

## A SIGN FOR AHAZ ISAIAH 7:10-16

In verse 14 Isaiah pens, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.”

I saw it happen again last Sunday morning on my way to church. Some poor, lost soul was traveling northbound on Scenic Highway, through downtown Snellville, when he took a right hand turn onto Highway 78. The motorist obviously didn't understand the configuration of the intersection... *and uh oh, he suddenly found himself driving into oncoming traffic...*

And you know what he did? He stopped and tried to turn around in the left-hand turn lane. *Big mistake!* After several awkward maneuvers - *that including driving over the concrete curb* - and some patience from on-coming drivers, who probably have made the same mistake themselves, the fellow survived... I just slowed down, and thought to myself, “*Welcome to Snellville, and the world's most confusing intersection!*”

Officially, the Georgia Department Of Transportation calls it “*A Displaced Left Turn Crossover Intersection.*” To the DOT it's a DLT. But to motorists it's a mess. If you haven't had the experience, it's time to treat your wild side, and take a drive through the city of Snellville.

To turn left at the intersection there's a light before you get to the light at the intersection that lets you crossover into a displaced left turn lane, to make the left hand turn... Hope you got all that! *Just make sure your collision insurance is paid up before you try it.*

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 23% of fatal car crashes occur at intersections. The total annual cost to American society of intersection-related crashes is \$40 billion. The DLT Crossover is suppose to *reduce accidents, lower construction costs, use less land, increase traffic flow, and minimize engine idling improving fuel efficiency.*

*But I don't care how much lipstick you put on a pig...* it's still seriously confusing for unsuspecting motorists.

In fact, the DOT website admits, “*There will be an adjustment period for drivers that can take awhile (how about going on four years... it goes on...).* There can be confusion, frustration, and some accidents resulting from the new design. Given that going against the flow can be counter-intuitive, it is imperative that the signage be clear and concise to help drivers adjust.”

And just as confusing and counter-intuitive as the intersection in Snellville - is our subject today, **the virgin birth of our Lord Jesus**. *For there have been crashes here too - crashes of faith!* The virgin birth of Jesus is an intersection of the divine and human, of God's wisdom and human logic, of revelation and reason. When some folks encounter this topic, their faith and intellect collide. It can prove costly to their salvation. This is why we want to see the miracle of the virgin birth as it was originally intended. God's promise in verse 14 had to be bold and grand, for it was a sign to Judah's frightened and war-wearied, King Ahaz...

Originally, the promise of Immanuel - *the promise the Angel of the Lord made to Joseph to explain the events of the first Christmas* - was to the Kings of Judah, of which Ahaz was a representative. At the time (735-716 BC), the nation Judah was under attack by several invading armies - from both the Syrians and Israelites. And King Ahaz was petrified. The king was horrified.

It was the prophet Isaiah who came to reassure Ahaz that God was in control, and would deliver His people! And to confirm it, King Ahaz could ask for a sign...

In Isaiah 7:10, **"Moreover the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above."** *God is saying ask something supernatural of Me. Anything you can think of that would confirm My promise, nothing is off the table!* What an amazing command! God will assure Ahaz of His deliverance with a sign of the king's own choosing. He can ask for the most outlandish sign imaginable, *and God will do it!*

If this offer were made to you, what *supernatural sign* would you choose? ***"Cause the moon to brush up against the Earth? Roll back the hands on the clock? Have the long line at Walmart disappear? Or really go crazy, God let Tech beat Georgia in football just once?"***

**"But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!"** We learn from Ahaz' future actions this was just false humility. He had already decided to strike an alliance with the Assyrians. The king had more faith in his political maneuvers than in the power of his God.

But this offer of a sign pricked his conscience. God was wanting to prove Himself and His faithfulness to King Ahaz. Sadly, he was already leaning far from God.

So, since Ahaz refuses to name a sign, **God does it for him**. Verse 13, **"Then he (Isaiah) said, "Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign..."** Notice Isaiah takes this matter of a sign beyond the current, local situation. The

immediate politics had provoked the prophecy, but it's as if God knew it would be wasted on Ahaz, so He broadens its implications to *the whole house of David*.

The sign Isaiah reveals will speak not only to King Ahaz, but it'll be a sign to all the kings of the Davidic dynasty, and to all generations of the tribe of Judah.

And what God chooses as a sign is far more bizarre than anything Ahaz - or us - could've dreamed up. Isaiah writes in verse 14, "**Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.**" That is, "**God with us!**" What a sign indeed!

If God can cause a virgin name Mary to conceive a Son; then there's no question he can get King Ahaz, or whoever might be king at the time, and the chosen nation of Judah, out of hot water with their enemies.

Realize, Christmas started as a sign. It was a sign to a man weak in faith, that he served a mighty God for Whom nothing is impossible. *And if it were a sign for Ahaz, why isn't it a sign for all the Lord's followers? If God can impregnate the womb of a virgin by His Spirit; then there's nothing He can't do by that same Spirit!*

The virgin birth was a feat so outlandish - so beyond the pale of our understanding - it set a precedent. If God could work this miracle, He can do anything!

Today, even with the tremendous advances we've made in the field of reproductive science: *fertility medications, in vitro fertilization, test tube babies, cloning, etc., etc.* - nothing evenly remotely helps us explain the mechanics of a virgin birth. The advances in obstetrics are marvelous, but they're explicable. Yet the virgin birth is not just *marvelous* - it's *miraculous*!

It caused the great Reformer, Martin Luther, to write (*in a rather tongue-in-cheek manner*), "**The incarnation consists of three miracles: The first that God became man - the second, that a virgin was a mother - and the third, that the heart of man should believe this.**"

When we see a wide receiver dive and catch a football most players can't reach, we call it *a miracle, but it's not...* When we undergo a medical procedure that 50 years ago was unimaginable, we call it "*a miracle,*" but technically it's not... A new gizmo gets labeled, "*a miracle,*" but in the truest sense it's not.

A real miracle is a phenomenon that's impossible to explain or reduce into scientific terms. It goes beyond the *scope of science*. It can't be replicated in a petrie dish, or studied under a microscope. A genuine miracle is an event that depends on God's direct intervention!

The truly miraculous isn't just a technological improvement, or scientific breakthrough. A real miracle usurps natural laws to accomplish a divine purpose.

Miracles baffle the intellect. They drive us to our knees, and force us to face our human limitations. Miracles become a internal intersection. They bring us to the *brink of understanding* and the *beginnings of faith*. The inquisitive, technical, mechanical, analytical mind must *give up* in the face of a genuine miracle. *One will never figure out what only faith can grasp.*

Tertullian, the second century Latin apologist, once commented, "*I believe because it is absurd...*" It was the fact that he couldn't figure it all out - *the power of God, the person of Jesus, the claims of Christianity...* that's what drew Tertullian to the Christian faith.

And I agree. If God's ways can be deciphered by my little pea brain He can't be much of a God! *God's ways should be beyond my ways.* If God doesn't at times frustrate my thinking, He's not a God worth serving!

Philosopher, Dr. Mortimer Adler, became a Christian at the age of 82. He made the following comment, "*I believe Christianity is the only logical, consistent faith in the world. But there are elements to it that can only be described as mystery... My chief reason for choosing Christianity was because the mysteries were incomprehensible. What's the point of revelation if we can figure it out ourselves? If it were wholly comprehensible it would be just another philosophy.*"

A miracle reminds me who God is, and who I am. Up against a miracle my wisdom appears so naïve - my intellectual prowess seems so shallow - my mental powers so weak - *while God appears more Godlike!*

And Christmas is a time to ponder a miracle. It's the season for humbling our *hearts and our heads*, and marveling at a miracle! *A virgin conceived!* As John wrote in his Gospel, "*The Word became flesh.*" Or as the Greeks called it, "*the Logos*" - the ultimate reason behind life was revealed in skin, blood, and bone. As scientists call it today, "*the unified theory*" or "*the theory of everything*" was revealed in a man named Jesus.

God added humanity to His deity. God became a man. Think of it, *the ancient of days became a child of time. The infinite became an infant. The Creator a kid!*

*How did it happen?* Well, the details are sketchy, but here's what we know, "*The Spirit of God overshadowed a virgin's womb. The seed of the spiritual impregnated a human egg. The Divine seed planted into human soil. The human and divine mingled, and blended, and became one... It was a miracle of the highest order!*"

And that's as far as I go. To me, it's inappropriate to probe any further. Here we stand on holy ground. Recall, from a blazing bush on the side of Mount Sinai, God told Moses, "*Take your sandals off your feet, for the place you stand is holy ground.*" Well,

the virgin birth is another reason to slip off your sandals before a miracle. It's not for us to scrutinize this divine mystery.

We need to stand humbly in awe of God's omnipotence and wisdom. Christmas is not a time to be analytical or technical. **It's a time to gawk at God!**

Unlike King Ahaz, the Angel of the Lord knew Joseph was a man of faith. Jesus' foster father didn't need an explanation to believe. All he needed to navigate the intersection of mystery and mandate, of puzzle and obedience was *a sign!* - a reminder of God's promise...

So after the angel's visit to Joseph, the Gospel writer, Matthew, puts it all in context. He tells us... "So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying (and he quotes Isaiah 7:14): "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

The idea of God's Son coming into the world through the womb of a virgin is like a unconventional intersection you're experiencing for the first time. It's counter-intuitive. It's not in keeping with the norm. It's unprecedented, and thus it can be difficult to navigate.

And that's why collisions and crashes occur, *unless*, you **trust the engineer** and **follow the signs!** The virgin birth can confuse your faith if you see only its complexities. But if you see it as a sign - if you hear God say, "Since I can do this... I can work the miracle you need." Then it builds your faith in amazing ways.

This is why the devil works overtime to undermine this miracle. He throws shade on the virgin birth.

For example in Isaiah 7:14 the Hebrew term translated "*virgin*" is the word "*almah*." And there are skeptics who'll say "*almah*" doesn't necessarily mean "*virgin*." It can mean "*a young girl of marriageable age*."

Which is true... but it does often mean "*virgin*." In fact, "*almah*" appears seven times in the OT. And in four of the seven passages the context is without a doubt speaking of a girl who has never had sexual relations with a man. The three other uses of the word are less clear, but also probably refer to virgin girls.

Besides, this birth is to be "*a sign*" to Ahaz. And what kind of a sign is it for a young woman of marriageable age to birth a child? That was an everyday occurrence. A sign is an extraordinary event. It attracts attention. It indicates that God is up to something unique, special...

All doubt about the meaning of the word "*almah*" was eliminated in 270 BC when the OT was translated into Greek - a translation known as the Septuagint.



The Septuagint renders the Hebrew word “**almah**” with the Greek word “**parthenos**” - which is a strong term. It’s an unequivocal reference to a genuine virgin.

*And here’s the icing on the cake!* When in the New Testament the Gospel writer Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, and it gets recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the word used is this term, “**parthenos.**”

Obviously, when both Isaiah and Matthew wrote of a “**virgin**” - a woman who had never had sexual relations with a man - is exactly what the authors meant!

Isaiah continues to write of “**Immanuel**” in verse 15, “**Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse evil and choose the good. For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings.**”

Curds and honey were Jewish baby food. Thus, Isaiah is saying before this miraculous, virgin-born child reaches adulthood, Judah’s neighbors, Syria and Israel, will no longer be a serious military threat.

*Now it would be 730 years before the child of this prophecy was even born. Yet if Jesus had been born that very day the timeframe would have still been valid.*

A Jewish boy celebrates his **bar-mitzvah**, or his passage from childhood into adulthood, at age 12. At the time this prophecy was given to Ahaz it took a little less than a dozen years for the Assyrians to wipe out both Syria and Israel. Both enemies had been toppled.

Of course, some folks ask, “**How can an event 730 years in the future be a sign to a man in the present?**”

Well, Isaiah’s point is to introduce to Ahaz, and the nation, this person, “**Immanuel.**” He would be born of a virgin seven centuries in the future, but Immanuel was active that very moment. God’s Son was Immanuel from the dawn of time, not just at His birth. In the OT, Immanuel appeared at various times, for various reasons. We call it a “**Christophany**” - a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. Here, He comes to defend Ahaz.

In Isaiah 8 we learn it was Immanuel who drew a sword to fend off the invading armies of Assyria.

The Immanuel who would later be born in Bethlehem had already been active in the life of the nation 700 years earlier. The ultimate intersection of divine and human, and the sign that taught us *who Immanuel really was* and *what He’d really come to do* wouldn’t be revealed until the virgin had conceived and bore a Son.

There are other OT passages that affirm God's promise of the Savior's virgin birth. This miracle is spoken of in several places... Genesis 3 anticipates the ultimate conflict between *the Savior* and *the Satan*.

God speaks to the serpent who deceived Eve in Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." Hostility will exist between Eve's offspring and agents of Satan. Satan will bruise Eve's Son, but Eve's Boy will crush the devil. This happened on the cross. Jesus got a nasty bruise, but Satan got his skull crushed in.

And notice, the wording of this prophecy. Jesus is referred to as "the seed of the woman." This is the only time in Scripture which speaks of a woman possessing a seed... The man supplies the seed, not the woman. Obviously, Genesis 3:15 is predicting a kind of miracle birth - a unique, and special, and supernatural birth.

Consider as well, Jeremiah 31:22, "For the LORD has created a new thing in the earth - a woman shall encompass a man." The Hebrew rabbis, writing before the coming of Jesus, understood this verse to refer to the birth of a son by supernatural means. One rabbi explained it, "Messiah is to have no earthly father."

Another rabbi stated, "The birth of Messiah will be without defect. The birth of the Messiah will be like that of no other man." And a third rabbinical interpretation, "The birth of Messiah will be like the dew of the Lord as drops on the grass without the action of a man."

All three interpretations strike a similar chord. Jewish scholars before Jesus understood that the Prophet Jeremiah predicted Messiah would be born of a virgin.

Realize too, the virgin birth is not only predicted in the OT, it's a crucial, essential teaching in the NT.

If Jesus of Nazareth had been the bastard child of Mary's infidelity - or even the legitimate offspring of her marriage to Joseph - we'd have no salvation. Jesus would be a mere mortal - a common sinner - guilty of sin Himself, and unable to die in our place for our sins.

Sin is inherent. It's passed down. Every person is born with a rebellious, stubborn nature. We're selfish from the womb. As the saying goes, "We're not sinners because we sin. We sin because we're sinners."

Romans 5 teaches us that the first Adam acted for all humanity - so that the last Adam, Jesus, could save all who would trust in Him. **One man acts for all men.**

Thus, the Bible makes a big deal that sin passes from Adam, not Eve. It's the father's bloodline that's stained. The reason we're *born into sin* and *wicked from the womb* is because of our *distant daddy*, Adam.

This is why the Virgin Birth is a necessity. Since Joseph was not His blood relative, Jesus avoided the inherent sin from Adam. Jesus received His humanity from Mary, but His spiritual nature came from God. *Jesus might've inherited Mary's Jewish nose, or her black wavy hair, but He was born with a divine nature.* In Jesus, God became flesh. Jesus was born sinless.

If Jesus had been born in sin - even if He'd lived a perfect life afterwards - He still would've died for His own sin, not ours. To die a substitutionary death, Jesus had to be guiltless **not only from birth, but in birth!**

The miracle that occurred in the womb on the young maiden enabled Jesus to be as human as his mother Mary, yet as sinless and divine as God in heaven.

And this is why the Virgin Birth is foundational to all Christian theology. It's essential, not optional. In fact, kick out the cornerstone and the whole house caves in.

Without the sign God gave to Ahaz, Christianity becomes a *"house of cards."* Lose the truth of the Virgin Birth and Jesus is no longer the *God-man* - He's just a *con-man*. Our salvation becomes a sham.

Forget about *"peace on earth, good will toward men..."* Never mind Christmas is for kids... Ignore Christmas cheer and charity... There is *no reason for the season* if Jesus of Nazareth is not virgin born...

Without the virgin birth, Jesus isn't *who He says He is*, and He's *unable to do what He says He does*.

Which brings us again to this counter-intuitive intersection of faith and reason. Here's where collisions occur. At the virgin birth a high-mindedness runs head-on into a humble heart... A know-it-all attitude crashes into a child-like faith... A desire to believe gets tangled in an inability to see what God is doing in my life...

And that's why to avoid trouble - to keep from taking a wrong turn - I have to approach the virgin birth as **the sign** it was intended to be. Remember God has let us in on this miracle not to enlighten our intellect, or to satisfy our curiosity, or to even color our imagination, **but to strengthen our faith. If God can birth a child through a virgin, He can work the miracle I need.**

The virgin birth is a lesson on following God even when I don't understand all He does, even when I can't figure Him out. It reduces Christian faith to its simplest equation: **If God can do that; then God can do this.**



Take note here, **the why** isn't important. Only **the what!** When I'm in the thick of the confusion at Scenic Highway and 78 I'm not pondering *why*. I'll think about *why* later. *Why did the engineer think this was a good idea? Why did he come to this conclusion?* Those are questions for later... But in that moment I'm focused on **what** to do. *What are the signs telling me?* And this is the point of the virgin birth. It's a sign telling us that we can trust God even when we can't track His ways.

I want to read you some challenging thoughts from that profound theologian, Dr. Seuss. I've shared this with you before, but it really bears repeating. I'd like to read an excerpt from his book, "On Beyond Zebra..."

"Said Conrad Cornelius O'Donnell O'Dell, to his very young friend who was learning to spell, 'The A is for Ape, the B is for Bear, the C is for Camel, the H is for Hair, the M is for Mouse, the R is for Rat ... I know all the 26 letters like that. Through to Z is for Zebra, I know them all well,' said Conrad Cornelius O'Donnell O'Dell. So now I know anything anyone knows, from beginning to end, from the start to the close, because Z is as far as the alphabet goes..."

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor when I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more. A letter he had never dreamed of before... And I said, 'You can stop if you want with the Z, because most people stop with the Z, but not me. In the places I go, there are things that I see that I never could spell if I stopped with the Z... I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends, my alphabet starts where your alphabet ends.

My alphabet starts with this letter called yezz, it's the letter I use to spell yezzametezz. You'll be surprised what there is to be found, once you go beyond Z and start poking around... So on beyond Zebra, it's high time you were shown that you really don't know all there is to be known.'" I love the message Dr. Seuss is conveying, for too many of us live like we know it all.

We stop at Z. We refuse to trust God when He does the unfamiliar or the counter-intuitive. When God's plan doesn't fit snugly into our frame of reference, or God works in ways we can't see or explain, we refuse to accept them. We're afraid to go beyond Zebra.

Realize, if this is you, you'll never get anywhere with God until you choose real faith! Hebrews 11:6 tells us, "Without faith it is impossible to please Him." To know God personally you've got to *trust Him* beyond where you're able to *trace Him*. This is why Christmas is so therapeutic for us. It forces us beyond our own limitations, and possibilities, and preps us for God's miracles... *To be brought to my knees in simple faith and absolute trust is good, good medicine for my soul! To be baffled once a year at Christmas is a blessing...*

Christmas is one huge lesson in humility. It encourages me to rest *my probing mind* in *God's loving arms*. I cling to the motto, "I love God because I know Him. But I adore Him, because I cannot comprehend Him." It's like the ole saying, "What's over my head is still under God's feet." Jesus' Virgin Birth teaches us that God is bigger than my questions and problems.

Think for a moment about a pizza. (*It's time to get you prepped for lunch. It's hungry time!*) Have you ever wondered why pizza is round? It could be any shape, but it's round... And yet why does that round pizza come in a square box? You'd think a round pizza would require a round box... And when I open that square box why do I find pieces cut in triangles? I got a round pizza, in a square box, cut in triangles... Is it just me or does that seem confusing? Yet none of the mystery stops me from eating that pizza when I get hungry!

And this is how David expresses his faith in Psalm 34:8, "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!" I don't have to scrutinize the recipe, or read the label of ingredients on the side of the package before I eat. Not knowing the contents of the dish, doesn't stop me from diving in and enjoying a delicious meal. *I can taste before I know.*

*Do I have questions that I'll one day ask God?* Of course I do. Who doesn't? But a few unanswered questions doesn't stop me from tasting His goodness.

This is how I approach many of the elements of my relationship with God and the Christian life, as well as the virgin birth. *Do I wait for God to explain every nuance of a Scripture before I believe it?* No. I trust His Word... *Do I expect God to give me all the details before I embrace His will?* No. I've chosen to follow Him... *Do I question God's love for me just because life doesn't always turn out the way I think it should?* Of course not! Jesus died for me on a rugged cross, how can I doubt His love for me now... *Or does God owe me an explanation, or need to get my permission, before He brings a trial my way?* Certainly not! God is the Father and I am the child. My understanding is always lagging behind God's movements in my life.

Pastor Gardner Taylor was Martin Luther King Jr.'s role model for preaching. Dr. Taylor was an amazing communicator of the Gospel. The grandson of emancipated slaves he grew up in a segregated South.

Once, Gardner was preaching in an old country church in the Louisiana bayou. A sole electric light bulb illuminated the sanctuary. In the middle of his sermon that light bulb died, and the room went pitch black.

Dr. Taylor, a young preacher at the time, didn't know what to do. He stumbled for a few seconds; then one of the deacons sitting on the back pew shouted, "Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark."

This is the nature of true faith. Genuine faith is the equivalent of night vision goggles. It sees Jesus even in the dark. Despite the circumstances, it holds fast.

This Christmas I hope you'll go beyond Z, and let God be as big and bold and incomprehensible as He truly is... I trust you'll look for Jesus not only in the decorative lights of Christmas, but also in the dark places, because He's there too... This Christmas may you taste of God's goodness as you stand in awe of Him at the intersection of His wonders and mysteries...

**Christmas is the holiday that humbles us.**

The virgin birth is the intersection of God's infinite wisdom and our fidelity and trust. In the confusion of our lives - in the unconventional routings of faith and reason - let God be God, surrender to His ways and wisdom, and love Him for the great God that He is.

Then **taste and see that the LORD is good!**