

The beauty of the promise behind Emmanuel

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[0 : 00] So, this time last year, we never had this service, and many churches throughout the country, not necessarily Scotland, but England and Wales, are not having this service and other services, and that's a shame that the church is living under the conditions that it is.

So, I want to begin, before I go any further, by giving thanks to the church. I think the church, over these past, what will soon be two years, without any kind of lift, I think, in what we're used to now, has done extremely well.

And so, I want to thank you all, all the servers, all the stewards, everyone, Sunday school, parents, helpers, teachers, the lot.

It's really important that you understand that your contribution in serving others in this church is not gone unnoticed by the Lord. It may go unnoticed by people in the church, but that we're not serving, they may be the result of our service.

But what matters is the fact that you have served the Lord, and you have served the Lord faithfully.

And I say that in light of the differences amongst the people within the fellowship.

[1 : 34] Some of us have very strong views over, I don't really want to go into the whole COVID thing, I don't want to spoil a carol service with COVID. But what I'm saying is the fact that this church has maintained a sense of gathering and the worship of God through, even through their differences, and even through whether or not we've done things that, you know, we shouldn't be doing, or we haven't done things that we should be doing.

I think it's testament to the unity and to the fellowship amongst many of the people here. And everyone can complain, but those who are doers are the ones that we are giving thanks to tonight. Not just hearers of the word, but doers. And so I want to thank every single one of you, and I really mean that. And I'm sure that if you had opportunity to thank each one, you would. Also, this morning, I want to thank all the children in particular for the nativity.

You did extremely well. Very proud of all of you. Thank you, Callum, and Emma, especially. Callum, I heard you were a bit of a last-minute stand and came to the rescue.

Well done. You did really well. And so did you as well, Emma. You were a very beautiful Mary. And so you did extremely well. And so did everyone else.

[2 : 58] And then, of course, Jacob. Wow. Brilliant. You did really, really good. And I think everyone in the church is really proud of you being able to practice so very hard and play for us.

So we're looking forward to the next song. Whenever you read it. Okay, you got your thumbs up.

Okay. Rebecca's well. Well done. You played really well as well.

And, of course, you know, I do feel as though that talent has skipped a generation. Don't you? I don't think I was gifted in any way with that. But well done to both of you.

And, of course, for the stewards, in particular this evening and today, and, of course, over the weeks, of being able to get in and out the building, keeping it clean, and just trying to do their very best, sometimes one might feel, to ease the tensions of people coming and going.

You know, that it's more of a psychological help than it is anything else. Obviously, it's a very practical help, but the psychological benefit to it might be even greater for some of you.

[4 : 05] And, of course, this evening, thank you, ladies, for singing and Celia for singing as well. It's been a tough time. It's been a tough time. So I decided two weeks ago that the message this evening would not be one where I would preach evangelistically like I would normally do and reach out telling those who do not belong to the Lord Jesus Christ to belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Most of you here this evening, and those who don't belong to Christ, have heard that message from me. So I've made it clear, I've made it abundantly clear, that if you don't belong to Christ, you should belong to Christ, you should turn to him now and do not leave it too late.

But what I would like to do is to address, perhaps this year more than any other year, the beauty of the promise behind Emmanuel.

Emmanuel, because Emmanuel was given not as a Christmas promise, but it was a promise given in a time of crisis, a time of absolute crisis.

So I'm going to read, and then I'm going to sort of declare to you the wonderful promise of Emmanuel. And this is taken from Isaiah chapter 7. Again, I'm not going to read a lengthy portion, but I'm going to read long enough just so that you can get a gist of where we are.

[5 : 32] So this is Isaiah 7, beginning at verse 10. Hear the word of the Lord.

Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz. Ask for a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be as deep as sure and high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.

And he said, Hear then, O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Emmanuel. He shall eat the curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

For before the boy knows how to refuse evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.

[6 : 40] The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as you have not come since the day of Epipharim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria.

That may seem like a very strange reading, especially at Christmas time. But let me try and give you the promise here. The promise of Emmanuel is a sign and it's a message.

But it's a message given to a king in a time of crisis. So why is Emmanuel a sign and a message in a time of great crisis?

And now the circumstances that Ahaz had to deal with are very different than the circumstances that we're having to deal with. In fact, the whole world is under a crisis, one might add.

That the COVID is a crisis for us all. And it would be tempting to think, well, Christianity has got nothing to say about this because it only takes cares of matters of life and death.

[7 : 51] I don't think that's fair to Christianity. And it's definitely not true of what God's word teaches. But let me give you the background. Ahaz was in trouble and Ahaz needed great help.

And the question always was, who was Ahaz going to turn to for help in a time of crisis? Who would he turn to?

Now, Ahaz, unlike previous kings, was not a king who had a heart after God's own heart. Israel had good kings and bad kings and Ahaz just so happened to be one of the bad kings who didn't really devote himself to the Lord or follow the Lord or listen to the Lord or do anything that the Lord commanded him to do.

Yet, nonetheless, the Lord God continued to reach out to Ahaz, even, one might say, overstretching his promises, so that Ahaz would turn and trust in the Lord.

Yet, Ahaz turned to human allegiances, to human powers as a means of security and what he thought was certainty.

[9 : 10] And as he turned to these human powers for what we would call salvation, to be rescued, to be saved from enemies, not to be overturned, he could not help but turn away from God at the same time.

And God did not want him to turn away from him. He wanted Ahaz to turn to God and God says, ask for a sign and I will give you the greatest sign possible.

As high as the heaven and as deep as shul, I will give you the sign of Emmanuel. And Emmanuel means, as you will know, that it means that God is with us.

God is with you. Now, what greater promise is there to have for those who belong to God to know that God is with you in a time of crisis?

And then what kind of mind and heart do you have to have to turn to other powers in that time of crisis for security, for a sense of certainty, for a sense of rescue and salvation?

[10 : 26] So Emmanuel is given to a man who faces a crisis. And Emmanuel comes to us this year, if I can put it in that context, in a sense of true crisis.

The world is in a crisis. But the principle is the same and the message is the same. The principle is this. In a crisis, where do you look to for help?

In a crisis, where do you look to for rescue? In a crisis, where do you look to for certainty and indeed for salvation?

And so it is if these last two years, it is as if everyone in the world has, without exception, has had to face the same crisis and the same challenge.

Everyone in the world has had to face, without exception, the same crisis and the same challenge. The crisis is clear.

[11 : 39] Almost two years of a virus that kills people. Not serious. Not serious. The challenge is that in that time, God has been graciously present, calling out to people to turn to him, in the same way he did with Ahaz here.

And, just like in the days of Ahaz, people have trusted in human powers in the church more than they have trusted in God.

It is a repeatable fashion amongst God's people, it seems to be. And people in the world have definitely trusted in their like-minded people. For certainty.

Not necessarily security, but definitely for certainty, because you can sell certainty. Very difficult to sell security. If you speak with a sense that you're right, and a sense of authority, whether you are or not, it's very easy to convince a person who desire is for certainty.

And so Ahaz here, it's being spoken to by two groups of people. The Lord God himself, who promises that God would be with him.

[13 : 05] Or human allegiances that say, come on, turn to us, and we will help you out. And so it seems that we're all in the same boat this evening.

We all live in the same world, facing the same crisis, and yet there's the same challenge here for us all. What does it truly look like to truly trust God in a time of crisis?

What does it look like to trust God when it's easy to turn to powers, human allegiances, for certainty, for rescue, for all of these things?

And so the issue here before us this evening of Emmanuel is that God is saying that whatever the crisis is in the world, there's something greater than that still.

And that doesn't undermine the crisis, and that doesn't undermine the fact that you should do all that you can to mitigate the crisis, or to stop it, or whatever it may be.

[14 : 17] But it's a question of what you do first, and why the crisis even happens in the first place. So Emmanuel, the promise of Emmanuel given here to Ahaz, places us all in the same boat this evening, and that is who are we turning to?

Who are we turning to to help us out of the situation we're in? And we're not just talking personally, we are talking globally. Who can help us to actually deal with a crisis as big as this one that we face?

Is God not the God of the world? Is he not the creator of all? Is he not the creator of every atom, every virus, every blade of grass, every molecule?

Is that not the God that we belong to? Is the God that we belong to not the God, as Spurgeon says, that when you open up your curtains, and you allow that beam of light to come through, and you see all the dust particles floating in the air, in some houses, wouldn't be your house, I'm sure, but in some houses, you see those dust particles floating through the air, and Spurgeon says, if you don't believe in a God who holds every single one of those in its place, then you're not believing in the God of Scripture.

That's who we belong to. And so now when it comes to trust and trusting first, it really does matter, and that's what it means to believe Emmanuel.

[15 : 56] That's what it means to believe that God is with you in a time of absolute crisis. So even though our crisis, our current crisis is clear, and I don't want to keep saying the word to spoil your Christmas any further than it might be spoiled with the COVID restrictions, but what I will want to say is this, whatever the crisis may be, in the past, the present, or the future, the challenge remains the same.

The principle remains true. Who do you turn to for certainty? Who do you turn to for rescue? Who do you turn to for help in time of need?

Who do you turn to when you have no one else to turn to? More importantly, who do you turn to when you could turn to anyone?

Ahaz did not turn to his own God. And the beauty of Emmanuel, the beauty of the promise behind Emmanuel, is God, it sounds strange to say, but almost going out of his way to convince Ahaz not to do what he is about to do and to turn and put his trust in God completely.

That doesn't mean that he's not to be sensible, but it means that he's been able to order his life and his mind and his heart properly with God taking first place in everything.

[17 : 36] So the challenge is simple. Who do you turn to? Who do you turn to in a time of crisis?

Who do you turn to in a time of need? And so this promise of Emmanuel, though it's spoken of in Christmas because it represents the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, and though, as we have seen through our readings, the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ is for the forgiveness of sins, that he comes to rescue us and deal with a very particular problem between us and God, a very particular situation that requires him to live a human life and to die a death on a cross and to rise from the grave. It deals with something very particular. Nonetheless, he is God of all and Lord of all. And so here we sit this evening and you ought to be sitting in the absolute comfort of Emmanuel, the absolute comfort that God is with you.

Now I don't know what it's like in too many cases, but I'll give you one example. When I was young, I wanted to be a boat builder. And when I was young, I used to get taken out into fishing boats. They weren't very big. And we used to go out of the harbour and the men who used to take me out couldn't swim, which I didn't know at the time because if I did, I may not have got in.

[19 : 09] And the boats would go up and down and up and down. And of course, I would be petrified. And of course, every now and then, one of the men would just grab hold of me by the scruff of the neck, whatever, it wasn't very comforting, by the scruff of the neck and hold me still.

And though I didn't understand anything that was going on, none whatsoever, just the sheer hand of the man on me was enough to tell me that I was okay.

I didn't understand which way the boat was going, I didn't understand which way the wind was coming, I didn't understand whether the boat was going to fill up with water, I didn't understand any of that.

but what I knew is that tough hand grabbing my collar and just holding me was enough to remind me that we're going to be okay. And I've had other places like that where I've been stuck out on the rocks and the tides have come in and I've had to have people come in and get me and I think, this is not good.

So there's been plenty of cases where I've not known what to do and others have and I've not known what is going on but others have and in exactly the same way the promise of Emmanuel is that that you don't need to know how you're going to get out of it, you just need to make sure that the one who's got hold of you can get out of it and that's really the message of Emmanuel.

[20 : 43] You don't need to know how you're going to get out of it, you just need to know can the one who's got hold of you get you out of it and I'll finish with this.

Spurgeon told a beautiful story once of a man on a battlefield in the First World War being shot and he used this as an illustration to focus the mind and focus the heart on God and he says, no man who ever got shot on the battlefield whilst on the operating table says to the nurse, what type of bullet is it?

but rather can you save me? Some questions are just no longer important when you know what you're facing and so the promise of Emmanuel is a promise that addresses our greatest issue and that is we need God with us especially if we are people without belonging to God and so this year as you think about Emmanuel think about it in that context that it was given to a man at a time who was facing a crisis who was tempted and indeed did turn to human allegiances for certainty when the only certainty is in God Amen Amen Amen Well we're going to close to ■■■■■ous une■■■ une Breath