

The Unchanging Jesus is always Immanuel

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Date: 25 December 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone, and Merry Christmas to you at BEM Kuching. My name is Felix, a friend of Pastor Brian, and we train together at Sydney Missionary and Bible College.

Now, at the moment, I'm one of the pastors here in a church in Brisbane, Australia, called Cooper's Plains Evangelical, and it's a really great privilege that I can be opening up God's Word with you on this very special day, celebrating the coming of our Lord Jesus.

And I've been told that you guys have been continuing on a series called The Unchanging Jesus, and so today we'll be looking at how Jesus is our unchanging Emmanuel, our God with us.

Before we start, how about I pray? Father God, we thank you so much for your Word. We thank you for your Word, which explains to us, describes to us the coming of the Lord Jesus.

And so, Father, please help us, help us to understand what this truly means for us, and help us to respond rightly to the coming of your Son Jesus into our world.

[1 : 0 6] In his name we pray. Amen. Don't be afraid. Your God is with you, he tells the king. Now, the king pauses and he thinks about it, but he says nothing.

Trust in God, he says again. Ask him for a sign. But the king says, no, I will not put the Lord to the test.

Now, King Ahaz, the king of Judah, the king of God's people, he had a problem, and a pretty big one. Two of Judah's closest neighbors had formed a military alliance, and now he had two big armies right at his doorstep, ready to pounce, ready to destroy Jerusalem.

And Isaiah the prophet gives Ahaz the solution to this problem. Put your trust in God. Ask him for a sign that God is with you.

But the king refuses. He doesn't want to trust God and depend on God's word. He wants to trust in what's big and powerful in his own eyes.

[2 : 1 4] And so he decides to reach out to the foreign power, the nation of Assyria, for help instead. Now, in this story found in Isaiah chapter 7, God's response is a little bit surprising.

As Ahaz refuses to trust God and ask for a sign, God will go ahead and give Ahaz a sign anyway. He will give Ahaz a sign that he is with his people.

And this is the sign in Isaiah 7 verse 14. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel. A baby would be born of a virgin.

Now, this virgin might simply mean a young lady. But it could also mean someone who has never had sexual relations before. A baby would be born, which would be the sign that God was with his people.

And the name Emmanuel means exactly that. It means God with us. And so a child was born. And before the time it takes a child to grow up, both the nations of Aram and Ephraim, those are the nations that were threatening Judah, both of them were indeed defeated by the Assyrians.

[3 : 29] Just as God had promised, Judah would be delivered from her enemies. And so if you were living during that time, as these events unfolded, that provided comfort for God's people.

Would you look at that? God's sign came true. God was for us. He is protecting us from our enemy just as he said he would. God is, in fact, with us, his people.

But as comforting as this sign might have been back then, there's something rather unsatisfying about this prophecy. I mean, for starters, who exactly is this Emmanuel?

Who is this child? Isaiah doesn't tell us directly. And so some think that it might be Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, who eventually becomes the next king, and he does rule with righteousness.

Or some think that it's Isaiah's own child who he says is a sign for the people. But we just can't say for sure. Who is this child?

[4 : 29] That's the first thing. But the second thing, the second thing is this. If defeat over Israel's enemies or Judah's enemies was a sign that God was with them, the problem is, well, this peace doesn't last very long.

In fact, within the same prediction of Assyria coming to destroy Judah's enemies, this very same prediction goes on to say that Assyria, this foreign nation that Ahaz will put his trust in, Assyria will also bring trouble to Judah.

If this is all there is, God's presence is only evident when things go well, then this promise of God just seems a bit fleeting, doesn't it? I mean, for us today, it's a problem for us too.

If I told you that you can know God is with you, that God is for you, if things are going well for you, if your business is raking in profit, if you're living the happy life with your dream home and a dream job and your dream family, if I say God is up there showering you with earthly blessings and that's how you know that God is with you, then that's a rather unsatisfying answer, isn't it?

You don't have much assurance. You don't have much security that God is with you. Because we have all faced trouble and difficulty in our lives, haven't we? Many of us might be going through hardship right now.

[5 : 50] Does that mean that God is not with us? And I hope that you can already tell that the answer is no. Success and prosperity, these aren't the definitive signs that God is with us.

A quick glance over the history of God's people through the Old and the New Testament give us example after example of faithful men and women who suffered greatly because of the devotion to God.

And yet, it's clear from the pages of Scripture that God was with them. And so what's the answer? How can we truly know that God is with us?

Is God truly with us in the first place? Well, let's fast forward a few centuries from Isaiah and we get to our passage today. We're introduced to a young woman called Mary.

Mary, whom we'll be told is to be married to Joseph, a man who in the previous verses, we're told is from the line of David. But this Mary, before the wedding day, she's found to be pregnant.

[6 : 52] Now, Mary's husband does what you would expect him to do. The wedding is called off, right? Clearly, this young woman who had been pledged to be faithful to him alone, well, she must have been unfaithful, right?

There's no way he could commit himself to her after what she must have done. But as a testament to his character, he does so quietly as to not to publicly disgrace her. But just as he makes up his mind, he receives a message from God.

An angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream. Verse 20. Joseph, son of David, the angel says, 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. Mary hadn't been unfaithful.

She had done nothing wrong. She hadn't betrayed or sinned against you, Joseph. But it's through the Holy Spirit that Mary had become pregnant. Now, hearing all this, what does this all mean?

[7 : 59] I mean, just put yourself in Joseph's shoes here. Being told, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. Marrying someone who is evidently pregnant already, but to be told that she had not had any relations with another man before.

Conception through the Spirit of God. What on earth is going on here? Well, verse 22 tells us. Verse 22. 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 Emmanuel, which means God with us. See, this prophecy in Isaiah 7, which we looked at before, within the event of Ahaz's time, this was incomplete.

This was not satisfying, wasn't it? Because as significant as the birth of this boy was in King Ahaz's day, as crucial as it was that God's people were given a sign that God was with them, as true as the birth of this boy, whether it be Isaiah's son or Hezekiah, spelling the end of their enemies, that fulfillment, as true as it was, well, it was incomplete, wasn't it?

Because here, in Matthew chapter 1, with the announcement of this baby now growing inside young Mary, this prophecy takes on a far richer, far more complete meaning.

[9 : 22] Because now, not just any young woman is with child, it is now a virgin. In the fullest meaning of that word, a virgin is with child. Conception due to supernatural consequences, circumstances.

And if this sounds like fantasy, if you think, this just couldn't happen today, it doesn't fit with our scientific knowledge and understanding of how the world works, then I would say, yes, you're completely right.

Because it wasn't like it was ordinary back then either. Mary and Joseph, well, guess what? They knew how biology worked even back then. They knew how babies were conceived. The people who wrote this down, Matthew, the gospel writer, he wasn't stupid.

But Mary, Joseph, Matthew, and other eyewitnesses that recorded these events, they wrote it down because they had to. Because they saw, they experienced firsthand that this must have been a miracle.

It had to be something due to supernatural causes. A sign that God was at work. And as this passage tells us, it was a sign that God is with us.

[10 : 36] God with us. No longer some symbolic meaning, not simply that God is for us somehow, that God is out there working behind the scenes for his people. Yes, that's true.

That's all true, but it's so much more than that now. The fact that this baby was conceived through God's very spirit, it means that God himself is coming personally.

God is with us in a way that's completely inconceivable to us before. God would step into our world, not in just some symbolic way, but God would be with us physically, personally, as a baby.

God would condescend himself, not in the negative sense of the word as we use it today, but truly condescend down to our level. The God of the universe in all his might, all his glory, all his holiness and purity.

He would come down and take the form of one of us, a human, who is none of those things that I just mentioned. This limitless God steps into our messed up, unclean, unholy world, to be with us.

[11 : 47] And so for some of us here today, even as we've been Christians for some time maybe, maybe we just don't feel that God is particularly near us. God is up there somewhere.

Jesus is up there with the Father. God doesn't particularly feel with us right now. If this is you, can I ask you to focus on this picture that we have in our passage today?

God has already come as a baby. He actually walked among us. If you were there 2,000 years ago in history, in a particular place in Jerusalem, you could touch God with us.

You could hear God with us speaking. You could see with your very own eyes the love of God in person. Our God would walk among the poor and the outcasts, the sick and the oppressed.

He would speak to them face to face, teaching them through God's word. He would see their suffering and have compassion on them. He would reach out and touch those who were too unclean to even go near God's temple.

[12 : 53] He would touch and heal them. This isn't abstract. This isn't distant. This isn't just up there. This happened in real time and space.

This happened in the real person of Jesus. And of course, ultimately, this God with us, this Emmanuel, he saves us. Just as in Isaiah 7, how that is a sign of God's deliverance from their enemies, this Emmanuel in Mary's womb is not just a sign, but he himself is our salvation.

He himself is how Yahweh says, our salvation, our deliverance from the real threat of sin. Now, many of us know this already, right?

We know that Christianity is about Christ dying on the cross for our sins. It's not about us earning our way into heaven by doing good things. We know that Jesus saves us from God's wrath, the ultimate enemy that we all face, and freely gives us righteousness so that we can have perfect relationship with God.

But even as we know all that, I think it's easy for us to think of Jesus' work as simply some sort of distant transaction. The cross is some distant event that took place ages ago.

[14 : 13] On that cross, somehow my sin was placed upon Jesus, and Jesus' righteousness is given to me somehow. This sort of nice, clean trade. And as true as that might be on a theological level, that description just completely falls flat when it comes to understanding God's love for us, doesn't it?

God isn't someone who just waves his hand at a distance to grant us forgiveness. Because can you see this Emmanuel?

Our God who comes near. Can you see and feel his hands, which were pierced, physically pierced for our transgressions, taking on God's wrath in the most physical and brutal and most personal way?

Can you see, can you look at our God who suffered and died on the cross for us, taking on God's wrath so that we wouldn't have to? This is exactly who our God is.

Our God is Emmanuel. And so this Christmas, today, will you know that God is with us? If you're doubting God's love for you, if you're feeling that God is distant and unapproachable, then will you look at this picture of God coming down, taking the form of one of us as a baby, stepping into our world to be with us, to walk with us, and to save us in the most personal and painful way.

[15 : 46] This Christmas, will you remember, will you know that God is with us? Let me pray. Father in heaven, we thank you so much that you are with us.

And this isn't just some abstract thing now, but we can hold on to it. We can see this for ourselves because we know that you sent your son, Jesus, God in the flesh, as a baby, to walk among us and to ultimately save us.

Please help us know how much you love us. Please help us know and feel how much you are truly with us. And may we continue to trust in the one that came, in the one that brought us salvation.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Merry Christmas to you all. God bless you all. In Jesus' birth