

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 31 December 2023. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## The Family of Immanuel

### Isaiah 7:14

Back in 2019, a group called Transport Focus did a survey of Britain’s motorists, in regard to Britain’s motorway signs. The study showed that nearly one-third of those surveyed had missed a motorway exit, or had had to make some “dangerous last-minute manoeuvres” in order to make an exit, on account of a poorly-designed exit sign.<sup>1</sup> Usually, the problem was either that the sign was obscured by trees and shrubbery, or that it was difficult to read. However, difficult signage isn’t always the reason why people miss an exit. Usually, the sign is clear; yet, people miss the exit simply because they aren’t paying attention, or (worse yet) because they don’t *believe* the sign that they are seeing. During my three years of deputation, as I was visiting churches to raise support to come to Ireland, I drove about 250,000 miles back and forth across America; and during those long road trips, there were a few times when I saw the sign for an exit, yet ended up driving past it; and I had to travel another fifty miles before I could get turned around. Why did I miss the exit? Because for some reason, I had a different conception, in my mind, of what the sign would look like, or say; therefore, when I saw the sign, I drove on past it.

So it was with the sign of the Messiah’s virgin birth. There were some who were prepared for the sign, and who received it when it came. There were some who were unsure about the sign at first, but who soon believed the witness of God’s Word, and embraced the sign as true. There were some who rejected the sign for a good while, but who finally “made the exit,” and arrived safely in the household of faith in Jesus Christ. Tragically, though, there were many who rejected the sign to the day of their death, because they simply refused to believe. Sadly, this was true of the nation of Israel as a whole. There were a precious few who believed on Jesus as their Messiah; but most rejected Him. The Bible says that “**he came unto his own** (His own people, the Jews), **and his own received him not.**” Yet, even among the descendants of King David—the very kindred of the Messiah—there were some who refused to believe the sign. But, praise God, there were some in the family of David who *believed* the sign; and God used them in a powerful way for His glory.

This past month, we have been talking about Jesus’ wonderful name, Immanuel (“God with us”), which was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. We talked about the “**sign**” of Immanuel—the fact that He would be born of a virgin. We talked about the **mother** of Immanuel, and examined her godly character. We examined the **deity** of Immanuel—the fact that He is God in human flesh. Now, as we conclude this series of messages, we will examine the **family** of Immanuel; and we will see how Immanuel’s family received the sign of the virgin birth. The title of this message is *The Family of Immanuel*.

**Read Isaiah 7:1-16.**

#### I. The recipients of the sign: the house of David

The virgin birth of the Messiah is one of the most amazing prophetic signs in all Scripture. Yet, *to whom* did God give this sign? At first glance, one might assume that the sign was given to King Ahaz. After all, Ahaz was the one to whom Isaiah was speaking. Through

Isaiah, God had just offered Ahaz the opportunity to ask for any miraculous sign that he wished, in order to confirm His promise that the kings of Syria and of Northern Israel would not overthrow him. Despite Ahaz's great wickedness, God was mercifully offering Ahaz to ask for any sign whatsoever, whether *"in the depth, or in the height above."*

However, you'll notice that Ahaz *refused* to ask for any sign. Why wouldn't he take God up on His offer? Because he had no personal, saving faith in the God of Israel. Ahaz viewed Jehovah not as the only true God, but rather as one of *many* gods, whose power could be "tapped into" by doing magic rituals. He had no concept of simply trusting God's Word, because he did not know the ever-faithful God. Now, Ahaz certainly had a *head* knowledge of the true God. We know that there was at least *one* righteous man who had access to Ahaz's royal court: and that man was Isaiah. Ahaz surely would have *heard* all about the saving grace of Jehovah, and of His promise of a coming Redeemer, through the witness of Isaiah. In fact, Ahaz had enough "head knowledge" of the Scriptures to *cite* it as he made his reply to Isaiah. His reply was, *"I will not ask, neither will I tempt the LORD."* This was a reference to **Deuteronomy 6:16**, which says, *"Ye shall not tempt the LORD your God."* See? Ahaz *knew* some Scripture! However, the problem was that he didn't *believe* the Scripture. His unbelief is obvious, because he *misapplied* the Scripture in order to excuse himself from asking for a sign. It would *not* have been "presumptuous" for Ahaz to ask for a sign, because God had *offered* for him to ask for a sign. The simple fact of the matter is that Ahaz didn't *believe* in the immortal, invisible God. He chose to believe only in "gods" that he could see and touch—gods of wood and stone. He chose to trust in gods that *he* could control, through magic. He chose to believe in gods that were just as carnal, deceitful, and fickle as *he* was, rather than in a holy, righteous God, to whom he must give account. Ahaz *wouldn't* ask for a sign, because he couldn't muster any faith to *ask* for a sign from the God before whom he refused to bow.

Do you see why this sign of the virgin birth was not given to Ahaz himself? Ahaz had forfeited his chance to be given any sign. God, in His mercy, did protect Ahaz from being overthrown, for the sake of his godly ancestor, David; but *Ahaz himself* was not given any sign to confirm this promise. God therefore took it upon *Himself* to give a marvellous sign. And to whom did He give the sign? Let's look again. **(Read Isaiah 7:13-14 again.)** Whom did Isaiah address as he replied back to Ahaz? Did he say, "Hear *thou* now, O *Ahaz*"? No, he said, **"Hear ye now, O house of David."** He didn't address Ahaz personally; instead, he addressed the whole "house," or "family," of David: and he addressed the house of David with *plural* pronouns, to show that he was speaking to *all* of them. (That's why our King James Bible uses the old-fashioned, but accurate, pronoun "ye, which is always *plural*!")

What's the point, then? The point is that God gave this sign to anyone and everyone who was a descendant of David, from that day forward. The members of the house of David were put on alert to *watch* for this sign. This miraculous sign would one day be revealed to the descendants of David who were living at the time. Why is it so important that this sign was

given to the *house of David*, and not to Ahaz personally? Because if God had told *Ahaz*, “You will see this miraculous sign,” it would have been a false promise. (*Ahaz* never saw the “sign” of the miraculous birth of Messiah, because Christ wasn’t born until 742 years later!) However, God *didn’t* give the sign to Ahaz: He gave it to the descendants of David who were living at the time when the virgin birth of the Messiah took place.

Now, did God give any clue as to *how long* it would be before this sign would appear? Yes, He did give *one* faint little clue. Let’s read **verses 15 and 16** again. (**Read Isaiah 7:15-16 again.**) Look carefully at what God is saying, here. God said that before this Child named “Immanuel” would be old enough to know the difference between good and evil, the land of Judah would be “*forsaken of both her kings.*” In other words, sometime *before* the Messiah would reach toddler age, these two enemy kings who were threatening Ahaz would fail in their mission of overthrowing him, and would go back to their countries. Ahaz *did* see the withdrawal of Rezin and Pekah from Judah during his lifetime (in fact, it happened within that next year); but he never saw the birth of the Messiah.

As you can see, God didn’t reveal very much in regard to the *timing* of Messiah’s birth (not in *this* prophecy, anyway). Now, two centuries later, God did give *Daniel* a very specific prophecy about the timing of Messiah’s coming. God told Daniel that it would be 483 years from the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls until the death of the Messiah. However, **Isaiah 7:14** tells us almost nothing about the timing. There is no actual indication of *how much time* would pass between the retreat of Rezin and Pekah, and the infancy of the Messiah. For all the people of Isaiah’s day knew, it could be a few years, or a few centuries. The “house of David” was therefore given the responsibility, from that day forward, to watch and wait for the coming of Immanuel. (It’s like the command that Christ has given to *us* today. Jesus foretold that before His return, Peter would die, and the Temple would be destroyed; but otherwise, we know not the day or hour of His return! Therefore, we must *watch!*) As for the descendants of David, it was 740 years before they finally saw the sign of the virgin birth.

Now, perhaps you are wondering how this truth applies to us. We’ve seen that the recipients of this sign were the members of the house of David: but is there anything in this passage that speaks to our hearts, and challenges us in our daily lives? I believe so. Look at what the LORD said about Immanuel. He said, “***Before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.***” Let *that* sink in! We know that Jesus is 100% God, because that’s what His name, “Immanuel,” means—“God with us”! Yet, although Jesus is 100% God (which means that He is all-knowing), He is also 100% Man; and as a Man, He actually *came to know* right from wrong in His infancy—just as He came to know how to sit up, to speak, to feed Himself, to walk, to read and write, and so on. Jesus never had any sinful nature, and thus never had the *inclination or desire* to do evil; but He did *come to know, by way of human experience*, obedience to God the Father. If that’s hard to imagine, just think of what it would have been like if Adam and Eve *hadn’t* sinned, and had had children. Those children would have been born with a sinless, holy nature, inclined only toward good; yet, they still would

have had to *learn* everything from motor skills to *moral* skills! They would have *come to know* good from evil by way of personal experience; yet, while they were growing and learning, they would have naturally refused evil, and chosen good, at every stage of their development. Well, that's the way it was with Baby Jesus. The Bible says that Jesus, in His humanity, "***learned...obedience by the things which he suffered.***" This doesn't mean that He had evil habits that needed to be "purged" through suffering; it simply means that He went through the *experience, as a Man*, of obeying His Father. Yet, we must never forget that as Jesus was learning the precepts of God's Law at the feet of Joseph and Mary, *He never had the potential to sin*. Adam did have the *potential* either to continue to obey God, or to disobey Him (and, of course, he chose to sin); but Jesus literally *could not* sin, because He is God. The Bible says in **Titus 1:2** that God "***cannot lie***"; and Jesus is God! Jesus was the perfect Man, in every way. He was Man as God *intended* Man to be!

Now, we, on the other hand, are *not* the way God intended us to be! Because we have inherited a sin nature from our father Adam, we have the natural inclination to do evil. We are *not* born as "innocent, blank slates," with the potential either to do evil, or to stay innocent. No, the Bible says that we are born with evil hearts, which naturally gravitate toward selfishness and rebellion against God. Isaiah said, "***All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.***" Even when we do "good deeds," they are usually tainted with selfish motivations; and *glorifying God* certainly is not on our minds at all. "***We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.***" It is only through the miracle of *salvation* that we can truly come to know to refuse the evil, and to do good. We can *hear* about refusing evil, and choosing good; and our consciences "know" (intellectually) the difference between good and evil; but *how to do* good, and *how to refuse* evil, we know not, because our natural hearts are inclined only toward rebellion. We cannot *personally know* God's holy mind until Christ imparts to us a new nature.

This leads me to a question, then: Have *you* received the new nature? Have you been saved? Have you been converted from the inside out, by repenting of your sin and trusting in Jesus' wonderful grace, which He poured out on the cross? Or are you like Ahaz, who wanted a "God" whom *he* could manipulate, and who didn't reprove him for his sin? If you have a *head knowledge* of God, and a *head knowledge* of Scripture, but have never known Him in a real and personal way, I urge you to cry out to Him in faith today, and ask Him to come into your life, and be your Lord and Saviour! Believe that His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead is all you need to have your sins washed away!

## II. The response of the house of David to the sign

Ahaz forfeited his right to ask for a sign. Yet, the sign of “Immanuel” *was offered* to the house of David: and that included even Ahaz! *Ahaz* was a member of the “house of David”; and even though he would never *see* the Messiah with his eyes, he *could* have “seen” Him by *faith*, if he had simply repented of His sin and placed his faith in the coming Messiah. Tragically, through, Ahaz rejected the sign of Immanuel. His life of continued wickedness shows that he had *no* faith in God’s promise of the coming Redeemer. As the centuries rolled on, many of Ahaz’s descendants in the royal line of Judah were just as wicked as he was; and they, too, rejected the coming Messiah. Yet, there were also *godly* people in the line of David, who were waiting and longing for the arrival of God’s Salvation.

Well, seven hundred forty-two years waxed and waned, until finally, the announcement of Immanuel’s arrival was given to the first member of the house of David: and that person was none other than the virgin of whom Isaiah had foretold!

**Read Luke 1:26-45.**

What was Mary’s response to the “sign” of the virgin birth? Her response was **instant belief and submission**. She didn’t believe only when she was finally *forced* to believe. She didn’t believe a couple weeks later, when she woke up to the reality that she was, indeed, pregnant. No, she believed straightaway. She could have *refused* to believe what she was seeing and hearing from Gabriel (just as many people refused to believe on Jesus, even though they saw His miracles with their own eyes); but she didn’t. She instantly *believed* God’s Word. Why? Because, as a believer who was walking with the Lord, she was ready to *accept God’s will*, even if it were painful. Mary *did* experience much pain in her life, as people refused to believe her story, and called her an “adulteress”; yet, at the same time, her life was greatly **“blessed”** with spiritual blessings, because she believed God’s Word.

You see, you cannot separate true belief in God’s words from *submission* to God’s words. Oftentimes, even we who are saved don’t really believe many of the things that God has said (for example, God’s warning that **“The love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”**). And *why* don’t we really believe? Because we don’t want to *submit* to what God has said. We want what *we* want out of life; and we don’t really want to hand over the “wheel” of control to the Lord. Many Christians are content for Christ to be “co-pilot”; but ultimately, *they* want to keep their hands on the wheel. Christian, Jesus didn’t save you so that He can offer you help and suggestions, and “help you out” when you get into a really big jam: He saved you so that He can be the absolute *King and Potentate* of your life! You are not even the *co-pilot* of your life: He is King, and you are servant. Mary said, **“Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”** Christian, is this *your* attitude?

Now, let's look at the next member of the house of David who received the announcement of Immanuel. His name was **Joseph**—the man whom God chose to be the earthly step-father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's see how he responded to the sign of Immanuel.

**Read Matthew 1:18-25.**

What was Joseph's response to the sign of Immanuel? Well, at first, he didn't believe Mary. (And understandably so!) However, Mary's story about Gabriel, and about his message, nagged at him. The Bible says, "***While he thought on these things.***" What "thoughts" was Joseph having? Well, we know that he was considering divorcing Mary, since the Law allowed for divorce during the period of betrothal (on the grounds of adultery); yet, at the same time, Joseph was probably also pondering whether Mary's story might actually be true!

Why would Joseph have given Mary's story a second thought? I believe it is because he knew the prophecy of the virgin birth in **Isaiah 7:14!** How would a simple carpenter have known the Scriptures? Well, contrary to what the liberal "scholars" tell us, the Jewish people were *not* an illiterate people. Most "scholars" say that the literacy rate of the Jews in first-century Israel was probably only 1% - 3%, and that only scribes and high government officials could read and write. However, the Scriptures *and* extra-biblical writings indicate just the opposite!

You see, God *commanded* the head of each Jewish household to teach and talk about the Scripture with his family "***when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.***" God also commanded them to write His words "***upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.***" God was literally *commanding* Israel to be a literate people, so that they could be the custodians of His Word, and communicate His Word to their children, from generation to generation; and they took that command very seriously. Even in times of great apostasy, common Jewish people could read and write. In recent years, archaeologists have uncovered the **Tel Arad** fortress in southern Judaea, which dates to about 600 B.C.—shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. In this fortress, they found 18 ostraca (pieces of pottery with writing on them); and of these 18 writings, there were at least 12 different authors. (This in a fortress with about 30 soldiers!)<sup>2</sup> These twelve men were common soldiers, ranking from a commanding officer, to a liaison officer, to a quartermaster named Eliashib, to his deputy, Nahum; and they wrote about common, everyday matters such as rations of flour, bread, and wine.<sup>3</sup> This finding has awakened historians to the reality that a *very large majority* of Jews were literate! According to the rabbis, the scribe Ezra established the *beth sepher* ("house of the book") in Jerusalem in 459 B.C., for the purpose of providing education to fatherless boys from age 16 and upward.<sup>4</sup> (This implies that boys with fathers *already* had education, since their fathers taught them!)

According to the Talmud, a man named Simeon ben Shetach, in about 100 B.C., ordered that *all* children should go to school, and be instructed in the Torah *early*; and the first century historians Josephus and Philo both confirmed that this was, in fact, the case.<sup>5</sup> Josephus, in explaining to the Romans why the Jews were so literate, said that the Law “commands us to bring [our] children up in learning, and to exercise them in the laws.”<sup>6</sup>

What’s the point of this little history lesson about the literacy of the Jews? The point is that Joseph *was*, unquestionably, literate; and as an observant Jew, who attended synagogue every week, he would have heard and remembered Isaiah 7:14. Even if he *didn’t* remember it at first, the Lord would surely have *brought* it to his memory! The Holy Spirit was working on Joseph’s heart already, and convincing him of the reality of the virgin birth. Yet, he probably was unsure of whether it was the Lord working on him, or whether it was his own naïve desire to believe that his precious Mary was innocent. Being a “*just*” man, Joseph surely would have been *praying* about this, to ask God for direction. That is what righteous men do. They pray!

### **Read James 5:16.**

“Just” men pray; and when they pray, God answers. Joseph was struggling with the question of whether Mary was innocent; but God mercifully intervened, and gave him clear revelation. He sent an angel to Joseph in a dream, to confirm the miraculous conception of the Child in Mary’s womb; and when he awoke, he “*did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him.*” Joseph surely knew that by marrying Mary, he was opening himself up to ridicule and scorn for the rest of his life; but he obeyed God. He believed: therefore, he obeyed.

Now, were there others in the house of David who believed? Yes! We know that Mary’s sister, **Salome**, believed; and so did Salome’s husband, **Zebedee** (also known as **Cleophas**); and so did their sons, the **Apostles James and John**. Yes, my friends, the James and John *were* first cousins of the Lord Jesus! They might not have been descendants of David on their father’s side; but they certainly were descendants of David on their mother’s side. (We know that Salome was Mary’s sister by comparing **Matthew 4:21**, **Matthew 27:56**, **Mark 15:40**, and **John 19:25**.) All these members of the house of David were mightily used of God!

Now, what about Joseph and Mary’s children? Obviously, they were not there at the time of Jesus’ birth; but in a real way, they *were* witnesses of the sign, in that they heard the story of Jesus’ virgin birth first-hand, from their own parents; and they themselves witnessed Jesus’ holiness first-hand as He was growing up. How, then, did *they* respond to the sign? The same way that most of the people of Israel responded—with unbelief.

**Read John 7:1-8.**

Why did James, Joses, Simon, and Judas not believe that their Brother was the Messiah? Perhaps because of envy and jealousy. (Can you imagine growing up with a brother who was absolutely perfect, all the time?) Perhaps it was because of the influence of people outside their family, who whispered that their mother was a whore. However, whatever the reason may have been, they rejected the Lord—*until* after His resurrection!

**Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-7.**

Before the resurrection, James didn't believe on Jesus: and neither did his other brothers. However, the resurrection changed everything! By the way, James didn't believe *after* he saw Jesus: he believed *before* he saw Him. We know this to be so because years later, Peter said that Jesus appeared only to *believers* after His resurrection. James believed through the *witness* of those who had seen the risen Lord; and from that point, God used his life in a mighty way. James went on to become an Apostle, and wrote the Epistle of **James**.

**Read Galatians 1:18-19 / 2:9.**

James was a powerful witness for Christ. According to extra-biblical sources (as well as Scripture), James was one of the early pastors of the Jerusalem church. James had such a holy testimony, that even unbelievers called him “James the Just,” and “Old Camel Knees.” (It is said that he spent so much time on his knees in prayer on the stone floor of the Temple, that his knees became hard and calloused, like a camel's knees.) Incredibly, the unbelieving Jews even allowed James to pray daily in the Temple!<sup>7</sup> However, after fourteen years of pastorship, in A.D. 62, James was martyred. According to the records of Josephus, Ananus (the high priest) called a meeting of the Sadducees; and in this meeting, they tried and condemned James to death. James was given the opportunity to renounce Christ publicly; but instead, he boldly proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah.<sup>8</sup> The Jews were so enraged, that they threw him off a pillar of the Temple, and then beat his brains out with a stone.<sup>9</sup>

Though Scripture doesn't record whether Jesus' brother Jude saw Him after the resurrection, we do know that Jude *also* became a believer, and that he had a powerful influence in the early days of the church age. He later became the author of the **Epistle of Jude** (around A.D. 66). In fact, Scripture indicates that *all* Jesus' brothers believed, and were saved!



## Read Jude 1-2.

## Read Acts 1:12-14.

What made the difference in the lives of Jesus' brothers? The resurrection! After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, these men were never the same again. They not only believed on Jesus, but they became incredibly bold, Spirit-filled witnesses for Christ. They went everywhere telling people that Jesus of Nazareth is Immanuel—"God with us"! As members of the house of David, they saw the sign of Immanuel; and they responded in faith.

**Conclusion:** As we close this morning, I would ask, "Have *you* responded to the sign?" By the way, I'm not talking about a "sign" of *your* choosing. God doesn't have to give you some big, miraculous "sign" that *you* demand to see. God sometimes is merciful, and actually grants people the "signs" that they request; but He is not obligated to do so. The "sign" of Immanuel was *written down* 2,750 years ago; it was *fulfilled* about 2,000 years ago; and it was faithfully recorded in the New Testament, by God's Apostles. God has given us the record of His Son: and it is *our* responsibility to believe His Word, and be saved. I ask again: "Have *you* responded to the sign?" Head belief isn't enough: it must be a *heart* belief. It must be a belief that moves you to *repent* of your sin, and to let Christ come into your heart, and be your Lord. If you have never done this, I am inviting you to come forward in this invitation, repent of your sin, and ask Jesus to be the Lord of your life. For those of you who *are* saved, I would ask you to consider the lives of Mary, Joseph, Salome, Cleophas, James, John, James the less, and Jude. These people were all willing to suffer for their Lord, because they *knew* that Jesus was not merely their blood relative, but *God* in human flesh. Don't ever forget *who Jesus is*, Christian! **He is Lord! He is Jehovah!** Serve Him with all your heart, mind, and soul, no matter the cost!

<sup>1</sup> "The Sunday Times Driving, "One-in-Three Drivers Have Missed Motorway Junction Because of Obscured Signs," <https://www.driving.co.uk/news/one-in-three-drivers-miss-junction-obscured-road-signs/>

<sup>2</sup> "New study says literacy widespread among ancient Israelites," Sep 24, 2020, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-middle-east/2020/09/new-study-says-literacy-widespread-among-ancient-israelites>

<sup>3</sup> Science Daily, September 10, 2020, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/09/200910110828.htm>

<sup>4</sup> History of education in ancient Israel and Judah, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_education\\_in\\_ancient\\_Israel\\_and\\_Judah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_education_in_ancient_Israel_and_Judah)

<sup>5</sup> "Ancient Jewish Literacy," <https://trisagionseraph.tripod.com/jewishliteracyf.html>, citing from "Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus," Alan Millard, p. 157, citing from *Leg. Gai.* 210; *Apion* 2:178.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, citing from Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book 2, Chapter 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ken Johnson, *Ancient Church Fathers* (Charleston, SC: Biblefacts.org, 2010), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Rod Mattoon, *Treasure from James* (Dexter, MI: Thomson-Shore, Inc., 2005), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Johnson, p. 9.