

Week 26 – Tough Questions – “Can prophecy be fulfilled more than once?”

Hey, Tim Perry here, pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church, and I want to congratulate you if you have made it this far in Tough Questions because here we are in Week 26. You have made it exactly half way through the year. In the year 2012 at Christ Community Church, we’ve been going through a thing called Project 4:4 – reading through the whole Bible in a year. In your daily readings right now, if you’re tracking with us, you are exactly half way through your Bible. Congratulations!

Hey this week in honor of being at the mid-point of this project, I’ve got a pretty cool tough question I want to ask. It comes out of our readings out of the Book of Isaiah. The question I want to ask is, “Can prophecy be fulfilled more than once?” Somehow that seems kind of fishy to me.

Now you remember way back at Week 8 – we talked about the test for a true prophet. Do you remember that? If a true prophet says something, it comes true – if not – he’s a false prophet and you’re not supposed to listen to him. In fact you’re supposed to stone a false prophet.

Well, Isaiah is giving us some prophecies here in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 of his book that are fulfilled more than once. They have to be or else Isaiah couldn’t be meaningful be speaking to his own generation as well as being a fulfillment of those same prophecies that show up in the New Testament.

Well, let’s take a look at it over here on my whiteboard. OK, here’s the prophecy that we’re talking about. If you’re real familiar with your Bibles or even if you’re familiar with Christmas time like my nice color coding here (red and green) – you’ve often heard this quoted as an Old Testament prophecy about the coming of Jesus. Isaiah said, *“Here now you House of David, it’s not enough to try the patience of men – will you try to patience of my God also? 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 (do you remember the name?) – Emmanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he will knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right.”* (That word Emmanuel means God with us).

Now one of the things that you’ve got to know is that Isaiah and his family are all very significant prophetic characters in the Old Testament drama. Isaiah even says of himself and his wife, *“Here I am, me and my children – we are signs and symbols in Israel.”* (Isaiah 8:18) We are signs and symbols from the Lord. So as Isaiah and his wife begin to have kids – those kids have very unique symbolic names that fit the circumstances of what’s going on in Israel at the time.

Let me give you a little bit more background. Imagine a timeline here that backs all the way up to the very beginning of Isaiah’s ministry. Around 740 BC is when Isaiah starts his prophetic ministry. He probably starts a family around that time, too, with

his wife. So he starts having kids and he starts preaching and starts giving prophecies. Well, something else that's happening at that point in time is that Israel is really up for grabs – especially the Northern Tribes – that was called Israel, you remember. The Southern Tribes were called Judah. Isaiah was a prophet from Judah, but he spoke about the events taking place in Israel. At that time, Israel is seeking an alliance with Syria – Israel's king is Pekah. Syria's king is Resin. Pekah and Resin are coming together because they're afraid about Assyria – the larger super power further to the north and further to the east. They say to the king down in Judah, which is Ahaz – “Hey, come and make an agreement with us – make a pact with us.” Ahaz goes to Isaiah, the prophet and says, “Isaiah, what do I do?” So Isaiah responds and says, “Hey, don't worry about Pekah, don't worry about Resin – don't enter an alliance with them. You don't need them. Just count on God's protection and you'll be OK – even if Assyria should attack, God is still in control.”

Well, in 732 BC, Pekah actually gets assassinated so Isaiah's word to Ahaz comes true – don't worry about Pekah. Resin is also taken off of the scene. So a prophecy happens right about in this period of time leading up to 732 BC – right before Pekah is assassinated. One of these prophecies is about one of Isaiah's children. His firstborn child is a kid named Shear-Jashub, and Shear-Jashub's name, little SJ – let's call him, means “remnant shall return”. And just the name of that child is spelling out a prophetic utterance to the Kingdoms of the North of Israel – saying you are marked for destruction. You are marked for exile, but little Shear-Jashub is reminding everybody that a remnant will return. God will be faithful somehow.

Well, Isaiah and his wife have other children and another child that they have has a really interesting name – get this - Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz – how about that? Do you want to name that for one of your kids? No way! But little MSHB – his name actually means “spoils speeds, prey hastens” – that's ominous. Same thing is going to happen here. These kingdoms are going to bring warfare on Israel. Israel is going to be wiped out. So this other child of Isaiah and his wife is reminding everybody, “Hey, difficult times are coming.” But child #1 reminds them that a remnant is going to return. There's a message of hope imbedded even in the names of these kids.

Well, here's the cool part because sandwiched right between these two kids, Shear-Jashub and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, is a prophecy about another child that's the prophecy that I just read to you – that a child is going to be born to a virgin and that that child's name is going to be called Emmanuel.

Well, many people wonder did Isaiah and his wife ever have little Emmanuel? Did they have that third child in their family? Whether they did or whether they didn't, the prophetic message behind Emmanuel's name is very profound. Emmanuel's name means, “God is with us” so if in the span of these few short years here leading up to the exile of Israel and the destruction of those northern tribes, this little child Emmanuel is born to Isaiah and his wife as a prophecy – as a word of encouragement to them saying, “God is going to be with you – even in the midst of these very hard difficult circumstances way back here in the 8th Century BC. So it's a

prophecy that spoke to the people at that point in time. It encouraged them. It gave them some hope in the midst of what was looking more and more tumultuous.

Well that same prophecy gets fulfilled on a bigger scale much, much later. Here you remember according to Isaiah 8:18, he and his family are signs and symbols to their own generation. But what Isaiah doesn't realize is that little Emmanuel is also a reminder of a future prophecy that's going to come true. Some 700 years later, the real Emmanuel is going to come along. Not just a child who is a symbol or a sign, but actual God with us comes at 0 AD in the form of Jesus and Matthew, one of the New Testament writers who knew all about Jesus, picks up on this and he says that this all took place in order to fulfill what Isaiah the prophet said way back here 700+ years before. So Jesus is more than just a symbol – he's a literal fulfillment.

So here you have prophecy being fulfilled more than once. Isaiah was not a false prophet. Isaiah's word that he spoke fit the circumstances of his day. Maybe little Emmanuel was born to Isaiah's family and he was an important message to all of Israel at that time, but later on another Emmanuel was born – Jesus – who really did come as God in the flesh – God literally with us. So that's how scripture can have more than one fulfillment – a single prophecy being uttered by Isaiah is meaningful to the people in Isaiah's day as well as a meaningful prediction of the messiah to come.

Now I want to encourage you to keep reading Isaiah. It's one of the most encouraging books out of the Old Testament you can imagine. Watch for how Isaiah talks about things that are going to come true – not only when Jesus shows up but pushing the timeline even further out to eternity future – he talks about the New Jerusalem and the Holy City. There are so many phrases and depictions of heaven and eternity that John, the writer of Revelation, at the end of the New Testament uses but he's borrowing all of the language that Isaiah used and that Isaiah spoke about back in the early 700's BC in his predictions.

So scripture is marvelous in the way that it fulfills itself multiple times. But it doesn't mean that any old person can come along anywhere on that timeline and claim that they are the fulfillment of a prophecy. The fact that a prophecy can be fulfilled more than once means that it actually is more precise the more times it is fulfilled. It's even more difficult for a prophecy of Isaiah's to be fulfilled equally in his day and in Jesus' day, and that's how prophecy really works. If it has multiple fulfillment at all – it has an accurate multiple fulfillment in different periods of time in salvation history.

Well, if you find this kind of interesting or if you're a little skeptical about this whole fulfilled prophecy thing hit on the "comment" button there, I'd love to hear from you. And congratulations again for making it half-way through Project 4:4. Keep reading and keep hitting me up with your questions. I'd love to hear them.

This is Tim Perry, Pastor of Spiritual Discovery, at Christ Community Church.