

Immanuel: God With Us (II)
Matthew 1:18-25
Key Verse: 1:23

by Dr. James Rabchuck

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel -- which means "God with us."'"

Merry Christmas, everyone! I want to thank you for the invitation to come and speak to you today at this Christmas service. I pray that this message may speak to all of us and help us celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior during this Christmas holiday.

I. God's promised salvation

The story of Jesus' birth begins with the history of God's people. Who are God's people? They are the children of Abraham. Abraham received God's promise to be a source of blessing to the whole world. The Lord told him, "and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." Can you think of a better promise from the Creator of Heaven and Earth? Abraham fell in love with the Lord, and the Lord loved him and blessed him. But those whom the Lord loves, he disciplines. Abraham's children, the Israelites, were enslaved in Egypt and served for 400 years. They grew into a great nation, and when the Lord sent Moses to free them, they were a million strong. They returned to the land the Lord had promised Abraham, the land of Canaan. But despite the leadership of Moses, Joshua and Caleb, they were unable fully to claim the territory God had promised them. They needed a shepherd who could lead them to claim all of God's promise to Abraham.

Therefore, God raised up David, a man after God's own heart, who would unite the twelve tribes of Israel into one nation. The Lord was with David. He gave him victory in battle. He taught him the righteousness of God through the law. And David served God's people as a lamp lights the way. He sang them psalms. He prepared the construction of the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. But David sinned by taking for himself the woman Bathsheba, wife of his general Uriah, and having Uriah killed. David was the standard of faith and righteousness for his people. He fell short of God's standard. David humbled himself and accepted God's correction. He believed God's promise that God would do for him what he could not do for God. God was going to build a house for David and for God's people that would stand forever. God would send an offspring for David and Abraham who would accomplish all of God's will. God himself would be the shepherd of his people through his Christ.

David's great kingdom lasted only two generations. Israel was divided, and most of the tribes began to follow other gods. None of David's offspring ever came close to the standard he had set. The government officials became corrupt. Worship of God became ritualistic and dead. Finally, the kingdoms of Northern Israel and then Judah fell, and the kingly line of David fell into obscurity. The temple was destroyed. Returning exiles rebuilt the temple. Yet how could God's people believe that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you?" Still, they clung to their identity as God's chosen people. They kept the lamp of God burning. Their strength, however, was almost gone. Then in God's time, God fulfilled his promises to David and to Abraham. He raised up for them Jesus Christ, prepared from birth to accomplish God's will. Jesus was their offspring through Joseph, the son of David, and husband of Mary. But he was truly God's gift to David's family, for he was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. David's line had failed. Abraham's children had lost track of his footsteps. But the Almighty God cherished his promises to his friends Abraham and David, and by his power and authority he fulfilled them completely. God's people never could live up to God's love! But we can love him absolutely, because he has demonstrated through the birth of Jesus a love that never fails. Praise God who will fulfill every promise to his people, even as he did for Abraham and David through the birth of Jesus Christ!

II. Mary and Joseph

The birth of Jesus came about in the humblest of families. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. The angel of the Lord came to her and declared God's favor upon her life. She was to be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit so that the son conceived in her would be from God. As a result, she would have to be willing to sacrifice her future with Joseph. She would risk bringing shame to her family forever. But when Mary heard the angel's message, she believed what

the Lord had told her. It shows that she believed in God's promises to his people. She was ready to sacrifice herself in order to see God's promises fulfilled. It was just as Jesus taught in his prayer: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come." She told the angel, "May it be to me as the Lord has said."

When Joseph found out, he was hurt and disappointed. Surely it was a betrayal of the promises they had made to each other! But the Bible says that Joseph was a righteous man. It means that Joseph loved God's law and God's truth. Therefore, he wasn't free to act according to his feelings of anger or betrayal. He felt compelled to act in the way that would please God. He felt compelled to live up to his commitment before God to love and protect Mary. Righteousness is not legalism. It is a commitment of faith to do what God wants us to do instead of what we feel like doing. Joseph was a righteous man. So he had in mind to divorce Mary quietly to protect her and her family. But after Joseph had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel spoke directly to Joseph. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, for what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." The angel called Joseph the son of David. Joseph was not a nobody in God's eyes. He was the heir of God's promises. He was also chosen for a difficult mission. He didn't need to be afraid of anyone else, or what they might say. He just needed to do what God commanded him and take Mary home as his wife. It isn't easy to do the right thing, even for righteous people. We need God's voice to guide and help us not be afraid, as the angel guided Joseph. Having the decision to live a righteous life is the way we invite God's guidance. Having a willing heart to accept God's guidance makes us somebody in God's kingdom.

III. Jesus saves us from sin

The angel then told Joseph about his holy mission. Verse 21 says, "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." Jesus was not Joseph's son. But Joseph's mission was to take Mary's baby home as his baby. And he was to care for him and give him the name Jesus. Jesus, or Yeshua, means "The Lord saves." It was because this baby -- Mary's baby -- was sent to save God's people from their sins. The baby needed a daddy and mommy to feed him and change his diaper. But Mary's little baby was God's Son. He came down to Earth from Heaven. He came to save his people from their sin.

The Old Testament is full of the stories of men and women who were saviors in their generation. All of them were great warriors, wise leaders or people of prophetic vision. And God's people were confident that God would send them such a savior as the Christ. But Abraham and David knew that the Christ could not be like them. For they knew they were wicked men in their hearts. David confessed in Psalm 51, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." David's hope was not in a better version of himself. His hope was in God's complete redemption from sin. So he wrote in Psalm 16: "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." As David foresaw, the Savior had come not to conquer armies and men, but to conquer sin and the power of death. Those who trust in him will rejoice. They will be free from sin. They will live forever in his presence.

The baby Jesus came to save his people from their sin. Sometimes, however, people imagine they have no sin. They know they commit sin. They just imagine that having committed sin, they can forget about it and move on, or make up for it by doing something unusually good. But sin is not so easily forgotten or made up for, as we think. Are the Catholic priests who sexually abused young men absolved because of their service to the church? Are Jim Baker, Jimmy Swaggart or Ted Haggard guiltless of committing adultery because of their excellent preaching? Do my 25 years of service in UBF justify my sin of looking at pornography? But sin goes way deeper than the failings of religious leadership. We all carry around with us the habits of anger, of self-indulgence, and of irresponsibility that we learned in childhood and have been passing down from generation to generation. And deeper still, there is the root of selfishness and disobedience that we have inherited from the first man and woman. Sin cannot be forgotten about or made up for, because sin is always with us. Therefore Paul testified about himself in Romans 7:21-24, "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" The baby Jesus was sent into this world to rescue sinners from the body of death. As Paul declares, "Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

IV. God with us overcomes sin with us

The author Matthew then draws our attention to the prophecy of Jesus' birth from the book of Isaiah. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'--which means, 'God with us.'" Matthew was a tax collector. He dealt with people at their worst. He knew from experience that everyone was tainted by sin, from the highest religious leader to the lowest prostitute. But the virgin birth of Jesus, foretold in Isaiah, confirmed for Matthew what he saw in Jesus. Jesus was not stained by sin. Jesus was not a great man in the image of David. Rather, Jesus bore the image of God himself. Jesus was born into this world as our Savior. He would not be Savior because of the great victories he won over the Romans or the religious elite. He was the Savior of the world because he is Immanuel, God with us.

Immanuel! God is with us! What can save us from our sin? No law. No hero. No amount of knowledge. Think of the challenge we face to meet our needs for energy! Every alternative to oil -- nuclear power, hydroelectric and even wind -- entails negative consequences that can lead to our destruction! The same is truer still with our sin. There is no "sin-lite". As Jesus taught, pornography isn't a better sin than adultery and anger isn't a better sin than murder. The very real presence of sin in us corrupts and undermines every solution to sin we might suggest. But God with us provides us the antidote for every element of darkness that threatens our souls with destruction. God with us is the light of truth that exposes every lie and every false step. God with us therefore frees us from the body of death. Jesus told the Pharisee Nicodemus, "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." God with us lights the way to life and peace. Jesus is God with us, Immanuel. As sinners we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and let his Spirit be ever present in our hearts and minds. God with us, Immanuel Jesus, saves us from our sin.

Immanuel Jesus saved the tax collector Levi, and made him Matthew, the gospel writer. Matthew wrote down the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world! -- Be perfect therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect!" He was a man who committed terrible sins against himself and his people. Still, he was not condemned by Jesus' words. He was uplifted, knowing that Immanuel Jesus would be with him, helping him every step of the way. Likewise, Immanuel Jesus saves me from my sin. I was born again as one of God's people through faith in God's promise in Romans 8:1-2. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." Twenty years later, however, I thought I was good enough to put my hope first in being recognized by others as a physics and bible scholar. Strangely, the more recognition I received, the more my soul became restless and dissatisfied. My relationships, especially with my precious wife and children, became strained to the point of breaking. I had become a worldly religious person who tried to fool myself and Jesus into thinking I was alright and could handle sin with me all by myself. But I couldn't. So I accepted from Jesus once more the Living Water of his Spirit, and my soul was satisfied in a way that recognition or pleasure never could. God with me through Jesus enables me to overcome sin with me, and my relationships with others could begin to be restored. I confess that Jesus alone saves me from my sin. Thank you, Jesus Immanuel!

How much of God's purpose for Jesus did Joseph understand in his dream? We'll never know. But thank God, he just obeyed what the angel commanded him, and took Mary home as his wife. He respected the child in her and had no sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave the child the name Jesus. Joseph also gave Jesus the right to be called the son of David, so that Jesus fulfilled in every way God's promises to his people.

Sin with us is capable of destroying the best of us, and it leads all of us to death. So let us this Christmas Season newly welcome Jesus as our Immanuel! Let us rejoice in him, for the only salvation from sin with us is Immanuel Jesus! Merry Christmas!