



ADVENT  
**Emmanuel**  
**Matthew 1:21-23**

November 27, 2011  
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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).

## Introduction

Today we cross the threshold into the season of Advent. This is the first of four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day, when we celebrate the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. Advent is a special season for the people of God, because it provides us with an opportunity to reflect on what it means when we say that God became man by taking on human flesh.

The incarnation is a glorious and multifaceted truth, like a diamond whose luster is practically blinding in its brilliance. What we want to do over the next several weeks leading up to Christmas day is take up this precious jewel of the incarnation, and look at it from several different angles to capture as much of the glory of what it means that God is in the flesh. We have five messages, beginning with today's and going through Christmas Eve, and I would like for us to reflect upon who this Christ is by considering the five titles given to Jesus in the classic Advent Hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” They're not the usual titles for Christ, like Son of God, or Savior of the World. Instead, they're unusual, like Rod of Jesse, Dayspring, Desire of Nations, or Key of David.

One of the unique features of the Advent Hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” is the presence of a two voices in the hymn.<sup>1</sup> There is the lead voice, and this is the voice of anticipation, the voice of longing, the voice we hear at the beginning of each of the five stanzas, the voice that repeatedly prays: “O come, O come, Immanuel.”

But there is also a second voice, call it the voice of faith or the voice of revelation; this is the voice of the one who sees with the eyes of faith that the Christ has indeed come, and so says with the voice of faith in response, “Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”

The aim of this message, and each in this series, is to stir-up both of these responses in your heart: both longing for God's advent and rejoicing in God's advent. The application of this

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<sup>1</sup> So Frank Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live: Their Meaning & Message*, pp. 18-19.

advent series is, then, you might say, a *heart-application*: that you would go away with a heightened sense of longing and rejoicing, perhaps praying more fervently, “O come, O come,” but also believing more enthusiastically, “Rejoice! Rejoice!”

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we begin with the first title from the first stanza: *Emmanuel*. “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appears.” Emmanuel, it literally means, God with us. This is why God became man—so that God might be with us; this is the purpose of Christmas; this is the reason for the incarnation. This is one of the great themes of the Bible. You might even say that it is the *central* theme of the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, we watch the progressive unfolding of how it is that the Creator God can also be Immanuel, God with us.

### **What Humanity Forfeited at the Fall**

God with us was the original design of creation. But we forfeited it at the Fall. When Adam and Eve rejected God’s rule and sought to establish their own, they squandered their communion with God. They turned their back on Immanuel. And, tragically, their perfect fellowship with God was replaced by the dreadful fear of God. “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the morning, and the man and his wife *hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God* among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8).

Whenever there is a lack of true fellowship with God, there can only be the dreadful fear of God. Fear of God always comes as a result of a lack of fellowship with God. If you do not have fellowship with God, you will only fear him, like a child who cowers in the presence of a stranger.

But the loss of fellowship was not all that was lost. They were barred from access to God’s presence. Adam and Eve were ejected out of the garden, exiled and estranged from God, with the way back to the garden blocked. The language is strong: “He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24).

### **What Was Anticipated in Ancient Times**

Yet no sooner did Adam and Eve fall into sin than God began his own full-scale recovery operation. Our gracious God was intent on restoring by his grace what humanity has squandered by our rebellion.

God began his recovery operation in ancient times with an ancient people: first, with Abraham, and then with the Jewish nation, Israel. And over the course of some fifteen-hundred years, the Jewish people received anticipations of Immanuel, God with us. First, in the *Tabernacle*, that portable tent the ancient Israelites carried with them during their wilderness wandering, where “the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exodus 33:11). Then, in the *Temple*, which David’s son, King Solomon, built as a permanent dwelling place for God, made by human hands yet set apart by God when he said to King Solomon, “I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever” (1 Kings 9:3). But also, along the way, in a thousand different *tokens* (or signs) of God’s ongoing commitment to Israel, like the one given to King Ahaz by the prophet Isaiah in the midst of a desperate time for the people of God, when he was given a sign of reassurance of God’s

presence with them and for them: “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

The Tabernacle, the Temple, and these tokens of God’s presence with his people; they were all very real, and yet they were all very partial as well. They were but anticipations of God with us, not the full manifestation of Immanuel. And so they left the ancient Israelite with the painful realization that there must be something more, like being served a salad with no entree. It has been said of the Old Testament that it is a book of “unfulfilled promises, unexplained ceremonies, and unsatisfied longings.”<sup>2</sup> That’s exactly right, which is why the ancient Israelites cry out in song: “O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appears.”

### **What Was Recovered With the Advent of Jesus Christ**

It took no less than four hundred years for that prayer to be answered; roughly four centuries from Israel’s last prophet to the advent of God’s Son. That’s a rather long time to wait, to live with unfulfilled expectation.

Did you hear about Dev Shapiro, that Black Friday legend? He spent all last week camped out on the sidewalk near the entrance to the Best Buy near his home in Plano, Texas. He was eagerly anticipating getting a good deal on the new TV for his parents, and a Blue-Ray player and a GPS device. A peculiar modern parable of people waiting in anticipation, longing and expectation.

Try to imagine, then, the raised eyebrows when the gospel writer John boldly declares that the four-hundred year wait is over, because the word has become flesh and (literally) “tabernacled among us” (John 1:14). Immanuel is here, God with us, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. “He is the image of the invisible God. . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19). “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3). He was “born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7) and took on human flesh, not like you or I might put on a jacket or a coat, but as one who in his divine nature fully embraced and joined himself to human nature. With his characteristic clarity and wit, C. S. Lewis helps us get our heads around what the incarnation means:

The Second person in God, the Son, became human Himself: was born into the world as an actual man—a real man of a particular height, with hair of a particular colour, speaking a particular language, weighing so many stone. The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a foetus inside a Woman’s body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.<sup>3</sup>

What was lost through the Fall, and only anticipated in ancient times, has now been recovered by Jesus Christ, who is himself God with us. He truly fulfilled the words of the

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Ray Ortlund, *Isaiah*, p. 462.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 140.

prophet Isaiah, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear and son, and they shall call his name, Immanuel,’ (which means, God with us)” (Matthew 1:22-23).

Yet notice how the incarnate Son of God was not given the name Immanuel at his birth. Instead, he was given the name Jesus. Literally, *Jeshua*, meaning, not ‘God with us,” but “the Lord saves.” Jesus’ father, Joseph, was told of his wife, Mary, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). This is, of course, not the upsetting of prophecy, but the ultimate fulfillment of prophecy. Immanuel, God with us, is none other than *Jesus*, the one who alone saves us from our sins. Because until our sins are dealt with, there’s no God with us; we can’t be with God, and God can’t be with us. God must first die for us in order to then be with us—and us with him.

### **What We Can Now Experience by the Spirit**

So you see, then, that God with us is *God for us*—in the person and work of Christ. Because the Son of God has appeared in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, dying in our place on the cross, delivering us from our sins through the shedding of his blood, rising again on the third day, everyone who trusts in this Jesus can now experience God with us.

But God with us is also *God in us* through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Shortly after he was raised from the dead, Jesus appeared to his disciples; they were huddled behind closed doors, fearing for their lives, when the risen Christ all of a sudden appears in their midst. “Peace be with you,” he says to them, showing them his hands and his side, the marks of his crucifixion (John 20:19-20). And then he did something peculiar, you might say, or, at least, intriguing; he breathed on them. Then, he spoke these words to them: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22).

And so they did—receiving into their very persons the very presence of God himself, the Holy Spirit. You see, God with us in the person of the Son, the God-man, leads to God with us in the person of the Spirit, the very presence of God indwelling the one who has faith in Jesus. By virtue of the gift of the Spirit, the church as a whole is “being built together into a dwelling place for God” (Ephesians 2:22).

So, too, each individual believer is likewise made into a residence in which God dwells. “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). This is the great mystery of the Christian faith—what the Apostle Paul so triumphantly calls “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

### **What One Day Will Be Brought To Consummation**

Immanuel, God with us is the purpose of Christmas. This is what Jesus has revealed to us in his first Advent. And so we rejoice!

But we also continue to long for his coming. Because we know that the reality of God with us will only reach its full consummation at Jesus’ *second* Advent. John the Evangelist tells us what he saw of God with us, when God graciously drew back the veil of time and allowed him to peer into the future.

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. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem,

coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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.” (Revelation 21:1-3).

Here, then, is the consummate vision the Bible holds out for us: God with us—the goal of human history, the goal of redemptive history, the fulfillment of everything God has done and is doing in the world and through his Son and Spirit. A new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells and evil has been eradicated; a new heaven and a new earth, where God communes with man in an unhindered and uninterrupted way, where God’s redeemed people know that they are forever his, and where these same people know that God himself will be with them as their God, their special treasure and possession, forever and ever, world without end.

My son Addis has a charming way of adding possessive pronouns where a child normally wouldn’t use one. When he’s speaking about me to one of his sibling, he doesn’t say “Daddy,” he says, “My daddy.” It’s as if he wants to clarify that he belongs to me, and that I, in turn, belong to him. He is my son, and I am his father. This, friends, is the joy of knowing Immanuel, God with us—to know that you are one of God’s own people, and to know that God himself will be with you as your God. Jesus wasn’t joking, or speaking in hyperbole, when he said to his disciples, just before he ascended into heaven, “And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

### **Conclusion – Rejoice! Rejoice!**

Rejoice, then, you who know Immanuel, God with us. For you have the highest privilege and honor imaginable: “Blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!” (Psalm 144:15).

Rejoice, as well, that you have the sweetest comfort in times of difficulty, knowing that the Lord is your shepherd, therefore you shall not want. He will make you lie down in green pastures. He will lead you beside still waters. He will restore you soul (Psalm 23:1).

Rejoice that you have the safest refuge in times of trouble, knowing that God, your God, is with you; he will strengthen and help you; he will uphold you with his righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10).

Rejoice that you have a boundless resource in times of need, knowing that you can be content with whatever circumstances you have, knowing the one who has promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you,” so that you can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Hebrews 13:5-6).

Immanuel, God with us. This is reason for Christmas, the purpose of the incarnation. This is the design of creation and the goal of history. Understanding this leaves us with a deep sense of rejoicing, yet also a profound sense of longing—for the consummation of all things at the coming Advent of our King.

Amen.