loose and where sheep run. And the Lord said to me, take a large scroll and write on it with an ordinary pen, Maha Shalal Hashbaz, and I will call in Uriah the priest and Zechariah, son of Zeberekiah, as reliable witnesses for me.

[9:40] And then I went to the prophetess, she conceived and gave birth to a son. The Lord said to me, name him Maha Shalal Hashbaz, which means, which means, quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.

Before the boy knows how to say my mother or my father, the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria.

The Lord spoke to me again, because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah and rejoices over Rezin, the son of Ramaliah, therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the river.

The king of Assyria, with all his pomp, it will overflow its channels, run over its banks and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck.

Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel. Raise the war cry, you nations, and be shattered. Listen, all you distant lands, prepare for battle and be shattered.

[10:53] Prepare for battle and be shattered. Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted. Propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

The Lord spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. He said, do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy.

Do not fear what they fear. Do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. He is the one you are to fear. He is the one you are to dread.

And he will be a sanctuary for both houses of Israel. He will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

And the people of Jerusalem, and for the people of Jerusalem, he will be a trap and a snare. And many of them will stumble and they will fall and be broken. They will be snared and captured.

[11:55] Bind up the testimony. Seal up the law among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord who is hiding his place from the house of Jacob.

I will put my trust in him. Here am I and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty who dwells on Mount Zion.

When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God?

Why consult the dead on behalf of the living to the law and to the testimony? If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land.

When they are famished, they will become enraged and looking upward will curse their king and their God. Or might be cursed by their king and their God. And they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom and they will be thrust into outer darkness.

[13:04] But there will be no more gloom for those who are in distress. In the past, he humbled the land of Zebulun, the land of Naphtali. But in future, he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles by the way of the sea along the Jordan.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.

They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning.

It will be fuel for the fire. For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end.

[14:16] He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Amen. Terrific scriptures, aren't they? So we'll just have a little delve into that and you'll probably not thank me for being too long with it, will you? So let's do the map.

This is the Mediterranean. Mediterranean. That's Egypt. That's Cyprus. And as follows. So Jerusalem is there.

God's headquarters. That's where it's all taking place. Egypt is there. Exercising pressure on Judah. Join in with us. Trust us. We'll keep you safe. That's the place where they were rescued from slavery and a possible, plausible, but actually disappointing, ally.

[15:24] That's the area of the superpower Assyria, which at this time is, hasn't stretched out her full capacity, but is also pressing here.

Judah is squashed in the middle with these powers pressing against us. How shall we survive? What shall we do? Should we make a covenant with Egypt and come under their protection? Or should we make a covenant with Assyria and come under their protection? And at the point in the reading is the northern kingdom, Ephraim, and Aram, which is Syria, are both ganging up against Ahaz, and the pressure is on for his security.

That's the context of it. And the date is about 736 BC, the place is Jerusalem, the enemies in the north, Israel and Syria, or Aram, and Assyria in the further away, but big and powerful.

And the issue is when this pressure is on, who do you trust? That's what this whole thing is about.

[16:48] When the pressure is on, who do you trust? Who do you rely on? Who do you say they're the ones, or that's the one whom I really need to fear, to rely on, to trust?

That's the one that looms largest. Who's that going to be? And how can I be sure of that? That's the context in which this is put.

and it's, I mean, we can identify with that in a small way, can't we? Because pressure comes on us in all sorts of shapes and forms, sometimes overtly, sometimes more subtly, the things that we worry about, the things that get to us, the things that oppress us, the things that we rely on for our security.

And that's exactly the situation that Ahaz is in. What's going to keep me going? What am I going to rely on? And you will bear in mind that there's two such situations in this piece of history.

There's the Ahaz situation, and then later on, there is the Hezekiah situation. Both these men are put in more or less the same position with enemies at the gates, and a huge pressure to make some sort of alliance with some human power.

[18:29] And you remember Hezekiah, when the enemy came to his gate, with the Assyrian field commander, who sent a message, you know, we're going to get you.

I've got all the other nations. We're going to get you. It's just a matter of time. Might as well give in now. Hezekiah, do you remember what he did? He had that letter.

Do you remember what he did with it? He spread it before the Lord, and he went and prayed, and God delivered him. Thank you very much. And the question, so that's what happened to that second generation.

Now, what happens in this first generation? And notice the way that this is pitched. So chapter 7, verse 8 and 9 says, look, don't be intimidated by these two little nations to the north.

If they were intimidated, it says verse 2, the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken as the trees of the forest were shaken by the wind. They really were intimidated.

[19:43] But God says, look, don't be intimidated by that. Verse 8, the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is just resin.

They're just people. And they're people that don't last very long. Now, within 75 years, Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.

You can't put your trust in them. They're not eternal and strong. They're weak and temporary. And the same thing about Ephraim. And verse 9 ends, you have to trust in the Lord.

That's what is essential to being the people of God. If you've lost that, there's nothing left. If you don't stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.

It's a very fundamental lesson. True for Christmas, it's true all the year round, isn't it? If we're not believing people, trusting people, on a day-by-day basis, then we're not standing at all.

[20:55] You've got to be a nation of faith. And then in chapter 8 verse 12, same sort of thing. Don't be knocked off course.

Verse 12, don't call conspiracy everything these people call conspiracy. Do not fear what they fear. Do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy.

He is the one you are to fear. He is the one you are to dread. And he will be a sanctuary. In other words, I think a safe, holy place for his people if they come to him in faith.

And it also says that he has the what should I say the he sort of poses a dilemma, a two way thing that if we put our trust in him he is security to us.

If we fail to trust in him he becomes a stone that we trip over. A stumbling block. A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

[22:27] Verse 14. So it really does matter whether we meet the Lord in faith or if you put it another way around, whether we meet life in faith in the Lord or whether we don't.

know and this whole chapter is simply about that. Ahaz, what are you going to do? Are you going to trust the Lord or panic or find another way out or whatever?

and if you like that's my point this evening that's the point of this chapter if they don't believe in the Lord then this has consequences the mission of Israel believing Israel was to be a light to the nations and a blessing to the nations but if they fail to respond in faith then what will happen is described here that this Assyria and we presume that the thought was that you sign a contract with Assyria sort of a protection contract with Assyria and then you think well now at least we'll be safe but what he says if you do that if you don't trust in the Lord that this Assyria will come down come sweeping down and fill your land come up to almost like the borders of your house and this is why this idea of bees coming from the land of Assyria coming and settling in the steep ravines and having shaved you know almost so you've almost got no hair left at all he says that's what will happen and I put this sentence that I got from one of the commentaries what we trust in instead of the Lord will eventually turn on us and destroy us and that's certainly what's happening here with Assyria now why to believe?

because there are reasons given for believing and several of the reasons come from these children with specific names so let's have a little look at the children with the specific names the names are signs if you look at 8.18 Isaiah says here am I and the children the Lord has given me we are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty who dwells on Mount Zion so these children they have names that are supposed to remind us of things now then if you've got children did you give your children names to remind you of things?

Ben? not such no names that are meaning to remind us so does Lilia mean something?

[25:28] I gave back to God oh right nice yes thank you there used to be what you call virtue names so these are names of admirable qualities so virtue names would be Prudence know anybody called Prudence?

there's a song Dear Prudence by the Beatles but I think that's completely different Verity know anybody called Verity? means truth let's just think Irene means peace can I think of any other virtue names?

Temperance I've never met anybody called Temperance Grace yes Faith yes yeah yeah yeah lots of so these children in this chapter have names with significance so let's just dip into this 7 verse 3 the Lord said to Isaiah go up you and your son Shi'ar Yashub don't know what they called him for short but for long it was Shi'ar Yashub which means you see if you've got it in your margin a remnant will return now is this a good thing or a bad thing?

a remnant will return I mean it's good that a remnant will return but it's a little bit scary that there will be a remnant in the first place the remnant meaning loads of people will be taken away but some of them will come back it's a little bit double-edged isn't it?

Shi'ar Yashub and Maher Shalal Hashbaz chapter 8 verse 1 and verse no yeah verse 3 name him Maher Shalal Hashbaz which means quick to the plunder swift to the spoil that sounds a bit a bit scary an enemy comes along and they're quick to the plunder and swift to the spoil they'll come down and grab everything so there's that name and of course there's this other name Emmanuel verse 14 this child is called Emmanuel and Emmanuel crops up in 714 and 8 8 God 8 8 yes the breadth of your land O Emmanuel and then it's put in the words of 8 verse 10

[28:19] God is with us so in the life of those times Isaiah is saying put your trust in the Lord it's a good thing to trust the Lord and there will be consequences if you don't trust the Lord and in case you'd forgotten here's my son a remnant will return and here's another child called quick

to the plunder swift to the spoil and here is another child Emmanuel now let's think it's a little bit more about what this this sign means the Lord himself will give you a sign and this is where the child Emmanuel comes from I think it's mysterious I think it it's a this is the most mysterious of the children so it's mysterious in a number of ways so what is meant by the virgin so there are two words that you could use in Hebrew one is more technically meaning virgin but this word means according to the dictionary

I looked it up in unmarried or recently married young woman so a maid a maiden she'll have a child and I think the first readers of it would have thought well that's that's not particularly surprising Matthew as he picks on it says ah there's a bit you missed because that maiden bit is actually more important than you thought it's filled out more than you thought it would be but in its original it could simply mean a young woman and who's this young woman so could it be Ahaz's wife and the child that comes this sort of kingly child is Hezekiah which I think is Ahaz's son or is it is this woman Isaiah's wife because she's she's going to conceive and have a child it says it in the next chapter or is it some unspecified and unknown future woman or some of the commentators say is this actually a way of saying the city and the nation because the city and the nation is portrayed as a woman Isaiah 1 verse 8 says the daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard and cities and women are often linked aren't they in Galatians Hagar stands for the city of Jerusalem Sarah stands for the Jerusalem which is above our mother which is free so what does he what does what does he mean if you think of this matter of childbearing the quotation I had from this morning was 26 verse 17 which seems pretty clear that that one is the nation or if you like the city 26 17 this is the bit which says as a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain so were we in your presence oh lord we were with child we writhed in pain but we gave birth to wind we have not brought salvation to the earth we have not given birth to the people of the world but so is that in view that thus far the people of God have remarkably failed to be the fruitful people that they're meant to be and they've remarkably failed to witness to the world or spread the news to the world or have many offspring as the purpose of the Lord was so who's this woman and I'm going to come back on this filling thing and I think in a way the filling fills all of those spaces and the fulfillment is a fullness along all of those lines what about the child and then again this is mysterious so it certainly refers to

Jesus does it only refer to Jesus so is it being said to Ahaz in 700 years there will be a child come or is he meant to say is he meant to think that this is something there's an imminence to it something that's happening even as the words are spoken so I in the research that I did I think the commentator says it doesn't quite fit Hezekiah because he was already born is it another name for one of these children or the child that's about to be born that's in chapter 8 is that what he's thinking of so who is the child there's a mystery I think about that and this prophecy about the curds and honey that he's going to eat verse 15 he will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right is curds and honey a positive thing or a negative thing do you like curds and honey yogurt you like it yeah

I think that's what curds is isn't it it's like yeah sorry yes yes yeah in Sri Lanka curds is like they make it out of buffalo milk yes so is it saying that when he eats curds and honey that that will be a nice thing or is it a nasty thing it's sort of interesting isn't it which way are we supposed to take it it goes on to say in verse 27 there will be an abundance of milk so there will be curds to eat and all who remain in the land will eat curds and honey so there's a sense in which there's something positive there but it's also pretty clear that it's a very abnormal situation because there will be depopulation there's enough to go around because there aren't so many people and the land that used to be productive verse 23 every place where there are a thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels there will be only briars and thorns so there will be sort of luxury and abundance but there'll be luxury and abundance because there aren't many people there for it to go round so there's an interesting sort of two way thing there could be either way of course that fits with the stone doesn't it that the

[35:38] Lord is there either as our great refuge if we come to him in faith or the stone over which we stumble if we approach him without faith so I really just intended to take us through the chapter and get a little feel for the dynamics of it the Lord is fulfilling all these things in

the birth of the Lord Jesus and let's just draw a few conclusions this child sign it says at least this don't fear the nations don't fear the things that other people fear make the Lord the one that we fear make him the one who we set apart as holy don't trust the nations don't put our trust in the things of this earth around us very tempting to do so isn't it but he says our trust can't be in that our trust should be in the

Lord the Lord wants us to trust him and he becomes impatient with unbelief it's in verse 13 will you try the patience of God let's not try the patience of God let's be people who do trust him the Lord says there is actually no other way if you don't stand firm in your faith you will not stand at all the Lord demands to be treated with seriousness verse 13 chapter 8 verse 13 the Lord almighty is the one you are to regard as holy he is the one you are to dread to fear to see as great it's an important lesson isn't it it is the Lord who is able to bring about his purposes to defeat his enemies and at the center of his purposes is this son this child and we're caught up in that that we have the child

Emmanuel and chapter 8 verse 18 is seen as an important verse in the New Testament here am I and the children the Lord has given me we are signs and symbols in Israel we are caught up to in the purposes of the Lord he will bring about his purposes through Emmanuel for us his people and that's enough let's stop there let's pray