

The Birth of Christ Foreshadowed in the Birth of Isaac

“This Christmas it’s Mayhem in Bethlehem!” So read the subtitle on a film about a school the nativity. That may have been true for the film but it certainly wasn’t true about the real thing – and never could have been. Not only did the sovereign hand of God rule over the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, but the amazing foreshadow of it seen in the birth of Isaac showed it to be an event of eternal planning. Allow me to show you the amazing way in which the birth of Abraham’s firstborn son was predictive of the birth of God’s firstborn Son in Genesis 21:1-7.

1. ISAAC’S BIRTH WAS THE FULFILMENT OF PROPHECY.

We read in Genesis 21:1 that, “the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken.” In other words Isaac’s birth was a fulfilment of divine promise. Throughout Abraham’s life God had been predicting that he would give the patriarch a son. At first this prophecy was implied when He said He would make Abraham “a great nation” (Gen.12:2). Later, however, it became very specific when God said, “one who shall come from your own body shall be your heir” (15:4), and then, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son” (17:19). All these prophecies wonderfully came to pass when baby Isaac was born. It was just as God had said.

In the same way the birth of Christ was a wonderful fulfilment of prophecy. It was first implied when, in the Garden of Eden, the Lord said that the Seed of the woman would crush the serpent’s head (Gen.3:15). Then later it was made very specifically when Isaiah prophesied, “Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” (Is.7:14). Again, God did exactly what He had said. The birth was a fulfilment of prophecy.

2. ISAAC’S BIRTH HAPPENED AT THE SPECIFIC TIME GOD HAD PROMISED.

In Genesis 21:2 we read: “For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.” We see here that the Lord not only predicted the fact that this birth would happen, but also exactly when it would take place. This promise was given back in Genesis 18:14 when the Divine Visitor to Abraham’s tent said, “At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.” And that is exactly what happened. When “the set time” came Isaac was born, just as God promised.

Again, so it was with the Messiah. As Galatians 4:4 says, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” God the Father sent His Son to be our Saviour at the set time.

3. AT HIS BIRTH, ISAAC WAS GIVEN THE NAME GOD HAD COMMANDED.

Several people in the Bible had their names revealed before they were born, including Ishmael (Gen.16:11), Josiah (1 Ki.13:2), Cyrus the Great (Is.44:28), and John the Baptist (Lk.1:13). This was true also for Isaac. In Genesis 17:19 God had said to Abraham, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac...” When the baby was born this is just what happened for we read, “And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him – whom Sarah bore to him – Isaac.” (Gen.21:3).

The parallel with the Lord Jesus is obvious – His Name was revealed to both Joseph and Mary before He was born (Matt.1:21 & Lk.1:31). Like Isaac, however, the Lord was given the Name which God had commanded. “His Name was called JESUS, the Name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.” (Lk.2:21)

By the way, why were these names so important? Very simply because they told you something about the child. A short while ago I met a lady called Carol. She told me that her parents had named her this because she was born on Christmas day! So, you see, her name was a testimony to something significant about her. This is also why the name Isaac was given to Abraham’s son, because that particular name means ‘laughter’ – and laugh is what Abraham did when God revealed to him that he and Sarah would be in child at their (very) old age. The Name ‘JESUS’ (Yeshua in Hebrew) however, is the most wonderful of all names as it means, ‘The Lord Saves’ – and that is exactly what He came to do. By dying on the cross He paid for our sins so we can have salvation if we repent and put our faith in Him. No wonder the angel said to Joseph, “...you shall call His Name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.” (Matt.1:21). We can testify ‘He’s just the same as His lovely Name’ – He saves all those who come to Him.

4. ISAAC’S PARENTS OBEYED THE COMMAND TO CIRCUMCISE HIM.

Coming back to Genesis 21 we read, “Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.” Do you realise that before this time Abraham had probably never circumcised a baby before? He had circumcised himself and the men in his household earlier on (17:23-27), but as far as we know Isaac was the first to be circumcised on the eighth day (apparently the perfect day *medically* for this to be done on) – the very day God commanded (17:10-12). This showed the desire of Abraham to conform to God’s instruction.

Fast forward two thousand years and we see the same thing was true with the Lord Jesus Christ. Joseph and Mary were observant Jews and eight days after the shepherds had left the manger-side they brought Jesus to Jerusalem for this very same thing. Luke tells us, “And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His Name was called JESUS...” (Lk.2:21). This may seem like a trivial detail at first, but be assured it wasn’t.

If the Lord Jesus was to be our Saviour He had to meet all the demands of the Law, and this first act of obedience was as important as any other. If it was left undone the whole plan of salvation could have been jeopardised. Think of the responsibility that lay in Joseph and Mary's hands at this point! How wonderful, then, to read, "So when they had performed *all things* according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth." (Lk.2:39). This detail was also foreshadowed in the circumcision of Isaac.

5. ISAAC'S BIRTH WAS A MIRACLE.

If you are familiar with the story of Abraham you will know how miraculous it was that he and Sarah should have children at all. One of the first things we are told about him is that his wife was unable to conceive: "But Sarai his wife was barren; she had no child." (Gen.11:30). Add to this the advanced age of them both and the size of the miracle just grows! Yet in Genesis 21:5 we read this awesome statement: "Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him." The enormity of this was not lost on Sarah herself who said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age." (v7). Make no mistake about it, this birth was a supernatural act of God – and in this way it was yet another foreshadowing of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet at this point we have to say His birth was an even greater miracle than Isaac's, and even more necessary.

There are eight supernatural births in Scripture, mostly babies born to barren women, but the last is the most wonderful of all: a virgin birth. This was how the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world – not through the ordinary means of husband and wife but by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit on the virgin Mary's womb (see Lk.1:35). Josh McDowell has described this as, "a natural birth of un-natural conception, a criterion beyond human planning and control." ('Christianity – A Ready Defence' P212). There are a number of Biblical reasons why this miracle was necessary but the formation of Christ's body in the womb of Mary without becoming contaminated by sin is undoubtedly one of the most important. Out of all the babies born in Scripture – including the 7 other miracle-births - this is the only One who has the power to save because He has no inherent sin from Adam. As the Christmas carol puts it, "Christ was born to save."

6. ISAAC'S BIRTH BROUGHT GREAT JOY.

The final foreshadow here is that Isaac's birth brought great joy to others. Listen to the account in Genesis 21:6: "And Sarah said, 'God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me.'" Earlier Sarah had laughed in shock at the Angel's words concerning her (see Gen.18:11-15); now she laughed in joy that God's miracle had come to pass. The margin in my Bible says this verse should literally be rendered, "God has made laughter for

me.” What joy this was and what a wonderful parallel with the birth of our Lord Jesus. The first angelic announcement to the shepherds in Bethlehem was, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be for all the people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.” (Lk.2:10-11). As typified in Isaac the birth of the Messiah would bring unspeakable joy, ultimately the joy of salvation which all can know. “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!”

So you see, there was no mayhem in Bethlehem that first Christmas. The foreshadow of the birth of Isaac had prophetically revealed the eternal plan of our Saviour’s birth. No wonder the Lord Jesus could say to the Jews, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad.” (John 8:56).

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