

# Immanuel

*Matthew 1:18-23*

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**Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. <sup>20</sup> But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: <sup>23</sup> “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us” (Matthew 1:18-23).**

## **Introduction**

Somehow a panel discussion popped up in my feed which included a man I’d never heard of, Martin Iles, who is part of a Christian lobby in Australia. He was apparently called upon to explain the behavior of a famous Australian rugby player, Israel Folau, who posted what some thought to be inflammatory statements about the need for people to repent from a sinful life and call upon Christ. I never saw his posts but apparently, he was not unclear that heaven and hell were hanging in the balance. As far as I could tell, he was simply proclaiming basic, biblical Christianity.

Naturally, the word ‘hatred’ came up by the host and other members of the panel who did not side of Folau or Iles. Somehow they concluded that to warn others about the prospect of hell is an insult, synonymous with telling somebody to go to hell. One would think that even a worldly person, who denies the existence of God,

has enough sense to realize that warning someone against the prospect of hell is an act of love.

The worldly person might view the Christian as delusional for believing in God and heaven and hell (not granting the legitimacy of such a view). But if I truly believe in hell, it seems like everyone should recognize that it is an act of love on my part to help someone else avoid it.

But this interview, like so many others like it, contained an irony. The language, both bodily and verbally, unveiled that there was, to be sure, hatred on the stage and in the audience. While this fellow, Martin Iles, gave a loving, sensible explanation of biblical Christianity, the seething, almost venomous, disdain by which he was surrounded became thick and hot.

All this to say, that the whole idea of “**God with us**” is not something the natural man is terribly excited about. I am not opening with this that we might corner up in some culture of victimhood. I am opening with this that we might understand the environment. It is not always friendly. The people on that panel did not want God in their midst.

## **Two Sides of Immanuel**

This very popular passage culminates with a quote from Isaiah 7:14 – **Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).** The translation of Immanuel is given in the text itself – God with us. It is on our Christmas posters, cards, and in our songs. It is a one-word explanation of the deity of Christ and the presence of God in our midst. There remains only one other place in all of Scripture where we read the word Immanuel, the next chapter of Isaiah.

In Isaiah 8:5-8 is a passage of God judging Syria and Israel by the vicious king of Assyria. It doesn't have the warm feel we are generally looking for in our Christmas cards. They desired the sanctuary of powerful human kings. They refused the gentle waters of Shiloah so the raging rivers of the worldly kings they longed for became their destruction. The loving presence of God among the

faithful Israelites would include the wrathful presence of God among the unfaithful.

**“God with us”** is not always a comfortable situation.

### **Simeon’s Prophecy**

There is another side of Christmas we seldom examine. We see it in the words of Simeon.

**And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this *Child* is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against <sup>35</sup> (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:33, 34).**

Jesus was destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel. The presence of Christ in the world is the presence of both redemption and judgment. Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16).

The Hebrew origin of Siloam is Shiloh. We see Siloam mentioned on two occasions in the New Testament, one of a healing pool (John 9:7) and the other of a destructive falling tower (Luke 13:4, 5).

Immanuel means God with us. But is this what we truly desire? The presence of God can be either great or terrible.

**Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God (Romans 11:22).**

There are times when my children aren’t excited about my presence – when they’ve done something wrong. But there are other times when they run to me – when they’re afraid or hurt.

The presence of God with us can either be a blessing or a curse. Because when we’ve done something wrong (as all of us have) we

have not merely violated some faceless, nameless set of ethics wafting through the universe designed to protect people; we have offended the person from whom the ethics, or law, comes, we have offended the protector – we call this person God. If I make rules in my house designed to protect my children, the person who violates those rules both endangers my children and offends me. And when I get home, the offender will contend with me.

The presence of God can either be a blessing or a curse. The Ark of the Covenant caused the Philistines to have tumors (1 Samuel 5). They had to remove it. The blockbuster, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, was not far off in the last scene. The Nazi's thought the Ark would grant them the power to defeat any adversary, instead it consumed them.

But that leaves us with our final quandary. If all have sinned, how can Immanuel be good news for us? I do not bring up this Isaiah 8:8 example of Immanuel to be the instrument of bad news. I don't wish to turn Christmas glee into Christmas flee. After all, John writes, **"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"** (John 3:17).

In briefly examining the judgment of God, we more deeply plumb the depths of Christmas. Immanuel is not like me coming home to my children. The incarnation is not a matter of finding out who is naughty and who is nice. The Word becoming flesh was not a reconnaissance mission for God fully knows that **"there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin"** (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

## **Pronouncing and Taking Judgment**

Immanuel is the presence of God, not merely in pronouncing a judgment, but in taking a judgment. God the Son became a man to rescue sinners from our own depraved hearts and the attending judgment. Immanuel accomplished this work of redemption by taking upon Himself the sin and judgment that belonged to humanity. And that redemption becomes ours through the instrument of faith. To believe that His victory is your victory.

Those He has rescued will be invited to His table.

