**Scripturally Speaking: Immanuel**

When Joseph, the carpenter betrothed to Mary, discovered his betrothed was pregnant, he “resolved to divorce her quietly” (Matt. 1:19). Before he could do so, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream informing him that Mary had not been promiscuous and that the child she bore was a fulfillment of what Isaiah the prophet had spoken, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name *Immanuel*.” Matthew’s account specifies for us that *Immanuel* means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). When we read this literal meaning of *Immanuel* through twenty-first-century eyes, I think we quickly jump to the deity of Christ. Jesus was, after all, literally God incarnate. This is certainly a part of what can be inferred from Jesus being called Immanuel; but if we spend time considering Isaiah’s prophecy, we will find that Jesus’ designation as “God with us” has more implications than the incarnation of deity alone.

Isaiah’s prophecies regarding *Immanuel* were received in the context of the Divided Kingdom. Ahaz, the king of Judah, requested help from the king of Assyria to defend against the alliance of Israel and Syria. Looking forward from this point in Judah’s history, we can see that Ahaz’s actions led to Assyria taking Israel and laid the groundwork for Babylon (and later the Medo-Persian empire) to conquer Judah. However, before Ahaz requested Assyrian help, God sent him a message via Isaiah: “Do not fear!” (Is. 7:3-9). To assure Ahaz further, God instructed him to ask for a sign from God, but Ahaz refused under the pretense of not wanting to test the Lord (Is. 7:10-12). God’s response indicates that Ahaz’s protest was not sincere and demonstrated a lack of faith in God. Therefore, God determined to give the king—and, indeed, all his people—a sign anyway. The sign was a child named Immanuel. Over the course of multiple prophecies, Isaiah says that before this child is very old, Assyria would destroy Judah’s adversaries and Ahaz’s concerns about Israel and Syria will be irrelevant (Is. 7:16). However, because Judah has chosen the help of Assyria instead of YHWH, this child will also live to witness his land largely subjugated by Assyria instead (Is. 8:5-8).

In Isaiah’s prophecies, we see three themes which find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus: *Salvation*, *judgment*, and *redemption*. The significance of the child born in the time of Isaiah was not the child himself, but the events that would come about in the child’s lifetime as a result of God’s presence (“God with us”). While the child was still young, God would provide *salvation* by ensuring that Israel and Syria were no longer a threat to Judah. But chapter eight’s prophecy demonstrates that salvation is not the only thing that comes with God’s presence—so does *judgment*. Within the child’s lifetime, God would enact judgment on Judah by allowing it to be overrun by the Assyrian empire. However, immediately following the description of Assyria subjugating Judah, God provides hope of *redemption* by reminding all nations (including Judah) that anyone who makes plans to conquer or threaten God’s people will ultimately come to nothing because “God is with us” (Is. 8:10). We see in this Old Testament context that *Immanuel* is a promise of God’s presence—a presence that meant salvation, judgment, and ultimately redemption for God’s people.

In the New Testament, Jesus’ designation as *Immanuel* brings the same implications of God’s presence. The angel of the Lord explicitly tells Joseph that Mary’s child would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21) and Paul describes the message of Jesus as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). In Jesus’ incarnation, we find God’s intent and power to *redeem* and *save* his creation. But Jesus said that whoever does not believe in him “is condemned already” (John 3:18) and is subject to *judgment* because “the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19). So in Jesus’ incarnation, we find his condemnation of those who continue to reject him.

Since Jesus ascended to his throne, it might be tempting to think that the days of “Immanuel” are over, but even now God’s presence persists (as do its implications)! The most significant symbol of God’s presence in Israelite history was the temple. Only Levites could be priests, only the high priest could enter the holiest place of the temple, and even he could only go once a year and only with blood. In the new covenant, we are told that Jesus is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16) and we are his priests (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Individually, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit whom we have from God (1 Cor. 6:19); and, collectively, we are being built together into a holy temple and dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:19-22). God is indeed still with us! Jesus is still our *Immanuel*, serving as our High Priest and connecting us to God (Heb. 7:23-25). In Jesus, *salvation* from sin and *redemption* to a restored relationship with God are freely available; but the way of Jesus is exclusive (John 14:6), and those who reject Jesus reject God and are subject to his *judgment*. Just like King Ahaz who received judgment for trusting Assyria instead of YWHH, if we choose to trust some *other way* than Jesus, *Immanuel* is a promise of judgment.

God became flesh. *Immanuel*. We can be confident in the salvation found in his sacrifice. *Immanuel*. He continues to be with us through his Spirit dwelling in us. *Immanuel*. God with us!

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