

God With Us

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[0:00] Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and be the son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel. I'm led to believe that my name Colin means young hound. I'll leave you to judge for yourselves whether I'm young or have canine features. All I know is that when I was born, my parents liked the name. Nate Taylor's proper name, I believe, Nathan, means gift from God. Nate's parents saw him as a gift from God, and so do we. Kirk is the old Scottish word for church, so it's appropriate, I guess, that Kirk is a minister of the church. In our culture, people tend to give their children names they like at the time. I wonder if Mary and Joseph ever got used to calling their child Emmanuel. According to our passage in Matthew 1.23, as well as Jesus, this is what they were to call him, Emmanuel. Joseph and Mary didn't choose that name for him, rather it was chosen for them by God.

Jesus, or to use its Aramaic form, Joshua, was a relatively common name in the Israel of the day, but Emmanuel was probably a first. I was called Colin because my parents liked the name, but Joseph and Mary called their boy Emmanuel because he was destined to change the world forever. God gave him that name for that very reason. For that child born in a stable in Bethlehem changes everything about us and everything about our world. He gives us hope in the darkness. He gives us forgiveness for all our guilt. He gives us presence in our loneliness. The only time we tend to call Jesus Emmanuel is at Christmas, and that's a shame because really and truly the name itself is so important and precious. We should call him that all year round.

[2:43] Emmanuel is a Hebrew name meaning God with us, and everything about Jesus and his mission is in his name, who he was, and what he came to do. As we think about these remarkable words, God with us this Christmas Eve morning, let's reflect together on two things. God and us, and God with us. God and us, first of all, he is so very far away. God and us, so very far away.

Ludwig Furbach is a name with which only a niche set of philosophers and theologians are familiar. He was a 19th century German philosopher, and he developed the view that God, or whoever God is, is an extension or projection of the human mind. An atheist by conviction, Furbach insisted that we do not derive our existence from God. We did not make God. Sorry, God did not make us. But that God derives his existence from us, that we project all our hopes for justice, for forgiveness, and for happiness outwards, and we call that projection God. In essence, humankind creates God as a projection of our own insecurities and longings. Furbach was highly influential upon later works of such figures as

Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin and Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. I wonder if Furbach had taken the Bible seriously. What did he made of this name of Jesus? Emmanuel, God with us. Because in this name, there are two distinct entities, God and us. For Furbach and his successors, there was only ever one entity, us, with God being a projection or an extension of the us. But according to the Bible, not only are we real, but God is real, but God is real, and we are different from each other. God and us are not the same.

The birth of Jesus Christ is conclusive proof, if ever it was needed, that for all his intellectual and philosophical brilliance, Furbach was most definitely wrong. The coming of Emmanuel is all the evidence we need that there is an us, that there is an us, and there is a God. But then none of us need to be told that here, do we? Because, well, we all know it's true. The Bible describes who God is, and we learn from the Bible that he is nothing like us at all. From the beginning, we learn that he

is a creator, and we are created. God does not derive his existence from us. Rather, we derive our existence from him. He does not depend upon us. We depend upon him for life, and for breath, and for everything else.

The essence of God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, as Stephen prayed. But as human beings, we are finite, limited, and frail. God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. As we read on through the Bible, we learn more about who God is. He is majestically holy and supremely pure. His radiance shines brighter than the sun of the sky. The mighty angels shield their faces from him and worship him in adoring song. His voice is like the sound of deafening thunder and a million trumpets. Whenever he appears, even the holiest of human beings fall down before him. Nearly a hundred years after Furbach died, another German philosopher, for this time a man called Rudolf Otto, started working in the area of the human experience of the supernatural. And in his famous book, *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto defined our response to the holiness and otherness of God in these terms. When we encounter him, we are filled with tremendous mystery and fascination.

[7:43] Tremendous mystery and fascination. The God who is so very far away from us as human beings, such that we are filled with tremendous mystery and fascination when we encounter his holiness in all its distinctness, in all its radiance, in all its purity. His almighty power, his all-surpassing holiness, his all-consuming purity, completely overwhelm our senses and we're left with nothing else than to fall down before him in tremendous mystery and fascination.

The Old Testament laws, with all their ceremonies and regulations, even though they were designed to point to how sinful human beings could approach God, only served to reinforce the distance that is between us.

We're separated from him by curtains, by sacrifices, by temples, by priests. We can't even get close enough to begin to understand him because he is so infinitely beyond our comprehension or our measurement.

You know, unless we have experienced Otto's tremendous mystery and fascination, chances are we have never really encountered the real God in his majesty and holiness. He is so very far away from us.

Well, if that is the God in the name of Emmanuel, what about the us? What about the us? God and us? The history of the human race is the history of war, violence, and hatred. Even in the blessed garden of Eden, the male and female genders created to complement and love one another went to war against each other.

[9:52] Their oldest son, Cain, murdered his younger brother, Abel. The heart of mankind created in all innocence by God was twisted, darkened, ruined. Within a short time, we read in Genesis 6 verse 5, Nate preached on this recently. The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Bible reveals to us every side of the human nature. Fratricide, brother killing brother. Homicide, the killing of another human being.

Matricide, the killing of one's mother. Patricide, the killing of one's father. Philicide, the killing of one's child. God and deicide, the killing of God. Created in innocence, humankind's descent into the darkness, terror, and ruin of sin has been total. We need no evidence to prove this point. We know it to be true.

Nearly a hundred years ago, someone wrote into the letters page of a national newspaper with the question, what is wrong with the world? We might do the same today as we look out and see the world and all its chaos. What is wrong with the world? They wrote into the newspaper with that question. The great writer G.K. Chesterton, himself a devout Roman Catholic, replied with these words, Dear Sir, I am your sincerity, G.K. Chesterton.

What is the problem with the world, dear sir? I am your sincerity, G.K. Chesterton. Because instinctively, we know that not only is there something wrong with the world in which we live with all its brokenness and violence and death, but there's something wrong with us, each one of us on the inside. We're paranoid but proud. We're helpless but self-reliant.

We're ashamed but brazen. We're dying but arrogant. We're lost but spiteful. We're loathly but closed. We are darkness but light. What has Christmas become but an opportunity for shameless materialism, consumption, and greed? Our longings for warmth are all too often replaced by anger and jealousy and greed.

[12:41] Surely, Chesterston was right. The greatest problem we have isn't out there. It's in here. The holiness of God might well be described in terms of tremendous mystery and fascination, but the history of humankind is one of tremendous misery and suffering.

Nice to see Ruthie here today. She'll tell you for real that what I'm saying is true. In the London Underground, as a troop train arrives, the announcer comes across the Tanoi speaker saying, mind the gap. Mind the gap. Mind the gap. Warning, commuters of the gap between the platform and the train.

We might say the same thing when it comes to us and God. Mind the gap. As high as the heavens and above the earth, as far as east is from the west. That's how great the gap between us and God. We're all familiar with Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, The Creation of Adam, with a bearded old man representing God, reaching down to a young man representing Adam.

He's reaching up, and their forefingers never quite touching in the middle somewhere. The reality is somewhat different. Whereas God reaches down, humanity never reaches up.

[14:11] And even if we did try, given the infinite distance between us and God, we'd never bridge that gap. When it comes to God, it is most definitely God and us.

And that is the ultimate human problem. God and us. The history of human religion is the history of men and women trying to reach up to God by our own efforts.

Religious, ceremonial, and moral. That's what all religions have in common. The supra-human effort to try and reach up to God, whether it's by building a tower called Babel in Genesis, or constructing a system of moral laws like the Pharisees, or by following a carefully designed set of ceremonies like all the world religions in existence today.

They're all trying to bridge the gap rather than minding the gap. Rather than recognizing our own innate inability as human beings to be reconciled to a holy God by our own sinful efforts, we persist. And in so doing, we compound our misery. The great C.S. Lewis once wrote, and he's so right, of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst.

[15:42] Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst. Religion drives men mad. And prompts them to commit all kinds of unbearable humanity.

The kind of things we see on our TVs today. God and us, and never the twain it would seem, shall meet.

He is so high, and we are so low. He is so light, and we are so dark. He is so pure, we are so dirty. God, us.

The ultimate divergence. God is so very far away. But second, God is so very close.

So very close. God and us. God with us. Christmas would not be good news for us as human beings unless Emmanuel had been born.

[16:51] His name does not mean God and us, as if to reinforce the distance between us. But God with us. The God who is so very far away from us, has in the birth of Christ and His coming, come so close to us.

Once He was further away from us than we could ever imagine. But now in the child Emmanuel, He is closer to us than we could ever imagine. All our reaching up to God through religion and culture has got us nowhere, except deeper into misery and suffering.

But what we could not do, God has done by reaching down to us. Whereas once it was God and us, now it is God with us.

Religion is all about men reaching up to God and failing. Christianity is all about God reaching down to men and succeeding.

This is what makes the Christmas story such good news and brings light to our darkness. In the birth of the child whose name is Emmanuel, God has reached down to us.

[18:12] The God who is so very far away from us is now so very close to us. It is no longer God and us. It is God with us.

Little words mean big things and score lots of points in a game of Scrabble, as I'm led to believe.

We start with God and us. We're now at God with us. But why is God with us?

It is because God is for us. The true and living God is for us. His attitude toward us as a sinful, mortal, limited humanity is one of love, pity, and compassion.

He does not hate that which He has created. Rather, He looks upon us like sheep without a shepherd and has great compassion upon us. Because He is for us, He has become with us.

[19:22] The infinite love of God is the cause and reason for the birth of Jesus. In love, God took the first move and gave His Son to be our Emmanuel, God with us.

Now, in the first instance, this tells us about who the Jesus born in the stable is. The famous hymn asks us the question, Who is He in yonder stall at whose feet the shepherds fall?

And then it answers, 'Tis the Lord, O wondrous story. 'Tis the Lord, the Lord of glory.

The name Emmanuel does not mean another man with us or an angel with us. It means God with us.

The Christmas story isn't one of the cozy brotherhood of man, but of God Himself, the Lord of glory, becoming one with us.

[20:35] The Christmas story isn't one of goodwill between men, but of the goodwill of God toward men. His name is God with us.

The Jesus born in the stable in Bethlehem is God Himself. He could not entrust such a serious mission to anyone or anything else. God Himself came.

This Jesus, this Christ, He is God. And though a fragile newborn, we, as did the angels and the shepherds and the wise men, must bow before Him in worship, praise, and faith.

For this is where we meet with God as human beings. This is where we meet with God as human beings. Not a religious place, but a real person.

Not a sacred temple, but a servant king. Not in a religious ceremony, but in a real Christ.

[21:45] All the ceremonies and temples and religious duties of the Old Testament pointed to this one event when God Himself would become flesh, acts again and so, and be with us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Someone, perhaps, goes off on a worldwide journey of discovery. They've left university, they've got a gap year, and says, I want to discover myself. So they go away for a year's journey around the world saying, I'm going to look for God.

And you want to say to them, you know, unless you're looking at Jesus Christ, you're looking in all the wrong places. You won't find Him in a jungle in Burma.

Sorry, Myanmar. You won't find Him in a mountaintop in Nepal. You'll find Him in Jesus Christ.

Many of the promises of the Bible to which we cling are also contained within this name of God.

For example, consider God's promise to Joshua as he stands ready to invade the promised land.

Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened. Do not be dismayed.

[22:57] For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Or think about God's great promise to David in Psalm 23.

A promise which is so precious to us all here and has become even more precious in the passing of both Bette and Colin. even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me.

You rod and staff they comfort me. You see the most precious element of all these promises consists in the word with. God is with us as we face our challenges.

God is with us as we go through the shadows. These promises aren't in the abstract. They're fulfilled in a person Jesus Christ who is God with us in whom we too can be strong and courageous and through whom we need fear no evil.

His name is Emmanuel God with us the fulfillment of all the shadows of Old Testament promise.

The God who is the fountain of our being and the purity of divine glory the God who has always been so very far away from us has in the child born in the stable become one with us for as far away as he once was from us he is now so very close.

[24:30] He's closer to you than the person sitting next to you this morning. He's closer than those you love and those who love you.

What according to da Vinci's painting human beings could not do reach up and touch God God himself has done in the child Emmanuel God the tremendous mystery and fascination has become one with us what we could not do by reaching up to God through our religious efforts our cultural

improvement and our moral excellencies God has done by uniting himself with a likeness of sinful flesh and being born in a Bethlehem stable.

The initiative is entirely his. The Jesus who is Emmanuel is God with us. He's God with us in our joys and in our sorrows.

He's God with us in our fears and in our confidence. He's God with us in our loneliness and in our company. He's God with us in our grief and in our glory.

He's God with us in our sickness and in our health. He's God with us in the daytime and in the night and in the dark and in the light and in poverty and plenty and guilt and forgiveness and despair and hope and strength and weakness.

[26:04] He's God with us. There are no situations in which He will leave us for having been born in our likeness and our flesh He is now with us and by His Spirit He with us He remains.

The Jesus who became flesh was born in the stable in Bethlehem remains flesh and He sits at the Father's right hand in glory where one day we too who have faith in Him will also be.

But one question remains for us this morning. How shall Emmanuel God with us bring us sinful human beings to a holy God who is so very other?

After all we've seen that God is very far away from us. We've seen how God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. How shall He overcome the obstacles of our sin and guilt?

In 33 years time this child Jesus called Emmanuel He shall be nailed to a Roman cross. For no crime of His own He's going to endure a criminal's death.

[27:26] This child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger by His mother shall on that day be wrapped in grave clothes and laid in a tomb by His mother. He shall give Himself as the sacrifice for our sin and guilt.

Jesus shall bridge the gap between us and God by removing the obstacle of our sin on the cross. In the cradle He was God with us and on the cross He was God with us and still by His Holy Spirit today He is God with us.

For those of us who are Christians this morning who have already placed our faith and trust in Emmanuel as our Lord and Savior this is the truth for us to believe and to experience in every situation of life and I mean every situation He is with us.

in every situation of life He is with us. He is so very close to us that none of us can ever accuse Him saying where is He when I need Him the most?

He is with us this Christmas and He's not going anywhere. He'll be with us until the end until finally we go to be with Him until then you're His and He's yours Emmanuel closer to us than we may ever know or ever dream.

[29:15] Remember that this Christmas but not just at Christmas time always.