

Sign, Son, Saviour

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[0 : 00] Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. You know, it seems almost unbelievable that today is the first! Sunday of December. It seems like only yesterday that we took down our Christmas decorations.

This year's felt so short in some ways, and then so long in others. The first Christmas tree I saw up this year, I'm sure you maybe saw someone earlier than this, was in Scottsdale on the 8th of November.

Christmas trees are going up earlier, I think, every year because people want to brighten up their lives with some good news. And the advent of Jesus is just that. It is good news. It celebrates the coming of the Son of God, the birth of the divine child, the incarnation of Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah lived 600 years before Jesus was born, and yet he saw that birth with more clarity than many do today. He understood who that child really was and the difference that child would make to a world lost in sin, guilt, fear, loneliness, darkness, and shame.

And I want to, from Isaiah chapter 7, 14, perhaps the most famous of Isaiah's prophecies about Jesus, the Lord Himself will give you a sign, and so on. I want us to examine what, as it's quoted in Matthew chapter 1, verse 23, and stands tall and bright among through the ages. I want to see how this text can brighten our hearts with the promise of the gospel. There are three elements to this prophecy in Isaiah 7, 14 I want to draw attention to. A sign, a son, and a Savior. A sign, the Lord Himself will give you a sign, a sign, a sign, a sign. Those to whom Isaiah was originally writing were in a terrifying situation. The dominant superpower of the day was the vast Assyrian Empire.

[2 : 35] Against Assyria stood the king of Syria, not the same Assyrian Syria, and the king of Israel. They were desperate for Ahaz, the king of Judah, to join in their alliance against the Assyrians, and so they invaded Judah to force Judah into action. Their army marched to Jerusalem, but were not able to mount a successful siege against it. Nevertheless, as we read in verse 2, when the house of David was told, Syria is in league with Ephraim, that's Israel, the heart of Ahaz, the king of Judah, and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. So the people of Judah are terrified because they're caught between a rock and a hard place. This is geopolitics. If they side with Assyria, this vast empire, they face destruction at the hands of Syria and Israel. But if they side with Syria and Israel, they face destruction at the hands of Assyria. No wonder they're terrified. They're caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Even wise King Solomon would have scratched his head as to what they should do next. But God had a message for a terrified Ahaz and the shaking people of Judah.

He sent Isaiah the prophet to say to him, be careful, be quiet. Do not let your heart faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands. So gracious is our God, even to an evil king like Ahaz, and he was evil, that he says to Ahaz, ask for a sign of the Lord your God. This is to be a sign that God's word and God's promise can be trusted, that God will destroy the armies of Syria and Israel, and he will deliver his people from their fears. This is the sign that God is going to save his people from this political danger which terrifies them. A self-righteous Ahaz refuses to put God to the test. And so in verse 14, Isaiah says, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Let's get this straight in our heads. This is to be a sign of God's loving determination to rescue his people from death and destruction. God has spoken his word through the prophet, and now God will also speak through the giving of a sign. God assures Ahaz using, I guess what I call a double lock promise, a promise spoken and a promise signified, word and sign. So not only does Ahaz have God's word in verse 4, he also has the double lock assurance of God's sign in verse 14. God will not leave his people to death and destruction. He will save them, and that sign will be that a virgin shall give birth to a child.

That's the sign. All this goes to show that among many other things, the advent, the coming of Jesus, is a sign from God. It's the seal of a double lock promise. It's a sign that a loving God shall not leave his people to death and destruction, but shall save them from it. It's a sign of God's destruction of death and God's salvation of sinners. He has promised it to them in his word, and now he gives them a sign of his promise. So baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs of God's grace. So the birth of a child whose name shall be called Emmanuel is a greater sign. The manger is a divine sacrament of God.

And this is in and of itself, it's a most wonderful thing. 2025 has been a hard year for many of us. I'd like to think, however, that in our studies in the Bible, week by week, we brought reassurance to the fearful and peace to the anxious. There may have been many things which worried us, but Isaiah's sign shows us in the words of Julian of Norwich, things are going to be okay.

[7 : 47] Things are going to work out. In fact, to put it more accurately, the virgin being with child is the sign that things are okay, that things have worked out. The virgin has been with child and has called him Emmanuel. The sign God gave in the past is God's promise that everything is going to be okay.

God is in control. We don't need to be afraid anymore. There may be many things in our lives which cause us to shake in our shoes, just like the kings of Syria and Israel caused Ahaz and the people of Judah to tremble like trees in the wind. We shook as the trees of the forest before the wind, to use the words of verse 2. But God has given us a sign, the birth of Emmanuel.

And on the basis, therefore, of the coming of Jesus, He says to us, be careful, be quiet, but verse 4. Do not fear. Do not let your heart faint. You don't need another sign that things are going to be okay and that things are going to work out for you. The message of the birth of Jesus is that things are okay, that things are working out, that God's in control.

My father was brought up in Aberdeen. And when I was growing up, he'd often use the word fash. Fash is an Aberdonian word. I'm looking at some of you going, eh. Fash is an Aberdonian word that means to be anxious, panicky, and fearful. Aberdonians might say of someone who's looting the plot that they're fashing. Whenever I was anxious or panicky or fearful as a child, my father would say to me, did I fash yourself? Which being translated means, don't go worrying. Don't be anxious. Stop panicking. I don't know there's such a thing as a Doric translation of Isaiah 7, but I guess if there was, the translation would be like this. Did I fash yourself? And the reason for it's this, God is going to give you a sign. The virgin is going to give birth to a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel. So, we have a sign, first of all, a sign. Then we have a son, a son. Sometimes we use a phrase so often that it loses its meaning, and this is like a phrase like this. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son. It rolls off our tongues without us even giving it a second thought, and yet in its understated starkness, it points to that sign which overcomes our fears and overwhelms our anxieties. There are a couple of aspects of this phrase I want us to direct our attention toward. In the first instance, God's promise here begins with the word behold. Behold. Behold is a very important word in the Bible. Its use throughout the Bible seems to point to a couple of things. First, things are not what they seem to be. When you see that word behold, things are not what they seem to be. So, the armies of Israel and Syria are poised to attack Jerusalem, and to all intents and purposes, Judah appears to be doomed to either be squeezed in the vice of an alliance or to be destroyed by the Assyrians. But behold, things are not what they appear to be.

God is working in this situation to bring about his salvation and deliverance. You cannot see the spiritual realm, but if you could, you'd see a God who is perfectly in control of all things.

[11 : 51] And the same is true for our lives and the life of our world. Behold, things are not what they appear to be. God is in control, and he's working all things together to bring about his salvation.

But secondly, the word behold is used in the Bible to draw attention to the fact that God is working. As if we might replace it with the words, look closer. God is at work. It's the difference between a glance and a stare.

God is at work.

God is at work. And he calls upon us to trust him. In the second instance here, consider how ridiculous it sounds. And it sounds so ridiculous, doesn't it?

[13 : 10] That a child being born is the answer to the problems of the world. A child being born is the answer to the problems of the world.

Judah faces invasion. Jerusalem faces destruction. And rather than promising armies and military assistance, God promises the birth of a baby. What on earth is a child going to do to change the terrifying situation the people of Judah face?

You might as well send a snail to do the work of a man. How is the weakness of a child going to overcome the power of this world's armies and superpowers?

When you think of a baby, you automatically think, ah, cute. Cute. Cute. But cute's not a word soldiers use in the battlefield. You might as well send a child with a water pistol into battle against a mighty army with swords and guns.

Or to put it another way, you might as well send a shepherd boy to do battle with a Philistine giant.

Or you might as well send a boy with five loaves and two fish to feed a crowd of 5,000 people.

[14:21] You might as well send an apostle with significant physical weaknesses, what he calls thorns in the flesh, into the mission field. God uses weak things to shame the strong and foolish things to shame the wise.

He even uses a humble child born in a stable in Bethlehem to turn this world upside down. This is the economy of God.

But the ridiculous prophecy of a child being born is the sign of God's sovereignty and salvation.

Weakness will defeat strength.

And foolishness will defeat the wisdom of men. But then here, notice this child's conception shall be miraculous.

This child's conception shall be miraculous. It shall be a virgin who shall conceive and give birth.

This shall be a conception like none that has ever happened before.

[15:28] Not a freak event. Not one in a billion. But a genuine impossibility to reproduce. You'll know that females contain only X chromosomes.

And males X and Y normally. There are many cases of virginal conception in the lower non-vertebrate animal world. Where female conceives female.

Not should we add in the higher vertebrate world. But there has never been a case, nor can there ever possibly be a case, no matter how much the girl denies it, where female conceives male.

Because the female lacks the Y chromosome. So what we have here is absolutely miraculous.

Earlier, using the word behold, we agreed that things are not what they seem to be.

God's at work. If you want proof of this, look no forward, look no further than the blessed virgin in whose womb is conceived a child and who gives birth to a son. In the early to mid-20th century, a furious theological battle was waged between those like ourselves from a conservative position who held tenaciously to the truthfulness of the virginal conception of Jesus, and those from a more liberal background, if I may use that term theologically, who were happy to concede that perhaps Mary wasn't really a virgin after all.

[16:53] What was at stake was the soul of Christianity. For if conservative evangelicalism had given him this point, it would have called into question the authority of the Bible, and the suitability of Jesus as the mediator between God and man, and basically, well, the whole gospel.

Make no mistake. Make no mistake. This was a miraculous conception and worthy of our tenacious belief. Jesus was conceived within and born from a virgin.

Such a thing is impossible. It gives weight to the jewel issue of behold and the implications of a child being sent to save his people and not a mighty army bedecked in heavenly armor being sent.

This is the sign, and the sooner this strikes us with freshness, the better this Advent season will be for you. The virgin conceived and gave birth to a son.

Bethlehem stable is the sign of God's sovereign salvation over all things, over death and over our sin.

[18:20] Well, third and lastly, a savior. A savior. Anne shall call his name Emmanuel.

In the history of name-giving, never has there been a greater or more important name given than the one given to the child born of the virgin. A child whose conception is the sign of God's sovereign victory over all his enemies and his love to save his people.

Now, you'll all know the name Emmanuel literally means God with us. When his people's backs are up against the wall, God is at work.

No more than that. When God's people's backs are up against the wall, God is with them there.

Over the 22 and a bit years I've been your minister, I think every Christmas we've talked about what the name Emmanuel means.

So, I want to do something a wee bit different today and give you the perspective of the early church fathers on the name Emmanuel. Men and women very different from us who lived over 1,500 years ago in the Middle East, Africans and Middle Easterners.

[19 : 38] We've been thinking about them in our series on the Nicene Creed. And yet, having in common with us their worship and glorying in this name Emmanuel. One group of church fathers interpreted Emmanuel in what's called a higher sense.

Such church fathers as Irenaeus and Tertullian. You may have heard of these names. They insisted that the name God with us means, first and foremost, God became a human being.

God became a human being. They want to speak about how God as Emmanuel, he understands us, he shares with us in our human experience. As Emmanuel, God experienced the hatred of his enemies, the pressure of violence, just as the people of Judah faced here in Isaiah 7.

And this is most certainly a true and precious promise from the Word of God. Jesus has been tempted in every way such as we are, yet without sin. He shares in our infirmities.

He carries our sorrows. If we should think that first century Palestine was free from the troubles we face today, we'd be wrong. You know, if a person was fortunate enough to live past infancy, and most didn't, they faced a thousand diseases and human afflictions which could kill them.

[21 : 06] You could get a scratch, a tiny scratch on your finger. It could go septic, and you could die because there was no antibiotics.

And Jesus understood that. He saw it. Emmanuel understands only too well the hazards of the problems we face.

Perhaps we don't realize. Perhaps we don't realize. He understands what it felt like to be lonely. To be grieving. To be sad.

The point is that those church fathers like Tertullian and Inanias, who held to that higher sense, were saying, God shares in our humanity.

And there's great blessing for us there this Christmas season. The sign is one of God's oneness with us. In our grief. In our exhaustion.

[22 : 09] In our questions. In our loneliness. You're not going through this alone, whatever you're going through today. Behold, the sign of God's presence with you, the child Emmanuel, whose birth we celebrate this Christmas.

And yet there was another group of church fathers, led by St. Jerome, who interpreted Emmanuel in what was called a lower sense.

A lower sense. While not denying anything of the higher sense, they wanted to focus more on what this child born of the Virgin would achieve. Namely, he shall protect, he shall deliver, and he shall save his people.

That's for them what Emmanuel went. He will protect, he will deliver, and he will save his people.

And in truth, both senses work really well together, with the first focusing on God sharing humanity through Emmanuel, and the second focusing on God saving humanity through Emmanuel.

One, sharing humanity, the second, saving humanity. Who is this child to be born? He is God with us. The God who will do battle against all our enemies and destroy them.

[23 : 29] The God who will rescue his people from the smoldering firebrands of Israel and Syria, and from the fierce anger of Assyria.

You know how I said earlier that it sounds ridiculous that the birth of a child could be the answer to the problems of the world, but what if the child to be born is God's warrior king, who will go to battle against our fiercest foes, against death, the final enemy, against the devil, our fiercest enemy, and against the righteous judgment of our sin, our surest enemy.

That's the essence of the lower sense in which the likes of Jerome interpreted the sign of Emmanuel. God is promising He will take the battlefield against all our enemies and He will defeat them, be victorious over them, and save us from them.

Yes, both higher and lower senses work well together, especially as we move from a cradle in Bethlehem to a cross outside Jerusalem, because there, Emmanuel, God with us, gave Himself to take away all our sins and to conquer all His enemies.

the father of lies, the devil who inspired the enemies of Judah to raise up their batters against the people of Israel, were defeated once and for all by this child born of the Blessed Virgin.

[25 : 10] He was crucified to destroy death and to win life for all who have faith in Him. So this verse tells us that the sign is the Son and the Son is the Savior.

Isaiah's call, written 2,600 years ago, sounds through the ages. Look, see the sign of the Son born of the Virgin.

See the sign and put your faith and trust in the Savior. That is the best and surest way to celebrate this Christmas.

This Christmas. Son