



# Immanuel: God with Us

Matthew 1:18-25

Text: Matthew 1:22-23

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One of the biblical perspectives on the birth of Christ is this idea that the meaning of this birth is Immanuel – “God with us.” Jesus’ birth means that God is with us in a way that he was not with us before Jesus was born. The same idea is conveyed by John 1:14 which says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....” Clearly God becoming man meant that God began to dwell among his people in a way that he had not dwelt among them before. That is what we will look at this morning from the perspective of Matthew 1:22-23 which says, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name “Immanuel” (which means, God with us).’”

Now this prophecy in its original context is found in Isaiah 7:14. It was given to king Ahaz who was a king of Judah. Judah was being threatened by two enemy nations, one of them being the kingdom of Israel – the ten tribes. King Ahaz was a wicked king and he did not trust in God to deliver him. God said he would deliver him from these two enemy nations anyway and the sign would be a virgin conceiving and bearing a son who would be called Immanuel (which means, God with us).

A lot has been written about the question of whether the original promise in Isaiah 7:14 referred to a young women or specifically to a virgin. The Hebrew word can be translated either way. There is no virgin birth recorded in the story in Isaiah. It seems that the sign that God was with his people in the OT context was a baby who was born by normal conception. So probably the text originally referred to a baby who was conceived in the normal way. But clearly the deeper fulfillment of these words referred to the virgin conception of Jesus. There is no doubt that

Matthew understood Isaiah 7:14 as referring to the virgin birth which happened when Jesus was born. And his point is that the birth of Jesus means “God with us.” The fact that Jesus was God and man means that God is with us his people now in a way that is closer than God’s presence with his people before Jesus was born.

So what we need to do to understand this perspective on the birth of Jesus is to consider the meaning of the idea that God is with his people and then consider how the birth of Jesus means that God is now with his people in a closer more intimate way.

Now God can be present in a number of different ways according to Scripture. One of the things that Scripture teaches is that God is present everywhere. In Psalm 139:7 David writes, “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence. If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol you are there.” God is everywhere. He is present in every square inch of his universe. He is always present everywhere.

However, God is present with his people in a different way than simply by means of his being present everywhere. Listen to how God speaks to his people in Isaiah 43:2, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame will not consume you.”

Here God’s presence means that his people will not be harmed. If God is with his people he protects them. They can be threatened by danger, but God’s presence with them means that nothing can harm them.

The idea of God’s presence with his people goes all the way back to God’s purpose in creating human beings in the first place. God created us in his image so that we could be in relationship with him. The idea of presence, when it involves people, has to do with much more than simply sharing the same space. It has to do with relational closeness. You can be with other people on a bus, but you are not really with them in any other way than physical proximity. Or two friends can be together on the same bus. They are with each other in a way the other riders of the bus are not with them.

So when God is said to be with his people, it involves relational closeness. God is personally present with his people. There is a togetherness. There is fellowship. God and his people have a relationship. They speak to one another. They listen to one another. There is an emotional relational connectedness.

This is all very important for our whole way of understanding life in this world. God is a personal God. That means he can be with other persons with a personal presence. The three persons of the Trinity have always been with each other eternally. And when God created man he designed us as persons with whom he might dwell. This is one of the implications of the fact that we are made in the image of God. And we see this happening in the story of creation. The creation story reveals God as the mighty creator of heaven and earth who created everything simply by speaking. But it also shows us that this great and glorious creator-God was present with the human beings that he had made. God did not only create Adam; he spoke to him. He was present with him.

This is unspeakably significant. The creation story reveals God both as higher and greater than any created thing because he is the creator. But it also shows him as very interested and involved in his creation and particularly the human beings created in his image. It reveals God as a God who interacts with Adam and later Adam and Eve. The creation story shows God involved with man. He gives man a task. He invites man to enjoy the beautiful garden home that he has created. He creates woman and brings her to the man. He institutes marriage.

One of the things that is not obvious, but what biblical scholars have discovered is that the Garden of Eden is a pre-fall version of the temple. The meaning of the temple in the Bible is that it is the place where God dwells among his people. There are indications in the creation story that the Garden of Eden was understood to be a garden temple. It was the place where God dwelt with man. Then you have at the end of the biblical story, the new heavens and the new earth described as the place where God dwells with man. Revelation 21:3 says, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'"

So the idea of God dwelling with man is integral to the biblical story. The great God of heaven and earth designed the creation as a temple - as a place where he and humanity could dwell together. This is the point of the creation. The relationship between God and man is the point of the creation. From the very beginning God intended to be involved with the human race – to relate to people – to be present with them – to dwell among them and to enjoy relating to them and have them enjoy relating to him.

This picture of reality is very different, of course, from the way that many in our society think of reality. Many in our society think of the universe as impersonal. If nothing exists besides the physical material world, then we live in an impersonal world. Human beings are the only personal beings. We are alone in an impersonal universe. The universe is uncaring and unfeeling. We are just accidents of evolution. We are alone in the universe. One quote that I found online says, “The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it is hostile but that it is indifferent....” For some people, at least, it is painful and disturbing to think that we live in a universe that is completely indifferent to human beings – completely indifferent to our joys and our suffering.

The biblical picture is so very different. God reveals himself as the creator. But he also reveals himself as caring about the people he has made and wanting to live together with them.

This is what makes life so rich for God’s people. Just think of how being with other people is such a key part of the richness of life. But at the very core of the richness of life is this reality that God desires to live in fellowship with his people. It is not that he needs human beings in order to be fulfilled. It is that he has chosen to dwell with human beings out of his generosity in giving them the opportunity to enjoy a relationship with him. God dwelling with his people in the Bible is a form of him blessing them. The presence of God is the greatest blessing that we can know. At the heart of the joy of heaven is that we will be with God.

Now we are no longer living in Eden. Adam and Eve sinned, and that sin caused separation. Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. The relationship between them and God was severely damaged. Isaiah sums up the effects of sin when he writes in Isaiah 59:2, “[Y]our iniquities

have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.” Sin is now a great issue. Sin causes separation between God and man. That is why sin is so destructive. It causes us to be separated from God and our relationship with God is the key to fullness of life.

The biblical story is about how God has provided a way of reconciliation. In the biblical story we see God choosing a people to be his people and through them bringing salvation to the rest of the world. And there is a lot of the language of God dwelling with his people. After God had delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt he instructed Moses in Exodus 25:8, “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.” That sanctuary was also the place of sacrifice by which sin was atoned making it possible for God to dwell in the midst of a sinful people. But all of that is God’s doing. The instructions for the temple come from him. The instructions for the sacrificial system come from him. God is taking the initiative. And the great goal of it all is so he could be their God and dwell in their midst.

In Exodus 29:45-46, God says, “I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.”

Now this dwelling with his people went together with God being their God and they being his people. God dwelt among his people as their God. That defines the nature of their being together. They are together as God and his people. That is a specific kind of relationship. It is not a relationship of equals. It is a relationship of **God** and **his** people and so that means that it involves things like worship and obedience and prayer and sacrifice from our part. God dwelling among his people means that he is pleased to speak to them, and he is pleased to receive their worship and obedience. The relationship not between persons who are on the same level. God dwells among his people as their God. He treats them as his people, which includes all manner of blessings and his people are to treat him as their God, which is blessing in itself and includes reverence, obedience and seeking his glory. God dwells in the midst of his people as their Creator and as their King and as their God

and they dwell with him as the works of his hands, as servants and as worshippers.

To mankind in sin that is a negative because mankind in sin does not enjoy submission to God. He does not enjoy putting God's will before his own. He does not enjoy seeing the purpose of his life as glorifying God. But the Bible makes it clear that there is no better way to live than to live as servants and worshippers of this God. There is no greater blessing than to have God dwelling with us.

The godly in Israel treasured the fact that God dwelt among them. Think of Psalm 84:1-2, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faiths for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God." Psalm 16:11 "[In] your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Psalm 46:1,11, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.... "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." Psalm 132:5 "Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool." Psalm 23:4 "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

So you see God being with his people is a source of great joy and it is the greatest possible source of security. If God is with you do not have to fear in any kind of trouble. When God is with his people he supplies all their needs. At the heart of all of this is God's love. God is with his people because he loves them. He loves to be with them.

This is the background to the meaning of the name "Immanuel" which means, God with us. And the birth of Jesus means that God is now with us in a closer way than he had ever been with his OT people. This is the meaning of the virgin birth. Verse 23 says, "'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us.)" Jesus was born of a virgin. Mary, his mother, became pregnant with Jesus in a supernatural way. In Luke 1 we read of an angel appearing to Mary telling her that she would become the mother of the promised messiah and Mary asks, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" This is what the angel said: "The Holy Spirit will come

upon you, and the power of the Most high will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy - the Son of God."

The conception of Jesus was a miracle. The Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Most high overshadowed her and the result was God and man in one person – Jesus Christ. Now God was with his people as the God-man. Now God was joined to a human nature. And this was permanent. It was not a momentary manifestation of God in the form of a man. The eternal Son of God became a man without ceasing to be God so that Jesus is God in the flesh. John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

This brings "being with us" to a whole new level. We know that he did this so that he could save us from our sins. In Matthew 1 the name "Immanuel" is closely associated with the commandment to Joseph, "[You] shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." One of the ways that God is with his people is in order to save them. God was with his people when he saved them from the slavery in Egypt. And now God came to be with his people in Jesus in order to save us from our sins. He became a human being so that he could fulfill the law and then experience the curse of our law-breaking which is death.

Hebrews 2:14–15, "<sup>14</sup>Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup>and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." God with us means salvation. God came to be with us so that he could save us.

But there is more than that. God also came to save us so that he could be with us. We have seen from the creation story that God's will from the beginning was to dwell with his people – to live together with them in a beautiful God-man relationship. Clearly God values dwelling with his people. He values giving himself to us as our God and he values our love and our worship and our service and our obedience. He loves us and he loves being with us.

And the birth of Jesus is part of that picture. Jesus became a man so that he could save us, and he saved us so that he could be with us. As we have seen already, the goal of the new heavens and the new earth is God dwelling with us. Think of the nature of love. When you love someone you want to be with them. And the most intimate love between people is marriage and at the heart of marriage is living together – being together. One of the ways that God describes the relationship between himself and his people is as a marriage relationship. Jesus gave himself for his bride, the church, so that he could live with her forever. He removed the barrier of sin so that there could be the togetherness of living together forever.

And there is great significance in the fact that God became a man in order to dwell with us. He did it so he could save us, but he also did it so that he could be with us as a human being. God as a man was able to reveal himself to us in a deeper way. John 1:14 again, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory....” Jesus in the flesh reveals the glory of God to us in a way that is more revealing than God not-in-the-flesh. Jesus in the flesh is the perfect image of God. One of the things about God not-in-the-flesh is that we cannot see him. We can see manifestations of his glory – like at Mount Sinai – and like in the heavens – but God himself is always invisible. Jesus is not invisible. He is a human being. And as a perfect human being he reveals more of God to us than we can perceive apart from the incarnation. Hebrews 1:3 teaches us that “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” Colossians 1:15 says, “He is the image of the invisible God....” 2 Corinthians 4:6 tells us that by God’s illumination we receive “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Jesus dwells among us and we see his glory.

But there is more. Jesus was born to become God with us. He dwelt among us as a human being and we can see his glory. But what he accomplished as a human being opened the way for the reality of God dwelling with us to be realized in an even more profound way because he sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. The church is the temple of the Holy Spirit and that both as a body, but also as the individuals who make up the body.



Paul says to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and the God’s Spirit dwells in you.” So now God with us means God in us. The dwelling place of God is within his people. The church as a whole is the temple of the Holy Spirit; also our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

What does all this mean for us? Jesus’ birth happened because God wants to be with us. Jesus came to save us from our sins so that the cause of the separation between God and us was removed so that God could dwell with us and he goes so far as to dwell in us. God does this because he is a God of love and wants us to be blessed in the enjoyment of his presence, but at the same time it shows how much God values us. God is not needy in the way that we are needy, but God does love and delight in us. Psalm 149:4 says that “the LORD takes pleasure in his people....” That is part of the reason that he planned and implemented the whole plan of salvation – because he delights being with his people.

This is not the only reason. God did it because of his love and generosity which leads him to bless his people. There is no greater blessing than to be in God’s presence and to enjoy fellowship with him. But at the same time, the Bible makes it clear that God does get pleasure and joy from by being with his people.

And so, the birth of Christ is a huge step forward in God’s desire to dwell with his people. As the God-man Jesus is with us as a human being and that makes it possible for him to be closer to us than God not-in-the-flesh. We relate at a deeper level to a God we can see. And while we do not yet see Jesus because he is in heaven – he is seeable. And one day we will see him. He will dwell among us as the God-man. Revelation 7:17 gives the picture. “For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Clearly this should be important to us. Clearly it is important to God – to dwell with us. The birth of Jesus underscores how

important it is to God. It is important to God because he is a God who delights to bless and there is no greater blessing than to be with God – to be in his presence. But it is also clear that God takes pleasure in being with his people. That is an awesome thing.

And the way of blessing for us is to live our lives in such a way that prioritizes the gift of God's presence. We experience God's presence when we think of God, when we worship him, when we listen to his word, when we assemble before him, when we pray, and when we seek to please him. To enjoy the blessing of the presence of God it is necessary to live with the awareness of God's presence and thus also of God's delight in spending time with his people. This is a way of being in the world – living consciously of the presence of God. And that is an anticipation of what we will enjoy in perfection in the new heavens and the new earth.