

Unto Us...Immanuel

December 2009

Water crawled through the small stream, giggling and swishing as the king sat on a log, thinking of the hard decisions he would make. The kingdom looked good on the outside, but the dangers the lie ahead could destroy what everyone knew and loved about Israel. Ahaz knew there were only a couple of ways to save the nation. But nowhere in his heart did he want to hear the prophet yelling at him from the other side of the brook. Isaiah stood on the other son, trying to speak hope into a defeated king. When Israel had found out about the northern alliance bent on taking their land, the people's courage took a vacation.

But Isaiah stood with his son, whose name signified both the greatest fear of the people and the greatest message of hope from God. The boy's name is translated "A remnant will return," signifying their defeat and capture, but also the plans of the Lord for restoration. As the prophet pleaded with the king to place trust in God instead of Egypt for help, the king refused to hear of God's message. He would not even ask God for a sign. But through Isaiah, God gave one anyway. A virgin or young woman would bear a son called Immanuel, meaning, "God with us." That was the hope, but the king did not listen, and the nation was overrun.

Cold darkness surrounded the shepherds as they laid in the opening of the cavern to keep the sheep from danger. Long and hard the days pass for men of this caliber. Most of them were treated rudely by everyone, having the lowest of low jobs, the job no one

else wants. But they were strong and courageous like Joshua, mighty warriors like David, and gentle enough to care for the sheep that didn't know better. Suddenly, the warm light of the celestial beings filled the sky and warmed their hearts as these men no one cared about were the first to hear the proclamation of a son born unto them, a shepherd and a king! The hope of a nation. The hope of the world!

Christmas brings a time of year in which meditation upon the incarnation of Jesus comes quickly and easily. Despite the secularization of Christmas, I find it more at the forefront of my mind to think on how and why Jesus came unto us. This year in my Christmas preaching, I am focusing on the passages in Isaiah that prophesy of Jesus' first coming. Isaiah 7 and 9 are very special chapters in the revelation of God's plan for all of us.

You can read the passages from Isaiah 7:10-17 and Isaiah 9:1-7 and see very clearly that they are used in New Testament passages, such as Luke 2:10-12 when the angel announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds in the fields, and the direct reference in Matthew 1:23. When the angels proclaimed Christ's birth to those shepherds that night, they used clear references to Isaiah 9:1-7. They used words like "unto us" and "joy and peace," not to mention King David's city. The night and proclamation go down in history as God began to bring everything full circle.

While many scholars buck against predictive prophecy and stages of fulfillment, let me give just one quick example of how prophecy has an immediate fulfillment, then points of fulfillment throughout history, and finally a culminating fulfillment to which it originally pointed. Let us take the example of Daniel, who prophesied about the abomination of desolation mentioned by Jesus (Daniel 9:24-27 and Matthew 24:15-28, also Mark 13:14-23). The idea gathered over time by the Jews was that a ruler would come and desolate the temple by an impure or improper sacrifice or a violation of God's temple laws and ordinances.

Now when the prophecy came to Daniel, it was time-specific. There were a number of weeks to wait for things to fall into place so that Israel could be restored. For Daniel, that prophecy was not fuzzy math, like what some people do with the 70 weeks in eschatology today. However, the more important subject of this prophecy was not the timing, but the abomination. The timing was a confirmation of the prophecy. In the times before Jesus, a Gentile ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes IV took Jerusalem, walked into the temple and offered the sacrifice of a pig on the altar, a grave abomination to the Mosaic Law.

Jesus came along and made this abomination of desolation part of the ending of time, as one of the signs of the end times. He talked about a ruler who would do this as well, whether it was in the same way as Antiochus Epiphanes or not. Then, Paul comes along in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, pointing to the antichrist, the son of desolation, who would commit this crime. That is the culmination because it happens in the time of the second coming of Christ. This is how prophecy works in the Bible. Sometimes it is

extremely specific, and other times, the main idea of the prophecy recurs throughout time.

Now, as we look at these two specific prophecies of Isaiah, let me start with Isaiah 7:10-17. Many, if not most scholars, have a caveat about how the word for virgin here can also be translated "young woman" or "betrothed woman." I would also say this because that is the word's range. I would also suggest as most that in the time of Isaiah, this timed prophecy, just like with Daniel, had a specific and quick fulfillment, but not total, in that some woman, probably in the royal household that Ahaz would know, would surprise the family with a pregnancy of some kind. The point of the sign is to confirm to Ahaz God's word, so it was probably a personal sign. But while it confirmed things for Ahaz, it was not completely fulfilled until when the alma (Hebrew word discussed here) Mary would be both betrothed and a virgin. Let us not forget that Matthew under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit goes to this prophecy and claims it is about Jesus. That says a lot about prophecies and their fulfillment!

On top of this, while they could name a child Immanuel in the days of Isaiah, and that name would confirm that God was with them because He was doing what He had said through Isaiah, the name itself is much more readily fulfilled in the God-Man Jesus, whose name means, "The Lord saves." Jesus is God. He is God come in the flesh to dwell or tent with us! If ever there was a more literal fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, it was the literal virginity of the pregnant Mary and the literal outworking of "God with us" as the Son of God who is fully God steps into our world!

Not only does Matthew show the most literal and full interpretation of that

prophecy, Jesus will fulfill all of the names as He ministers to the people before His death. His resurrection will prove that He is the Everlasting God! Beyond this, the government of the Kingdom of God will indeed rest upon His shoulders as Jesus inaugurates the Kingdom of God! But this part of the prophecy of Isaiah, I believe, is still yet to be completely fulfilled. I believe that the sections talking about His government refer in part to the Kingdom of God, but in full point to His literal millennial reign after His feet touch down on the Mount of Olives. That is when we will see a King who rules with peace and rules with the character of the names given by Isaiah. So Christmas should not just remind us of the time past when Christ came unto us, but also when Christ will come to us again!

Now moving to Luke 2:10-12, the angels hinted to the passage in Isaiah 9:1-7. Even the light lighting up the skies for those shepherds would have referenced in visual form the prophecy of people in darkness seeing a great light! Jesus confirms these names in His character and Person as well. He is God, so calling Him Mighty God. The people of Isaiah's time would have seen that in kings who would refer to themselves as divine or almost divine, but Jesus was the embodiment of the name! He indeed was wonderful and a Counselor offering the most sage advice ever in all of History. And He will reign again forever and ever, both literally on the earth and in eternity!

These prophecies get me more excited about the celebration of Jesus' incarnation, His coming to us to save us. The prophecies do much more for me than holiday shopping, Christmas decorations, overplayed Christmas music and even eggnog and snow! I hope for some small hint of what

was, what is, and what will be, they have brightened your Christmas spirit this year as well. May your Christmas season be filled with thoughts of the King, past, present and future. Let that sacred night fill your heart with meditations of Him as we look to another coming, the second coming of our Lord!