



## Part 1 – Expectations of Christ’s First Coming

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### **BELONG**

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- Now that we are in the Christmas season, what is a Christmas memory that you look back on fondly?
  - We talked in the previous series about the Second Coming of Christ and the predictions related to it. Were you aware that there were predictions for Jesus’ First Coming as well?
  - Do you think that the prophecies about Jesus’ birth are important for Christians to know? If so, why?
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### **BELIEVE**

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

In this 3-week series, our goal is to demonstrate that the first coming of Christ was by no means an accident or happenstance, but rather a deliberate plan by God to redeem a lost and fallen world. As we approach the traditional Christmas story, we will first look at the prophecies anticipating the appearance of the Messiah. Believe it or not, people have awaited the coming of Christ since the time of the book of Genesis!

## The Messiah Predicted Throughout Early History

### 1. God's Promise to Adam

The first prediction of the coming Messiah, often referred to as the “first gospel” or the “protoevangelium,”<sup>1</sup> is given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after being deceived by the Serpent and eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Before informing Adam and Eve of their punishment, God speaks to the Serpent and provides a prophecy, saying:

Genesis 3:15 (NIV)

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.”

Other translations say “seed” instead of “offspring.” The point is, at the very beginning of history itself, God set in motion a plan to defeat the Devil and to redeem mankind of their sin. A descendent of Adam and Eve will be the promised Messiah, and this prophecy is fulfilled in the writing of Luke's Gospel, where in chapter 3 the author tracks Jesus' lineage all the way back to Adam.

### 2. God's Promise to Judah

After Joseph was appointed by Pharaoh to a position of great authority in Egypt, Joseph revealed his identity to his family. As famine swept the surrounding land, Joseph brought his family into Egypt where they had prepared for the coming food shortage. Jacob, in his dying moments, blesses each of his twelve sons, but he provides a prophecy about his son Judah and his line:

Genesis 49:10 (NIV)

“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.”

The prediction anticipated the establishment of a monarchy in the land of Israel. “The scepter” and “the ruler's staff” were symbols of kingship in the days of ancient Israel. More importantly, Jacob predicted a particular person would rule and all the nations would obey him. The promised Messiah would be a king and a descendent of Judah. This prophecy finds its fulfilment in the writing of Matthew's Gospel, which traces Jesus' lineage to the line of Judah.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://stpaulcenter.com/the-first-prophecy-of-the-messiah/>

### 3. God's Promise to David

During the rule of David, the most famous king in Israel's history, the prophet Nathan received a vision from the Lord to tell David of the coming Messiah. The prediction said of David:

#### 2 Samuel 7:12-13 (NIV)

"When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you... and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Once again, the Messiah is predicted as a king who will rule over Israel, but this kingdom will be eternal and never ceasing. The prophecy also claims the Messiah will be a descendant of David. As you might have already guessed, this prophecy is fulfilled in the writing of the book of Matthew, where the genealogy of Jesus also links him to David.

## The Messiah Predicted by Isaiah to King Ahaz

### 1. The Syro-Ephraimite War

By this time, the reign of David had long been over. The kingdom of Israel has splintered into two separate nations, one to the north (still called Israel) and one to the south (called Judah). Ahaz, the current king of Judah and the next in a long line of corrupt rulers, now faces a seemingly hopeless situation.

The empire of Assyria (what is now modern-day Iraq) has grown in power and now poses a threat to its middle eastern neighbors. Fearing being overtaken, the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Syria formed an anti-Assyrian coalition to oppose their expansion. The two countries offered Judah to join their alliance, but Ahaz refused, causing Israel and Syria to attack Judah in retribution. This conflict, known as the Syro-Ephraimite War, is the backdrop to the prediction of the Messiah by Isaiah to Ahaz.

Though their armies have yet to attack, Ahaz knows that an assault against his people is coming, and he can do nothing to stop their advance. The only thing Ahaz can do is perhaps delay it or soften the blow.

### 2. God's Promise to Ahaz

God never leaves His people without hope, no matter how dire the circumstances may feel. The book of 2 Chronicles provides further insight into the dynamics of this conflict. According to 2 Chronicles, Judah was under attack by Israel and Syria as a direct result of Ahaz's unfaithfulness to God. The two countries were God's agents to enact retribution upon the corrupt king, yet even in His judgement God stretches out His hand in mercy to the one who has shown Him no favor.

The prophet Isaiah is sent by God to tell Ahaz to be quiet, to be still, and to look to Him for strength. Isaiah says:

Isaiah 7:8 (NKJV)

“For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken, so that it will not be a people.”

For context, Damascus is the capital of Syria, meaning that Rezin is the king of Syria. Ephraim is a prominent tribe in Israel, so sometimes the kingdom is referred to as Ephraim instead.

Regardless, Isaiah predicts that within 65 years Israel will no longer even be a country, so why should Ahaz worry? Isaiah previously described both Israel and Syria as “two stubs of smoking firebrands.” These nations that Ahaz fears are to God already defeated! God encourages us to trust Him by looking to the bigger picture. Ahaz however, being the faithless man that he is, does not trust God to deliver Judah from their trouble despite His promise.

Even in Ahaz’s doubt, God offers to provide him with a sign that will affirm God’s promise. Ahaz declines to even ask, but God, demonstrating His patience, still provides the sign anyway. God’s faithfulness to His people is not based on anything that we do, but rather on who He is and the promises He has made to us. Isaiah says:

Isaiah 7:14 (NKJV)

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

If this verse sounds familiar, it is because Matthew quotes Isaiah in Matthew 12 when talking about Jesus’ birth! However, if you read further into the passage, it seems to indicate that the prophecy is not about Jesus at all. How then do we know this passage is about the Messiah?

### **3. Understanding the Promise of Isaiah 7**

Immediately after Isaiah’s prediction, he provides more information about this promised child. He says:

Isaiah 7:16 (NKJV)

“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.”

According to Isaiah, the child will be born before the kings of Israel and Syria are defeated. This is how the child will be a sign to Ahaz of God’s promise to defeat his enemies. When

Ahaz sees the child of promise born, he will know that God is with him. If this prophecy were only referring to Jesus, how could the child be a sign to Ahaz if he would never actually live to see the child born? Remember that Jesus is born hundreds of years later.

Who then was this child born during Ahaz's time? There are several theories, but the most likely person is a boy named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz<sup>2</sup> (quite the name). This is Isaiah's son who is born in the very next chapter, and the text provides several connections between this child and the prophecy. How then is prophecy about the Messiah also?

If you continue reading, Isaiah begins to anticipate a time when the plans of Israel's enemies will be completely thwarted because "God is with us." This is the literal meaning of the name "Immanuel." He then says this:

Isaiah 9:6-7 (NKJV)

"For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And his name 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..."

Isaiah describes the same child of his original prediction as being a ruler over Israel whose peace will know no end. This is the same thing God predicted to Judah and David about the Messiah, so we know it must be the same person! Isaiah takes it a step further and refers to the Messiah as God Himself. Jesus is clearly the fulfillment of this prophecy.

#### 4. Double Fulfillment

How can both Jesus and Maher (possibly) be the subject of Isaiah's prophecy? The key is to understand that prophecies in the Bible often have a near (partial) fulfillment that applies directly to their hearers as well as a far (ultimate) fulfillment related directly to Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Maher's birth was the near (partial) fulfillment. His birth signaled to Ahaz and the people of Judah that God is with them in their affliction. Even more so than this, Maher's birth was a sign unto them that God would defeat Israel and Syria and deliver them from their enemies. Does this mean Maher was a virgin birth like Jesus? The answer is *no* of course!

The Hebrew word for "virgin" in the original version of the text is *'almah*, which can simply mean a young woman of marrying age. This word can carry with it the implication of virginity, but not always. In this way, Maher was indeed born of a "virgin," but rather in the sense that his mother was very young!

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<sup>2</sup> <http://beginningwithmoses.org/bt-articles/205/interpreting-old-testament-prophetic-literature-in-matthew-double-fulfillment>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus-virgin-child-isaiah/>

When Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 when talking about Jesus, he actually quotes the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Greek word used for 'almah is the word *parthenos*, which literally means "virgin." This demonstrates that the Jews always viewed Isaiah 7:14 as messianic even though it had a partial fulfillment in Ahaz's time! Not only that, but the Jews anticipated an actual virgin birth.

Jesus is the far (ultimate) fulfillment of the prophecy. His birth signaled to the world that God Himself had entered the world to save it from sin. Jesus' birth didn't just indicate that God was with us in a spiritual sense; through the person of Jesus, God was quite *literally* with us! He is here to protect us just as He did Ahaz and will deliver us from evil just as He did Ahaz!

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## BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- What do you make of the story of Ahaz? How would you have reacted to the birth of a child being the sign of your deliverance?
- What do you make of the concept of a prophecy having double fulfillment? Do you think it makes sense or is it hard to wrap your head around (if the latter, us too!)?
- How does knowing the story of Ahaz and its relation to the prophecy of Jesus' birth impact your faith?