

Series: Who Is God?
Immanuel
God With Us

In one of his columns for *The New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof pointed to belief in the Virgin Birth as evidence that conservative Christians are “less intellectual.” The question is, are we saddled with an untenable doctrine? Is belief in the Virgin Birth really necessary?

Kristof is absolutely aghast that so many Americans who believe in the Virgin Birth. He writes in the Times, “The faith in the Virgin Birth reflects the way American Christianity is becoming less intellectual and more mystical over time.” He explains that the percentage of Americans who believe in the Virgin Birth “actually rose five points in the latest poll.” On no! Is this evidence that we’re becoming less intellectual?

Actually, according to a Harris poll 82% of adults believe in God. 73% believe in miracles. 70% believe there is a heaven. 59% believe that there’s a hell. And 70% believe that Jesus Christ is God or the son of God.

So, seven out of ten hold to the belief that Jesus Christ is God or the Son of God. But when they were asked about the virgin birth that number dropped to 58%.

Apparently the virgin birth isn’t quite that important to a lot of Americans. Jesus can be the Son of God without having to deal with that troubling virgin birth stuff.

Well, opinion polls can give us an idea of what people believe but they can’t tell us what is true.

What is true according to the Bible is that the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is one of the fundamentals of the Christian Faith.

The dictionary defines “fundamental” as; “forming a necessary base or core; of central importance.”

In other words, a fundamental of the Christian faith is part of essential nature of the Christian faith. If you take the virgin birth out of Christianity you’re left with something that isn’t Christianity any more.

As we celebrate the Christmas season there’s an essential theme that keeps coming up in the Bible readings and, in the Christmas carols. It’s found in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, chapter 7, and verse 14. *Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*

The Gospel of Matthew incorporates this verse into the first chapter this way: *Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."*

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." (Matthew 1:20-23)

Isaiah 7:14 is a well known prophecy of the virgin birth of Christ. What aren't well known are the historical events that lead up to that prophecy.

This is week 4 of a series we're calling *Who Is God?* What we're doing in these messages is looking at names of God in the Bible to see just what they tell us about the nature and character of God. We're not defining God according to the latest Harris polls or *New York Times* editorials. We're letting God define Himself through the Bible.

This morning we want to look at another Hebrew name Immanuel or "God Is With Us." In Hebrew *im* means "with," *eu* means "us," and *el* means "God."

The name Immanuel is only used 4 times in the Bible; once in Matthew and 3 times in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. We worship a faithful God. Christmas is all about God being faithful to fulfill His promises.

Isaiah 7 is one of those passages that reinforces to us that our God can be trusted to do what He says.

The prophet Isaiah ministered to Judah and Jerusalem at a crucial time in the nation's history. Isaiah lived in the 8th century BC during a time in which the nation of Israel was divided into 2 kingdoms, Israel and Judah.

During the early part of period both kingdoms were strong and wealthy but it wasn't long until their success breed an attitude of smug self-confidence.

They went through the motions of worshipping God but they really worshipped their wealth and their military power.

There was no shortage of people going through the motions of religion but real, true God-followers were few and far between.

Isaiah was a prophet to the southern of the two kingdoms known as Judah. Judah was in bad shape at this time. Almost 750 years before this God had given them a warning. It's found in Deuteronomy 28. There God said if you forget who brought you to the land and blessed you and you ignore My commandments My judgment will fall.

Of course, who worries about those ancient statements of God, right? They're for another people at another time. Besides, we've been living this way for a long time and nothing's happened yet.

Isn't that the way we all tend to think?

With that in mind, I want us to go to **Isaiah chapter 7 page 672**

I. God Really Does Judge Sin

Read 7:1

King Ahaz was ruler in Judah. The king of Israel and the king of Syria had attacked Judah separately but couldn't conquer Ahaz.

Now at first glance this might just look like some random kingdoms fighting. But what often looks to us as inconsequential is really part of God's plan for the world.

Over in the book of II Kings, chapter 15 is this explanation: *In those days the LORD began to send Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah against Judah.* (II Kings 15:37)

So what looks on the surface like a petty squabble between some Middle Eastern nations turns out to be part of God's plan of action for the world.

God is actually using Syria and Israel to correct Ahaz.

See, Judah has a strategic part in God's plan for human history. It was through the tribe of Judah that Jesus Christ would come. It was in Judah that the Messiah would have His throne and rule the nations.

It was imperative that Judah get back to trusting God and serving Him. It was time to stop the imitation religion and get back to real faith in God.

So Judah's sin set the corrective judgment of God into action. The Bible says, *The LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.* (Proverbs 3:12 NIV)

God is a perfect parent to His children and that means administering correction at times.

In Judah's case it was physical discipline by military confrontation.

God can, and at times does, use physical pressure to discipline an individual or a nation that's in rebellion to Him.

That's not to say that all suffering in this life is directly related to sin. Jesus was our example of suffering for righteousness sake.

But it's still a fact of the Bible that God can use physical pressure to deal with someone who names His name but doesn't want to obey His authority.

So here we have Ahaz, ruler of a hypocritical, materialistic, proud nation and Syria and Israel are sent by God Himself to bring Judah back to dependence on Him.

When God disciplines, either physically or emotionally, one of two things can happen. It's either a learning time or a panic time.

Either we realize that our hope has to be in God or we fall apart. It's our faith that determines which one it will be.

Ahaz and the people of Judah had made an enemy out of God. Now they didn't know how to find Him as a friend.

I. God Really Does Judge Sin

II. Lack Of Faith Can Lead To Panic

Verse 2

Word gets back to the court of Ahaz that these two kings have formed an alliance against him. The Hebrew literally says, "Syria is resting upon Ephraim." They're joined together to fight as one.

God was beginning to tighten the screws and look at the response; sheer panic. Fear was moving their hearts like the wind moves tree branches.

Well, this is a time of desperate need, so God who's trying to get Ahaz' attention intervenes with gracious help.

Verse 3

Ahaz was concerned about the city of Jerusalem, but not as concerned as God was, which is the way it usually works in our lives.

I'm sure that Ahaz was worried about his own neck, as well as the safety of his people. And it wasn't that God didn't care about Ahaz' life. He did, but His concern for Judah went way beyond this one man.

God had a plan for you, me, and the whole world that was built around Judah and Jerusalem. The very glory of God was at stake here.

So God speaks to the prophet Isaiah and sends him to king Ahaz.

In ancient cultures soothsayers and fortunetellers generally had access to the king.

Israel was a theocracy headed by Jehovah God and so it was God's prophets who were supposed to give direction to the king.

Isaiah is God's prophet but he's not to go alone to see Ahaz. God tells him to take his son Shear-Jasub. Shear-Jashob means "A remnant shall return" in Hebrew.

Here's the message. Through all of this there is to be a bunch of people in Judah who are going to turn back to God. The very presence of this boy with Isaiah was intended to serve as a sign of hope.

So here we have Ahaz, trembling with fear, out checking his water supply situation, at the end of the aqueduct, and up comes Isaiah who's not trembling with fear.

Read vs 4 through "fainthearted"

Notice, God doesn't say go to Ahaz and make these suggestions. He says these are

commands. “Be quiet and don’t fear.”

See Ahaz was ruler over God’s people. This was God’s nation. Ahaz should have turned to God. He should have been calmly depending on Jehovah God.

But he wasn’t, and here’s how we know. In II Kings 16:7 we read, *So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, saying, “I am your servant and your son. Come up and save me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who rise up against me.”*

And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasuries of the king’s house, and sent it as a present to the king of Assyria.

Now we’ve got a 4th nation in the mix, Assyria.
Assyria was located to the north east of Israel.

Here’s what God’s really warning against through Isaiah. The pressure is on Ahaz and instead of turning to God he’s out begging the pagan king of Assyria to bail him out.

Ahaz is panicking under pressure and he’s doing it in the face of a tremendous promise.

Read 4b -9

God says not only are these two going to fail but within 65 years Ephraim would no longer exist as a separate entity.

God is saying to Ahaz, “Here it is. This is what it’s all about. I’m your salvation. I’m the one to trust when trouble comes.”

And isn’t it easy for us to sit back and say, “Ahaz, how can you be so blind? God is promising you His deliverance and you’re going to go groveling to some pagan king. Wake up Ahaz. Just trust God. When has He ever failed to keep His promises?”

We say that, and yet how often do we act Just like Ahaz.

God makes His promises:

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28

Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. Isaiah 41:10

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7

Those are all there in the Bible. Some of us have memorized them. But when the pressure is on how many times is our first response to look anywhere but God for the solution? Here was a situation in which Ahaz didn't have a clue about what God was doing in Judah.

He was just like the rest of the people. He went through the motions of religion but completely overlooked the fact that God was chastening them for their ungodliness.

There he was, the king of the nation that God had promised would rule the world some day begging for help from a nation that didn't even acknowledge that God existed.

Here's Ahaz saying to the king of Assyria, "I am your servant." What a disgrace!

All the trappings that go along with Christianity; church services, Bible study, fellowship with other Christians, those are vitally important.

They were instituted by God just like the sacrifices and ceremonies were for Israel. But just like the sacrifices and ceremonies became empty ritual that people went through without them impacting their lives, so can the things we do.

The real test of Judah's faith didn't come on some feast day when they were going through the motions of worship. It came when the armies of Rezin and Pekah were lined up on their border.

The real test of your faith isn't did you make it to church this week. It's where do you turn when the pressure starts?

Is God so real to you that His grace is sufficient? Are His promises indelibly written on your heart so that they're there in time of need?

Obviously that takes reading the Bible and spending time with God, but not as some formal ritual you go through.

Isaiah said, “If you will not believe surely you shall not be established.”

In other words, that which was going to make sense out of this mess that Ahaz was in was trust in the living God.

The only thing that’s going to allow you and me to see life with its trials and pitfalls for what it is faith. We have to believe the promises of God no matter what things look like.

In this case this was God’s chastisement.

Ahaz never recognized what it was and missed out on the blessing of being instructed by that chastisement.

God doesn’t ask us to figure everything out a head of time. All God expects of us is that we turn to Him as our source of strength in the problems of life and if we do we’ll get out of it what God intends.

Our responsibility isn’t to figure out “why.” Our responsibility is to trust our God.

If we believe, we’re established. If we refuse to believe and look elsewhere for our answers, we’ll suffer the consequences.

So here is Ahaz being judged by God and panicking instead of trusting. But now were going to see A beautiful illustration of the faithfulness of God.

I. God Really Does Judge Sin

II. Lack Of Faith Can Lead To Panic

III. God Is Faithful To Keep His Promises

Read vs 10-11

Ahaz was a child of Abraham, a Son of David. God had made promises to Ahaz through his forefathers and He wasn’t about to go back on them.

So even though Ahaz didn’t deserve it, God still said, “I’m your God, Ahaz. Ask me for a sign and I’ll give you one.”

But look how Ahaz responds, **Read verse 12**

That sounds spiritual doesn’t it? I’m not going to test God.

What was really going on was Ahaz already made up his mind that he trusted an Assyria he could see, more than a God he couldn't see.

But he made it sound spiritual.

So here's Ahaz continuing his sham of religion right up to the end.

Now at first glance it might look like we're at an impasse. But God isn't limited by stubborn humans.

Read 13

Isaiah says, "Ahaz, I'm getting really tired of this. But if you think I'm getting fed up with you, God's had it, man."

Read 14

Ahaz had the opportunity to have a sign of blessing but he refused so now he gets a sign of blessing and judgment rolled into one.

Way back in Genesis 49 God had given this promise.

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people. (Genesis 49:10)

In other words, until the day Messiah comes the kings of Judah would only be from the tribe of Judah. Rezin and Pekah didn't qualify. They weren't going to overthrow Ahaz.

God told David, *You shall not fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.* (I Kings 9:5)

God made a covenant with the household of David and Ahaz, son of David was willing to reject that covenant.

So God takes over and gives a sign of a greater deliverance as well as the deliverance from Syria and Israel.

Now just how much of this Ahaz understood at that point I have no clue. What I do know is that in verse 13 this is directed to the whole house of David. This is to the nation of Judah.

He says, The virgin shall conceive...

Obviously the virgin birth is a point of contention and critics of the Bible love to point out that the Hebrew word *almah* that's translated "virgin" can mean "young woman." NASB even has a footnote which says the word can mean "maiden."

That's true, it can mean young woman and not every young woman is a virgin. But it's also true that *almah* means a young unmarried woman.

The obvious question is, what kind of sign would it be for a young unmarried woman to conceive. That happens all too often.

The thing that makes this a sign is this is to be a morally pure young woman that conceives. She bears a son whose very presence brings God to His people. This is a young woman who bears "God with us."

This mother is both unmarried and a moral woman. The fact is there is only one *almah* that fits that description and that's the Virgin Mary.

Matthew quotes this verse and uses the Greek word *parthenos*. Luke, who was a medical doctor, uses *parthenos* to describe Mary. *Parthenos* strictly means "virgin."

Isaiah 7:14 is a beautiful prophecy of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. It was an assurance that God's promises to Judah were not going to fail.

But it was also a condemnation of Ahaz who thought that God's promises had failed and that the kingdom was in danger.

This prophecy goes on to say.. **Read 15-16**

In other words God was using the infancy of the Messiah (the length of time between his birth and the time he could discern between good and evil) to be representative of the time Judah would be in danger from her enemies.

It only takes a child a couple of years to get to that point so God's saying in a couple of years you'll have nothing to fear from these hostile kings.

You know, because of the faithfulness of God to His promises Ahaz was ultimately delivered from Rezen and Peka. But Ahaz never gave up his trust in the king of Assyria.

- I. *God Really Does Judge Sin*
- II. *Lack Of Faith Can Lead To Panic*
- III. *God Is Faithful To Keep His Promises*
- IV. *Be Careful Or God May Give You What You Ask For*

Read vs 17

II Chronicles 28:20 says, *Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came to him, but gave him trouble instead of help.*

Assyria gave Ahaz a hard time but never helped him. In fact Assyria was a thorn in Judah's side for years to come.

Ahaz got what he asked for, and so much more.

I wonder this morning how you stand before God. The virgin has conceived. She's born her Son. God has visited the planet in Jesus Christ.

The true and living God isn't some far off deity or some uninterested divine being. He's God with us. The God who is with us didn't come with a flashy, dramatic display, but in the birth of a little child.

Jesus was born of a virgin because Jesus was the only person who ever lived who was born without a sin nature. Christ the sinless God-man was born to die for our sins.

Isaiah went on to pen various prophecies about Christ. One of his best known is in the 53rd chapter.

There he writes, *Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.* (Isaiah 53:4-6)

Immanuel, the God who is personally with us, the sinless, virgin-born, Son of God died for the sins of the world. That means He died for your sins and mine.

He promises forgiveness and eternal life to all who believe.

If you refuse to believe God's promise of salvation and you want to take care of your sin debt some other way, (if you want to pull an Ahaz) God will give you what you wish for.

But outside of Jesus Christ there is no forgiveness only judgment. Why strive to pay a debt that's already been taken care of?

Craig Groeschel says Immanuel entered the world through a door marked "No Entry," the virgin womb. Immanuel exited the world through a door marked "No Exit," the empty tomb.

The Christmas message is this:

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23)