

## Why Everyone Should Love the Name "Immanuel"

Isaiah 7:10-15 | Matthew 1:20-25

Mark Vroegop

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10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, 11 "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." 13 And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good (Isa 7:10-16).

20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us) (Matt 1:20-23).

"Immanuel" is one of the few well-known names in the Bible. In large part this is because Matthew gives us the meaning of the name in the first chapter of his gospel. Apparently, he thought the meaning was important enough that it deserved some kind of explanation. Matthew wanted his readers to know that this name – Immanuel – has some pretty significant meaning attached to it. Thus he says, "which means, God with us" in Matthew 1:23.

Several months ago in our study of Matthew I came across this explanation ("which means, God with us") by Matthew, and I found it very interesting. Like you, I was very familiar with the name Immanuel and even its technical meaning. But I was not familiar with the connection between Matthew's use of it and the Old Testament context. I looked into it enough to learn two things: 1) There was more to the story than what I thought, and 2) it was more complicated than what I had time for. So I deferred a full inquiry until now.

What I discovered was a rich treasure-trove of information and application. I came to see that the simple name Immanuel is loaded with meaning, and I began to appreciate Matthew's quotation of it in a whole new way.

I love it when I am able to learn about something familiar in such a way that it makes the common come to life in whole new way. And as I've looked at the concept of Immanuel, I've come to love it. In fact, I think that everyone should love the name Immanuel – especially this time of year.

So my aim for our time in the Word today is to show you the background, connection, and the significance of this beautiful name.

### **Not All Prophecy is the Same**

The first thing that you have to understand about this name is its connection to prophetic fulfillment. That is important because Matthew 1:22 says, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet..."

Now when I say the word prophecy, most of us think of it in a particular category: prediction. We think of those instances in the Bible when something is described as going to happen in the future. For example, we know that Micah 5:2 predicted that the Messiah would be born in the Bethlehem. Even the religious rulers knew this. Daniel would be another great example of this. Under divine influence, he was able to predict the future (Daniel 2, 4, 7 and 8).

However, much of the New Testament is filled with a different kind of prophecy, a type that is more related to the unfolding plan of God observed in hindsight. Don't get me wrong, prediction was certainly there, but it wasn't clear until the fulfillment happened. In this way, the Old Testament gives us many more types than specifically understood predictions.<sup>1</sup> The book of Matthew is filled with this kind of New Testament fulfillment passages as Matthew looks back and clearly sees fulfillment of something that wasn't entirely clear in the Old Testament (e.g., Matthew 1:18, 3:2, 4:14-16, 27:9).

It is important for you to understand New Testament fulfillment passages in light of the differences of prophecy that is predictive and prophesy that is typological. Now the main reason for the distinction is that predictive can only have one fulfillment where typological prophecy can have immediate events and future events in mind. In other words, the prophecy could be seen to be partially or fully fulfilled in the Old Testament but the full ramifications of it are not fully realized. Matthew uses this kind of prophecy-fulfillment model frequently.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Immanuel Connection**

I tell you all of this because you need to understand this to fully appreciate the connection between Matthew 1 and Isaiah 7. Now there are a number of views on the connection, but it

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<sup>1</sup> Fredrick Bruner, [The Christbook – Matthew 1-12](#), (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 33

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent and enlightening article on this see Craig Blomberg – "Interpreting the Old Testament Prophetic Literature in Matthew: Double Fulfillment" <http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/articles/mattclb.htm>

seems clear to me that Matthew looks back at Isaiah 7, and he sees a typological fulfillment text. In other words, he sees something that happened in Israel's history as a harbinger of Christ's coming. There is an immediate fulfillment in Isaiah, but there is more to come. The events of Isaiah 7 are double fulfillment, and Matthew captures that in regards to the birth of Jesus.

So with historical hindsight Matthew can identify the meaning clearly. And I think that it is for this reason that he translates the name Immanuel ("God with us") for his readers. He doesn't want them to miss the connection that is tucked into the meaning of the name. The meaning of names is really important in Isaiah. At least two of his sons are mentioned and their names are important: (7:3) – Shear-jashub = a remnant will return and (8:1) – Maher-shalal-hash-baz = the spoil speeds, the prey hastens. Both have deep meaning.

My fascination with this text comes from the fact that something is happening in Isaiah's day that Matthew sees as fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, and he ties it to the name Immanuel – God with us. What is the power of this name given in both contexts?

### **Ahaz: Faith-less Fear**

The promise of Immanuel in Isaiah 7 comes at a very tumultuous time in Israel's history. On a global scale, the nation of Assyria, under the rule of Tiglath-pileser III, had expanded its control of what we now call the Middle East. Our story takes place when the nation of Israel is divided two parts: Judah to the south ruled by King Ahaz, and Israel to the north ruled by King Pekah. Additionally, just to the north of Israel was the nation of Syria, ruled by King Rezin. Now the big threat was Assyria because it had advanced to the northern border of Syria. In order to protect themselves from the Assyrian threat, Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel formed an alliance. Further, they wanted to Ahaz, King of Judah, to join them in their combined resistance against Assyria.

Ahaz was in the line of David, but he was not a good king. Here is how 2 Kings 16 describes him:

2 Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God, as his father David had done, 3 but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. 4 And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree (2 Kings 16:2-4).

This wicked and godless king was being threatened by the kings of Syria and Israel that if he didn't join their alliance, they would march on Jerusalem and take the nation of Judah by force. Isaiah 7:2 tells us that the people and King Ahaz were filled with fear: "When the house of

David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."

Therefore, God sends Isaiah and his son whose name means "a remnant will return" to meet Ahaz at the conduit of the upper pool. The King was probably inspecting the water supply in light of a coming siege. Here is what happens:

3 And the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. 4 And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah. 5 Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, 6 "Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it," 7 thus says the Lord God: "It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. 8 For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. (Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken to pieces so that it will no longer be a people.) 9 "And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all." (Isaiah 7:3-9)

Here's a summary: "Ahaz, don't fear and don't be afraid because the plans of Syria and Israel are going to fail. Be firm in your faith in God's help."

The problem is that Ahaz has probably already decided what he is going to do. He has determined to make an end-run around Syria and Israel and attempted to buy off Assyria. 2 Kings 17:8 tells us that eventually Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the temple and in the royal palace, and he sent it as a present to the King of Assyria. Ahaz requested to be the servant of Assyria.

God knows Ahaz's weak heart, and he tells Isaiah that Ahaz should request a sign from God (7:11). But Ahaz responds with a spiritual-sounding answer (v 12): "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." Why did he respond that way? Ahaz would rather trust in his own plans, his own political savvy, and his own brokering to figure a way out of this. It's almost as if he says, "Isaiah, I don't need a sign – I've got a plan." But he couches it in spiritual language. Ahaz is a self-confident fool who is using religious language to cover his tracks.

And in response to his self-confidence Isaiah tells him about a coming child whose name is loaded with meaning:

14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted (Isa 7:14-16).

The promise here is that a child will be born and before he grows up to distinguish between good and evil, the threat of the two northern kingdoms will be conquered.

Now there is a great deal of controversy over the Hebrew word *almah* which is translated here as virgin. The word likely means a young woman who is not married at the time, will be soon marry and will bear a son. Isaiah is not implying a virgin birth is going to happen in Ahaz's lifetime, nor is he saying that the child will be divine.

We are not sure who the young woman is. Nor are we sure as to who the child is. But the prophetic word is not so much about the young woman or the child. The real focal point of Isaiah's prophecy is about the connection between the birth of this child and the promise of "God with Us." Isaiah 7 was not meant to be a proof-text for a prophecy regarding the virgin birth. Rather it is a rebuke to Ahaz regarding his faith-less fear and his self-confident, foolish plans. He cannot solve his own problems. God is the one who will intervene in this national crisis and preserve his people.

"Immanuel" means that God is on your side. He will intervene. God is among us. Intervention is coming. God is going to vindicate his people. Ahaz would do much better if he would stop putting his faith in an earthly nation and start trusting God.

### **Joseph: Believing God**

Now let's go to the New Testament. Fast forward over 700 years to another man in crisis. The threat for him is not a nation but humiliation. Joseph has discovered that his wife-to-be, Mary, is pregnant, and he knows that he is not the father. Matthew tells us (1:19) that he was "unwilling to put her to shame" and that he was going to "divorce her quietly."

God intervenes by sending an angel to Joseph in a dream: "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:20). He learns in that moment that the child in her womb was divinely conceived. The child is the son of God! Here is an explanation from God that seems impossible. But there is more. His name carries enormous significance.

"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:20-21). Here we learn about the mission of God behind this miraculous birth! This child will be the long awaited Messiah, the chosen one, the anointed one, the Christ. God will use this baby to save his people from the transgressions that separate them from God. Everything that is foreshadowed in the Old Testament will have its fulfillment in him.

God is going to save his people once again. But this time he will not save them just from the looming power of an evil empire or the conquest of a foreign power. This time God's mission is to save his people from the real foe in life. Underneath all conflict, beneath all wars, at the

core of all crimes and injustices, and the cause of all death is the ultimate enemy: sin. It destroys, separates, tarnishes, kills and damns. But the son named Jesus will change all of that. His name means "Jehovah saves." And his birth announces that God's mission of deliverance has come to earth.

How is this connected to Isaiah 7? A crisis, a virgin, a child, and promised deliverance are all here. And when Matthew considers all of this, he can't help but see the ultimate fulfillment accomplished through Jesus. The coming of a child, the birth through a virgin, and the presence of God's deliverance all take on new meaning. Thus Matthew says, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)" (Matt 1:22-23).

Immanuel means God with us! And Matthew wants us to see that like in the days of Ahaz, God is intervening on behalf of his people. He is gloriously and miraculously making a way to deal with the most pressing threat on our lives. The birth of this child announces the glorious news that God is **with** us!

### **Real Hope Comes From God's Help**

I began my study of the name Immanuel with a question: What is the connection between Isaiah 7 and Matthew 1? Here it is: **Immanuel is a name that tells us that real hope comes from God's help.** "God with us" is a clear message that real hope comes from God's help. Any other kind of help is not hopeful.

Isaiah 7 and Matthew 1 show us this truth in unique ways. Ahaz fails to trust. Joseph believes. The threat to Ahaz is foreign invaders. The real threat in Matthew is made clear: our sin. And the link between these two stories is the beautiful message that "God is with us", announced through the birth of two children.

As I weave these two stories together, and as I look at the whole of the New Testament some summary thoughts come to mind:

#### **1. My plans can be treason against God (Isaiah 64:6)**

I have no ability to change my situation on my own. In fact, my attempts to create any plans to self-justify not only do not work; they are subtle or defiant attempts to make an end-run around God. Sin by definition is my attempt to be my own God, set my own rules, and live by what I want.

#### **2. There is no real deliverance without God (Psalm 18:1-3)**

Over and over we see the Bible clearly communicating one significant truth – God is our ultimate deliverer. We are part of his plan, his drama, his story, and offering him glory. We are helpless people on our own. Our need is so great, the consequences so overwhelming, and our power so limited that God is only hope. The story of salvation is God helping us.

### **3. The joy of eternal life is “God with us” (Revelation 21:3)**

What is the ultimate aim in life? Listen! “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev 21:3).

The joy of heaven is the nearness of God!

### **4. The personal embodiment of hope and help is Jesus (John 1:14 & 16)**

Here is the most important truth that you will hear today, something that depending on what you do with it determines your eternal destiny. Real hope and help comes through Jesus. He is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise regarding “God with Us.”

Everyone should love the name Immanuel because it announces that hope and help have come. They have come through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Immanuel means God with us, that real hope comes from God’s help. Or let me say it a little differently: Real hope comes from God’s help through Jesus.

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