

Movies, books, and sermons that talk about the end of the world attract attention. People who set a date for the end of the world not only attract attention; they also relieve a lot of people of their hard-earned cash. Remember our brother in Christ, Harold Camping, and his prediction that the Rapture would take place on May 21, 2011, followed by the destruction of the world on October 21, 2011. Remember also the completely secular prediction that when the Mayan Calendar ended on December 21, 2012, it would be the end of all things.

Here we are – still! But the 100% failure of these doomsday predictions doesn't quench the thirst for apocalyptic fright. But it does put biblical prophecy in a bad light, and that's a shame. I'd like to try to put it in a good light with you. Isaiah can help. He is acknowledged as a prophet, a great prophet. If I can show you how he spoke as a prophet, maybe you will understand better how biblical prophecy works, and maybe you will see how far it is from the doomsday predictions so many people are drawn to.

Let me frame what I am going to say with the golden rule of biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy is not history written in advance, and all you have to do is crack the code. A generation ago, there were people, who were convinced that Henry Kissinger was the antichrist. They looked at current events, connected them to statements in the Bible, and came to the conclusion that our moment in history was the one the Bible had predicted. Kissinger was the predicted antichrist, Russia was the kingdom from the north that would destroy Israel, and nuclear weapons would make the earth melt with fervent heat. It's not a responsible way to interpret the Bible. Biblical prophecy is not history written in advance, and all you have to do is crack the code.

The Function of Biblical Prophecy

Let's have a look first at Isaiah 13:9-10: **See, the day of the Lord is coming – a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger – to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.**

Compare Isaiah's language with Jesus' language 700 years later in Mark 13:24-25: **“The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”**

We find that language in several places in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The writers were not describing the collapse of the solar system. They were describing the judgment of God on nations, and it was going to be so bad that it felt like the disintegration of the natural order.

Isaiah 13:1 makes that clear: **I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.** Even that statement is too general. Isaiah was not talking about indiscriminate judgment. Isaiah 13:1 gets very specific: **An oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.** Isaiah was writing about Israel's enemy, Babylon. Two more characteristics of biblical prophecy emerge here.

First, Isaiah was predicting the destruction of Babylon, but he wasn't setting dates. His prediction was an act of faith. He believed that Babylon was the enemy of God, and God would bring Babylon to judgment. He was right, but it didn't happen for 200 years. Second, Isaiah was writing to encourage the faith of his fellow Jews. They were facing the possibility that Babylon might invade and destroy their nation. Biblical

prophecy is never meant to stimulate curiosity about future events; it is meant to strengthen faith in present and difficult circumstances.

You find the same principle at work in the book of Revelation. John predicted the fall of the Roman Empire. It happened but not for another 400 years. He didn't want Christians to speculate about when Rome would collapse. He wanted to build up their faith in the supremacy of Christ so that they could overcome the harsh realities that threatened to compromise and even destroy their faith in Christ.

So, what have we learned so far about biblical prophecy? First, biblical prophecy is not history written in advance, and all you have to do is crack the code. Second, biblical prophets predict the future, but they never set dates. Third, they prophesied in order to strengthen the faith of God's people to withstand attacks against their faith.

The Virgin's Pregnancy

Now, let's have a look at how the Prophet Isaiah went to work in a specific situation and wrote one of the most famous lines in the Bible. Look at Isaiah 7. The events recorded in this chapter took place in time of war. The King of Judah was besieged in Jerusalem by two armies. We're not going to talk about what caused the war. That's another story. We are going to talk about the King of Judah, a man named Ahaz. He was afraid that his adversaries were going to capture Jerusalem and kill him. It was a fearful time for him and his people.

Guess who had the king's ear in that crisis? Isaiah! Isaiah and his son go out to meet King Ahaz. Isaiah 7:4 summarizes Isaiah's message to the king: **Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid** of this threat of invasion. Isaiah's message in verse 7 is blunt: **"It will not take place, it will not happen."** Ahaz was not persuaded. At the end of verse 9 Isaiah tried to stiffen the king's resolve with these words: **"If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."** "You have to trust God, or you will fail."

Then, something unusual happened. Verses 10-11: **Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz** (through Isaiah), **"Ask the Lord your God for a sign whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."** "Your royal highness, you don't believe me when I tell you that your adversaries will not capture Jerusalem. Okay, I will put my credibility on the line as a prophet of God. I'm telling you that God is willing to give you a sign that what I say is true. You can even choose the sign. What do you say?"

The king's response seems pious enough. Verse 12: **But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."** That's the right answer, isn't it? The Law of God said in Deuteronomy 6:16: **Do not test the Lord your God.** The king did not want to disobey the Law of God blatantly. What was Isaiah doing, inciting the king to disobey the Law of God?

Isaiah was not impressed. Verse 13: **Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will try the patience of my God also?"** By the way: the fact that Isaiah could talk like that to the king's face indicates the kind of authority Isaiah and other prophets enjoyed at the palace. I said last Sunday that we are not always sure what audience Isaiah was speaking to. We are sure here. The king was his intended audience. Maybe Isaiah's whole ministry was to those in power.

In any case Isaiah was not impressed with the king's piety. If the king was not willing to ask God for a sign that Jerusalem would be spared, Isaiah said that God was going to give him a sign anyway. Verses 14-16: **Therefore the Lord himself will give**

you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boys knows enough tor eject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

The prophecy actually goes much further and predicts an even more desperate time to come at the hand of the Assyrian Empire. But we are interested in the sign God gave the king. The sign was simple enough for all the see: a little boy, as yet unborn, would be born, and before he knew the difference between right and wrong, the threat to Jerusalem that King Ahaz feared would be gone.

We don't know who the boy's mother was. Isaiah called her **the virgin**. Presumably, he was talking about some young girl, unmarried at the time, whom the king knew. All the king had to do was watch this girl get married, bear a son, and then watch the danger to his city disappear before the boy knew right from wrong. That's how he would know Isaiah spoke the truth and that God was with the king and his people and would protect them.

Mary, the Virgin

That was the sign. Almost no one remembers the sign. Events in a tiny hamlet on the West Bank during the reign of Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great were interpreted in such a way as to change forever the way we read Isaiah 7:14.

Matthew 1:18-21: **This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.**

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Then, Matthew attached a meaning to Mary and Jesus that transformed the embarrassing circumstances of her pregnancy and transformed the original meaning of Isaiah and transformed the world. Verses 22-23: **All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" – which means, "God with us."**

The virgin no longer meant some unmarried, young girl whom King Ahaz knew, and whom he watched get married, bear a son, and then saw the danger to his city disappear before her little boy knew right from wrong. Now a Virgin was pregnant, and her Son was not a reassurance to the king that God was with him and his people in time of danger; He was literally **God with us**.

Take Away

That brings us to our mystery. Isaiah's words meant one thing, when he spoke to the King of Judah, but Matthew gave them another meaning that Isaiah would not have guessed in a hundred lifetimes. One way to solve the mystery is to say: Language is

flexible. The same set of words can have more than one meaning, depending on the circumstances. That's the case here.

Yes, but there is a deeper meaning to the mystery, and there are powerful reasons to prefer this meaning. Here's the meaning I propose for your faith. Isaiah meant one thing when he spoke to the King of Judah. Matthew meant another thing when he wrote his gospel. But what if the God of Israel, who inspired both the Prophet and the Apostle, had both meanings in His mind?

2 Peter 1:21 offers a powerful reason for accepting this meaning. It says: **For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.** You know that sacred book you hold in your hand or store on your digital device? God was behind it. He didn't tamper with the personality or speech habits of the people who wrote the Bible; but He guided them in such a way that they wrote what God had in mind without error. If you can use the same words and give them different meanings, why could God not do that with Isaiah and Matthew?

There is a second powerful reason for accepting this meaning. The New Testament writers found hundreds of patterns in the Old Testament language, rituals, and historical events ways that helped them to interpret the meaning of Jesus Christ. They found the Old Testament to be a deliberate preparation for Jesus Christ. They learned to think that from Jesus Himself. Jesus said: **"Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms."** (Luke 24:44)

We have to go deeper. Who better to take us deeper than Isaiah? Just close your eyes for a moment and listen as I quote Isaiah 46:9-10: **"I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please."**

God had Bethlehem in mind when Isaiah spoke to the King of Judah, and 700 years later, He remembered His other meaning. He who makes **known the end from the beginning** made His decisive move in the City of David, Bethlehem, where "just another homeless family, hoping for a stranger's charity, just one night in one safe place to stay, under the stars so far away" became parents of a baby boy, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger. God was with us, and we'll never again be the same, as the labor pains of the old creation bring us closer to the fruition of God's eternal purpose **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.** Then, "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."