

The Waiting: The Prophecy of a Son
By Jason Huff
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Matthew 1:18-21; 1 John 2:1-2; Isaiah 7:14, 9:1-7

Our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Isaiah 7:14 and 9:1-7. May God add His blessing on this reading from His holy Word. “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 Immanuel...there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the 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, 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. 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.”

Titles mean more than we think. We rarely use titles for people – I almost never claim my title of reverend, and I have friends with doctorates who don't advertise the fact. American society sees titles as presumptuous, even snooty. But in England, they are still a big thing, not ancient history trotted out when studying Henry VIII or figuring out who's related to whom on Downton Abbey. In many countries, titles tell us about your family and your accomplishments.

At Christmastime, there are different titles that are important – the titles of items on a gift list. If you buy a Star Wars fan something Star Trek or vice versa, I can promise you, you'll hear about it! A few letters in a title can be the difference between renting a Hollywood blockbuster and getting a cheap knockoff that isn't worth the DVD it's printed on. Every Harry Potter book begins with “Harry Potter and.” If you don't know the rest of the title, you'll probably disappoint whoever you're buying for this Christmas.

Tonight's passage is all about titles that give us a clearer picture of just how great the coming Christ will be and details of how we will know Him. We sing about them at Christmas; we hear this passage whenever we listen to Handel's *Messiah*. But tonight, we'll realize just what they say to us about the nature and person of Jesus and how He came to us. They should help us remember just how amazing Jesus really is.

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah about the coming of Jesus many times, but two particular prophecies stand out about Jesus' first coming. Ahaz king of Judah refuses to seek a sign from God, even though God told him to ask for one. So God says, “I'll give Israel a sign instead!” It's a prophecy that was partially fulfilled in Isaiah's day and comes fully true in Jesus.

The prophecy says, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” We’re promised that a virgin will have a child. Now why is that? The virgin birth has offended and perplexed people since the story of Jesus’ birth was told. It was so important to the early church that the virgin birth made it into the earliest creeds that we still say today. But it’s so astounding that people can’t believe it. In fact, the Pharisees came up with a story that Jesus was illegitimate, which was far more believable than His birth to a virgin.

Why does it matter? It matters for reasons we might not expect. Jesus is not born to a virgin because sex is inherently sinful; before Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they were told to be fruitful and multiply. That’s not it. The reason Jesus’ birth to a virgin matters is two-fold, and it doesn’t have to do with sexual sin.

First, it separates Him from all the mythology and legends surrounding the gods of the other nations. The Greek and Roman gods were playboys, cheating on their wives with earthly women who gave birth to their kids. They lusted after humans. But the one true God does no such thing. Luke reveals that the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary; there isn’t a hint of impropriety. And with a virgin mother, no one could claim to be Jesus’ biological father.

Second, the virgin birth marks Jesus’ unique stature as the one who is both God and man, who is fully human yet fully divine, not half and half but both in a way we can only begin to comprehend. He is not a god who appears from nowhere and descends from heaven to rule with an iron fist. Nor is He just an ordinary person living an extraordinary life.

As one born of a virgin, placed there in her womb by the Holy Spirit, He has the power to bridge the gap between us and God. Because He is a man, He relates to us and can become the proper sacrifice for man’s sins; because He is God, He uniquely has the power to be perfect as no typical human could be. Since the sacrifice for sins had to be without blemish, only a perfect man who is in very nature God could be the sacrifice. The virgin birth, as crazy as it sounds, not only makes sense as it’s told to us in Scripture, it shows us that there could be no other way.

The child is to be named Immanuel, which means, “God with us.” It isn’t necessarily an uncommon name. For the Jewish people, the name Immanuel was a statement of their faith: God is with us. God had never completely forsaken or abandoned them, even in their exile apart from the temple where God’s Spirit resided alongside them. It was a good, godly name.

But in Jesus, the name takes on a whole new dimension. God is not just watching over us from on high, keeping us from danger. No, God comes to dwell alongside us. The Father sends the Son to be in the midst of us, to become one of us, living as we do except without sin. In this prophecy, we’re promised that God will not just hang around; He will come to live with us.

Then there’s a transition, a new passage. Inbetween the first and second passages we’re looking at today, Isaiah prophecies about destruction from Assyria: gloom and doom for Israel. But as chapter 9 begins, the gloom and distress are gone. Galilee of the Gentiles is honored by God – which is surprising, since the Jews were suspicious of foreigners and considered Galilee a backwater. Suddenly, a great light dawns, Israel enlarges, threats and oppression against God’s people cease, and war ends. It’s magnificent: finally, a promise of peace and victory for all time.

What brings about this promise? The line many of us know from the Messiah: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders.” This dovetails with the previous prophecy of the virgin bearing a son named Emmanuel. This is where the previous prophecy left off and now continues. A very special Son is coming.

The first thing we know about Him is that “the government will be on his shoulders.” This is why the people of Jesus’ day expected an earthly king, but the reign of Jesus is far above that. God has always been on His throne, He has always governed the universe that He created, and He has a kingdom on earth that is still spreading even today. It is a kingdom of truth, spirit, and power, not one the world knows and understands. For the government of God to be on Jesus’ shoulders is an honor.

“On his shoulders” is idiom in English. You know, “He’s got the weight of the world on His shoulders.” We think of it as a burden. That’s true here, but it’s even richer. Ancient kings and dignitaries were adorned with the crest of their kingdom which they wore on their back or on their shoulders. In ceremonies, ancient rulers would have a key placed on their shoulders ceremonially symbolizing their rule. So for the government to be on Jesus’ shoulders means, first, that He is rightfully given authority and rule as the perfect King over us.

But second, Jesus takes the yoke of oppression that had weighed down His people, weighed down our shoulders, and He lifts it off of us; whatever burden there is, He places on Himself. He does so precisely because He is our King. Jesus takes on our burdens, our temptations and sins, the things that oppress us. This coming King relieves our afflictions and carries our sufferings.

That leads into these titles which He has earned. The first title is “Wonderful.” Sometimes it’s matched with the second title, “counselor,” but it should stand on its own because it’s not an adjective in the Hebrew but a noun. He is, in the simplest translation, “a wonder.”

Words and titles like these sometimes lose their meaning because we like descriptive language for things we really appreciate. Something that’s merely good isn’t good enough, you know? It has to be awesome, spectacular, cool, incredible. We even cycle through words for really impressive things because those *words* are no longer impressive. Nothing’s “rad” or “bad” or “wicked” anymore because those *words* are no longer good enough to describe goodness!

And we can lose “wonderful” too as somewhere between “amazing” and “awesome.” But the word in Hebrew is “pele” – like the soccer player in the 1970s! It’s the same word used of the wonders and miracles God did in Egypt. He is beyond human ability to think or describe, truly extraordinary, someone who we do not understand so much as marvel upon. He’s not just nice, or good, or great. He is a wonder, as hard to fathom as a miracle and just as stunning.

Then comes the second title: counselor. That’s not a title you expect for a king. Kings have advisors telling them what they should do. But our King is different. He keeps His own counsel. And He is our counselor. He not only knows Himself what to do and which way to turn, He guides us and leads us in the ways we should follow. He counsels rather than being counseled.

And this says something to me. Before we learn the last three titles, we have “counselor.” This King, this One who reigns supreme, this wonder and marvel, the One who we will learn is in very nature God – He cares for us. He counsels us. He wants us to be on the right path. He desires the best for us. A king orders His people and they move at His command. But a counselor listens, a counselor guides and steers and directs, a counselor weeps and rejoices with the person they counsel.

This passage reveals Jesus as His most awe-inspiring. But don’t ever feel that He is unapproachable, that He doesn’t want to know you or that you are too far gone spiritually to turn from your sin and come before Him. His love is shown in that this wonder of a Son would die for you. And more than that, that He would live for you, and lives even now! We can get down and depressed in this season of the cold and dark, but Jesus is there to be your counselor, to lead you on. Don’t be overwhelmed by who He is, because He says to us over and over again in Scripture, “Do not be afraid.” He wants all those who would humble themselves to approach Him, knowing that He loves them and will hear them.

The Son is a wonder, and a counselor. But then comes the kicker – another title is Mighty God. This passage begins revealing to us the deeper nature of God, who is truly and really One, yet One in three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. How can a Son be the Mighty God who has existed from all eternity?

There is no completely satisfying answer from the Jewish perspective. There are theories. Because there are multiple words that mean “god” in Hebrew, some have taken it to mean some very powerful ruler who is not the one true God. But this unique title, Mighty God, doesn’t refer to any other being in Scripture besides the one true God. Isaiah is writing about something revealed to him by God that he doesn’t yet even understand – that the Son born to us will be truly Emmanuel, God with us, God in the flesh, God to be worshipped and adored. We understand it now on the other side, having seen Jesus come. That’s the beauty of this passage – we get to see it and understand it. Jesus is truly God come among us.

The next one is even more mind-blowing: Everlasting Father. What did that mean? Isaiah didn’t know God as Father – God was the Father of the nation of Israel, but the Jews never saw Him as their Heavenly Father as we do. So they had no idea how this might relate to what we now know as the Father and His Son, Jesus.

So is this passage confused? Jesus is not the Father; they are separate. Jesus prays to the Father over and over again during His life. However, in the mystery of the Trinity, with the Holy Spirit, they are one God. Philippians 2:6 tells us Jesus is in His very nature God. In John 10:30, Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” In John 17, Jesus prays for the unity of the disciples and the church so that we might be one as He is one with the Father. John 14:9 tells us that anyone who has seen Jesus has seen the Father.

In Jesus, we have a direct relationship with God, not a substitute or something secondary. Jesus is unique because He is the mediator between us and the Father. He stands in the gap; He makes it possible for us, despite our sin, to enter the Father’s presence and to know the Father because we are covered by His sacrifice.

Not only is He one with the Heavenly Father, He is also our everlasting father in a different sense. Adam is the father of the human race. When he fell into sin, we fell with him. While we are judged for our own sins, humanity is sinful because the first man passed sin along to us. But when Jesus comes, 1 Corinthians 15 says, He is the last Adam. The first man was from dust; the second man was from heaven; the first man was earthly; the second man was spiritual. When you have faith in Jesus and turn away from sin, you have a new father, the second man: Jesus. You are no longer connected to the sinfulness of Adam. You are claimed by Christ and remade into His image rather than the image of Adam. We who believe can call Christ our father in a very real sense.

Finally, the last title is a beautiful contradiction: Prince of Peace. The title “prince” means leader or commander. It’s a term of war – a general leading an army. That’s why the turnaround is so surprising. He’s the admiral of peace. He doesn’t bring conflict but a rule of *shalom*. That’s the Hebrew word for not just freedom from war but wholeness and completeness. His Kingdom is not of this world – Jesus said so. It is a Kingdom founded on the heavenly peace He brings.

And His Kingdom will always be increasing. This descendent of David will never leave the throne, but establish it forever by the zeal of the LORD. Once we know Christ as our Savior and Lord, there is no worry that He will not finish what He started. He will change us, complete us, and resurrect us when He returns again. There is no threat that He will be dethroned. If we put our trust in Him, we will always be a part of His glorious Kingdom.

Many weeks, we spend a lot of time trying to figure out the practical side of biblical passages – what they are calling us to do or say in everyday life. This passage is spiritually practical. It doesn’t tell us to be good or kind or thoughtful or self-controlled. It doesn’t go into the theology of what it means to be saved by God and to repent of sin. It simply focuses on who the Son of God, who Jesus, is.

And in the busyness of this season, I think that’s perfect. Don’t take home a to-do list from church this week in your head. Instead, just reflect on the wonder of our Lord and Savior. He is beyond our ability to comprehend, yet He becomes One of us. He counsels us in His ways. He is our Mighty God, but He is also our companion, One willing to come to earth as a child in order to save us and befriend us. If we simply celebrate the wonder of our Lord this week because we learned more about who He is, we’ll have done well.