

Text: Matthew 1:22-23

Title: “The Immanuel Factor ... God with us in our Struggles”

INTRODUCTION

I love ministry in the Christmas season. It’s an opportunity for us to fall more deeply in love with our Savior, and with the Father who gave us such a magnificent gift in His Son Jesus Christ. Open your Bibles to Matthew 1:22-23.

And to add something special to your Christmas celebration I want to encourage you to go to see the recently released movie “The Nativity.” I don’t recommend movies very often, but this one is a must see for two reasons: one, it’s a fairly accurate retelling of the biblical events surrounding the birth of our Savior; second, because when good movies like this come along we need to send a message to Hollywood that it’s worth their effort to produce movies that are wholesome.

Matthew 1:22-23 (NIV) - All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

Today I am beginning a series of Christmas messages entitled, “The Immanuel Factor.” Throughout the Bible we are assured of the God’s presence with His people. But in the birth of Christ that presence became more personal and powerful than ever. In fact, God is closer than most of us think.

There are many names that are ascribed to the second Person of the Trinity. And many of these names tell us what God had in mind when He sent His Son.

For instance Joseph is told ... **Matthew 1:21 (NIV) – 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.”**

The name Jesus means “Jehovah is salvation,” and Christ would accomplish that very thing ... “he will save his people from their sins.” And that is something that God is up to in the life of every human being ... to save them from their sins.

But in Matthew 1:23 we see another name that was to be given to the Christ ... Immanuel. This goes back to a prophecy found in the book of Isaiah ... a prophecy that was ultimately fulfilled in the coming of the Christ.

And here is something else that God is up to in the life of every human being ... he wants to be with us. God wants to be near. He created us for a relationship with Himself. That’s why He came near at the incarnation.

In fact, it may be that the central message of the Bible is “I will be with you.”

Before sin entered the human experience, God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the Garden of Eden. He was with them.

The great men and women of the Bible walked with God. Why? Because they were extraordinary individuals who found God? No, because they were found by a God who wanted to be with them.

To great leaders like Joshua ... **Joshua 1:9b (NIV) - Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.**

King David knew this when he composed that legendary psalm: **Psalm 23:4 (NIV) - 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.**

God gave Israel the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night all as Post-it notes to remind His people, “I am with you. I will be with you.”

All of that was powerfully real, but God had an even greater demonstration of His desire and His design to be with us. At the incarnation God became a man. Jesus Christ, the Son of God was born to a virgin girl named Mary. And here's what the Gospel tells us...

Matthew 1:22-23 (NIV) - All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

That was the promise at Jesus' coming. And there was a promise when 33 years later he departed this earth to return to the right hand of the Father. Here's what he said to His disciples:

Matthew 28:20b (NIV) - And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

And one day when God has closed the curtain on history, and He has made all things new in His Kingdom, as the redeemed stand before God in the glory of heaven ...

Revelation 21:3 (NIV) - And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

God is near ... and not just when we are good to be around. As humans we tend not to want to be around certain people at certain times. But it's not that way with God. He is near ... and He wants us to count on it all the time ... when things are going great, and when they're not ... when you feel lovely, and when you feel unlovely.

Specifically, today I want you see how God is near us in our struggles, in our battles, in our times of peril. Maybe you are facing a battle, a struggle, today ... battle with cancer, a battle with depression, a battle with loneliness, a battle with bitterness ... whatever.

Nothing reassures us more in the midst of our struggles like the knowledge of God's presence with us through Christ.

1. THE FACT OF HIS PRESENCE IN MY STRUGGLES (Matthew 1:22-23; Isaiah 7)

You need to know, dear child of God, that when you fight battles you are not fighting them alone. God has promised to be with you in the battles you fight. It's a fact.

As a matter of fact, this is the message behind the original Immanuel prophecy. Jesus virgin birth was predicted by God through the prophet Isaiah.

Matthew 1:22 (NIV) - All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

You need to see the connection between the original setting of the prophecy and the perfect fulfillment of it in Christ's birth. It was a time of struggle and battle for the people of God in the OT.

The scene in Isaiah 7 is the reign of King Ahaz in Judah. He was likely the most wicked king ever to reign over the people of God. He filled Jerusalem with pagan idols, reinstated the worship of the god Molech and even burned his own son as a sacrifice to that god. Judah came under attack from two allied powers, threatening the people of God and the royal line of David. Instead of turning to God for help, Ahaz secretly surrendered his kingdom and people to the evil king of Assyria.

At that time God sent Isaiah to confront King Ahaz for his foolishness in seeking security in Assyria rather than in the God of Israel. Isaiah told him that God said these enemies would not prevail against Judah. Don't trust Assyria ... trust God.

Ahaz ignored Isaiah, taking steps to deepen the relationship with and dependence upon the king of Assyria. He went so far as to take the sacred objects from the Temple and send them to the king of Assyria. Isaiah came a second time to confront Ahaz and to prophesy that God would deliver His people from the attacking kings.

Again Ahaz refused to listen. The Isaiah, under the anointing of the Spirit said this:

Isaiah 7:14 (NIV) - Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

So what's the deal? What's the connection and significance of this ancient prophesy? Isaiah prophesied about a Child to be born who in some way would relate to the nation's deliverance. The birth of the Baby, to be named Immanuel, has great significance for the line of David.

Now there's a dual fulfillment to this prophecy. The first fulfillment came in the days of King Ahaz. To confirm the prophecy that they could trust God to deliver them, a child would be born. The sign involved not only the birth and the boy's name (Immanuel, "God [is] with us") would assure the people of God's presence. And this child would become a man who would somehow be part of God's deliverance of His people. So trust God.

Isaiah 8:10 (NIV) - Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

You see, the prophecy meant that no one could destroy the people and the purpose of God. These invading kings would not overthrow the eternal plans of God for His people. God intended to preserve the royal line of David (Judah). Even though they would be carried off into captivity by the Babylonians ... but God's plans were not finished. God would be with them in their battles. They didn't need to trust the arm of flesh.

Centuries later the Holy Spirit led Matthew to quote Isaiah 7:14 as a statement that was also true of a virgin birth (i.e., a birth to a woman who was still a virgin). This is the first of many prophecies about the Messiah given by Isaiah.

The birth of Jesus Christ signaled God's desire and God's design to be with us ... even in our struggles. This is a fact for your head. But there's something else.

2. THE FORCE OF HIS PRESENCE IN MY STRUGGLES (Deuteronomy 20:1-4)

The Immanuel Factor is a fact for your head ... but it is also a force in your heart. It's one thing to know in my head that God is with me. It's another thing to experience the power, the force, of that reality surging through my life ... counting on it every day that I live.

God personally stepped into the human experience when Jesus was born in Bethlehem's manger to a virgin named Mary. It was real. And you need to know that God's presence is real to this day.

Jesus only lived on this earth for 33 years. But after He died He was raised to life. And after He ascended back to the Father's right hand, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be with us and to be in us.

The presence of Jesus is as real in this room today as He was 2000 years ago when He walked this earth. Amazing!

And that reality gives power to our lives as we count on that. There's an illustration of this in the OT. In God's preparing His people to enter the Promised Land, He knew that they would face enemy after enemy and battle after battle. So He gave them an encouraging promise:

Deuteronomy 20:1-4 (NIV) - When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you.² When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army.³ He shall say: "Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them.⁴ For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory."

Let me show you what this means:

- I have courage because He is with me.

Look again at the text. This promise was made before the battle to assure them that whatever the enemy, God would be with them as He had been in the past.

Deuteronomy 20:1-3 (NIV) - When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you. ² When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. ³ He shall say: “Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them.”

So here's the force that the Immanuel Factor brings to my life ... when I face and when I fight the battles of life, I can have courage. I do not have to be afraid because He is with me.

And the battle is real ... you just can't see your enemy. But God is with you. You do not need to be afraid.

And this promise runs right through the Bible:

Isaiah 41:10 (NIV) - So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

You know we sometimes think that fear is something that only happens to ordinary people like us ... it never would happen to someone, say, like the Apostle Paul. Well actually he did face fear. Why else would God come to him and speak in a vision:

Acts 18:9-10 (NIV) - One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”

I have courage because He is with me. But there's more to this force, this power, that God brings to my life in the midst of struggles.

- I have confidence because He is for me.

Deuteronomy 20:4 (NIV) - For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.”

The Immanuel Factor ... God with us ... not keeping us at a distance.

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION – Dallas Willard in his book “Hearing God” tells the story of a little boy whose mom had died. He was very sad and lonely, particularly at night. He would come into his father’s bedroom and ask if he could sleep with his dad. But he needed more. He couldn’t rest until his father’s face was turned toward him. “Dad, is your face turned toward me?” the boy would ask. “Yes, son,” his dad replied, “My face is toward you.” And with that the boy could sleep securely.

Deep down inside we all need to know that God has His face turned toward us.