

Matthew 1:18-25; 18:20; 28:16-20 (DHT)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. Having been pledged to Joseph, but before they came together, his mother Mary’s womb was found with a child from the Holy Spirit. Now Joseph, her husband, being righteous, and unwilling to expose her publicly, purposed to send her away secretly. Now having pondered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, you should not fear to receive Mary as your wife, for that which is in her has been conceived from the Holy Spirit. Then she will bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this then came to pass that what the Lord had spoken by the prophet may be fulfilled, saying, “Behold, the virgin’s womb will hold and will bear a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel,” which is translated God with us. Then having been awoken from sleep, Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and he received his wife, but knew her not until she had brought forth a son, and he called his name Jesus.

//

For where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there I am with them.

//

And the 11 disciples went into Galilee, the mountain to which Jesus designated them. And having seen him, they worshiped, however some doubted. And having come to them, Jesus spoke to them, saying, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore make disciples, going to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all of what I commanded you. And behold, all the days until the end of the age, I AM with you.”

This is the word of the LORD; **Thanks be to God!**

Introduction

There is incredible sentimentality that comes with Emmanuel because of its prominence in our Christmas traditions. However, I am convinced there is significance to the message of Emmanuel even after Christmas, so my hope is to show you a connection related to the message of Emmanuel that perhaps you haven’t considered before. As such, I invite you to leave your Bibles open for our time together.

Getting to Isaiah

In the beginning, God created everything, and then out of the watery chaos, God brought order. God formed a specific land, called Eden, and planted a garden *in* Eden as the place of his holy dwelling. God created humanity in his image—male and female he created them—and God brought the man and his wife into this prototypical earthly garden-temple to be priests of God’s presence with the mandate of extending the boundaries of God’s presence to the ends of the earth. God prepared a specific place for a specific people to carry out a specific purpose. And through all of this, the man and his wife enjoyed intimate fellowship with God who dwelt among them; who walked among them; he was their God and they were his people. This union with God was lost, however, when our first parents ate the fruit for which God commanded them not to eat or touch, and so they were exiled from the Garden back to Eden. When Cain murdered Abel, he was exiled from Eden, even further away from God’s presence, a fate Cain remarked was worse than physical death.

Throughout the Bible, as people continue to live in disobedience to God they are further removed from God’s presence through exile. While walking in the wilderness, the Israelites grumbled against God and Moses. In Ex. 17:7, the content of their grumbling is defined by the question: “Is YHWH among us or not?” In Num. 11:20, Israel is rebuked for rejected YHWH their God who was among them in exchange for craving to return to Egypt. Yet, sandwiched between Exodus and Numbers is the book of Leviticus, which is all about regulating how God’s unholy people can come into God’s holy presence without being consumed by God’s holiness. In Lev. 26:3, 9, 11-13, in the book’s final call to faith, God makes it abundantly clear:

For those who live by faith, God will “turn to you, make you fruitful and multiply you, and confirm his covenant with you... God will place his residence among you, and will not reject you. God will walk among you and be your God, and you will be his people. He is YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, *so that* you would no longer be their slaves. He broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to live in freedom.”

Living in the presence of God is a quality of life marked by freedom; the life we were created to experience. But this clearly did not happen. Israel did not live by faith; they lived in disobedience, and so they were scattered among the nations by means of exile. But God works in these times of exile to bring his people back to life in his presence. The reunion of God’s

presence with his people is what the story of the Bible is all about. While exile is a form of death worse than physical death, restored union with the presence of God is a form of life better than physical life. God works in times of exile to bring his people back to life in his presence.

Despite God himself being their king, and despite the fact that they were called to life differently from their neighbors, the nation of Israel insisted on having a human king just like the other nations. Israel exchanged the glory of YHWH as King for the lesser glory of a sinful human ruling over them. Paul reminds us in Rom. 1:24-26 that when we exchange the glory of God for anything else, sometimes God hands us over to our sinful desires as a form of judgment, and that is a terrifying thought. So God gave Israel a king, Saul, who turned out to be a hot mess. But God worked during this time of judgment by paving the way for King David.

After David had recovered the place of God’s dwelling, Ark of the Covenant from enemy captors, and after David brought God’s presence back into the midst of his people, then God made a covenant with David in 2 Sam. 7, one of the most significant chapters of the Old Testament. Starting in verse 8:

“This is what you are to say to my servant David... ‘I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you. I will make a great name for you like that of the greatest of the earth. I will designate a place for my people Israel and plant them, so that they may live there and not be disturbed again... When your time comes and you rest with your ancestors I will raise up after you your descendent, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom... My covenant-loyalty will never leave him... your house and kingdom will endure before me forever and your throne will be established forever.”

God’s presence will remain with his people through the human lineage of David, whose royal status will never cease.

Isaiah

Fast forward to King Uzziah. The Book of Chronicles tells us that his great military conquests prompted his great sin of arrogance, arrogance that ruled his life in his later years, and ultimately led him to treat what was holy with contempt; something that made him so totally unclean that he was quarantined the rest of his life while his son Jotham ruled. His grandson Ahaz was five years old when this happened. Later on, war came against the kingdom and

because King Ahaz was very much afraid of what was approaching him, his kingdom responded with great fear as well.

This is when the prophet Isaiah enters the picture. In Isaiah 7:3, YHWH instructed Isaiah to take his son *Shear-Jashuv* to see King Ahaz. In the context of the great Emmanuel prophecy, we meet here Child #1, whose name means “A-Remnant-Will-Return.” YHWH reminds Ahaz of his covenant with David particularly in the phrase in Isaiah 7:9, which uses loaded language from the various chapters of the OT describing the Davidic covenant: *If you are not faithfully established, then you will not be established at all.* Then YHWH speaks directly to Ahaz, telling him to ask for a sign from the depths of Sheol to the heights of heaven. Here we meet Child #2, a son to be born named *Emmanuel*, whose name means “God-is-With-Us.”

In Hebrew, the word translated “virgin” does not have a sexual connotation; it more simply means a young woman. A more literal translation is “the young woman has conceived, will have a son and name him Emmanuel. So, a young woman is already pregnant, she is having a son, and that son will have a name meaning “God-is-With-Us.” Isaiah provided King Ahaz a reason to stop being afraid and called on King Ahaz to trust in YHWH’s promise that the royal line of David had been faithfully established to endure forever. In other words, Ahaz is worried he will be the last king and Isaiah is reassuring him that he in fact will not. God is with you, King Ahaz, and will continue to be with you. Just like Child #1, Child #2, the one named Emmanuel, born to a young woman, most likely a son of Isaiah himself, was a child who lived in the days of Ahaz, and his name was a sign of YHWH’s continued presence with his people through the Davidic king. In Isaiah 8, YHWH instructed Isaiah to write down in the presence of named witnesses the name *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz* before being intimate with his unnamed, prophetess-wife. As a result of their union, she bore to Isaiah a son and they named their son *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*, which means “Fast-to-the-Plunder; Swift-to-the-Spoil.” Why such a name? Isaiah 8:4 says because the name signifies the coming judgment on the nations who are warring against the kingdom of God, and says it will happen before Child #3 learns to say father or mother. In other words, the redemption of YHWH against the enemies of God was happening very, very soon in the day of Isaiah and Ahaz.

Child #1, a son of Isaiah, had a name meaning “A Remnant Will Return.” Child #2, another son of Isaiah, had a name meaning “God is With Us.” And Child #3, another son of Isaiah, had a name that spoke to the judgment against the enemies of God. Isaiah 8:18 gives us

the purpose of these three children’s names. Isaiah says, “Here I am with the children YHWH has given me to be signs and wonders in Israel from YHWH of Armies who dwells on Mount Zion.” These names do not describe the three sons of Isaiah, but rather their names signify to weak, sinful King Ahaz something remarkable that YHWH is doing. The prophecy of Isaiah 7 is not about a sexual virgin at an unknown time in the future who will conceive of a child who is God in the flesh. The prophecy of Isaiah 7 is about a young woman, the unnamed prophetess-wife of Isaiah, who will give birth in Isaiah’s own day to a son whose name reminds all who encounter him that God’s presence remains with his people.

Matthew’s Use of Emmanuel

This brings us now to the Gospel of Matthew. There is a conundrum amongst scholars regarding Matthew’s quotation of the prophecy from Isaiah 7. This controversy centers on the word “virgin.” Matthew uses the Greek word most suitably translated “virgin,” with the sexual connotation that we are familiar with. Isaiah, on the other hand, used the Hebrew word most suitably translated “young woman” with no such sexual connotation.

Some scholars conclude that Matthew’s understanding of whatever is going on with Emmanuel far exceeds our own and is in fact beyond our comprehension. A majority of scholars, though, simply conclude that Matthew took Isaiah out of context or misunderstood Isaiah. I am dissatisfied by these conclusions. It must be true that Matthew correctly understood the significance of Emmanuel in its original context, and it must be true that Matthew communicates that significance in a comprehensible manner. Our affirmations about Scripture require both of these to be true.

The sign of Emmanuel in its original context signified four things. The sign of Emmanuel signified that 1) YHWH would bring judgment against the faithless; 2) YHWH would bring salvation for the faithful; 3) YHWH’s presence with his people would continue specifically through the royal line of David; and 4) the nations’ plans against YHWH would be thwarted. I contend that Matthew sees all four of these things in the person and work of Jesus Christ.¹

In Matthew 1, the ESV helpfully ends the quotation from the angel to Joseph at the end of verse 21. Then, in verse 22, Matthew provides what I call an editorial comment. Matthew is not writing this as the events are unfolding; he’s writing these events after the totality of Jesus’

¹ For a fuller argument, see my message titled, “The Gospel of Immanuel.”

earthly ministry is complete. The Gospel accounts are retrospective narrative. Moreover, verse 24 continues the narrative as it pertains to Joseph. You could take verses 22-23 out and have a continuous story, but Matthew interrupts the story to make sure we did not miss the significance of who this child is and would be. “All this took place to fulfill...” Rather than naming the Spirit-conceived child “Emmanuel” as the prophecy would otherwise suggest, the child would be named “Jesus.” After all, the child named Emmanuel was Isaiah’s own son, whose name was a sign pointing toward what God was doing for his people who were approaching exile. By naming this child “Jesus,” the prophecy about a child named “Emmanuel” was fulfilled *typologically*. Greg Beale, who literally wrote the *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, defines “typology as the study of analogical correspondences among persons, events, institutions, and other things within the historical framework of God’s special revelation that, from a retrospective view, are of a prophetic nature” (page 57). In fact, according to Beale and Carson’s commentary on the subject, *typology* is the primary way NT writers used the OT Scriptures.

The location of Matthew’s editorial comment pronouncing Isaianic fulfillment is significant. Matthew pronounces Isaiah 7:14 fulfilled neither immediately after Joseph is called “Son of David” (Matt. 1:1, 16) nor immediately after Mary is described as a virgin (Matt. 1:18, 25); but instead, the editorial comment pronouncing fulfillment immediately follows the *purpose* of Jesus’ name in verse 21: *for he will save his people from their sins*. During his crucifixion trial, in John 18:37, Jesus says *to that end he was born*. For Matthew and Jesus alike, to separate the end from the beginning is to misunderstand the beginning. To separate the presence of God from salvation is to misunderstand the sign of Emmanuel. Matthew sees significance in the birth of Christ only through the lens of the death and resurrection of Christ. The cross and empty tomb brought the unrivaled judgment against the *faithless* with eternal death, and the unrivaled salvation for the *faithful* with eternal life.

Each Gospel writer attempts to portray Jesus in different ways by emphasizing certain things over the others. Scholars generally accept that Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ identity as the King. It should come as no surprise that the concept of the Kingdom of God is most developed in Matthew’s account. Matthew also begins his account with a genealogy showcasing Jesus as the legal royal descendent of David. Matthew saw Jesus as the truest manifestation there could be of God being with his people through the continuation of the line of David, the sum of whose life would bring unparalleled judgment against the faithless and unparalleled salvation for the

faithful, thus thwarting the plans of the nations and powers in opposition to YHWH. This is what I mean when I say Jesus *typologically* fulfilled the prophecy of Emmanuel.

God’s presence with us through Jesus is of great concern to Matthew, “So why,” scholars have asked, “is there no other mention of Jesus as Emmanuel?” This is where I believe they miss the mark, for Matthew does speak to the typological fulfillment of Jesus as Emmanuel all throughout his Gospel. Reading through Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s accounts of the same events, Matthew time and time again subtly emphasizes the spatial presence of Jesus whereas the others usually do not. Not only does his conception by the Holy Spirit make Jesus the palpable presence of God, but throughout his Gospel, Matthew constantly reminds us of the identity of Jesus that he provided at the start. Here are a few examples:

Hosea 11:9-11 promises God’s presence with his people when he brings them out of exile. Matt. 2:14-15 quotes these words from Hosea 11 to speak about a Second Exodus; a great act of salvation comparable to the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt. The God who called his Son out of Egypt is the same God who is present in their midst. When a storm scared the disciples in Matt. 8:25, contrary to the other Gospels, the presence of Jesus is connected to a plea for salvation. When Jesus walked on the water in Matt. 14:22-33, contrary to the other Gospels, the presence of Jesus is connected to a cry for salvation and they worship him as the Son of God. After the resurrection, twice in Matt. 28 (9, 17), the presence of Jesus with his people is connected to the worship of God.

Jesus even self-identifies as God-with-us in Matt. 18:20. *For where two or three are gathered together unto my name, there I am with them.* This statement of Jesus has an almost too-good-to-be-true parallel in the Jewish oral tradition that says, “Where two sit and speak *Torah* together, there the Divine Presence rests with them.”² In both Matthew and *Mishnah*, the gathering of God’s people is for the purpose of living in the presence of God.

In his death and resurrection, Jesus stripped the serpentine Satan of his restricted and limited authority on earth. The Psalmist asks, “*Why do the nations rebel and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers conspire together against YHWH and His Anointed One... [But YHWH] said to me, ‘You are My Son... Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your inheritance and the ends of the earth your possession.*” The plans of those in opposition to YHWH will be thwarted *because* Emmanuel. After his death and resurrection,

² Mishnah Avot 3:2

Jesus prepared his disciples for his ascension by giving them the Great Commission. “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore make disciples by going to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all of what I commanded you. And behold, all the days until the end of the age, I AM with you.*” In Matthew’s final passage, Jesus uses the Greek words *ego eimi*. These are significant words. In Exodus 3, when Moses asks God who he should tell the Israelites sent him, God responds with the great “I AM.” The pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament translated this phrase *ego eimi*. John uses *ego eimi* throughout his Gospel to add extra significance to what we now call the “I AM’s” of Jesus. Here, at the end of Matthew, Jesus refers to himself as the great I AM. By calling himself God, Jesus assures his disciples saying that he remains with them. Even when he departs, all disciples of Christ can confess that God is with us.

The first narrative pericope of Matthew concludes that Jesus is God-With-Us. Matthew’s Gospel is littered with subtle emphases on the spatial presence of Jesus, and Jesus refers to himself as the divine presence when two of God’s people gather in his name. The final narrative pericope of Matthew concludes that even after Jesus ascends into heaven, God remains with us. The beginning, middle, and end of Matthew paint the same picture. The prophesied time before his birth, his pre-crucified life, and his post-resurrection life all paint the same picture: Jesus has restored God’s presence with his people once and for all by saving them from their sins.

From the beginning, Matthew makes claims about who Jesus is *in light of the totality of his earthly life*. This is why Matthew can call Jesus the “Christ,” “Son of David,” and “Son of Abraham” in his opening sentence; it’s why he can add the editorial comment in relation to Jesus saving his people from their sins; it’s why Matthew can setup the inclusio of God-with-us at the beginning, middle, and end. Matthew neither takes Isaiah out of context, nor misunderstands Isaiah, nor does he cram that context into a few verses in a way totally unbeknownst to us. Instead, *Matthew’s whole Gospel* is a portrait of Jesus as the Emmanuel-King who would save his people from their sins, removing that which exiles or separates us from God by embodying God’s presence with us himself.

Despite times of historical exile, the most consequential exile we all experience is our eternal separation from God’s presence due to our sin. But, even in our separation from God, God worked to bring his people back to life in his presence through the person and work of Jesus Christ who lived the life we fail to live, who took upon himself the full weight of the outpouring

of God’s wrath reserved for us, taking it instead himself. The innocent Jesus took your sins and mine, drinking the cup of God’s wrath on our behalf, paying the penalty we are unable to pay. God then raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his innocent sacrifice; securing and sealing for God’s people our eternal salvation and our justification to approach the throne of grace.

God’s Presence is Good News

Each year, BibleGateway.com releases the most searched verses of the Bible. For the most part, the top verses do not fluctuate much. Sometimes the order changes, but the same verses usually appear. However, in 2020 and 2021, an atypical verse made the list, Isaiah 41:10. Over the last two wild years of a global pandemic, toilet-paper shortages, racial tensions, church closures, destructive fires, deadly tornados, and the polarization that comes with an election in our post-truth culture, our fear-stricken world gravitated toward this verse. *Do not fear, for I am with you.* Living in the presence of God is good news!

“In his birth is our significance; in his life is our example; in his cross is our redemption; and in his resurrection is our hope.”³ If you have not yet believed in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and if you have not yet called on him as the Master of your life, today is the day of salvation. I invite you now to put your faith in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and he will forgive you of your sins, past, present, and future.

Put your faith in Christ today, and he will change your life by giving you a new heart, meaning you will be given a new worldview to see God as he truly is; to see yourself as God sees you; to see others as God sees them; and to care about and cherish the things about which God cares and cherishes, such as the dignity of human life at all stages, all ages, and all races.

Put your faith in Christ today, and he will come into your heart through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who empowers you right now to turn away from sin and instead turn toward YHWH; the Spirit who empowers you with spiritual gifts and abilities to strengthen the faith of other believers in the global and local Church. The presence of God transforms whatever space it occupies into sacred space. This is true also of believers. In speaking about the need to flee from sexual immorality, Paul poignantly states, “*Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?*” (1 Cor. 6:19). The moment you put your faith in the finished work of Christ through his death and resurrection and call on him as the

³ S.M. Lockridge, “Where Sick Men Can Get Well,” 1982.

Master of your life, the Holy Spirit dwells in you—the very presence of God lives within you! If the presence of God lives within you, then the space that occupies your body has been transformed into sacred space. *Do not fear, for I am with you.* Only can the Spirit-indwelt believer carry that assurance all the days of their life. The words of Jesus in Matthew 28 assure his disciples that as he prepares to leave, his presence; the presence of God will nevertheless remain with his people. How can Jesus remain with them after he departs? Jesus tells us that he must depart in order to send the Holy Spirit on them and on us. The departure of Christ through his visible ascension into heaven paved the way for the palpable presence of God to be poured out into every believer.

Put your faith in Christ today, and he will give you the promise of eternal life in God’s presence forever. At the end of Revelation, after all end-times activities are over, the final scene is one similar to the beginning. New Jerusalem comes down from heaven onto the new earth in the shape of a massive Garden-City. But John writes in Rev. 21 that there was no physical sanctuary in the massive Garden-City *because* God’s presence was there, making all of New Jerusalem on the New Earth one large Garden-Temple. Though the union of God’s people living in his presence in the first Garden-Temple was lost due to sin, it will once and for all be restored when all believers enter into the final Garden-Temple, more glorious than the first, to live forever in the presence of God, forever undefiled by the brokenness and sinfulness of our world.

Thanks be to God who did not leave us in our sin, but who gave his only son to satisfy his justice and raised him from the dead that we who believe may one day also be raised to live *with him* for all eternity. To separate God’s presence from salvation is to misunderstand the message of Emmanuel. Emmanuel is more than a mere Christmas story; it is the story of our salvation.

Once upon a midnight clear, heaven’s song broke through the air: Peace and goodwill toward men, born now in Bethlehem. Once upon a bed of straw, slept the sovereign Son of God; Lord of the universe, breathing the dust of earth. Once upon a splintered cross, Jesus died to rescue us; all of our shame and sin, nailed to the tree with him. Once upon a brilliant day, Christ the conqueror was raised; heaven and nature sing: “Praise to the King of Kings!”⁴

Let’s pray.

⁴ Lyrics from the song “Once Upon” by Hudson, Lacy and Nathan Stiff, published by Sovereign Grace Music, 2020.