

“Christmas in July” – Matthew 1:18-25

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.sobc.net.]

If you have your Bible (or one of the pew Bibles), turn with me to Matthew chapter 1. We are going to pick up right where we left off last week. While you’re turning there, let me call your attention to the new “Response Cards” that you probably noticed in the new containers on the back of the pews.

[Elaborate on “Response Cards”]

The last couple of weeks we have been working through the genealogy of Jesus that opens the New Testament. Today, we will move beyond that and into the opening narrative of the New Testament, which describes one of the greatest miracles we have recorded in the Bible—the incarnation. The word “incarnation” is a term used to describe the Son of God becoming a human being, taking on flesh. It is what we celebrate at Christmas, so the next few weeks are going to feel a bit Christmassy (but I’ve never known anyone to complain about that). But the Christmas story and the doctrines that it raises have far reaching implications and applications. We really won’t scratch the surface today on just how important the doctrine of the incarnation is to us and our salvation, but we hit some of those highlights at the end when we transition towards sharing the Lord’s Supper. Before we get to that, however, let’s spend some time reading and understanding the text before us. Let’s start where the story begins, in verse 18.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25; ESV)

This is God’s Word...

Let’s pray...

Despite what your Bible’s heading for this section might suggest, the actual “birth” of Jesus is not recorded here. Only the miraculous conception is. So the heading may create in your mind a *misconception* about the text (see what I did just then?). The birth of Jesus is recorded in Luke in great detail. Luke focuses on Mary’s perspective; Matthew’s narrative is much briefer and is told from the vantage point of Joseph. Furthermore, the concern here is to give us some theological reflection on the arrival of Jesus, especially from the standpoint of Isaiah 7:14, as we will see.

I'd like for us to work through this text in seven parts, which I've worded to aid our memories (each with initials "PS"). The first five relate to the details of the text and the last two concern the application of the text.¹ So let's get after it... first up:

The Problematic Situation (Matthew 1:18)

Before we get to verse 18, let me mention that Matthew has prepared us for verse 18 and we may not have even realized it. Last week we worked through the genealogy of Jesus given in Matthew and there are a couple of details I saved for this sermon.

The English of the genealogy obscures two significant points Matthew draws attention to in the Greek text. Look again at verse 16—"And Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, *of whom* Jesus was born..." Behind the English words "of whom" stands one word in Greek, a Greek relative pronoun. The pronoun is feminine, which means it can't be a reference to Joseph. So while Joseph is the legal father of Jesus (via his adoption of Jesus), Matthew is emphasizing that Mary alone is the biological parent "of whom" Jesus was born, which prepares the reader for the virgin conception and birth. That's one of those things that get lost in translation because English relative pronouns don't have gender.

Second, the word translated "was born" in verse 16, is a word that has already been used 40 times in verse 2-16. In all the other occurrences it is translated "was the father of... was the father of... was the father of..." because it occurs in the active voice, which emphasizes the human action in bringing about birth. But in verse 16, the verb, all of the sudden, shifts to the passive voice, showing that the subject (Mary) receives the action or is acted upon. Well, who acts to bring this about, if not Mary? God does. And this is a common construction in Greek, called a "divine passive," where the verb is stated in the passive when God is the implied agent of the action (it is believed that the Jews would often not mention God when it was clear He was the actor, so as to not take His name in vain). So here again, Matthew is readying us for the following verse, where God acts to bring His Son into the world through Mary, via a miraculous conception.

But that's not something that happens every day, am I right? So this creates an unusual situation. Look at verse 18—"*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit...*"

So Mary is betrothed to Joseph. What does that mean? Well, it means a whole lot more than what "engaged" means today. Betrothal was legally binding (involving a contract signed by witnesses) and it could not be broken without a certificate of divorce (cf. 1:19). So if the man involved in the betrothal (who, by the way would still be considered the husband [cf. 1:19, "her *husband* Joseph"])...if he were to die, then the woman would be considered a widow. Betrothal was usually arranged by the parents and involved a girl around the age of 12 and boy around the age of 18 (because at 18 they were hopefully financially stable...hmmm, imagine that...boys once grew up much more quickly in olden days. Adolescence is a modern invention folks. We probably should expect more from our teens...if you can't say "amen," you ought to say "ouch"). The betrothal period usually lasted about a year and was not consummated until the end of that time, at the wedding night, when the woman would go from her parents' home to her husband's home. This was serious business...

So, imagine the situation. Mary has committed, in a legally binding way, to be married to Joseph. But the text says that, "before they [Mary and Joseph] came together [i.e. had intercourse] she was found to be with child." Now, "found to be with child" does not imply any sort of attempted cover-up (i.e. that she was "found out"). The idea is simply that when you get pregnant, give it time, people are going to know

about it. There were no pregnancy tests back then, but you'd figure it out eventually if God was forming a baby in your womb for you to deliver.

So can you see the problem with this situation? Imagine how this situation looks to people. To her family. To Joseph. It looks like she's sleeping around, am I right? It looks pretty shady. And listen, it would be very inappropriate, for someone to apply the modern sentiment of "oh...well she wasn't even married yet...they were just engaged." First of all, that shows a glaring ignorance of the significance of a betrothal back then. And second, it exposes a wicked attitude of our culture, as if sexual acts outside of marriage are only sinful when you've "tied the knot" in a marriage...Bologna...

And speaking of bologna, that's probably the reaction people were giving to Mary when she was found to be *with child*. "Oh...so let me get this straight, Mary. You're telling me, you never slept with a man?...Bologna." "You're telling me, this just sort of happened to you, like some miracle?... Bologna." This is an *inconceivable* situation (I'm just rolling with the puns today...get it?...that was almost today's sermon title). So, it goes without saying, this is a precarious situation (oh look, another "p...s..." statement).

But next, Matthew brings us behind the scenes a little by telling us that Mary conceives "from the Holy Spirit." But that's not public information at this point. The only thing that is public, is "the problematic situation."

[The Parallel Scripture (Matthew 1 || Genesis 1)]ⁱⁱ

The Possible Solutions (1:19-21)

The text suggests two possible solutions (though more were, no doubt, considered by Joseph). The first solution is Joseph's own and we see it in verse 19—"*And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.*"

Now, let's notice first the character of Joseph. Notice how he is described. He is "just," or your translation may say "righteous." Either translations are appropriate. The word can have spiritual connotations ("righteous") and legal connotations ("just"). Both are probably intended here. Matthew wants us to see how pious Joseph is (in much the same way that Luke emphasizes the piety of Mary). Joseph is a man of righteousness and justice, faithful to God and His Law. And then we are also told that Joseph was "unwilling to put her to shame..."

So Joseph's character puts him in a very difficult position. Keep in mind, his marriage was probably arranged, and in a betrothal period he and Mary would have very little contact, so he probably doesn't know her very well. What else can he conclude except that Mary was an adulteress? So how does a man of righteousness, justice, and mercy respond to what is, by all appearances, would have been such a grievous betrayal and sin, on a number of levels?

He would have been highly criticized if he simply married her any way, because that would have been viewed as condoning what appeared to be a sin of adultery. In many Jewish circles, divorce was not optional in the case of adultery, but mandatory, because adultery resulted in a state of impurity that, as a matter of legal fact, dissolved the marriage. At least that was the interpretation of the Law that many had.

Yet, notice, that he is concerned not for his reputation, but for hers. He doesn't want her to be shamed. So that limits his options. The typical response would have been a public divorce, where her condition would be known overtly and his name vindicated. But if he opts for this solution, she will certainly be shamed to

the max and, though it was a rare practice in the 1st century, would make her liable to be stoned to death, in accordance with the law.

Instead of this solution, Joseph chooses to divorce her quietly. The law did not require for the deed to be made public to all, but allowed for a relatively private divorce, in the presence of two to three witnesses (Numbers 5:11-31). To Joseph, this seems the most merciful thing he can do. It allows him to maintain his personal righteousness according to the law and to compassionately spare Mary public disgrace (and possible death).

Given the information that Joseph has, this strikes me as a very merciful solution. And it is a real testament to the character of the man. But this good solution, is not the right solution in this particular case because it doesn't take into account all the facts. So God intervenes with some new information and instruction. Look again at verse 20—*“But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’”*

So now Joseph is brought into the loop, to some extent. The angel shows up and basically enlightens the man. “Joseph...that baby has no daddy. Mary is ‘with child’ because the Holy Spirit miraculously made her conceive.” Well, that changes things. And the angel has instructions too: “don’t be afraid to marry her, Joseph. She’s done nothing wrong. Though she will be shamed by the world, she has in fact been honored by the Lord. So man up and marry her. And when boy is born you’re going to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

What a dream. The name is significant. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago. “Jesus” is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew name *Yehoshua* (“YHWH is salvation”) or *Yeshua* (“YHWH saves”). It’s also the Hebrew behind the name “Joshua.” So Jesus and Joshua are the same name in two different languages. In ancient times names were chosen not to be trendy, but to symbolically carry the hopes and prayers of the parents for their child. Our son Asher turned three years old today, though he is still acting like a two year old (but I should give him some slack since he’s hasn’t even been 3 for a day). We gave him the name “Asher” because of it’s meaning in Hebrew (which has to do with “blessing” or “happiness”) and because the circumstances of the birth of the Asher from the Bible reminded us in some ways of our situation, along with our reaction to his birth and our hopes for him in the future. The name has meaning to us.

The name Jesus has meaning too. His name, according to this text, signifies His role. He will save his people. As the Messiah, the Jews would have expected no less, but many of them limited salvation to physical deliverance from their Roman oppressors. God has something far greater in mind. The extra clause tilts his hand: “He will save his people *from their sins*.” (that’s probably going to be a reoccurring theme...)

So Mary is pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Joseph has a dream where he learns the truth. What are the results? Well, first of all, Matthew wants us to see that this is a fulfillment of prophecy and, therefore, a testimony of God’s sovereignty throughout human history.

The Predicted Sovereignty (1:22-23)

Look at verse 22—*“all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:...”* This is one of around a dozen fulfillment passages that are important in Matthew, four of which occur in the infancy narratives in the first chapters. Together, they establish a theme that carries us throughout the book—that

God sovereignly works all events in conformity to his plan. To illustrate that here, Matthew references a passage written by the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years prior to the incarnation of the Son of God. Keep reading...“*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).*”

This quote comes from Isaiah 7:14 and the literature written to address this one quotation in Matthew is legion. There are a couple of problems that arise. One is an apologetics issue that I hear from the lips of skeptics from time to time. They’re quick to insinuate that Matthew is reading something into the original text of Isaiah because Matthew uses a word that means and translates “virgin,” but the word in the Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 doesn’t mean virgin, but “young woman,” so they claim.

Now, there is some truth to that. The Hebrew word used in the Isaiah reference is the word *almah*, which means “maiden” or “young girl.” That said, many scholars will confirm that it’s a word that is almost always used for unmarried, virgin women. What is significant, that the skeptics always fail to mention, is that in the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (sometimes references by the three capital letters, LXX), the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word *almah* is *parthenos*, which just so happens to be the same word that Matthew uses in his quotation of Isaiah in verse 23. And it just so happens to be a word that does in fact mean virgin, and almost without exception specifies a woman of age, who is both unmarried and a virgin.

Now, why is that significant? Because the Septuagint is a Greek translation put together by Jews. It’s not a translation written by Christians reading into the Old Testament their Christian theology. And it’s a translation that predates Christianity, which means that at least some of the Jews understood the Isaiah 7:14 as prophesying about a coming *virgin* who would conceive and give birth to a son. So long before Matthew wrote, this was the most widely read interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 by virtue of the fact that most of the Jews in the first century would have used the Septuagint as their Bible.

The next major line of questions has to do with when this was fulfilled. You see, many don’t believe Isaiah 7:14 was a messianic prophecy, but rather a prophecy that was fulfilled in Isaiah’s own day that Matthew has just latches onto in order to use it for his own purposes. So which is it? Was it fulfilled in Isaiah’s day? Or in Joseph’s?

I’m not sure those options are mutually exclusive. It’s not uncommon for Old Testament prophecy to have multiple fulfillments. In other words, it could have an immediate fulfillment (in the days it was written) and a second fulfillment in Christ. The first fulfillment, thus, pointed to the ultimate fulfillment in Jesus’ life and work. This is commonly referred to as typology (though term is used in different ways).

Without boring you with all the myriad opinions, I think that is probably the most satisfactory answer for this debate. It was fulfilled in Christ’s birth, but Isaiah’s prophecy, which was originally spoken to king Ahaz, also had historical significance of Ahaz. In fact, the context of Isaiah says that the fulfillment of this prophecy will be a “sign” for Ahaz. A sign for what? Well, in that passage it was a sign that God would destroy the kings he was dreading. To prove that this would happen and that Ahaz could trust in the Lord, God gives him a sign, at some point in his day a young girl will conceive and give birth to a boy and name him Immanuel, a symbolic hope of God’s presence in this dark time of national turmoil. So it seems to me that there was almost certainly an immediate fulfillment in those days.

On the other hand, in the larger context of Isaiah, there is an indication that there is more to this hope than meets the eye. Why? Because this promised Immanuel, if we keep reading, would usher in great light to a people in darkness (Isa. 9:2-3...sounds a little like the beginning of John’s Gospel) And he will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). And he is described

as one who will rule and maintain peace forever on the throne of David (Isa. 9:6-7) Does that sound like any “son of David” we know? JESUS! Jesus, who fulfills the Davidic Covenant (remember last time?) And we could keep going on and on with Messianic references from Isaiah, but you get the idea...ⁱⁱⁱ

So Joseph is told explicitly or implicitly, “Hey you remember what God was talking about in Isaiah? That’s going to be fulfilled now in this child, who is about to be born, who you are going to name Jesus.” And, in the prophecy that is being fulfilled, we are told, they shall call his name “Immanuel,” which Matthew translates for us, meaning “God with us.” So this child, in other words, is no ordinary child, but one who will usher into the world the presence of God...hmmmm...(we’ll come back to that).

But there is another result to note in the text. Not only is the prophecy fulfilled, but Joseph also obeys... Next time we will consider that obedience (“The Prompt Submission [1:24-25]”) and some of the lessons we can learn from Joseph (“The Post-Script”). But today I want us to focus on...

The Primary Significance (Learning from Jesus)

The most important question we can ask about a biblical text is: what does this text teach us about God? About the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

In the virgin conception and birth we can see some very important things coming together in the person of Jesus. It has huge Christological implications. The virgin birth points us to the divine nature of Jesus, He was conceived from God the Holy Spirit. Why is that significant? Well it’s significant because it helps us understand why Jesus, in the incarnation, can be fully human (born of a virgin) and fully God and yet in his humanity, not inherit our fallenness and propensity towards sin, that we ourselves have inherited.

This—the incarnation—is one of the great mysteries of the Bible. I don’t pretend that my finite mind can grasp the miracle of it and the mystery of it, but the balance that it sets before us in Scripture is a big deal. In Jesus’ humanity, he can relate to me. As the writer of Hebrews says, we have a sympathetic High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses and has been tempted in every way, as we are, and yet was without sin. So lay that over you life.

We were talking about decisions earlier. Think about your decisions. Jesus has been there. He knows your pain. He has been betrayed like that. He’s been ignored like that. He’s been rejected like that. He’s been abused. He’s been neglected. He’s tempted to doubt his Father. He’s been tempted to take the easy way out. But for the joy set before him he endured the cross. He has a unique capacity to relate with us, better than anyone. So don’t ignore him. Turn to him.

Christology is such a comforting doctrine. Not only because in His humanity he relates to us, but in His humanity he can die for us. His sacrifice could atone for our sins. And he is able to carry our sins to the cross only because “His divine nature is infinitely capable to sustain his humanity.”^{iv}

While the term “Son of God” is not mentioned in chapters 1-2, the truth is certainly implied. Think about the names: Immanuel and Jesus.

Immanuel means “God with us.” Jesus can be called God with us precisely because He is the second person of the Trinity. He is eternal. Without beginning or end. He is God, the Son. And he is God with us. This idea of God’s presence is a huge deal for Matthew. He mentions it here at the beginning of the story, he’ll draw attention to it again in the middle (18:20), and at the end, remember the great commission? Make disciples of all nations “and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”(28:20). God’s

presence with his people is the note struck at the beginning of this Gospel and in the very last words. And our fellowship with God is owing all to Christ and his work on the Cross. Immanuel is truly with us...

And then there is the name of Jesus, which comes from the Hebrew name “Yahweh who saves” or “Yahweh is our salvation.” Does the name suggest that Jesus brings salvation? Or does it suggest, in addition to that, that in some sense Jesus is the Yahweh who saves? In light of the Immanuel title, both seem appropriate. At the very least, we will see that Matthew has no problem citing Old Testament texts that are descriptive of Yahweh and applying them to Jesus.

These two names, taken together, express the meaning of the story as a whole. As N. T. Wright summarizes,

Immanuel—God is present with his people. He’s not a spectator from afar. He is active, sometimes moving in the most unexpected ways.

Jesus—God’s actions are aimed at rescuing people from their helpless plight and slavery to sin...by coming and dying in our place for our salvation from our sins.^v

And so I commend him to you all today as Immanuel and Jesus. One and the same. I commend him to you that you might turn from your sin and seek salvation in Him, by faith. By trusting Him to save you and not trusting in yourself and your best efforts to save you.

“This is the God, and this is the Jesus, whose story Matthew now sets before us. This is the God, and this is the Jesus, who comes to us still today when human possibilities have run out, offering new and startling ways forward, in fulfillment of his promises, by his power, love and grace.”^{vi}

I invite you to Him today. All of you. I invite you to trust in Him. Because I guarantee, HE is absolutely what you need for your situation. Have faith. Trust Him. Come to Him. And live.

Would you bow your heads...Pray with me...

ⁱ This sermon is based on a previous sermon I preached at First Baptist Church of Bolingbrook (IL) several years ago at a time when I was not distributing my sermons or posting them online. As a result, I did not cite my sources in my manuscript like I try to do now that the sermons are more widely distributed. Furthermore, I don't have the original transcript any more. Most of the content of the sermon is widely available in many of the major commentaries. The arrangement is original, but I'm confident there is content that is unoriginal, but memory does not serve me well enough to pinpoint the various sources that influenced me back then and time and geographical constraints have prevented me from tracking down those influences to my satisfaction. If the reader recognizes something clearly derived from another source (and not just commonly rehearsed reflections in multiple sources), I would appreciate knowing about it so I can properly footnote the reference. At the very least, I know that a former professor of mine, Grant Osborne (from both his teachings and commentary on Matthew), was quite influential on my understanding of this passage and I'm sure some of the reflections in this sermon are owing to him in one way or another. Cf. Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). I also know I consulted and quoted Michael Wilken's work in the *NIV Application Commentary* series a book which I no longer have at my disposal, but could search some pages online. Michael Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

ⁱⁱ There was not time to address the points of contact between Genesis 1 and Matthew 1, but they do exist. If one is interested in a quick survey of the major parallels they can consult David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Christ Centered Exposition Commentary Series; Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2013), 24-25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel M. Doriani has some great reflections on this: "The story of Jesus' conception invites us to imagine a young woman, holy and yielded to God, astonished to hear that God incarnate has entered her womb. The eternal God will grow in her womb, will be her baby. We may also imagine a young man, holy and yielded, startled to find that his betrothed wife is pregnant, not by him. He will adopt this child, the Son of God. It is the story of a young man and a young woman, but much more it is the account of God's action. God entered human history, declaring that he is the God with whom we have to do. Immanuel is more than a title: it is a declaration that God has entered our realm and that we must reckon with him. There are right and wrong ways to do this. This is so important that the Lord took pains to prepare his people to recognize the weight of it. To prepare us for Immanuel, he predicted it and sent a prototype of it. The prototype of the Immanuel principle came long ago, during the reign of an evil king of Judah named Ahaz. Early in the reign of Ahaz, two neighboring kings, Pekah king of the northern tribes of Israel and Rezin king of Aram (or Syria), invaded his land, marching toward Jerusalem, the capital city. If they succeeded, they would install a puppet king and divide his country (the southern half of Israel) among themselves. Ahaz and the people shook with fear (Isa. 7:1-2). Ahaz was not a believer, yet God sent Isaiah the prophet to offer him a gracious blessing. Isaiah said, "Do not be afraid." The evil plan, the invasion, would fail (7:4, 7). Since Isaiah knew Ahaz might be skeptical, he added two thoughts. First, he warned: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (7:9b). Second, he offered a promise: "Ask the LORD your God for a sign" and he will grant it so you can be sure he will grant you this deliverance (7:11). Unfortunately, Ahaz wanted no part of Isaiah or his sign. He did not believe the Lord would deliver him. Instead, he had his own plan of escape. To defeat two small powers—the northern tribes of Israel and Aram—Ahaz planned to appeal to the greatest power of his day, the king of Assyria. Ahaz, however, was unwilling to admit his plan to Isaiah, so he used a pious ploy, couched in religious jargon, to cover his rebellion. He said, "I will not ask [for a sign]; I will not put the LORD to the test" (Isa. 7:12). Now it is true that we should not test the Lord. We should not demand that he perform signs or wonders for us. We should not tell God, "Do this and do that for me and *then* I will believe in you" (cf. Gen. 28:20-22; Ex. 17:1-7). But God had already resolved to give Ahaz a sign, as a gift. He knew Ahaz did not believe in him, so he offered a sign as a token of his strong love. Ahaz was saying, in essence, "I want no dealings with God—no gifts, no signs. I will care for my own destiny." Isaiah replied that whether Ahaz *wanted* a sign or not, he would receive one: "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" (Isa. 7:14). Before this child knew right from wrong, the two kings attacking Ahaz would be destroyed (7:16). But after that, Isaiah said, God "will bring the king of Assyria" (7:17). Ahaz intended to hire Assyria to fight for him, to make an alliance. He invited Assyria's army to come and fight the invaders and then, most likely, to receive the booty from the defeated armies and a gift from Ahaz. We can imagine, therefore, that when Isaiah said Assyria would come, it pleased Ahaz, initially at least. Yet, Isaiah continued, Assyria would come and would deliver Ahaz, but in its own way. Assyria would come like a plague of flies, like bees swarming over the land, like a raging river sweeping over the land (7:18-19; 8:4, 7-8). God had offered Ahaz a gentle deliverance, but Ahaz wanted a mighty warrior. Now, God says, Ahaz would find one. The mighty army of Assyria would come and sweep away the invaders. But the army of Assyria would be hard to control, like a flood, bursting the banks of a river. That army

will overflow all its channels,
run over all its banks
and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it,
passing through it and reaching up to the neck.
Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land,
O Immanuel! (Isa. 8:7-8)

When we hear "Immanuel" again, it seems like a poor fit for the context. At first we cannot grasp its meaning. Clearly, this use of "Immanuel" has no direct connection with the birth of a child then or with the birth of Jesus later on. Yet in context the sense is clear: God is with Ahaz, whether he likes it or not. Ahaz has rejected God's deliverance. He said, "I want no dealings with

God. I want to work with the king of Assyria.” In essence, the Lord replied, “Go ahead and work with the king of Assyria. Afterward he will work you over. Once his army comes your way, it will sweep over your land and do as they please. After that happens, you will know that I am Immanuel and you still must deal with me.” That is, if Ahaz refuses the gift of God because he does not want Immanuel, because he does not want God’s presence, then he must know that God is still Immanuel. God offered to be with Ahaz to bless, but if Ahaz repudiates that, then God is still present—to curse. He will let Ahaz taste the folly of inviting the Assyrian army into his land. In the Old Testament, the principle of Immanuel teaches that if we reject God’s gracious deliverance and work something out for ourselves, we may succeed in the short run. Ahaz had deliverance for a day, when Assyria drove out the small invaders. But then Assyria stayed on, making Ahaz his vassal. Like floodwaters rising neck high, Assyria came within an inch of killing Ahaz. So it goes to this day. When we work out our own deliverance, it often seems effective for a while. But then trouble comes swirling, up to the neck. Some find deliverance by drowning their sorrows with alcohol or drugs. It works for a while, then comes swirling up to the neck. People seek deliverance in money and career, in bodily health and strength, in education and skills, in families, in networks of well-connected people. They all work to a degree, for a season, but none can match the eternal, gracious deliverance God offers. The original Immanuel prophecy meant that God offers to be present to bless. But if we refuse his blessing, he is still present, to judge. The original Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah bears a radical message: God is always present, always with us, either to bless or to curse. Later on, Isaiah makes this point another way. If Israel trusts in God, “he will be a sanctuary.” If not, “he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (Isa. 8:14). Yet Israel’s lack of faith will not permanently thwart God’s plan. Deliverance will come through Immanuel, God with us. We must trust this Immanuel:

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
... upholding it
with justice and righteousness ... forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this. (9:6–7)

According to Matthew, the blessed side of the Immanuel prophecy has now come. God has fulfilled it in the birth of Jesus. The promise of military deliverance for Ahaz prefigured something far greater. While the first Immanuel deliverance was powerful, it chiefly served to prepare for the second. In the first Immanuel, God offered to be with Ahaz in a *sign*. Now Jesus will be God with us in *person*. As before, it is God’s design to bless through Immanuel. Still, God has acted and, as we learned from Ahaz, Immanuel is here whether anyone likes it or not. Some people respond to the birth of Jesus with indifference, much as Ahaz was indifferent to Isaiah’s promise of Immanuel. They think it is a nice tradition and an amusing tale that some people happen to believe. They may even be happy for friends or neighbors who are comforted to think that there is a supernatural power watching over them. Such thinking completely misses the point of Isaiah and Matthew. Immanuel is not a religious option for those who choose to embrace it. Immanuel is the *truth*, whether we choose to embrace it or not! Some people like to pretend uncomfortable events never really happened: Stalin’s murder of Ukrainian peasants, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the slave trade all somehow prompt groups that deny that such events actually happened. Others choose to block such tragedies from their minds. Nonetheless the tragedies did happen. Immanuel happened too. Matthew declares that God is with us. If we believe, he is with us to bless and to save. If not, God is still with us, to call us to repentance. If you reject that, God is still with you, as judge. God’s deliverance is the only one that works in the end. Most people can work their plan for a while. But there comes a time when dark waters swirl up to every neck, when disaster or death looms. At that time we will want to be able to call upon Immanuel. He is our abiding hope.” Daniel M. Doriani, “The Origin of Jesus, Our Immanuel (Matthew 1:18-25)” in *The Incarnation in the Gospels* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 28-34.

^{iv} Wilkins, 86.

^v N. T. Wright, *Matthew For Everyone, Part One* (London: SPCK, 2004), 8.

^{vi} *Ibid.*