

Immanuel – God with us

Matthew 1:20-23

We'll start with Matthew 1, but this will go all over the place. The Lord has put it on me to bring some kind of encouragement to you all this Christmas. Usually my messages start with a Scripture, not an agenda. But this one started with the Lord's agenda. He said, "Find a way to encourage these people on Christmas Day." God wants to tell each of you, "I am with you."

At the end of Matthew 1, we read about two different names of our Lord. We'll begin in Matthew 1:20. *An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive, and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

The two names here are "Jesus" and "Immanuel." "Jesus" is how they said "Joshua" in Greek. What Joseph heard the angel say was, "name the little guy Joshua." And Joshua means "the Lord saves." Call him that, because this Joshua, this Jesus, will save his people from their sins.

And this in turn fulfills what the Lord said through the prophet, *The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

God is with us, my brothers and sisters, God is with each of us. The way Matthew tells this story, the two names are tied together. When God is with us, he really is right with us, but it is never only that. God is always helping us in some way, protecting, he's doing something.

Parents of two and three years olds take these children to the playground. I've done this. We go "with" our children to the playground. But these parents are not just keeping the toddlers company. They're right beside them, steer them away from scary stuff, help them climb up, help them climb down, pick them up when they fall, hold them a minute when they hurt themselves.

That's what God means when he says he's "with us." He's helping, guiding, holding us, picking us up, steering us in the right direction. That's why Immanuel is connected to "name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." That's the kind of thing God does, when he's with us. He saves us from our sins. When he's with us, he takes care of us.

Here are some OT stories. Abraham's son Isaac was living with the Philistines, because there was a famine. Isaac and Rebecca were in a trouble because of the famine. They were strangers everywhere, they had no land. Who will take care of them? God came to Isaac and said, "Don't go down to Egypt. Stay where you are. I will be with you, and I will bless you." Instruction with promise. "Stay where you are. I will be with you and I will bless you." And he did.

So Isaac stayed, but then the Philistines got grumpy with him and gave him grief. So God came to him again, and said, “do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bless you and take care of you.” Isaac saw hard times, but he trusted in the Lord. God was with him and blessed him.

We’ll turn to Genesis 39, the Joseph story. Terrible stuff had happened to Joseph. His own brothers pounced on him, and sold him as a slave, they got money for him, slave traders took him far way. Not many of us have troubles like that.

But in Egypt, “*the Lord was with Joseph, so that Joseph prospered. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and the Lord gave him success, Joseph found favor in his eyes.*” People, if we trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then he is with us, with every single one of us, even when we have fallen off the map, as far as everyone else is concerned.

He is certainly with us, and he NEVER does nothing. We will succeed in what we are supposed to get done. It cannot possibly be any other way. He is with us, so we will succeed.

Potiphar’s wife got mad at Joseph, and for no good reason Joseph ended up in prison, and was there for several years. But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him, the Lord showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden. The warden put him in charge, and Scripture tells us why: the Lord was with Joseph, and gave him success.

People, our God is the same God. He is with us, and if he’s with us, he’s busy, taking care of us and blessing us. And yes we see hard times. So did Isaac, and so did Joseph. It is specifically in hard times that God says this.

He tells us that he’s with us exactly when we need some kind of saving. Name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. This fulfills the word of the Lord that the virgin would bear a child, and call him Immanuel, God with us.

In Acts 18, Paul had come to Corinth to preach the gospel. He was scared. That missionary trip started in Philippi. Paul and Silas were mobbed in Philippi, flogged, and put in stocks in prison. From there to Thessalonica. Gospel preaching went well there for a few weeks, but then the Jews got rowdy. Paul and Silas hid, and believers snuck them out of the city during night.

Then he went to Berea, and that went well. But Berea was not far from Thessalonica, and when the angry Thessalonian Jews found out Paul was in Berea, they went to Berea, and stirred up a mob. The believers snuck Paul out of Berea, and he ended up in Corinth. And, he was scared.

So the Lord came to Paul at night. “Paul, don’t be afraid, keep on speaking, for I am with you, and no one will harm you here.” When the Lord says “I am with you,” it always means some kind of help, blessing, protection, guidance. Sometimes we trust this, sometimes we don’t, but he’s with us, and helping either way. When we are faithless, he remains faithful, he cannot deny himself.

Here's a story from the end of Paul's life. He was in prison, and this time he was not getting out, and he knew it. He was on death row. Execution was about to happen. This is 2 Timothy 4.

*At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side, and gave me strength, so that through me, the message might be fully proclaimed. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack, and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.*

“No believer in Rome supported me, everyone one of them deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side, and gave me strength. I was delivered. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack. He will bring me safely to his kingdom.”

So, my brothers and sisters, you and I have the very same Lord. If he stayed with Paul, when all others deserted, the Lord will certainly stay with us. And people, if he is with us, then he's giving us strength, delivering, rescuing. Every story I read showed God's people in some kind of hard place. And God was always with them, always protecting, blessing, helping, giving success.

This is Christmas Day. We remember the child who was first named Jesus, because the Lord saves, and then named Immanuel, because God is with us. That Jesus the Saviour, that Immanuel, is still with us, here, today.

Matthew ends with Jesus speaking: “*Behold, I am with you every day, to the end of the age.*” Only Matthew calls Jesus “Immanuel,” and only Matthew ends with Jesus promising to be with us every day. Matthew says nothing about Jesus ascending to his Father's right hand. Matthew knows about that, but ignores it at the end.

For Matthew, the ways in which Jesus is still with us, are more important than the ways in which he's not. For Matthew, Jesus is with us, in more ways than he's not. Which Jesus? That Jesus that he's written about through the whole Gospel of Matthew. That Jesus is with every one of us. He will never leave us or forsake us. He's with us, giving strength and helping, today. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, thank you, and thank you again. And Lord, give us faith, and again, give us faith. Thank you that when we are faithless, you remain faithful, you cannot deny yourself. For all the protection, we thank you. For all the guiding, the strength, the help, we thank you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you, and give you peace. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.