

"Immanuel"

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "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."

Names, we learn right away, are important. We know this from our own lives. I remember how much fun my wife and I had choosing the names of our children. We never found out the sex of any of them before they were born, so we had the great blessing of picking a girl name and a boy name five times! And we put a lot into picking those names because we wanted just the right name that conveyed the right meaning, had the right sound to it, and evoked the right feelings. Not to mention, in true Dad style, I always liked role playing some scenario, before they were born, using the full names we had chosen just to make sure it sounded right on those times I would need to exercise my fatherly authority.

Of course, that's not the way every parent goes about it. I did a quick internet search on celebrity baby names and found out that there are real people living in this country with names like *Audio Science*, *Moxie CrimeFighter*, *Pilot Inspector*, and *Jermagesty* thanks to parents who obviously had other things on their minds when it came time to name their children. But as we begin this season of Advent, which is a time of preparation that directs our hearts and minds to the anniversary of the Lord's birth on Christmas, and to his second coming at the end of the age, we are going to focus particularly on the occasion of our Lord's birth. And today, we begin with Matthew's account, where we find a name that definitely conveys the right meaning, because this name is how God would bring salvation to the world. As the angel tells Joseph, "Mary will bear son, and he will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

But that's not the only name that is given in the text. It turns out that this Jesus is a fulfillment of the ancient prophecy that has its own name. Isaiah prophesied, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means, God with us." So with the name Jesus, which means "the Lord is Savior," because he was the Son of God, at his birth Jesus became Immanuel. This is an amazing, mind-boggling name! I mean think about it. The child born to Mary and Joseph—the child they would protect and care for just as any parents would is literally God in the flesh! It's the defining characteristic of our faith! When God sent his son to live as one of us, Jesus took away this idea that God was somewhere "up there" and detached from our existence. In Christ, God was actually among us. He was born. He lived where people lived. He ate, he slept, he loved, he cried, he worked, and he suffered. Jesus understood life, not like some casual observer looking through a window, but as a fellow participant. And this is so important for us.

Because now we know that God can sympathize with us especially in all our troubles and struggles. Now we can see that God understands what life is all about. So when we pray in our sorrow, in our pains, with our human problems, God knows what it's all about. I know it's tempting to say things like "God just doesn't get it," but he does. Because he has been one of us— still is! He understands. He sympathizes. He knows.

But more than that, God has rescued us through that One, Immanuel. God walked among us as a man, but it was mankind who doubted him; mankind who despised him; mankind who crucified him. He could have stopped it with a word or a thought—he was God in the flesh! But he endured it for all of us, so that he who was innocent and full of life could die in our place. On the cross, Jesus was not just God with us, or God among us, but God for us. To really put it in perspective, he was God in our place. That's Immanuel. He is God with us and God among us and God on our behalf.

So, as we begin this season of Advent, I think it's so important to not only focus on the remarkable fact of who Jesus is, but also what he has done. Honestly the wonder of Immanuel born in the sleepy town of Bethlehem all those years ago should be enough for us to celebrate. But that wonder was just the beginning because of the plan of salvation, which in the flesh, he would work out for all people.

So, with all this, I think the annual Christmas frenzy that we can all get into is totally worth while! Immanuel has changed the world. He has elevated each one of you into significance. He has redeemed each one of you deliberately, and he calls each one of you personally to be his own. And this means that your life has purpose and meaning. I mean think of all the great works of charity worked through God's people in Christ. All of the great music composed and artwork created; all of the love and selfless acts that make this world a better place because God is with us. All of these things and countless others have happened and will continue to happen because God did the impossible—he became one of us.

You know, as we get closer and closer to Christmas Day, I know how these days can become either jam-packed and stressful for some or lonely and dark for others. And we can convince ourselves that it's not worth all the excitement and unnecessary fuss. It's just another day. But I say, it is a time to celebrate! It is a time to be busy decorating and singing. It is a time to be prayerful and thankful, it's a time to visit with family and friends. It's time to celebrate like God with us like actually matters! We don't have to celebrate because the commercialism and the consumerism of the world tells us to, but because God is with us! All of the excitement and anticipation— all of the activity and cheer can and should be directed to the one who gives us life, hope, peace, and joy. God is with us! Smile about that. I mean do it right now! Smile about the fact that you are not left alone in your daily struggle. Smile about the fact that the entire story of your salvation is connected to the name Immanuel!

God is with you! Teach this to your kids and grandkids. Talk about this your friends. Celebrate the miracle. It's absolutely amazing!

“And when Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.” **Amen.**