

Immanuel: The Most Wonderful Word in the World!

“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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 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).

- Matthew 1:20-23, ESV

Christmas is said to be “the most wonderful time of the year,” and many people would say that it is, while others would say it’s definitely not. I’ll confess that I’ve always loved Christmas. I’m a sucker for all of it – the trees, the lights, the music, the cookies, and the movies and TV specials. I love the Christmas Eve candlelight worship and the Christmas morning sleepy-eyed excitement of opening presents and, then, for us, travelling to be with family and see what everyone else got, eat a delicious dinner together, and get back home late at night and utterly exhausted stuffed, and satisfied.

But during the “Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” it can be easy to miss the Most Wonderful News of all. In the midst of the good, the best can be too easily overlooked. And even in the Most Wonderful News, the true Christmas story of the birth of Baby Jesus, we can miss the heart of this most important event. We can focus on shepherds and angels, on wise men and King Herod, on Mary and Joseph, and even on the purity, innocence and wonder of Baby Jesus Himself and miss what is truly wonderful about this wonderful child and His birth into our world.

So, during this Most Wonderful Time of the Year, I want to take a few minutes to focus our attention very clearly on a single word, on The Most Wonderful Word in the World. This single word is the very heart of Christmas; it is the one-word summary of the wonder and meaning of Christmas, but even more, it is a one-word summary of the entire Grand Story of what God is doing in the world. It is the Gospel in One Word, all of Redemptive History summed up in four syllables, eight letters – Immanuel.

To understand why this one word is so important, we have to understand why God created the world, why He made people in His image, what the world was like before sin entered to corrupt everything, how sin altered the very fabric of reality in the most profound way, and how God has set about to redeem and restore what sin has caused to be corrupted and lost.

Why did God create the world? It wasn’t, as poet James Weldon Johnson has famously said –

AND God stepped out on space,

And He looked around and said,

“I’m lonely—

I’ll make me a world.”

No, it wasn’t because God was lonely, but it was because God is love. God is Triune – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – three persons living in the absolutely indescribably intimacy of one being, one God. We

cannot even begin to grasp the depth, strength, and power of the love God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for one another, and it was out of the overflow of this love that God created the world.

God desired to extend His love to His creation, and of all of His creation, He made human beings in His image, created to reflect His character and to enjoy fellowship with Him. God said, “Let us make man in our image.” And while God spoke everything else into being, He shaped Adam with His own hands and breathed life into him – so Adam became a “living soul,” something said of nothing else in all Creation.

God created Adam to understand and experience deep intimacy, with God Himself and with the one uniquely created for Adam, from a rib taken from his side. Out of all creation, Adam could look at Eve and say “*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!*” And God declared at the first wedding, “*For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*”

So, the two-become-one, Adam and Eve, enjoyed fellowship with the Three-in-One God, as the Lord God walked with them in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day. This intimacy of fellowship with one another and with the Lord was destroyed when Adam and Eve chose to sin against God. Immediately after they sinned, they hid from God – no longer desiring to be with Him, but in shame hiding from Him. Then, when God called them out to give account for their actions, they blamed one another. From loving intimacy to shameful hiding and angry blaming, the heart of God’s good creation was broken by sin, and that sin brought alienation.

Sinful humanity is triply alienated – alienated first of all from fellowship with God, alienated from true intimacy with one another, and then even alienated from ourselves in our understanding of who we are, why we were created, and what we most deeply need. To use the Bible’s language, sin brings death, and death means separation – separation from God and from all of His good purposes for us as His image-bearers.

But even as God brought a deserved condemnation and a necessary expulsion to Adam and Eve, expelling them from Eden and thus banishing them from His holy presence, He blessed them with a promise and a provision. The promise came in the form of a curse pronounced on the serpent, the Great Deceiver, that the Seed of the Woman would come and crush the head of the serpent, even as the serpent crushed the heel of the Woman’s Seed. Speaking specifically of a seed of a woman is very unusual language, as seed usually refers to the offspring of a man – as in the covenant promises to Abraham and David given later in the Bible – and sometimes to the offspring of a man and a woman, but never to just the offspring of a woman, except in this promise-curse, the first faint echo of the Good News of Christmas, spoken in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:15.

So, the promise was for One born of a woman alone who would be the Serpent Crushing Deliverer of God’s people. Then, the provision God gave was animal skins for clothing, a covering for their shameful nakedness, a covering that allowed them to walk without shame but that required the shedding of blood, the death of innocent animals.

As Cain and Abel brought their first worship offerings to God in Genesis 4, we’re told that Abel’s offering pleased the Lord while Cain’s did not. Abel brought an offering in faith, the firstborn of his flock, and their fat portions through the shedding of their blood, the giving of their life. Cain brought the Lord just some of the produce from his harvest – no faith, no first-fruits, no shedding of blood. And so, from the very beginning, the worship of God was marked by offering sacrifices in faith.

But why offer sacrifices at all? Because the pattern for worship God accepted as pleasing to Him acknowledged three things:

1. We are separated from God.
2. We owe God a great debt.
3. A great sacrificial price must be paid to satisfy that debt and reconcile us to God.

This separation and indebtedness were caused by sin, and the worship of God by His people would be marked by this separation and this debt, through sacrifice, for generation upon generation.

When God gave His Law to His people through Moses, thousands of years after the Fall into sin in the Garden of Eden, at the heart of the life of the nation of Israel and her worship of God was a complex system of sacrificial worship and a constant reminder of their separation from God.

God gave His people directions for a Tabernacle, which they used for nearly 500 years, and then later Solomon built the Temple as a permanent version of the Tabernacle, and God's people worshipped Him through the that Temple for 1,000 years. At the center of the Tabernacle and Temple for 1,500 years stood the Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place, which represented the very presence of God on earth. The Holy of Holies held the Ark of the Covenant and was separated from the priests and the people by a thick curtain, physically representing the separation sin brought between God and His people.

Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and only once per year on the Day of Atonement, and only bringing the blood of the spotless sacrifice to sprinkle on the Mercy Seat, symbolically making atonement for the sins of the people. This had to be repeated year after year for 1,500 years because no real satisfaction had been made and the curtain remained heavily in place, separating God from His people, generation after generation.

In addition to this worship system, God also gave His people a precious covenant promise, repeated many times, that He would remove the barrier between them, change their hearts, cleanse them of their sin, and be their God forever.

The heart of this covenant promise is repeated throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, in God's most precious promise, that He would be with us as our God and take us to Himself as His people:

- God speaks first to Abraham in Genesis 17:8: "And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and ***I will be their God.***" --Genesis 17:8, ESV
- Then God speaks through Moses to His people generations later: "***I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God.***" –Exodus 6:7, ESV

Then, many generations later, God spoke through the Prophets:

- 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people.' – Jeremiah 7:23, ESV

- “Their prince shall be one of themselves;
their ruler shall come out from their midst;
I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me,
for who would dare of himself to approach me?
declares the LORD.
And you shall be my people,
and I will be your God.” – Jeremiah 30:21-22, ESV
- And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. – Ezekiel 36:26-28, ESV

What is clear throughout this precious covenant promise is that God’s people remained separated from Him, and that He was still promising to make things right and to reconcile them to Himself, so they might be with Him and He might be with them forever.

Finally, after so many centuries and generations of worshipping and waiting in hope, God’s people received what they most needed, in the precious gift of the Seed of the Woman, born of a Virgin, sent to crush the head of the serpent by Himself being wounded, born to repay the debt we owe at the cost of His very precious and priceless life, the One born as Immanuel, God with us, and Jesus our Salvation.

His birth name, Jesus, tells us why He came, to be our Savior, but His prophetic name, taken from Isaiah 7:14, tells why He came to save us. He came to bring us to God and to bring God to us, to pay the debt, bridge the gap, bring everlasting reconciliation – to be God with us.

Through His sinless life, He fulfilled what God requires of us – perfect obedience. Through His death in our place on the cross, He paid what we owe, suffered what we deserve, satisfied divine justice, and crushed the head of the serpent. That is why, as Jesus drew His last breath and committed His Spirit to the hands of His Father, the thick veil in the Temple – the separation between the Holy of Holies and the people – was torn in two from top to bottom. And by His resurrection from the dead, He overthrew death and brought eternal life to light for all of those who belong to Him by faith, all who trust in Him for salvation.

Because of Jesus, the words of Romans 8 are now true:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. . . What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 8:1, 31-39

And because of Immanuel, the end of the story for all of God’s people is not one of eternal separation, but of eternal reconciliation, fellowship and life!

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ 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. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. – Revelation 21:1-6, ESV

All because of Immanuel – God with us – the Word made Flesh, Salvation come from heaven to earth. Do you know Him? Have you received the greatest Christmas present? Do you truly understand the meaning of the Most Wonderful Word in the World?