

Introduction

The Christmas season is now upon us and one of the things we’re going to hear a lot about the next few weeks is **“the real meaning of Christmas.”** Sadly, almost all secularists don’t grasp what that meaning is. But you and I do because texts like the one we read, Isaiah 7:10-16, tell us. Let’s interpret and apply this text. We’ll discover the real meaning of Christmas as we do.

The Sign

Verses 10-16 record a conversation between Ahaz, the king of Judah, and Isaiah, the prophet of God. Two nations, Israel and Syria, had formed an alliance to defend themselves against another nation, Assyria. They then invaded Judah, hoping to dethrone Ahaz, set up their own king, and use Judah’s resources in their struggle against Assyria.

God responded to the invasion by telling Ahaz, through Isaiah, that He Himself would protect Judah. Ahaz though didn’t trust that He would. So Isaiah commanded him, in verse 11, to ask for a sign of his own choosing and God would give it. The sign coming true would then prove to Ahaz that he could trust Him. But Ahaz wanted to handle the situation himself – to protect Judah by forming an alliance with Assyria instead. In verse 12, therefore, he pretended to view the command as an affront to God and dismissed it. Isaiah, however, saw through his pretense and told him in verse 13 that his attitudes and actions denigrated God.

He then informed him in the opening line of verse 14 that since he didn’t choose a sign, God would choose one for him. In the remainder of verse 14, He revealed what the sign was, **“a virgin will be with child and bear a son.”** He then went on in verses 15 and 16 to mention that son’s infancy. His point in doing so was that his infancy represented the short-lived nature of the Israel-Syria threat. By the time he would be old enough to know good and evil, a period of just several years, the threat would be ended – which was exactly what happened.

Immanuel Becomes a Son

As all of you know, verse 14 is one of the most frequently quoted Bible verses during the Christmas season. And it's for good reason. According to Matthew 1:23, it's a Messianic prophecy. It foretells the birth of Jesus, and reveals two significant insights in doing so.

The phrase, "**and she will call his name Immanuel**" reveals one of those. The Hebrew word translated "**Immanuel**" means "**God is with us.**" Celebrated reformer John Calvin maintained that the name Immanuel "**cannot be applied to anyone who is not God**" and he was right. God is one being with three persons and Jesus is one of the three, God the Son. That means He possesses all of the divine attributes.

He is, for instance, omniscient. He knows everything it's possible to know – like how many atoms comprise the universe. It's estimated that the graphite in one lead pencil contains 25,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 atoms, a number so big I have no idea what it is. Notice I said "**estimated**" because no one knows or can know for sure. If there are that many atoms in the graphite in a lead pencil, we can't even imagine let alone know how many there are in the universe. But Jesus does know, down to the very last one. That illustrates the first insight that verse 14 reveals. Jesus is God.

The words "**child**" and "**son**" reveal a second insight. Jesus became a man. We call that the incarnation, meaning, the coming of Jesus in the flesh. He became like us in the essential aspects of our humanity.

First, He became like us physiologically. Consider two facts. One is that our kidneys filter 10,000 gallons of blood every year. The other is that we shed 9 pounds of dead skin cells every year. That's true of our body, and it was true of Jesus' body as well. His kidneys filtered 10,000 gallons of blood every year. And He shed 9 pounds of dead skin cells every year. His body, in its organic nature and function, was like ours.

Second, Jesus became like us psychologically. We have mental, emotional, and volitional dimensions and so did He. We have fond childhood memories, for instance, and so did He. We believe something

about taxes and so did He. We have our favorite food and so did He. We get a kick out of small children and so did He. We choose to marry or not to marry and so did He. We choose to pray or not to pray and so did He. Simply put, we think, feel, and will and so did He.

Those then are the two insights that verse 14 reveals. First, Jesus is God. And second, Jesus became a man.

The Grand Sacrifice

Now, those two insights together reveal the real meaning of Christmas. A simple syllogism expresses it. Premise #1 – **Jesus is God.** Premise #2 – **Jesus became a man.** Conclusion – **God became a man.** Let those words sink in because they're the real meaning of Christmas. God became a man. That doesn't imply that He was then not God or less than God because He wasn't. A. W. Tozer explained it well, "**In His incarnation the Son veiled His deity, but He did not void it.**" That exactly right. Jesus veiled His deity but didn't void it.

Veiling it, nevertheless, was a dramatic thing. Let's go back to His omniscience again. Think of Him during the first two hours after His birth. What did He know then? It was what every 2-hour old baby knows – nothing. He did grow and eventually became the smartest person who ever lived. But even then, His knowledge was veiled, limited. He probably didn't know, for instance, how many atoms comprise the universe. Before His conception, He knew everything. After it – and before He ascended - He knew less than everything. The difference between the two of course is inconceivably vast.

That demonstrates what the incarnation was. It was the grand sacrifice. I've stolen the word "**grand**" from C.S. Lewis. He called the incarnation "**the grand miracle**" and rightly so. But it wasn't only "**the grand miracle.**" It was "**the grand sacrifice**" as well. Suppose I ask 100 Christians, "**What is the ultimate symbol of sacrifice?**" Probably 95 or more would answer, "**the cross.**" But that's only partially right. The complete answer is, "**the manger and the cross.**" Jesus being born

in the manger was just as sacrificial as He dying on the cross was.

C.S. Lewis explained why. Referring to the incarnation, he wrote: **“If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.”** Well, let’s get the hang of it by thinking about just that, becoming a slug. So, it takes you or me 15 minutes to walk a mile. It would take a slug, whose top speed is 150 feet/hour, over 35 hours. Or you or I have a million gigabytes of memory capacity. A slug has none. Our descent in becoming a slug, as you can see, would be vast. But it’s nothing compared to the descent of Jesus in becoming a man. His descent was so vast in fact that it can’t even be imagined.

Francis of Assisi summed it up well. He called the birth of Jesus **“the condescension of God.”** And that’s the real meaning of Christmas. God descended to save us.

Wrapped Up In Ourselves

But save us from what? The answer is **“ourselves.”** Maybe you remember this little anecdote. A newspaper sent G.K. Chesterton a letter asking him to write an article that answered the question, “What is the problem with the world?” To which he sent back a two-word reply, **“I am.”** He was right and we need to admit it. What is the problem with the world? I am.

Now, it’s vital that we understand specifically why we are. I came across a catchy little maxim that says, **“The person wrapped up in himself makes a small package.”** Note the words, **“wrapped up in himself.”** That’s why the world has so many problems. It’s because people, in their natural condition or state, are wrapped up in themselves.

I read about an old Moorish palace that explains, by way of analogy, what **“wrapped up in themselves”** means. This palace has a grotto-like entrance into which tourists are invited one by one to come. That entrance in turn leads to a series of rooms that contain nothing except ceilings and walls that are mirrors. The intended effect is that no matter where the tourist is or looks, all he can see is himself.

People wrapped up in themselves are just like that. They see everyone and everything in relation to themselves. There was a thematic line on the *Everybody Loves Raymond* television show. Everyone thought and said, **"It's all about Raymond."** That's what people in their natural condition or state do. They make everything about them.

The Gospel Herald magazine published a little ditty that identifies specific ways they do that: **"Think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use 'I' as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually in the opinion of others. Listen eagerly to what people say about you. Be suspicious. Expect to be appreciated. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors. Never forget a service you rendered. This is an infallible recipe for misery."**

That ditty captures in practical terms what the problem with the world is. It's that people in their natural condition or state are wrapped up in themselves. They assert themselves to be above both God and others, to their misery and everyone else's around them.

Get Over Ourselves

That's the problem and God becoming a man, as example, teaches us its solution. In his book *Failing Forward*, leadership expert John Maxwell tells us what that solution is. He shares 15 steps for failing forward and succeeding. One of those is and I quote him, **"Get over yourself – everyone else has."** That's the solution that cures our misery and the misery of those around us. We need to get over ourselves.

Paul the Apostle calls us to do just that in Philippians 2:5-7. He writes: **"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, emptied Himself, being made in the likeness of men."** Do you get what Paul is calling us to do? It's to apply the descent of Jesus personally, to

ourselves. We should emulate Him, follow His example. He lowered Himself and so should we. We should make and carry out the very same decision He made and carried out – to be below both Father God and others, not above them.

Take instruction as an example of what I mean. How many of you have ever had someone under you in terms of knowledge, experience, or even years, attempt to instruct or inform you? How did you feel and act when they did? If you're like normal people, I know the answer to that. You felt insulted or resentful and asserted yourself to be above both the instructor and the instruction. But consider, in contrast, what Francis of Assisi did. He initiated placing himself under the authority of a series of spiritual brothers. They were men who: (1) **joined him**; (2) **knew less than he**; and (3) **were much younger in years and faith than he**. Francis lowered himself. He welcomed the instruction of others with gratitude and joy.

You and I should do the same in all things. Apply "**the condescension of God**," the descent of Jesus, personally, to ourselves. Make Him our model. Follow His example. Descend to be below both God and others, not above them.

Conclusion

We'll need the help of Jesus of course to do that and He'll give it – if we apprentice ourselves to Him. That is, if we arrange our affairs around being with Him in order to learn and do all that He says. C.S. Lewis explained what happens when we do that: "**The real Son of God as at your side. He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself. He is beginning, so to speak, to 'inject' His kind of life and thought into you.**" Lewis was right. When we apprentice ourselves to Jesus, He slowly but surely turns us into a human version of Himself. He shapes and molds us so that we eventually become the same kind of person He is, one who naturally, in all things, descends. God descended and so should we. That's the real meaning of Christmas.