

The Virgin Shall Conceive

Isaiah 7-9 • Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

DISCOVERY AIM

Participants discover the political crisis behind the most famous verse in Isaiah: a terrified king refusing to trust, offered any sign he can imagine, hiding behind fake piety. Into that refusal God gives his own sign: “*Behold, a virgin shall conceive.*” The group then faces the oldest objection to that verse at full strength, the *almah* debate, and answers it the way St. Justin Martyr answered it eighteen centuries ago. Finally they discover that the child of chapter 9 carries a name no mere child can carry: *Mighty God*.

CATHOLIC TOUCHSTONE

The virginal conception of Jesus (CCC 496-497) and the divinity of Christ confessed from within the Old Testament itself. This is also a session about trust: Ahaz and Mary both receive an impossible word about a child; one hides behind piety and refuses, the other asks her honest question and says yes. Every act of faith is a choice between Ahaz and Mary.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The setting is the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, about 735 BC. Syria (Aram, under Rezin) and the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim, under Pekah) have allied against Assyria and want Judah to join. When young King Ahaz refuses, they march to depose him and install a puppet, “*the son of Tabe-el*” (7:6). Ahaz, David’s heir, is inspecting Jerusalem’s water supply for the siege when Isaiah meets him, prophet and son (Shear-jashub, *a remnant shall return*: the boy’s name is a sermon) confronting a king whose heart, and his people’s, “*shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind*” (7:2).

Isaiah’s message is simple: do not fear these “*two smoldering stumps of firebrands*” (7:4); stand firm in faith or you will not stand at all (7:9). Then the astonishing offer: ask a sign “*deep as Sheol or high as heaven*” (7:11), a blank check on the miraculous. Ahaz refuses with a pious veneer, “*I will not put the LORD to the test*” (7:12), misquoting the spirit of Deuteronomy 6:16: it is not testing God to accept what God offers. The truth is that Ahaz has already decided to trust Assyria instead (2 Kings 16:7-8 shows him sending the temple treasury to Tiglath-pileser and calling himself the Assyrian king’s servant and son). Exasperated, Isaiah announces that God will give a sign anyway, to “*the house of David*” as a whole: the virgin, the son, the name Emmanuel.

Be ready for the layered fulfillment question, because honest readers feel it: verses 15-16 tie a timeline to the child (before he knows to refuse evil and choose good, the two kings will be gone), which happened within a few years. So the oracle has a near horizon in Isaiah’s own generation. But the oracle keeps overflowing every near candidate: the land is “*your land, O Emmanuel*” (8:8), as if the child owns Judah; and by 9:6 the promised son bears the name *Mighty God*, the very title used of the LORD himself in 10:21. No child of Ahaz’s court fits the suit. The Church reads this the way the apostles did: prophecy with a

near shadow and a far substance, exhausted only in Christ (Matthew 1:22-23; CCC 497). You do not need to deny the near horizon to confess the far one; the near horizon is what keeps the prophecy honest, and the far one is what makes it a sign deep as Sheol and high as heaven.

Chapter 8 continues the crisis (the sign-name son Maher-shalal-hash-baz, *the spoil speeds, the prey hastens*; the choice between the quiet waters of Shiloah and the Euphrates flood) and gives a thread verse: the LORD himself will be “*a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling*” (8:14-15), which the New Testament applies to Christ repeatedly. Chapter 9 turns darkness to dawn: Zebulun and Naphtali, the first regions mauled by Assyria, will be the first to see the great light, “*Galilee of the nations*” (9:1-2), and the child’s four throne names close the movement.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. The sign is given to *the house of David*, and it lives inside 2 Samuel 7: God’s oath that David’s line and throne would stand forever. Ahaz’s faithlessness cannot cancel a covenant God swore. The *almah* language recalls Genesis 24:43, where the same word describes Rebekah, explicitly a virgin bride at the spring; and behind every promised miracle-child stand Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah, wombs opened by God alone.

Fulfillment. Matthew 1:22-23 quotes Isaiah 7:14 as fulfilled in the virginal conception of Jesus, following the Greek Septuagint’s *parthenos*, a translation made by Jewish scholars two centuries before Christ. Matthew 4:14-16 quotes Isaiah 9:1-2 when Jesus makes Capernaum in Galilee his base: the light rises first exactly where the darkness fell first. The stone of stumbling (8:14) reappears in Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:8. And Luke 1:32-33 hands the child of 9:7 his throne: “*the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David... and of his kingdom there will be no end.*”

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr • *Dialogue with Trypho* (chs. 43, 67)

Around AD 155, the Jewish scholar Trypho put to Justin the exact objection your group will steelman tonight: the Hebrew means *young woman*, not *virgin*, and the prophecy pointed to a king in Isaiah’s own day. Justin’s reply still stands: a young woman bearing a child is no sign at all, for all young women bear children; the sign offered was deep as Sheol and high as heaven, and only a virgin conceiving rises to that scale. The objection is not modern. Neither is the answer.

St. Irenaeus • *Against Heresies, Book 3*

St. Irenaeus points to an inconvenient fact for those who retranslate the verse: *parthenos*, virgin, was the rendering chosen by the Jewish translators of the Septuagint long before Jesus was born, when no Christian argument existed to bias them. The Church did not smuggle the virgin into Isaiah; she found her there, in Israel’s own Greek Bible.

St. Leo the Great • *Sermons on the Nativity* (Sermon 21)

Preaching on the Nativity, St. Leo marvels that the child of Isaiah’s promise unites what no creature could: true God, born of the Father before the ages, and true man, born of the Virgin in time. The names of Isaiah 9 are not courtly flattery; they are a confession. And because God has so honored our nature by taking it, Leo bids the Christian: acknowledge your dignity, and do not return by sin

to what you were before.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 497.** The Gospel accounts understand the virginal conception as a divine work surpassing human understanding and possibility, and the Catechism cites Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew's use as the fulfillment of the promise. This is the session's spine.
- **CCC 496.** From the first formulations of her faith, the Church has confessed that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.
- **CCC 712.** The Catechism names Isaiah 6-12 *the Book of Emmanuel*: the section of Isaiah where the traits of the awaited Messiah begin to show. Your group is in its heart tonight.

THREAD WATCH

THREADS TONIGHT

Light (2:5, planted Session 1) develops massively: "*the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light*" (9:2), located in Galilee of the nations. Do not resolve where the light thread finally goes; it has two more stations (42:6; 60:1-3).

Emmanuel, God with us. Planted tonight: the name outgrows every merely human candidate (8:8; 9:6). It will shadow the whole book: God's answer to every crisis is not a plan but a presence.

The stone (8:14-15). The LORD as sanctuary to some and stumbling stone to others. One verse tonight; it returns as the cornerstone in Session 6. If your group did the Letters of Peter study, let them feel the recognition (1 Peter 2:8) without chasing it.

The stump. Not tonight. But 9:7 ends with a throne of David established forever, and next week a dynasty tree gets cut down. Say nothing.

SESSION GOALS

1. Reconstruct the Syro-Ephraimite crisis and Ahaz's false piety, and contrast Ahaz's refusal with Mary's fiat.
2. Run the *almah/parthenos* steelman at full strength and answer it with Justin, Irenaeus, the Septuagint, and the scale of the offered sign.
3. Articulate layered fulfillment honestly: a near horizon in Isaiah's day, exhausted only in Christ.
4. Discover Matthew 4:14-16: the light dawns first where the darkness fell first.
5. Weigh the four throne names of 9:6, especially *Mighty God* against 10:21.

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

SUGGESTED CLOCK

Gather and opening prayer, 5 min. Win, 10 min. Build, 55 min. Send, 10 min. Live It, memory verse, Take-Home, closing prayer, 10 min.

Pre-chosen cuts if running long: cut Question 8 (chapter 8, Shiloah and the stone) first; compress Question 2 (Shear-jashub) second. Never cut the steelman or the Matthew 4 discovery.

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Opening Prayer

Father, you are God with us. Not God watching us, not God advising us from a distance: God with us. Tonight we will watch a king refuse your sign out of fear dressed up as reverence. Save us from religious excuses. Give us instead the trust of the Virgin, who asked her honest question and then said yes.

Through Christ our Lord, Emmanuel. Amen.

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever turned down help you actually needed, out of pride, fear, or not wanting to owe anyone? What was really going on?
2. What is a decision you are currently facing where the real question underneath is *whom do I trust?*

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY

A King Shaking Like Trees (Isaiah 7:1-9)

1. Read Isaiah 7:1-9. Set the scene: who is threatening whom, where is Ahaz standing when Isaiah finds him, and what does verse 2 say the news did to the house of David?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Syria and northern Israel have allied to depose Ahaz and install a puppet king (v. 6), which would end David's line on the throne. Ahaz is out inspecting the water supply, siege preparation, when Isaiah meets him, bringing his little son Shear-jashub, whose name means *a remnant shall return*: a walking sermon Ahaz never asks about. Verse 2: the king's heart and the people's "*shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind*." God's word to the shaking king: these enemies are "*two smoldering stumps of firebrands*", nearly burnt out, and then the line to underline in your Bible, verse 9: "*If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established*." In Hebrew it is a play on one root: no faith, no footing.

2. Read 7:10-13. God offers Ahaz any sign, "*deep as Sheol or high as heaven*." Ahaz answers, "*I will not put the LORD to the test*." That sounds humble, even scriptural. What is actually wrong with it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

It is fake piety covering a decision already made. Refusing to demand a sign is reverent; refusing a sign *God himself offers* is refusal of God wearing a devout costume. And we know from 2 Kings 16:7-8 what Ahaz had already chosen: he emptied the temple treasury and sent it to the king of Assyria with the words "*I am your servant and your son*." Words a Davidic king should say only to God. Ahaz did not decline trust; he transferred it. Verse 13 shows Isaiah sees through it: you weary God himself. Watch for this move in your own life: the most dangerous refusals of grace are the ones

that sound humble.

The Sign Anyway (Isaiah 7:14-17)

3. Read 7:14. The sign is given no longer to Ahaz but to “*the house of David*.” State the sign in its three parts, and note the name.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A virgin shall conceive; she shall bear a son; and shall call his name Emmanuel, *God with us*. Notice the addressee: the dynasty, not the man. Ahaz can refuse to ask, but he cannot make God stop keeping the oath sworn to David (2 Samuel 7:12-16). And notice what kind of sign answers a succession crisis: not an army, a mother and a child. God's response to the threat against David's line is a birth.

STEELMAN • BUILD IT AT FULL STRENGTH

This verse carries the oldest textual objection in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Build it honestly and at full strength:

The Hebrew word in 7:14 is *almah*, a young woman of marriageable age; Hebrew has a more precise word for virgin, *bethulah*, and Isaiah did not use it. And a sign in Isaiah need not be miraculous at all: Isaiah's own children are called signs and portents in Israel (8:18), so a child born on a fixed timetable and given a loaded name is already a sign in this book, with nothing beyond nature required. The sign, verses 15-16 say, has a timeline: before *this* child can tell right from wrong, Rezin and Pekah will be gone, which happened by the late 730s BC. So the child belongs to Isaiah's own generation, perhaps Hezekiah or a child of the prophet. Matthew, reading the Greek Septuagint's *parthenos* (virgin), lifted the verse out of context and built the virgin birth on a translation. And *parthenos* itself does not always carry a technical claim about physical virginity; the Septuagint can use it of a girl who plainly is not one, as at Genesis 34:3 of Dinah. Modern translations like the original RSV render 7:14 “*young woman*,” and honest Christians should admit it.

Say it with conviction. Trypho the Jew put this very case to St. Justin Martyr around AD 155, so the group is joining an eighteen-century-old conversation. Then press with the next question.

4. Now answer it from the evidence. Consider: (a) who translated *almah* as *parthenos*, and when; (b) how *almah* is actually used elsewhere, for example Genesis 24:43; (c) what scale of sign God offered in 7:11; and (d) whether the prophecy stays inside its near timeline or overflows it (read 8:8 and 9:6).

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

(a) The Septuagint's *parthenos* was chosen by Jewish translators in Alexandria roughly two centuries before Jesus, with no Christian thumb on the scale. As St. Irenaeus argued, the Church found the virgin in Israel's own Greek Bible; she did not plant her there. Yes, *parthenos* has a range, and a passage or two stretches it; but the question is what the translators meant here, where the ordinary Greek word for a young woman was available to them and they did not use it. (b) *Almah* is used of Rebekah at the well (Genesis 24:43), explicitly an unmarried virgin bride; nowhere in the Old Testament does *almah* clearly denote a married woman. The word denotes a young woman,

unmarried in its biblical usage, whose context regularly implies virginity; the Greek translators were interpreting, not blundering. (c) St. Justin's point to Trypho remains the sharpest: God offered a sign *deep as Sheol or high as heaven*. That all young women bear sons is not a sign; it is a Tuesday. Only a conception beyond nature rises to the advertised scale. The 8:18 counter proves too little: those children are signs by their names and their timing, but none of them is the sign deep as Sheol or high as heaven that Ahaz was invited to name, none of them is handed the land (8:8), and none of them is called Mighty God (9:6).

(d) And here is the Catholic both/and, which does not need to fear the timeline verses. Yes, 7:15-16 gives a near horizon: a child born soon whose infancy clocks the fall of the two kings; the prophecy was a real word to its own decade. But the oracle will not stay in that decade. By 8:8 the land of Judah is "*your land, O Emmanuel*", no ordinary child owns the country. By 9:6 the promised son is called *Mighty God*. On this reading the near fulfillment is the shadow that proves the promise live; the far fulfillment is the substance, and Matthew 1:22-23 names him. Prophecy in Scripture often works this way: a near installment guaranteeing a full payment. The Church confesses the fulfillment in Christ (CCC 497); the layered mechanism is the interpreters' account, not a defined scheme.

One pastoral note: this is a place to be gentle and confident at once. The *young woman* reading is not stupid, and our answer is not a trick; it is the same answer the Church has given since the second century, resting on Jewish translation, Hebrew usage, the sign's scale, and the oracle's own overflow.

DIG DEEPER • The 1952 Bible Controversy

When the Revised Standard Version appeared in 1952 with "*young woman*" at Isaiah 7:14, the reaction was volcanic: some American pastors publicly burned copies of the translation. The RSV's Catholic Edition, the line that leads to the RSV2CE in your hands, restored "*virgin*", judging with the Church that the Septuagint and Matthew are authentic interpreters of the verse. Check your own Bible's footnote at 7:14 tonight; you are holding evidence of a live argument.

Darkness, Then Dawn (Isaiah 8:11-9:7)

5. (Optional, first cut for time.) Skim 8:5-15. Judah is offered "*the waters of Shiloah that flow gently*" and chooses the Euphrates flood instead. And in 8:14 the LORD himself will become two opposite things to two kinds of people. What are they?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A sanctuary, and "*a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling*." Same LORD, same stone: refuge to those who trust, tripping hazard to those who will not. Isaiah 8:14; the stone returns in this study, and the New Testament will hang enormous weight on it (Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6-8). The gently flowing Shiloah versus the imperial flood is the whole Ahaz choice in water form: God's quiet sufficiency or the impressive power that ends up at your neck (8:8).

6. Read Isaiah 9:1-2. Which two tribal lands are named, why those two, and what is promised to them?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Zebulun and Naphtali, the far north: the Galilee region Assyria gutted and annexed when Tiglath-pileser came (2 Kings 15:29 names Galilee and all the land of Naphtali; Isaiah 9:1 supplies the pairing), the first to sit in the dark. Precisely there, “*Galilee of the nations*,” the great light will dawn first. God’s pattern, worth saying aloud: the light rises first where the darkness fell first. Whatever region of your life took the first and worst hit is not last in line for dawn; it is first.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Seven centuries later, a man moves his home and headquarters to exactly this map square, and one of the Gospels stops the narrative to tell you why. Find it in Matthew 4. Pairs, 3-4 minutes.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Matthew 4:12-16. Jesus leaves Nazareth and settles in Capernaum, “*in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali*,” and Matthew quotes our verses: the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. Jesus’ choice of Galilee as his base was not real estate convenience; it was Isaiah 9 with an address. The light thread we planted in Session 1 (*walk in the light of the LORD*, 2:5) now has a person attached. It is still not finished; keep tracking it.

7. Read Isaiah 9:6-7 aloud. List the four throne names of the child. Then check who carries the name *Mighty God* one chapter later, in 10:21. What does the Church conclude about this child, and why?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Royal titulary, yes, ancient kings took throne names, but watch the second one. *El Gibbor*, Mighty God, is used in 10:21 of the LORD himself: “*A remnant will return... to the mighty God.*” Isaiah does not use divine names loosely. Within the space of two chapters, the same title names God and names the promised child. Add *Everlasting Father*, not that the Son is the Father, but that this king relates to his people as an everlasting father, and 9:7’s throne “*from this time forth and for evermore*,” and you have, inside the Old Testament, a child who is somehow God. St. Leo’s Christmas confession is already loaded in Isaiah’s syllables: true God and true man in one promised person.

Note the delivery: “*to us a child is born, to us a son is given.*” Born, from among us; given, from beyond us. And the government is on *his* shoulder, singular, which is very good news for everyone currently trying to carry it on their own.

8. One more contrast before we close, and it is the heart of the session. Two people in Scripture receive an unthinkable word about a virgin and a child: Ahaz here, and Mary in Luke 1:26-38. Read Luke 1:34 and 1:38. Mary also responds to the sign with a question. What makes her question different from Ahaz’s refusal?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Mary asks *how*: an honest question from inside surrender, seeking to cooperate with what she does not understand. Ahaz performs reverence in order to keep a decision he has already made against God. Heaven has infinite patience with honest questions and none at all with pious evasion. Mary’s “*let it be to me according to your word*” is what Ahaz was offered and refused, and through her yes the sign of 7:14 finally lands in history (CCC 496-497). Every believer standing before a hard word of God gets the same fork: Ahaz or Mary.

SEND • TAKING IT OUT

1. Where in your life right now are you doing an Ahaz: using a spiritual-sounding reason to avoid trusting God with something you have already decided to control yourself? Name it, at least to yourself.
2. *God with us* is a name, which means presence is God's method. Who in your world is sitting in a Zebulun-and-Naphtali darkness, and what would it cost you to be present there this month, before you have any solutions?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Pray with Luke 1:26-38 once this week, placing your hardest current decision in the scene, and practice Mary's sentence until you can mean it: *let it be to me according to your word*.
- Check your Bible's rendering and footnote at Isaiah 7:14. Be able to explain to a friend, in two sentences, why the Church reads *virgin* there.
- Do one act of presence, not problem-solving, for someone in darkness: show up, sit with, stay. Emmanuel is a name before it is a plan.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 9:6 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Emmanuel, God with us: you answered a shaking king with a mother and a child, and you answer our fears the same way, with your presence before your plans.

Strip our refusals of their pious disguises. Teach us Mary's question and Mary's yes. And let the government of everything we are worried about rest on your shoulder tonight, not ours.

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace: we trust you. Amen.

Before next session: read Isaiah 11:1-10 and keep one image from Session 2 in your pocket: the holy seed and the stump.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used tonight, in order

Primary Text

- Isaiah 7:1-9 (the crisis; shaking trees; smoldering stumps; no faith, no footing)
- Isaiah 7:10-13 (ask a sign; the pious refusal)
- Isaiah 7:14-17 (the virgin, the son, Emmanuel; the near timeline)
- Isaiah 8:5-15 (Shiloah vs. the flood; the stone of stumbling; optional)
- Isaiah 8:8 (your land, O Emmanuel)
- Isaiah 9:1-2 (Zebulun, Naphtali, Galilee of the nations, the great light)
- Isaiah 9:6-7 (the four throne names; the everlasting throne)
- Isaiah 10:21 (El Gibbor used of the LORD; cross-check)

Live Discovery Target

- Matthew 4:12-16 (Jesus settles in Capernaum; Isaiah 9 quoted)

Supporting Passages

- 2 Kings 16:7-8 (Ahaz's real trust: servant and son of Assyria)
- 2 Kings 15:29 (Assyria annexes Galilee and Naphtali; Isaiah 9:1 pairs Zebulun)
- 2 Samuel 7:12-16 (the oath to David's house)
- Genesis 24:43 (almah used of Rebekah)
- Deuteronomy 6:16 (the testing text Ahaz misuses)
- Matthew 1:18-23 (parthenos; the fulfillment citation)
- Luke 1:26-38 (Mary's question and fiat); Luke 1:32-33 (the throne of David)
- Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6-8 (the stone; background)

Catechism

- CCC 496-497 (virginal conception; Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew)
- CCC 712 (Isaiah 6-12 as the Book of Emmanuel)

Memory Verse

- Isaiah 9:6 (RSV2CE)