

Texts: Matthew 1:18 - 23; Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 8:8 - 10

1. Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy

What is the importance of Christmas? A Christmas tree and presents? No, these are not the proper idea of Christmas. Yet they are symbols for something much more wonderful: the light of the candles shows that God brings us his light, and the gifts show that he wants to give us his salvation as a present.

And both happened by his becoming man. Yes, in Jesus, God himself has become man. How is this at all possible?

God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary who was engaged to Joseph. The angel announced her that she was going to give birth to a son. She was to call him Jesus. He was to be called the Son of the Most High and reign on the throne of his father David forever. On Mary's how question, her being a virgin, Gabriel explained to her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High overshadow her, and that therefore the child was to be called holy – the Son of God.

Of course, this unheard-of revelation and promise required God informing her fiancé, as well. When Joseph discovered her being pregnant, although they had not yet come together, he of course thought he had to divorce her. At least he wanted to do it quietly, in order to protect her from public shame. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and relieved him from his apprehensions. Mary would give birth to a son conceived in her from the Holy Spirit. His name was to be called Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins.

In Matthew 1:18-23, a classical Christmas text, we read:

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared

to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

The angel of the Lord reveals to Joseph that the child to be born is conceived from the Holy Spirit. He orders Joseph to call the child's name *Jesus*. This corresponds to the Old Testament name of *Joshua* and means "God saves". In this way, Isaiah's prophecy of 730 years earlier is fulfilled (Isaiah 7:14):

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Only a little later in Isaiah, the name *Immanuel* recurs, this time with an indication of its meaning, "God with us" (Isaiah 8: 8-10):

⁸ "...and [the Euphrates, symbolizing Assyria and its king] will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel."

⁹ Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered; give ear, all you far countries; strap on your armor and be shattered; strap on your armor and be shattered.

¹⁰ Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

These are the only three places in the entire bible, where the name Immanuel occurs.

In this name, "God with us", the incomprehensible mystery of the virgin birth is concentrated. *God himself becomes man bodily, without abandoning his nature of eternity, his eternal dimension.* All

humans are sinners, but it is only a real yet sinless human being who is in a position to take upon himself, by his substitutionary sacrifice, the propitiation for the sinners. The only possibility of realizing this requirement is God himself becoming fully man, yet remaining fully God – and therefore sinless, so that his substitutionary atonement becomes effective for all who are ready to accept this tremendous gift of grace. In this way, God's plan of salvation is realized by means of the virgin birth and the substitutionary propitiation.

2. Warning signs for rebels who might yet return to God

The old Assyrian empire under Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC), that is, about 100 years before Isaiah's prophecies and until Isaiah's time, comprised a large area from south-eastern Asia Minor in the west to southern Mesopotamia in the east and from north-western Persia in the north to Syria in the south. The remaining part of the southern Israelitish kingdom of Judah, as well as the remaining parts of the northern kingdom of Israel and of Syria were minute in comparison. On the other hand, the neo-Assyrian empire under Assurbanipal (668-627), that is, 100 years after Isaiah's prophecies, extended even much farther, namely to Ethiopia in the south, to the middle of Asia Minor in the northwest, and to the Persian highlands and the Gulf of Persia in the east. Thus, it also comprised the entire extent of the original greater Israel under Solomon. This was shortly before the Assyrian empire was destroyed by the neo-Babylonian empire.

In 732 BC, God sent Isaiah and his son to the idolatrous king Ahaz of Judah (735-716). Ahaz was desperate because the kings of Ephraim and Aram planned to attack him ("Ephraim" now designated the remaining part of the northern kingdom of Israel, and "Aram" is Syria). But Ahaz, instead of returning to the Lord, tried to bribe the king of Assyria into helping him against Ephraim and Aram. Subserviently, he brought him all the treasures of Judah. The neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727) is represented on a large limestone relief receiving homage by a man prostrated at his feet. After this manner, Ahaz might have payed homage to him.

The name of Isaiah's son was *Shear-jashub*, meaning, "a remnant will return". He was, at this occasion, made a living reproach for Ahaz and a prophetic sign. Ahaz and most Judeans, especially those of the top-ranking class, did not want to abandon their rebellion against God. Nevertheless, unlike them, a *remnant* of Judah and Israel will return.

Isaiah told Ahaz that the attack planned by the two kings was going to be thwarted, and that within 65 years, Ephraim was going to be shattered completely. Ahaz was given the opportunity to ask the Lord for a sign confirming this prophecy. But Ahaz hypocritically refused to do so. So the Lord himself gave him a sign: a virgin would give birth to a son, Immanuel. But even before he would have grown up, Ephraim and Aram would be deserted. And those remaining in the land would then be better off, so that they would "eat curds and honey".

Later, God gave Ahaz another sign which indicated that Judah was going to be spared this time. Isaiah was to have another son, and he was told to call his name *Maher-shalal-hashbaz* ("swift-booty speedy-prey"). So Ephraim and Aram were swiftly going to be a prey of the Assyrians.

This is exactly what happened, partly however in a way different from what Ahaz probably imagined and desired. Two years earlier already, Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727) had occupied a large part of the northern Israelite kingdom (excepting Samaria, the capital) and deported the inhabitants into exile (2 Kings 15: 29). In the very year of Isaiah's prophecy to Ahaz, 732, Tiglath-Pileser conquered Damascus, the capital of Aram. And 10 years thence, Samaria, as well, fell to his successors Shalmaneser V (727-722) and Sargon II (722-705), and its inhabitants were deported into exile.

Now, in Samaria, the Assyrians settled pagan peoples from other countries they had conquered. Thus, enforced mixing of different religions as a device for keeping political control has a long tradition. Under the good king Hezekiah (716-687, successor of Ahaz), many believers remaining after the fall of Samaria came from Ephraim to Judah. But Manasseh (687-642, Hezekiah's successor) again led Judah astray into idolatry. He even did things more evil than all that the Amorites had done, whom God had driven out before Israel. So it was fulfilled that 65 years after Isaiah's appeal to Ahaz, Israel was scattered completely and did not function as God's people any more. These 65 years bring us to the year 667, half-way into Manasseh's reign.

3. God's patient compassion

Did God now, after having warned Ahaz, immediately bring the judgment deserved by rebellious Judah? Or did he, at least, do it 65 years later, after Manasseh had committed worse abominations than all the Amorites ever did? No! He is compassionate as long as it is at all possible and as long as there is a chance of some of the rebels returning. This is God's principle for his dealing with humans:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ezekiel 18:23)

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:7).

[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4).

In Judah, there was still a possibility of reforms – despite the wickedness of Ahaz – because his son *Hezekiah* and his great-great-grandson *Josiah* (640-609) became faithful kings, like David, a man after God's heart:

[*Hezekiah*] did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done. (2 Kings 18:3)

Before [*Josiah*] there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him. (2 Kings 23:25)

Therefore, God was not yet willing to destroy Judah. As long as – from his omniscient standpoint – there is still any use for it at all, he will compassionately woo even rebels.

In 701, during Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib (705-681, Sargon's successor) occupied the entire open land of Judah, but despite his superior army he was not able to conquer Jerusalem. An angel of the Lord smote 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp, so that Sennacherib was forced to withdraw ignominiously (2 Chronicles 32:21; Isaiah 37:36).

Sennacherib later published his annals on a famous, 38 cm high, hexagonal clay prism covered with 500 lines of cuneiform text. In it, he mentions his expedition against Judah – in his own way, however: he boasts that he shut up "Hezekiah the Judahite" within Jerusalem his own royal city "like a caged bird". No word, of course, about the disastrous Assyrian defeat.

4. Judgment for refinement

But Isaiah warned Ahaz that the Lord was going to bring a judgment over Judah, as well. The Assyrians will "overflow" Immanuel's land. But this will be a judgment of purification. Despite Judah's and Israel's apostasy, the Lord remains faithful to his promises. "A remnant will return" is the translation of Shear-jashub's name, and "God is with us" translates the name Immanuel. And this was effective for the time of Ahaz and his successors down to the Babylonian exile, that is, for more than 100 years. But it continues to be effective in an even much more comprehensive sense for the people of the Messiah.

The prophetic sign of Immanuel's birth was destined for Ahaz in a first, less important fulfilment only, in its much more important fulfilment, however, for a distant future and for all peoples. But *when* this messianic fulfilment would occur God didn't say.

But what Isaiah says between the two mentionings of the Immanuel already shows that God intends to go far beyond comforting, for the time being, king Ahaz and the leading clan in Judah. As a first step, God warns Ahaz, but this warning is directed to all of the Davidic dynasty and the entire people of Judah, as well (Isaiah 7: 17-24):

¹⁷ The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah – the king of Assyria.

¹⁸ In that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria...

²⁰ In that day the Lord will shave with a razor that is hired beyond the River [*Euphrates*] – with the king of Assyria – the head...

²⁴ ... all the land will be briars and thorns.

Ahaz imagines *himself* to have hired, by his strategy, the Assyrian army, but it is *God* who makes it come, namely for judgment not just over Ephraim and Aram, but over Judah and its whole dynasty, as well. The judgment is sent over the whole of Immanuel's land, all Israel is flooded.

Yet this time the water rises up to the neck only, no farther, because God will save his people once more. Furthermore, not just Israel but all nations are addressed – it is a case of world politics. They plan against the Lord and his people, but their plans will come to nothing, because "God is with us" (Isaiah 8: 7-10):

⁷ ...therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River [*Euphrates*], mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks,

⁸ and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O *Immanuel*.

⁹ Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered; give ear, all you far countries; strap on your armor and be shattered...

¹⁰ Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for *God is with us*.

5. The wondrous Immanuel

Who then is this Immanuel? Because his *future* birth is to be a sign for Ahaz, he can *not* be Isaiah's son *Shear-jashub* ("a remainder will return"). This boy was present when the sign was given.

For the same reason, he can *not* be *Hezekiah*, the son and successor of Ahaz, because this boy was then at least 6 years old already.

Isaiah's other son *Maher-shalal-hashbaz* ("swift-booty speedy-prey") can *not* be the Immanuel, because this boy explicitly was begotten in a natural way (Isaiah 8: 1-3):

¹ Then the LORD said to me, "Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters, «Belonging to Maher-shalal-hashbaz».

² And I will get reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah, to attest for me."

³ And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, "Call his name Maher-shalal-hashbaz"...

If Maher-shalal-hashbaz were the Immanuel, Isaiah 7:14 would have to talk about a "young woman", not a "virgin": "the *young woman* shall conceive..." It is true that the Hebrew word [*ʾalmah*] could *also* mean "young woman", but only before marriage, and then it was taken for granted that she was a *virgin*. But if she was married (like Isaiah's wife), there would have been nothing special about her going to give birth to a son – and therefore no sign at all for Ahaz. Furthermore, both the Septuagint (the old Greek translation of the Old Testament) and the New Testament have the unambiguous word "virgin" [*parthénos*] – which cannot mean "young woman". It is only with the clear meaning of "virgin" that Isaiah's prophecy makes any sense at all.

All four of Isaiah's prophecies given to Ahaz can be correct if Immanuel's birth will not happen before an unknown number of years later – and this is the only interpretation ensuring that *all* statements fit with both the historical preliminary fulfilments and the later messianic fulfilments. These four of Isaiah's prophecies were fulfilled in the course of the reigns of Ahaz and his two successors Hezekiah and Manasseh, as follows:

- 1: Isaiah 7:8 – In 732, early in the reign of Ahaz (735-716), Isaiah tells him: "Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken to pieces so that it will no longer be a people". – The historical fulfilment: In Ephraim, the mixture of remaining Israelites and pagans settled there by the Assyrians made a life according to God's commandments increasingly difficult or almost impossible. During king Hezekiah's reign (716-687), therefore, many believers from Ephraim came to Judah to keep the Passover and probably remained there. But during Manasseh's reign (687-642), Judah degenerated again. The 65 years ended in 667, when Manasseh was 32 years old, and his explicit apostasy from God may have happened around that time. So God then declared his definitive judgment over Judah (2 Kings 21:10-15), as well. And Ephraim was broken to pieces, no longer a people.
- 2: Isaiah 7:16 – Directly following his first statement, thus also in the year 732, Isaiah tells Ahaz about *Immanuel*, the son of the virgin: "... before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good,

the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted". – The historical fulfilment: In the same year 732, Tiglath-Pileser devastated the land of Ephraim and Aram.

- 3: Isaiah 8:4 – About in the year 723, which would be 9 years later, Isaiah tells Ahaz about Maher-shalal-hashbaz: "... before the boy knows how to cry «My father» or «My mother», the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria". – The historical fulfilment: In the year 732, Tiglath-Pileser had conquered Damascus. His successors Shalmaneser and Sargon conquered Samaria, the capital of Ephraim, in 722. This was towards the end of the reign of Ahaz. But, in any case, Maher-shalal-hashbaz certainly was not the Immanuel.
- 4: Isaiah 8:8 – Still later, Isaiah tells Ahaz: The king of Assyria will flood the land of Immanuel. – The historical fulfilment: In the year 702, Sennacherib conquered the land of Immanuel, not only Israel, but also Judah. But he could not take Jerusalem, and his army was destroyed by an angel of the Lord. This was in the midst of king Hezekiah's reign.

6. Messianic fulfilment 730 years later

The words Ahaz was given by Isaiah could have been very significant for him, if he had paid attention to them. But God's intention behind these prophecies included much more than this, namely a wonderful future fulfilment by the virgin's giving birth to the Immanuel ("God with us") 730 years later.

The Davidic dynasty was terminated by the Babylonian exile (Jeremiah 22:30):

Thus says the LORD: "Write this man [*Coniah = Jehoiachin*] down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah."

Nevertheless, the *Immanuel* will again sit on the throne of David. Joseph, Mary's husband, was a biological descendant of Jehoiachin, and therefore of David. Thus he would have been a legitimate heir to the throne of Israel. But he was not the biological father of Jesus, for "that which is conceived in her [*Mary*] is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). Now, as Joseph was the adoptive father of Jesus, the right of acceding to the throne of David devolved upon Jesus. Thus Jesus is a "son of David" and legitimate heir to David's throne. But he was *not* Joseph's son, and therefore *not* of Jehoiachin's offspring, but Son of God. For this reason, he is also David's Lord (Psalm 110:1). In this manner, the prophecies by David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah could all be fulfilled in Jesus, the Immanuel born of the virgin.

In many further direct and indirect prophecies through Isaiah, God predicted Israel's and Judah's exile and their return to their land – as well as the suffering of the Messiah and his reign of peace.

On the basis of the first preliminary fulfilments of his prophecies given to Ahaz, Isaiah was confirmed as a genuine prophet. Therefore, the believers could have confidence that his prophecies would some day be fulfilled completely. It would have been obvious to them already that this had not yet occurred by far when God spared Judah in the time of Ahaz.

7. Education out of love

Throughout the entire course of God's history with all humankind and with his people, God's purposeful salvation work is imprinted like a red thread. He gives wonderful promises of peace and blessing in his covenant. Those addressed, however, often refuse this offer through disregard, sin, disobedience, and apostasy. God's justice and holiness necessarily leads to judgment as a consequence. But always, there is a minority (a "remnant") of those who return to God by faith, and he forgives these believers and blesses them.

Man is incapable of surviving in God's holy presence by means of what he is and has in himself. Every human being is lost in sin and stands under God's death sentence. From the beginning, God knew this. Only the unfathomable substitution by God himself can provide a solution for man. From the beginning, therefore, it was unavoidable that God himself would become man in Jesus Christ, in order to realize, on the cross, the propitiation and salvation for all who want to accept this gift.

The entire history of God with humans has the purpose of educating them. By means of their historical experiences, it has to be made clear to them that the biblical God, Yahweh, alone is God, that he is absolutely holy and absolutely just, omniscient and omnipotent, that all is in his hand, – but also that he is seeking every human being in absolute love, willing to save them out of sin and forlornness.

Like Isaiah and the other prophets, the entire Old Testament in all its parts is pointing to the Messiah. From time immemorial he was promised, but during the course of salvation history, this revelation was becoming increasingly clear and more detailed. Therefore, at the time of the conception and birth of Jesus, it was already possible to unambiguously point to the fulfilment of messianic prophecies.

8. The atheistic circular reasoning

Those who doubt the veracity and reliability of God's word can point to the fact that every fulfilment of prophecies is uncertain. This uncertainty does really exist, as can be seen with the Immanuel prophecies. But the reason for that is *not* any unreliability of the texts.

These doubters claim that the prophets always spoke to their own time and culture *exclusively*. What came later is said to have been beyond their possibility to know. Therefore Matthew's claim of a messianic fulfilment is called mistaken. Old Testament texts quoted as messianic by the New Testament are said to be usually somehow taken out of their contexts. Of course, the conclusions of these doubters are then just as atheistic as their prejudice – a typical case of circular reasoning. If God *cannot* reveal the future, then clearly the prophecy *must* have been written later.

These critics are therefore *compelled* to postulate that much of what was written in the name of a prophet does not go back to him, but dates from a later author. Prophets are said to have usually founded their schools of prophet disciples who, dozens or hundreds of years later, uttered prophecies of an apparent future in the name of the founder prophet. But, it is claimed, such events have in fact occurred in the past or present of the disciple – or they could at least be perceived as very probably happening soon.

In this way of thinking, a second Isaiah was invented for chapters 40-55, the "Deutero-Isaiah" who is supposed to have lived 150 years later, and for chapters 56-66 a third Isaiah, the "Trito-Isaiah" dated 200 years later. However, even accepting this speculation, many texts do not even fit into this scheme. For instance, a full third of the text of the "first" Isaiah, scattered across a large part of his 39 chapters, is considered to be "too early" for its place. And the name of Cyrus, king of Persia, is said to have been unknown at the time of "Deutero-Isaiah", where it actually occurs. All these passages were therefore attributed to later writers, so that about a dozen different writers must be invented, if one is consistent, for the 66 chapters of Isaiah (a Dodekato-Isaiah, however, remains to be mentioned explicitly).

In an analogous vein, Daniel was demoted to almost 400 years later. And Moses was divided by the source critics into at least four author schools and countless "editors" having been active up to 1000 years later. Thus, a mesh, difficult to disentangle, of contradictory texts is supposed to have emerged, in which hardly anything is left that has to do with historical reality.

In this way, these critics have also condemned themselves to have to deny all messianic prophecies. Just in Isaiah, after all, this comprises over 20 passages from all three supposed parts, which are quoted explicitly in the New Testament, not to speak of the many indirect indications pointing to the Messiah, as well as other prophecies. Similar observations apply to the entire rest of the Old Testament.

9. God's restraint

The so-called historical-critical research has managed to get itself into absurdity. Unlike their schools of prophet disciples, largely suspected only, there actually are whole schools of such destructive source splitters and bible critics, even contradicting each other. Many bible parts are fragmented by them into hundreds of progressively smaller pieces. The only thing they are proving is the bankruptcy of their method, which is basically useless – and actually atheistic. In the final analysis, they are claiming that God cannot know more than man. Accordingly, they imagine that each biblical text can have but one single correct interpretation, namely the one they attribute to the ancient Near Eastern worldview at the time of the writer or editor.

But we believe in the almighty, omniscient, eternal God. So it is clear that *our* knowledge is partial, particularly with respect to eternal, heavenly things. If in prophecies and other biblical texts we encounter some ambiguity or uncertainty, we need not immediately take the text to be in error, but can search for a possibly harmonious interpretation. We do not doubt that all must, at a deeper level, have its reason in God's love, even those things that are, for the time being, uncertain or difficult to understand. And here, in fact, we have the solution of the problem of uncertainties.

God has created every individual human being as a genuine personality, capable of a personal relationship to God and to other humans – capable of love. But love presupposes freedom. Therefore, God refrains from giving us any absolute proofs of his existence, since a proof would logically coerce us into believing in him. This would render genuine love impossible. Genuine love can only arise if we are really free to decide for or against him. God does not want us to be puppets. He also gives this freedom to those who do not *want* to have anything to do with him. It is in the final judgment only that these people will have to recognize that their rebellion against God has made them dig their own graves.

10. God became man in order to take all suffering onto himself

Why is there sickness, suffering, and death? These must not be considered a direct consequence of sin (John 9:3). Nevertheless, sin causes suffering, for the sinner himself and for others, even for many who have not contributed to it. Then, there are natural disasters, not always caused by humanity. So why does God permit that – and this has happened for millennia – without intervening straightaway?

Violent events like tsunamis and volcanic eruptions are a normal consequence of geological processes. And these are necessary for the development and maintenance of our Earth, which must be inhabitable by humans. The intelligence God has given humans would allow us to foresee the dangers involved in such processes and events and avoid damages. Where this does not happen, it is – at least with modern science and technology – to a great extent a consequence of human sin.

Many believe that the vast amount of suffering, pain, sickness, death and disasters on this earth proves that there cannot be a God. Or else, he is either incapable of preventing all that, or cruel for not doing so. They refuse to take note of the reasons for this situation plainly revealed in the bible. They don't take God seriously. Instead of acknowledging his justice, they fashion themselves an idol in the shape of an innocuous old bearded man distributing sweets. After all, forgiving is God's job, Voltaire saucily opined.

But God's justice is like a fire, which would necessarily have to consume sinners. If someone wantonly throws himself into an earthly fire, he cannot blame God for being burned or even dying. The same is true in the invisible, spiritual dimension. To maintain that a loving God would *have to* take up all people into heaven eventually is clear heresy. It is also arrogant.

Rather, God is protecting the freedom and dignity of humans, and he is making possible the eternal glorification and bliss of those ready to thankfully accept this gift by faith.

God is eternal, and he wishes that the believing can share his blissfulness for all eternity. Their temporal suffering is transitory and short in comparison. It firstly serves to bring them to their senses, so that they accept God's offer of salvation, and then to make them ready and spiritually capable of some day living with God in his heavenly glory and enjoy life in him to the full.

How God's absolute justice and absolute love are compatible can only be seen at the cross of Golgotha. The *just* judge must condemn to death the sinner – which means *every* human being –, but the *loving* judge takes upon *himself* the guilt of all humans including the death penalty due. The substitutionary and propitiatory death of the sinless Jesus, Son of God, is the mystery's solution.

God takes upon himself the sin of the whole world and all their suffering. Jesus "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). This is the center of the entire biblical revelation, the reason for his "[making] himself nothing" (*[ekénōsen]*, Philippians 2:7) in his becoming man, which began with his conception, in the virgin Mary, from the Holy Spirit, was perfected by his death on the cross, and was confirmed in his resurrection.

This is the purpose of suffering and the importance of Christmas.

In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples – of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. (Isaiah 11:10)