

# What Kind of News is “God with Us”?

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by David Schrock

Immanuel. God with us. This is good news, right?

For the pure in heart and the righteous sufferer, it is. But for the rest of us, the news that a holy God has come to visit sinful humanity the news should be received with trembling.

In actuality, we often jump to the good news of Immanuel without giving proper attention to its antecedent bad news. As a result, we blunt the mercy of the gospel and the magnitude of our praise.

It is frightful to consider: the coming of a holy God does not mean life for impure rebels but death. Just ask Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-20), Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:1-23), or Old Testament Israel. If our sin prevents us from dwelling on God’s holy hill (Psalm 15:1-5), how much more should “God with us” strike us with fear—fear, until we know how God turned bad news into good by sending “Jesus” as our Immanuel.

## Immanuel as Bad News

In the Old Testament, the promise of “God with us” could be deadly. When God promised a virgin shall conceive and bear a son (Isaiah 7:14), it was first “fulfilled” at a time when God’s presence meant divine judgment. Speaking of the Northern tribes, Isaiah records the approach of Yahweh to his rebellious people. In Isaiah 8:5-8, Yahweh warns of water sweeping over Israel, threatening the nation of Judah too. Though God’s people have God with them (Immanuel), their sin disqualified them from his blessing.

Verses 9-10 continue the theme of judgment. Turning to the nations (“Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered . . . you far countries,” v. 9), the Lord scoffs at the concerted effort to oppose him. While his people Israel receive judgment for their sin, so will the nations. God is with Israel (v. 10) and he is working with them to bring about a son who will save his remnant.

In historical context, “God with us” was bad news when as long as sin remained. Though committed to doing his chosen people good, Yahweh’s history with Israel (and the nations) demonstrates the way sin undermines God’s good plans and makes “God with us” bad news.

Fortunately, Isaiah’s prophecy moves from judgment to salvation, from punishment to pardon. In Isaiah 9 the son of 7:14 is explained to be a righteous son of David who would bring light into the darkness (Isaiah 9:1-2) and peace to the earth (Isaiah 9:6-7). The rest of the Isaiah’s “Gospel” explains how this peace would be procured—through the suffering servant and his atoning sacrifice (Isaiah 53:4-6). In this way, the bad news for ancient Israel becomes good news for the world (Israel and the nations) when God sent Immanuel into the world under the name Jesus.

## Immanuel as Good News

In Matthew’s Gospel it is striking to see how he explains the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. In Matthew 1:18-21 the selected narrative explains the actions of Isaiah 7. Quoting the promise in Matthew 1:23, Matthew sets up the verse saying: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord

had spoken by the prophet" (Matthew 1:22). The "all this" points to the three actions of Isaiah 7 (conceiving, bearing, calling) which are each given a narrative explanation in verses 18–21.

In verse 18 the son is conceived in Mary's womb by the holy power of the Spirit. In verses 19–20 God's angelic revelation to Joseph explains how this son of David would become the adoptive father of David. Joseph's Davidic heritage is highlighted to stress the Davidic identity of Mary's son. Then the name of the son is given: "You shall call his name *Jesus*, for he will save his people from their sins."

This name is curious because it doesn't exactly match the prophecy. Isaiah 7 says his name would be *Immanuel*, but literally speaking, that doesn't happen. His name is *Yeshua*, or "Yah(weh) saves." Why the discrepancy?

The answer is found in what we've already seen: "God with us" is only good news *if* God comes to atone for sin. Had Mary's son been called "Immanuel," it would have left a question mark behind "God with us." The name Jesus puts an exclamation point. As verse 21 says, "You shall call his name Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins.*"

## **God *with* us and God *for* us**

Yes, Jesus is "God with us." But he is more than that. He is "God for us."

Had Jesus come and taken the name "Immanuel" Matthew's fulfillment formula might have been more exact, but it would have been ambiguous. Sons and daughters of Israel would have asked: Is God bringing salvation or judgment?

By taking the name Jesus, God gave the answer of his people's prayers. What God had promised long ago was now fulfilled in the birth of a virgin's son. Just as Isaiah's Gospel expounded the promise of Isaiah 7:14, so Matthew's Gospel outlines how Jesus' birth would bring salvation from Israel to the nations.

Jesus would grow up to be the Suffering Servant who would give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28); he would shed his blood to ratify a new covenant thus securing forgiveness for his people (Matthew 26:28); and he would gather disciples from every nation on the earth (Matthew 28:19), uniting them in his church (Matthew 16:18) so that he could dwell with us forever (Matthew 28:20). In this way Jesus is God with us (Immanuel) because he came to give his life *for us* (Jesus).

## **Worshiping Christ at Christmas**

At Christmas this year, let us not forget who Jesus is and what he came to do. To increase opportunities to worship Christ at Christmas, we will meet three additional times during December. Come join us on one or both of these nights.

- Family Gathering – Sunday December 13 at 6:00pm
- Christmas Eve Service – Thursday, December 24 at 6:00pm
- Christmas Eve Service – Thursday, December 24 at 11:00pm

For His Glory and your joy, Pastor David