

Immanuel: God with Us

The whole story of the Bible can be summed up with the Hebrew word: Immanuel, which means “God with us”. The Bible begins with the story of God’s creation, which culminates in the creation of man in His image and likeness. God made Adam and Eve to rule over His new world as vice-regents, and God set apart a garden in Eden as the special place where God’s very presence would come and dwell with His creatures. This garden contained the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and it was Adam’s job to work and guard this special sanctuary and everything in it. Instead of faithfully guarding this garden (and his wife!), Adam stood idly by while his wife was seduced into sin by the serpent. Seeing that she had not died, Adam then participated in the sin as well.

The consequences of this “original sin” were vast. The one most relevant to this survey is that Adam and Eve were barred from ever returning to the sanctuary garden. The responsibility of guarding the garden was turned over to angels with fiery swords, signifying that the only back into God’s presence is through knife and fire. Because of their sinfulness, mankind was no longer able to dwell in God’s presence. It was God’s mercy that they were expelled and sent into exile.

But in spite of mankind’s rebellion, God made a promise that He would provide deliverance through a “seed of the woman”, who would crush the Serpent and undo his evil work. It would have to be a man, since it was man who had sinned, but it would also have to be someone more than just a man. Who else could possibly make it back into God’s presence through the fiery swords of the cherubim?

Couldn’t an angel? Why didn’t God just have an angel step in right then and there to bear the consequences of mankind’s sin? No, an angel couldn’t do it, because an angel isn’t a man, a seed of the woman. Plus, angels, which are also created beings, do not have life in themselves. Angels can’t overcome death. An angel who died in man’s place would remain dead. Even if man’s debt could be paid in some abstract sense, death would not have been defeated. The sinful nature would still have control over man. Therefore, the biggest problem of all would remain: man would still not be able to have fellowship with his creator.

No, an angel couldn’t restore fellowship between God and man—only God could do that. Only one who is both God and man could do that (1 Tim. 2:5). The whole story of the Bible is the story of God, slowly but surely, restoring the fellowship that had been lost in the Garden. And the most amazing part of the story is that God promised to come Himself.

This is what the Tabernacle and the Temple were all about. They were models of the Garden of Eden in which God’s presence would dwell (Ex. 29:45; 1 Kgs. 6:13, 8:27). The first step in God’s plan was to provide a way of mediated access into His presence. God’s glory came and dwelled among His people in the Holy of Holies, and worshipers were able to enter God’s presence symbolically and vicariously through sacrificial offerings that were cut and burned (knife and fire) and ascended into God’s presence as smoke.

But God would not stop there. This provision was only temporary. The Law could not eradicate the sinfulness of man. God's purpose was to reestablish full communion and fellowship, which required that human nature be completely renovated. Adam's sinful flesh had to be put to death so that mankind could be raised to a new life dominated and empowered by the Spirit of God.

The prophets foretold the coming of a new covenant in which God's Messiah would come to deliver God's people from sin and death so that glory of God could once again dwell among the people of God. When Judah was threatened by Syria and Ephraim, the Lord prophesied through Isaiah that a child would be born to a young woman and his name would be called Immanuel ("God with us"). This child was to be a sign of God's presence with His people and the salvation He would accomplish (Is. 7). But, of course, Isaiah's prophecy had a much larger fulfillment than that one child. In Is. 9:6 Isaiah declared that the Child to be born much later, the promised seed of the woman, would be God Himself. The gospel of Matthew (1:20-23) shows us that Jesus' birth to the virgin Mary was the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus truly was "God with us". The shepherds of Bethlehem and the magi from the east recognized Jesus as God and worshiped Him as such.

Ezekiel records God's promise that He would come and dwell among His people: "My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (37:27). Zechariah also declares the good news that God would one day come to His people: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord" (2:10). In the book of Malachi, Yahweh promises to come to His Temple and purify the priests so that righteous sacrifices can be made. However, Yahweh speaks in the first person and third person: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." This messenger of the covenant, who is called "the Lord," has to be equal with God yet somehow distinct from Yahweh.

Jesus, of course, is the Lord who comes to His Temple to judge it and, ultimately, to form a new, living Temple in His church (Eph. 2:19ff.; 1 Pet. 2:4ff.). The fire that fell on Jesus' disciples on the Day of Pentecost is the fulfillment of God's glory filling the newly constructed Tabernacle (Ex. 40) and Temple (1 Kgs. 8:10ff.). The Church—the Body of Christ—is the new Temple. God's people are royal priesthood and the living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1-2) who ascend into God's presence through the Spirit. This is exactly what John has in mind when he opens his gospel account with the staggering claim that Jesus, the Word of God who was with God and is indeed God, became flesh and "tabernacled among us" (John 1:1-14). The glory of Yahweh is no longer behind curtains and veils, accessible only through animal substitutes. God has stepped out from behind the veil by taking our fallen humanity upon Himself to redeem it, glorify it, and exalt to the very heavenly sanctuary. John begins his gospel with this truth and closes his Revelation (the companion volume to his gospel) with another angle. In Rev. 21, John sees the Bride of Christ, the Church, coming from heaven to earth, and he hears: "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."

This is the culmination of God's plan to restore the fellowship that was broken by sin. The good news of the gospel is that God Himself has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. If Jesus isn't co-equal with the Father, then God has not come. God is a liar. There is no hope of restoration. There is no gospel.

Jesus as Lord and God

The covenant name of God in Hebrew was “Yahweh” (Greek = *kurios*; English = “LORD” [OT] or “Lord” [NT]). The Scriptures are absolutely clear that there is only one God.

Deut. 6:4 → “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

sh'ma yis'ra'el y'hwäh élohëynû y'hwäh echäd
ἄκουε Ἰσραηλ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστὶν

Other beings may be referred to as “gods”, but they are not really divine. The first commandment (“I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me.”) does not imply that there are other gods but that only Yahweh God is to be worshiped. The first commandment simply means that we are not to worship anything or anyone besides the one true God.

Throughout the pages of Scripture, Jesus (the second Person of the Trinity) is called both Lord (*kurios*) and God (*theos*). Either Jesus is co-equal with God the Father, or the Bible teaches polytheism.

Jesus is God

- Is. 9:6
 - *For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*
- John 1:1
 - *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*
 - Even if you translate this “the Word was a god” (as the NWT does), then you have to explain the embarrassing fact that John was teaching polytheism.
- Acts 20:28
 - *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”*
 - Apparently God has shed His own blood. The only way this is possible is for Jesus to be fully divine and co-equal with God the Father.
- Titus 2:13
 - *“...waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ...”*

Jesus is Lord

- “Lord” is used many times in the NT with clear reference to God the Father (Lk. 2:29; Acts 4:24; Rev. 6:10). This same title is used with clear reference to Jesus.

- John 20:27-29
 - *Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*
 - Thomas’s confession of the risen Jesus as both Lord and God is the essential confession for all who would follow Jesus. It is Jesus’ resurrection in a glorified physical body that vindicated His claims of divinity.

- Romans 10:9
 - *“...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”*
 - The confession that Jesus is co-equal with God the Father is the foundation and summary of the gospel message. If Jesus is not Lord, there is no salvation.

- 1 Cor. 8:4-6
 - *“Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God (θεὸς) but one.”⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-- as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” –⁶ yet for us there is one God (θεὸς), the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord (κύριος), Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”*
 - Paul makes a clear reference to Deut. 6:4 and explains that the doctrine of the Trinity is fully compatible with monotheism.

- Philippians 2:10-11
 - *“so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (κύριος), to the glory of God the Father.”*
 - The worship of Jesus as Lord does not detract from the Father’s glory because the Father and the Son share the same essence and glory.

- Jude 5
 - *“Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.”*
 - Who saved His people out of Egypt? Jesus. Who revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush? Yahweh (Ex. 3).