

The Incarnation Sign

by A.B. Simpson

The Incarnation is God's sign to Israel and the world, demonstrating His interest in the human race and the chosen people, and revealing His character and will concerning men.

Scripture: Isaiah 7:10

Topics: "The Incarnation", "God's Presence with Us"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the significance of the Incarnation as God's ultimate sign to humanity, rooted in the prophecy of Isaiah regarding the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. He illustrates how King Ahaz's refusal to seek God's sign led to dire consequences, while God's promise of 'Immanuel' reveals His deep commitment to humanity. Simpson argues that the miraculous nature of Christ's birth and His life exemplify God's love and the supernatural essence of Christianity, challenging the rationalistic views of the world. He further explains that the Incarnation not only signifies God's presence with us but also serves as a transformative power within believers, urging them to embody Christ in their lives. Ultimately, the Incarnation is a pledge of Christ's return in glory, reminding us of His intimate connection with humanity.

Transcript

"Moreover the Lord spoke again unto Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord. And he 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 shall give you a sign; behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Isa. 7: 10-14.)

King Ahaz was in great perplexity and despair. The allied armies of Syria and Israel were invading his land, and he had determined to apply to the great king of Assyria to come to his assistance. While this would undoubtedly bring temporary relief, yet to the farseeing faith of Isaiah it was plain that it would inevitably lead to greater danger in the future, and that as soon as the conqueror had found his way to the Mediterranean coast he would speedily come back to lay his greedy hand upon Judah and Jerusalem too. This was exactly what came to pass. The Assyrian king did go against Damascus and Samaria, and eventually blotted out both kingdoms; but he came back also against Jerusalem before long, and the most terrible dangers and sufferings of the dynasty of David came through the very alliance which Ahaz was now about to make.

The prophet Isaiah therefore threw all the weight of his influence against this proposed alliance with Assyria. Going out to meet the king in one of the public avenues of the suburbs, as he was driving in his chariot with his retinue, he earnestly appealed to him not to be afraid of the two firebrands of Syria and Israel, because God had said, "It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass." As the king hesitated, the prophet appealed to him to ask a sign of God for the encouragement of his weak faith; but the king, persisting in his wilful purpose, with mock humility declined, and said, "I will not ask a sign neither will I tempt the Lord." Then the prophet turned from Ahaz to his attendants, and cried out, "Oh! house of David, hear now, is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary God also? Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign; behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel."

The local meaning and application of this message has been much discussed by Bible expositors. Many believe that the primary reference was to some woman unmarried at the time, who was afterwards to be married and give birth to a child, in connection, perhaps, with the royal family, and that this was to be the immediate sign intended by the prophet, while ultimately the type looked forward to the greater event of the Messiah's birth. It seems unworthy of so great a theme to make any temporary and local application. To apply this prophecy at all to the birth of a child through the ordinary course of nature would throw discredit upon the stupendous miracle of the Savior's supernatural birth at Bethlehem. There seems no reason at all to attempt any other fulfilment than that which actually did occur when Christ was born of the virgin in the fulness of time.

The only objection seems to be that the prophet appeared to expect this event immediately. But in the perspective of prophecy it has always been the case that such events loomed so large that they appeared nearer than they actually were. The prophecies of our Lord's second coming in the New Testament read as though the writers expected the Lord to come during their own lifetime, and yet nearly two thousand years have rolled away and the actual event is not yet. Like some vast mountain, which looms so high as you approach that it seems just before you, although it is scores of miles away, so the coming of the Messiah, more than seven centuries distant, appeared to Isaiah's vision to be just at hand.

We have no hesitation, therefore, in applying this verse directly to the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. The prophetic announcement of this event in itself is almost as great a miracle as the Incarnation itself. So supernatural was the conception of one born of a virgin that it is said the translators of the Hebrew Scriptures into the Septuagint tried to find some other word than "virgin," and to substitute the word "woman." They felt that the Greek scholars of Alexandria and the common sense of the world would laugh at the idea of the Virgin Born.

This bold and naked prophecy, standing out like a mountain crag seven hundred and fifty years before the event in the writings of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, is in itself a sublime witness to Jesus Christ, which to the present time the Jew is unable to explain away. A French scholar has said that the story of Jesus Christ as a human invention would have been more wonderful than the actual events of His history. If it was an invention, who is the stupendous genius that created this transcendent work of literature? We know the author of the Iliad, of Milton's Paradise Lost, and of other great works of literature, but who is the great Unknown that gave to the ages the book of Jesus of Nazareth? No, the story is as marvelous as the Christ. And so this prophecy of Isaiah stands out as a finger pointing to Bethlehem, and as the prophet here expressed it God's great "sign."

In what sense is Jesus, and especially the Incarnation of Jesus, God's sign to Israel and the world?

I. As already indicated, the prophetic announcement, coupled with its extraordinary fulfilment as recorded in the Gospels, is a convincing sign and demonstration that Jesus Christ is indeed the Messiah, and that Christianity must be divine. It is not merely the gospel story which establishes this, but the extraordinary fact that more than seven centuries before the greatest of the Hebrew prophets had declared to an unbelieving age that this very thing should occur. The prophecy was not understood at the time, and was an inexplicable riddle to the Jewish rabbis. The very strangeness of the announcement makes it all the more impossible for it to have been a collusion or a merely human utterance, and the exact correspondence, later, of the fact with the prediction gives to the miraculous birth of our Lord an emphasis which, to a candid inquirer, is simply beyond criticism.

II. The Incarnation is God's sign to Israel and the world of His interest in the human race and in the chosen people. The translation of the prophetic name "Immanuel" expresses all this in a single sentence -- "God with us." What stronger assurance can we ask of the divine love and care? It was the dying message of John Wesley, "The best of all is, God is with us." So great did this manifestation of the divine love seem to Zacharias that it unsealed his dumb lips and called forth the joyful cry, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people." The dream of ancient mythology was the coming down of the gods into human form and human life. But the Incarnation has brought us the everlasting union of the Deity with our fallen race. God has committed Himself to humanity and has taken up humanity into Deity, and through endless ages a Man shall sit upon the throne of the universe and share with the infinite God all His attributes and glories.

One of the rulers of Egypt, it is said, was rearing a valuable obelisk upon its base. At the last moment, in order to impress the engineer with the importance of his responsibility, he fastened his only son to the summit of the obelisk, and then pointing to it said, "Be careful, the life of the heir hangs upon the fate of the obelisk."

In an infinitely higher sense, God has attached the very life of His own dear Son to the fortunes of this world. Jesus Christ is so identified with man that our failure would be His failure, and He cannot afford to let us fail. Just as your child is part of your very life and cannot cease to be your child, so we belong to God, and God is bound by His own very nature to guard our interests and guarantee our glorious destiny.

Speaking of this in the epistle to the Hebrews, the inspired apostle says: "For both He that sanctifies and they who are sanctified are all of one; for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren.... Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death; that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily He took not on Him the nature of angels; but He took on Him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people." (Heb. 2: 14-17.)

III. The Incarnation is the sign of the supernatural character of Christianity. Two schools of thought divide the minds of men, the one is evolution, the other is the supernatural. The tendency of unbelief today is to explain everything on the principles of rationalism. The whole character of the gospel is opposed to this. It is not a development; it is not the improvement of moral and social conditions through culture. It is a revolution rather than an evolution and the apostle's words are true of the whole process of redemption. "Therefore if any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, behold all things have become new, and all things are of God." Even Isaac, the type of the great Messiah, could not

come in the ordinary course of nature, but the promise had to wait until Abraham and Sarah had outlived their natural strength and the birth of the seed of promise was through a physical miracle in their own bodies. Still more manifestly was the Messiah Himself born, not through natural generation, but through the miraculous power of the Holy Ghost.

But the supernatural did not cease there. Christianity is divine from first to last. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ were the fitting climaxes of His miraculous birth and the conversion of every follower of the Savior is a miracle just as divine. "Except a man be born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God." Sanctification, too, is not a mere process of self-denial and spiritual endeavor, but it is a miracle of the indwelling Christ incarnate again in every believer.

Prayer is just an open door through which the Deity still interposes in the affairs of human life. And the great consummation is to come, not in the gradual uplift of human society through the forces of civilization, but in "the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven," and an age of righteousness and glory that will only come with the coming of the King Himself. Of all this the Virgin Birth in Bethlehem was God's great sign.

IV. The Incarnation was a reversal of all man's ideas of character, goodness and greatness. Other kings are born amid the acclamations of the multitude and crowned with earthly state and splendid pageant. Other systems of thought tell us about self-exaltation, self-reliance and self-assertion. Christianity begins with self-renunciation. The first step is downward and the only pathway to ascension and glory is the way of humiliation. "He that shall humble himself shall be exalted." "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many." The apostle has given us the great pattern in the second chapter of Philippians, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation and took upon Him the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2: 5-11.)

V. The Incarnation is God's sign and revelation of His own character and will concerning men.

Therefore in connection with His incarnation our Lord is called "The Word." "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us and we beheld His glory, even the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father full of grace and truth." Christ as the Word is the expression of God's character and will toward men. Christ is the Answer to all our questioning and the personal Messenger of God to men. "God who at sundry times and in diverse manners spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son." (Heb. 1: 1.) The blessed Babe of Bethlehem, the loving Friend of sinners, the Teacher who unfolded such wondrous words of grace, He was but the voice of the mysterious Being whom human hearts so long have dreaded. "He that has seen Me has seen the Father. The words which I speak are not Mine but the Father's who sent Me." Would you know how God feels toward sinners, sufferers and helpless mortals? Jesus is the Answer speaking more loudly than words, for He is "the Way, the Truth and the Life."

VI. The Incarnate Christ is God's sign in another sense namely, as revealing the hearts of men. This was what the angel said about Him when the annunciation came to Mary, "This Child is set for the fall and

rising again of many in Israel and for a sign that shall be spoken against that the thoughts of many hearts might be revealed." Human character and destiny are revealed by contact with Jesus Christ. Men are not saved or lost merely by moral character, but by their attitude toward the Son of God. As of old He hung on Calvary between two men that represented at once both heaven and hell, so still it is true that the cross of Jesus is the dividing line between lost and saved men. "On either side one and Jesus in the midst." Dear reader, on which side are you? Your present character and eternal destiny are to be decided by your attitude toward Him.

VII. Jesus Christ is a sign in the sense that He is the condition and guarantee of all God's promises and covenants. "All the promises of God in Him are yes and in Him amen." He is the Surety and Guarantor of every claim we have upon God. Just as the endorsement of the bank officials passes your draft, so every petition we present in the high court of heaven must bear the sign of His name. We are chosen in Him. We are made accepted in Him. We are complete in Him. The Father sees us only in Him. In His name we pray and receive the answer to our prayers. People often want to ask a sign from God that their prayers are heard and some important petition granted. We need no other sign than Christ Himself. His smile, His manifested Presence, His loving acceptance, guarantee every other blessing and, having Him, we may well add, "He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things."

A man of wealth had died intestate and no trace could be found of any will. At last his house was being sold at auction and all its contents. Among the various articles was a picture of his only son, for which nobody seemed to care but a poor old woman who had nursed him when a baby. Eagerly she bought it for a pittance and when she took it home and began to clean the dusty frame she found inside of it the old man's will, bequeathing all his fortune to the person who loved his son well enough to buy his picture. And so the old lady got the fortune because she loved the son.

Our highest claim upon God is that we are dear to the heart of Jesus Christ and He is dear to us.

VIII. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ signifies above all else the deepest mystery of Christian life, namely, the incarnation of Christ in the consecrated heart. True indeed it is, as the old monk sings:

"Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born,

If He's not born in you, your heart is still forlorn;

The Christ on Golgotha can never save your soul,

The Christ in your own heart alone can make you whole."

We cannot better express this than in the following eloquent words from a recent article by Dr. Henry Wilson:

"A piece of tin may reflect the light near which it is placed. The glass surrounding the light radiates the light within. "Just so we many become reflectors of Jesus Christ by coming to Him, following Him closely, imitating His life by the grace of His Holy Spirit, `enabling' us so to do; and further we may in a beautiful and true sense be changed by thus constantly `looking unto' and into the face of Jesus. "We all with unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord are transformed (transfigured) into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit." (2 Cor. 3: 18, R.V.)

"But surely the deeper thought and the deeper life is radiating as a lamp the light and life of an indwelling Christ. Paul himself, who, in the passage just quoted, gives us the reflector side of the truth, gives us in Galatians 2: 20, and many another passage, such as 2 Corinthians 6: 16: 'I will dwell in them and walk in them,' the radiating side of the deepest variety of the Christian life -- the power of an indwelling Lord, Jesus Christ. "Moses, from whom the last text is quoted, was himself the best example of a soul reflecting the glory, when he came down from the mount with the skin of his face shining with the light in which he had been living during those wonderful forty days in communion with God.

"But a greater than Moses is the highest example of His own indwelling when He came down from another mount, and 'His face did shine as the sun.' (Matt. 17: 2, and cf. Rev. 1: 16), not reflecting, but radiating the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. (2 Cor. 4: 6.) "A locomotive is standing on the track, just completed; painted, polished, perfect in every part, and the sun at midday shining upon it and making every bit of brass and steel a burnished blaze of glory. But no motion, except that which comes from without as the workmen painfully 'pinch' it forward inch by inch with crowbars.

"Another engine is within the shed, grimy and stained with the wear and tear of many a journey. But the fire is lighted in the furnace; the water in the boiler reaches 212 degrees; steam begins to pass into the cylinders; the piston moves; the wheels turn; the engine goes forward. Not by external pressure, but by the force of an energizing power within. "These two illustrations, the lamp radiating and not reflecting light; and the engine moved from within and not from without, may serve to make the difference between the two great schools of teaching on this subject.

"Three words similar in sound may also serve to accent the difference in degree, if not in kind, between these modes of presenting 'the truth as it is in Jesus' -- imitation, inspiration, incarnation of Christ. "For each view abundance of Scripture might be quoted, but our purpose is to emphasize the last as the highest and deepest of all. "Incarnations and reincarnations are words much used these days and in various senses. To us as Bible Christians the only incarnation worthy of the name is that which took place in Bethlehem of Judea nearly two thousand years ago, and the only reincarnation in which we believe is that which takes place in the heart first and then in the life of all who are 'born from above' in the sense in which Jesus used the words to Nicodemus in the third chapter of St. John; Christmas Day repeated daily in human lives; Christ reborn, reincarnated in lowly hearts and yielded bodies; the whole Christ in the whole man, "A living, bright reality."

IX. Finally, the Incarnation is a type and pledge of the Advent. The Christ of Bethlehem will soon be the Christ of glory. He who came in humble stall and manger bed is coming in a little while in power and glory, but it will still be the same human form and the same loving Christ, and it is only as we know Him in His fulness that we shall be welcomed by Him then to a place upon His throne. Blessed Christ, so near, so one. God grant that He may be all this, dear reader, to you and me.

"No distant Lord have I,

Loving afar to be,

Made flesh for me, He cannot rest

Until He rests in me.

Brother in joy or pain,

Bone of my bone is He,
More than my nearest, closest friend,
He dwells Himself in me.
Oh, glorious Son of God,
Incarnate Deity,
I shall forever dwell with You
Because You are in me."

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