



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 13, 2009
Released on Wednesday, December 9, 2009

"The Foreshadowing of Messiah's Birth"

Lesson Text: Isaiah 7:13-17; Luke 1:30-38

Background Scripture: Isaiah 7:13-17; Luke 1:26-38

Devotional Reading: Micah 5:1-5a

Isaiah 7:13-17

13 And he said, Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?

14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

15 Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.

16 For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.

17 The Lord shall bring upon thee, and upon thy people, and upon thy father's house, days that have not come, from the day that Ephraim departed from Judah; even the king of Assyria.

Luke 1:30-38

30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God.

31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.

32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

34 Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

36 And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

37 For with God nothing shall be impossible.

38 And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to study how the divine sign of the virgin birth given to David's house was to be fulfilled in the humble young Mary.

Principle: to recognize the incarnation of God in Jesus as the greatest of all miracles.

Application: to help people see that just as Jesus was born of Mary physically, so He can be born in us spiritually. Tell someone today who Jesus is.

INTRODUCTION

Futurists vs. Prophets

In 1771, the French author Louis-Sébastien Mercier published his utopian novel *L'An 2440* (translation: *The Year 2440*). Many previous authors had written about imaginary utopian societies, even the ancient Greeks. What made Mercier's work different was his projection of this one into the future. Earlier authors had placed their utopias in the forgotten past or in remote, undiscovered corners of the world.

Mercier wrote as the dynamics that led to the French Revolution were gaining steam, finally to explode in 1789. He told of a philosopher who fell asleep and awoke to Paris of nearly 700 years in Mercier's future. In so doing, Mercier used his observations of trends in society to create a vision of the future. This technique has been widely applied by other futurists, such as Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and George Orwell.

It is amazing to see how often such authors give accurate predictions of the future. For example, the 24/7 surveillance society of Orwell's *1984* seems to be more of a reality every day! Yet when we read these works many years after their original publication, it is also startling how much they got wrong.

If we think about it, though, such errors should not surprise us. Human projections about the future are no more than guesswork. Some may be highly informed and skillful, but it is still guessing. Consider that weather predictions of even a few days in the future are often wrong despite sophisticated technology and computer models.

The authors of the Bible make predictions of the future too. But these authors are not like modern-day futurists. The Bible authors have been given insights by the one who knows and controls the future: God. Such predictions are prophetic and can be understood only as something supernatural and miraculous. The prophets of the Bible were not merely good guessers; they were God's instruments to proclaim His plans.

Many prophecies in the Old Testament were fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus, God's prophesied Messiah. Isaiah, the greatest of the prophets, made beautiful predictions about Jesus over 700 years before His birth. This week's lesson will examine some of these prophecies and their fulfillment.

LESSON BACKGROUND:

Time: about 734 B.C.; 6 or 5 B.C.

Place: Jerusalem; Nazareth

The seventh chapter of Isaiah is set in the reign of King Ahaz of Judah, the father of King Hezekiah. Ahaz came to power around 740 B.C. His reign was overshadowed by the growing threat of invasion by the mighty Assyrian empire to the north. The Assyrian armies eventually conquered the northern kingdom of Israel (also called *Ephraim*; see Isaiah 7:8, 9, 17) in 722 B.C. The threat to the southern kingdom of Judah must have been terrifying.

Before this move by the Assyrians, the kings of Ephraim and Syria (also called *Aram*) formed an alliance to protect themselves. They brought military pressure on Ahaz to join them (2 Kings 16:5; Isaiah 7:1). To relieve the pressure, Ahaz pledged himself to Assyria and appeased the Assyrian king with gold looted from the temple (2 Kings 16:7-9).

This high-stakes political intrigue meant that Judah had aligned herself with the Assyrians against Israel and Syria. This is the backdrop for Isaiah 7-12. This section of Isaiah sometimes is called the Book of Immanuel. In this section, Isaiah

confronted faithless King Ahaz because he trusted in an alliance with the Assyrians rather than trusting in God.

The term *Immanuel* (or *Emmanuel*) occurs four times in the Bible. It is a straightforward combination of words that mean "with us [is] God." The only place it occurs in the New Testament is Matthew 1:23, where the author quotes Isaiah to show how the birth of Jesus fulfilled prophecy. The other three places are all in Isaiah. One of these (Isaiah 7:14) is in today's lesson text and will be discussed below. The two other occurrences are in Isaiah 8.

In Isaiah 8, the prophet depicts the coming invasion of the Assyrians in terms of a catastrophic flood. The waters of this flood were to reach up to the neck of Judah (Isaiah 8:8), meaning they would be highly damaging but not fatal. In the midst of this horror, Judah would still be able to cry, "O Immanuel" (again, 8:8), in this case a plea of "May God be with us!"

Isaiah goes on to say that the plans of nations are tiny and futile against the ultimate plan of God, for truly "God is with us" (= "Immanuel," 8:10). Isaiah's point is that the people should not fear the Assyrians. They should fear the Lord and only Him (8:13). At the same time, they should not trust the Assyrians (as Ahaz did), for only the Lord could provide them with safety (8:14).

A PROPHECY THROUGH ISAIAH (Isaiah 7:13-17)

1. Why was King Ahaz not seeking God's help against Israel and Syria (Isaiah 7:10, prior to lesson text)?

The Lord spoke very firmly to Ahaz through the Prophet Isaiah. In order to completely allay Ahaz's fears, God told him (through Isaiah) to ask for a sign confirming His word (vs. 10,11). But Ahaz arrogantly refused. Was it his unbelief in God, his annoyance at being told what to do by Isaiah, or simply his overwhelming pride that he felt no need for a confirmed word from God? Whatever his reason, Ahaz couched his refusal in the excuse of not wanting to test God, which was no doubt a transparently hypocritical response!

A comparison with 2 Kings 16:7 reveals that Ahaz was seeking assistance from the king of Assyria; so he apparently had no intention of relying on God for deliverance. Ahaz was unwilling to trust God and leave things in His hands; instead, he had thoughts of finding a political answer to his problem.

2. How did Isaiah chide Ahaz when he refused to obey God's command for him to ask for a sign (v. 13)?

In response to Ahaz's refusal of Isaiah's command to ask, the Lord then spoke to both Ahaz and other people: "Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?" (v.13). The reluctance of the king to ask for a divine sign brought a rebuke from Isaiah.

Isaiah's response uncovers the illogic and duplicity behind Ahaz's actions. The king's secret alliance with the Assyrians has been a perversion of truth to his nation (to *weary men*). Does he think he can lie to God also (*weary my God*)? To ask the question is to provide the answer. There is no such thing as duplicity with God, for we cannot deceive Him. To attempt to hide the truth from God is delusional thinking.

3. What was the sign God gave to Ahaz and the people (v. 14)?

Ahaz refused to ask for a sign but that did not stop God from giving a sign. The sign would be one of the greatest prophecies in all Scriptures – the birth of a son through a virgin, and he was to be named "Immanuel."

We know from Matthew 1:22-23 that this is a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, which was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. A question then naturally arises. How was this promised birth a sign to Ahaz that he could trust God's

word about not needing to worry over the alliance of Rezin and Pekah? The answer is that it is common for prophetic utterances to have both near and far fulfillments (Exod. 3:12; 1 Sam. 2:34; 2 Kings 19:29). These would only have the effect of signs on those who witnessed their accomplishment.

Ahaz's sign: *Behold*. "A forewarning of a great event" (Cheyne). *A virgin shall conceive*. The rendering "virgin" has the support of the best modern Hebraists, as Lowth, Gesenius, Ewald, Delitzsch, Kay. It is observed with reason that unless *'almah* is translated "virgin," there is no announcement made worthy of the grand prelude: The Hebrew, however, has not "a virgin," but "the virgin" (and so the Septuagint), which points to some special virgin, preeminent above all others.

In order for the sign to have meaning for Ahaz, this young woman had to be someone he knew; Isaiah did not include that information, perhaps because the more important message was the ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah, and that this was God's way of reminding Ahaz to trust in Him, for God is with His people and has not abandoned them.

4. Do you think there are some prophecies (such as the ones in Revelation) that will never be understood fully until after they're fulfilled? If so, then why are they included in the Scripture?

Isaiah's prophecy about a virgin giving birth is understandable in light of the virgin birth of Christ centuries later. Yet we wonder how many people really understood it at the time it was given! Jesus' disciples knew about the prophecy regarding Elijah in Malachi 4:5, but they didn't know it had been fulfilled until Jesus explained it to them (Matthew 17:10-13).

All this should serve as a caution. Some yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecies are so rich in symbolism that it seems impossible to come to a consensus regarding their interpretation. Some of the prophecies about Jesus were incomprehensible to many of the original hearers. The fact that we can read about prophecies that were fulfilled in every detail gives us confidence that God will fulfill all remaining prophecies. Our trust in that fact results in glorifying Him as the Lord over all of history.

5. What two things are mentioned as part of the sign to Ahaz (vs. 15,16)?

The two things that are mentioned as part of this sign to Ahaz are the time after the child would be weaned and able to eat food and the time when he would be old enough to know right from wrong.

In the time it takes a baby to be able to eat semisolid food and learn to behave, disaster will have fallen on the two *kings* to the north. Parents know that this sort of development varies from child to child. But by the second birthday a child normally will be weaned and begin to respond to a parent's teaching of the basics of what is wrong and what is right (*evil* and *good*).

King Pekah of Israel/Ephraim reigns for 20 years (2 Kings 15:27). King Ahaz begins to reign in Judah in Pekah's seventeenth year (2 Kings 16:1). If the prophecy of Isaiah came to Ahaz in the second or third year of his reign, we can see how the prophecy of Pekah's demise is fulfilled quickly. Pekah is killed by a usurper, namely Hoshea (2 Kings 15:30). Although exact information about the king of Syria/Aram is harder to put together, we know that King Rezin of Damascus (the capital of Syria) is killed by the Assyrians at about this time (see 2 Kings 16:9).

In short, Isaiah's message was that by the time these two things were true of this baby, God would have already dealt with the two kings coming against Ahaz. That should have sounded like good news to Ahaz, but there was bad news at the same time, as we shall see.

6. What did Isaiah say was coming in the future for Judah (v. 17)?

Assyria would indeed destroy Syria and Israel, but she would then attack Judah. God was behind this movement because of Judah's wickedness. This particular attack was going to be the worst since the nation split. The name "Ephraim" is used here to refer to the northern nation of Israel because Ephraim had become the dominant tribe of that nation. The split had come under Rehoboam, Solomon's son. Isaiah reminded Ahaz of the devastating division of the kingdom of Solomon. What is coming will be much worse.

For all practical purposes, the northern kingdom ceases to exist in 722 BC. Ahaz dies at about age 36, in about 728 BC (2 Kings 16:2). It falls to his son, the godly Hezekiah, to live through the terror of another Assyrian invasion in 701 BC. This time, however, God delivers Judah by killing 185,000 men in the army of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib (see 2 Kings 19:35, 36; Isaiah 37:36, 37). The saving intervention offered to Ahaz is realized in the reign of Hezekiah.

A PROPHECY THROUGH GABRIEL (Luke 1:30-38)

7. How did Gabriel's appearances to Zacharias and to Mary compare (Luke 1:30)?

It was a startling moment for young Mary. An angel suddenly walked into her presence and greeted her: "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (v. 28). As would anyone, Mary felt confused over such a greeting, wondering what the angel could possibly mean. His announcement was very similar to what he had said earlier to Zacharias (v. 13)—namely, that she did not need to be afraid and that she was going to have a son.

As with Zacharias, Mary was to name the boy what the angel told her. Zacharias had been told he did not need to fear because his prayers had been heard by God. Mary did not need to fear because she had found favor with God. The Greek word translated "favour" in Luke 1:30 is *charts*, which is usually translated "grace." The word behind "highly favoured" (v. 28) is *charitoo*, which means "to be indued with special honor." Mary was indeed blessed, for God was about to bestow upon her the highest honor ever given to a woman.

8. What do you think went through the mind of Mary at the news she "would bring forth a son" (v. 31)?

One of the most exciting moments for any woman comes when she can say to her husband, "Honey, we are going to have a baby!" If we allow our imaginations to picture this scene with Mary, however, we come to realize that instead of moments of great joy, Mary first experienced moments of great uncertainty over her news. How could she possibly give Joseph this information?

The news for Mary must be truly shocking. She, a young unmarried girl still living in her father's house, is to be pregnant and give birth to *a son*. This is disturbing, for it has the potential of ruining her marriage prospects and any chance for a normal life in that culture.

The *name* for the boy helps to explain this, however. His name will be *Jesus*, the New Testament version of the famous Israelite name Joshua. Joshua means "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh will save."

9. What were some of the significant statements given to Mary about the son she would give birth to (vs. 32,33)?

The angel made five significant statements about Mary's son. First, He would be great. The Greek word here is *me gas*. Jesus would certainly be no ordinary baby, for He was superior to all. Second, Mary's son would be known as "the Son of the Highest." The word for "Highest" here is translated "most high" in other places (see Mark 5:7).

"Mary could not have missed the significance of that terminology. The fact that [Jesus] was to be called the 'Son of the Most High' pointed to His equality with Yahweh. In Semitic thought a son was a 'carbon copy' of his father, and the phrase 'son of' was often used to refer to one who possessed his 'father's' qualities" (Walvoord and Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor).

Third, Mary was told that God was going to put her son on the throne of David. Being the godly young woman she was, Mary probably recognized that the angel spoke of the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, which had been given nearly a thousand years earlier: "And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam. 7:16). Fourth, He would reign over the house of Jacob forever. This will begin in the millennium and continue right into eternity.

Fifth, adding certainty to the previous statement, Gabriel said her son's kingdom would never end. This will include far more than the house of Jacob. Just as God promised Abraham that he and his descendants were to be a blessing to the whole world, so Mary's son will reign over the entire universe. From this she certainly would have understood that she was going to bear the Messiah.

10. What explanation did the angel Gabriel give Mary to help her (vs. 34,35)?

Mary is very young, perhaps only 15 or 16. Yet she understands the facts of life. Pregnancy is not self-induced (v. 34). She can say without pretense that there has been no sexual contact in her life. We should not understand this to be a lack of faith on Mary's part (as if she were saying "No way!"), but a desire to understand better ("How?").

While Gabriel had rebuked Zacharias for expressing unbelief (Luke 1:20), there was no rebuke to Mary. This is evidence that her question came not because of unbelief but merely from the fact that what was being described to her did not seem humanly possible.

Gabriel makes it clear that this is not some sordid, embarrassing affair. This is a *holy* undertaking, a provision of God himself. God was going to accomplish this through a miraculous conception. She would conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit and give birth while she was still a virgin. This creative act of the Spirit was necessary because of Jesus' pre-existence and deity. He already was and would continue to be the holy Son of God. Here was the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7. Galatians 4:4,5 assures us that this birth was for the purpose of our redemption so that we can be children of God.

11. What example did Gabriel give Mary to help her (vs. 36,37)?

In order to strengthen Mary's faith even further, Gabriel told her about her relative Elisabeth. Zacharias and Elisabeth were childless, and "both were now well stricken in years" (Luke 1:7). Gabriel had announced to Zacharias the coming birth of their son John, and as soon as the period of his temple service was completed, he returned home. Shortly after that his wife Elisabeth conceived (vs. 23,24). Mary's pregnancy was not God's only miracle going on at that time.

Gabriel emphasized that Elisabeth had conceived in her old age even though she had been childless her entire life. He also informed Mary that Elisabeth was now in her sixth month of pregnancy (v. 36); so she was well on her way to giving birth. If there were any doubts lingering in Mary's mind, this should answer them. However, to put a final conclusive thought in Mary's mind about the greatness and the possibility of this miracle, Gabriel reminded her that nothing is impossible with God.

This is a core statement of faith, yet one that we often neglect. If there are things that are *impossible* for *God*, then is He really God?

This issue comes up later in Luke concerning salvation, for Jesus teaches that salvation is not the result of human effort. Salvation is possible for the God for whom nothing is impossible (see Luke 18:25-27; compare Genesis 18:14).

12. How did Mary respond to Gabriel's words (v. 38)?

At this point, we cannot help but marvel at the faith of Mary, a mere teenager. Without a doubt, she does not understand all that is happening to her. Yet she freely submits to the will of God. She makes no demand for some kind of equal partnership with God, but offers herself as His *handmaid*, meaning His "servant" or "slave." Her acceptance is a sign of great faith.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** It is dangerous enough to try the patience of people; how much more deadly is it to try the patience of Almighty God? (Isaiah 7:13)
- 2.** Jesus is God come as man – God on our side. Once we are His, He is ours forever. (v. 14)
- 3.** Jesus' perfect knowledge of good and evil makes Him the perfect judge of all. (vs. 15-17)
- 4.** God favored Mary as He does us, not for our own righteousness, but sovereignly, out of His mercy and grace. (Luke 1:30-35)
- 5.** "Impossible" is God's specialty; never count Him out. (vs. 36,37)
- 6.** Mary's humility is not false; it is the only response to God for a favored sinner. (v. 38).

CONCLUSION

One of the ongoing promises of the Old Testament is found when God proclaims, "I will be with thee." God gave this promise to Jacob as he returned to his homeland (Genesis 31:3). A similar promise was given to Moses when he was called to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 3:12). Joshua and the people received the assurance as they entered the promised land (Joshua 1:5). Today this promise is reflected in one of the traditional blessings of the church: "The Lord be with you." A great part of the coming of God's Messiah was the prophecy of Isaiah that the promised one would be Immanuel. God is with us and will be with us eternally.

When we combine the prophecy of Isaiah with the story of Mary, we should realize that God is always "with" His people. This "with-ness" is more than an aspect of God's ever-presence, however. It means that God is behind His people, working with them and using them to accomplish His plans and fulfill His will. Ahaz, a king of Israel, did not understand this. Mary, a teenage peasant girl, did.

The church today, as God's people, retains this promise. God is with us. He will never abandon us. He will use us if we have the heart of submission to His will that we see in Mary. We may not be visited by angels, but we too need not be afraid. God is with us.

PRAYER

Holy God, as You chose and used Mary, may You choose and use us according to Your will. Make us sensitive to Your leading so that our response will not be that of King Ahaz, but will be that of humble Mary. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God is still with us.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Emmanuel's Birth." This lesson will show how Joseph was opened to divine explanation of what appeared to be inexplicable, obeyed God and accepted his role in the birth of Emmanuel. Study Matthew 1:18-25.

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY:

Renee Little

Jesus Is All Ministries

www.jesusisall.com

WORKS CITED:

Summary and commentary derived from Standard Lesson Commentary Copyright© 2009 by permission of Standard Publishing.

Reprinted by permission of The Incorporated Trustees of the Gospel Worker Society, Union Gospel Press, P.O. Box 6059, Cleveland, Ohio 44101. (Web site:

<http://www.uniongospelpress.com/>)

The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books

Holman Bible Dictionary, Holman Bible Publishers