

Series Immanuel

This Message The Incarnational Dwelling of God

The premise of this study is that the subject of Immanuel is not just for the Christmas season. The fact is that God's desires and efforts to dwell among His human creation is one of the most basic themes running throughout Scripture.

God's program to redeem and restore creation steadily unfolded over many generations and many centuries. The Old Testament portion of the Scriptures is a record of what God did to both maintain His presence among the human race and to move history toward the fulfillment of His promise.

The tabernacles and temples in the Old Testament, with their animal sacrifices, were the most obvious examples of God's determination to be in contact with people. He also sent prophets who spoke His words to encourage the people to be faithful to Him.

The Old Testament prophets had an important role in keeping the promises and actions of God in the minds of His chosen people. The first responsibility of the prophets was to warn the Israelites about impending judgment. They clearly proclaimed the consequences of rebellion against God. They also announced "incentives" as a means to get the people to change their ways. Tucked away in their warnings were frequent assurances of future blessings. God wanted His people to understand that His program would eventually lead to a complete restoration of Creator/creature fellowship.

As the years went on, God revealed more and more of His plans to His chosen people. His promises became more detailed and specific. The Israelites were informed that God would establish a unique kingdom on earth. It was revealed that a Messiah deliverer would arise from within the nation of Israel, and that this Messiah would combine the roles of true Prophet, Priest, and King, and that this Messiah would remove the barriers which separated people from God.

Old Testament verses described the coming Messiah in various ways: “the seed of the woman,” “the seed of Abraham,” “the son of David,” “the son of man,” “the Son of God,” “God’s Servant,” “God’s special chosen and anointed One,” “The Branch,” “the Prince of Peace,” “the Wonderful Counselor,” “the mighty God,” and “the everlasting Father” (*Genesis 3:15, Genesis 22:18; II Samuel 23:5; Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 42:1; Isaiah 9:6-7; Zechariah 3:8; Zechariah 6:12; Daniel 7:13-14; Daniel 10:16-18*).

We can consider the entire Old Testament after Genesis 3:15 to be preparation for the arrival of the Messiah Redeemer and Restorer. In this message, we will focus on some of the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah. We need to recognize that the incarnation of Jesus was a crucial step in God’s plan for the redemption of sinful humanity. The incarnation was the key to the restoration of relationship between God and mankind. The incarnation of Jesus was one of the unique ways in which God dwelled among the people on earth.

According to information in ancient Jewish Rabbinic writings, there are more than 450 special predictions of the Messiah (*see “The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah,” appendix IX, Alfred Edersheim*). We will look at only three of them. These three are among the best known prophecies from the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 9:2-7 “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”

At the time this prophecy was announced, the nation of Judah was facing a serious threat by the combined armies of two enemy people groups. It was in the context of the depression and gloom of those days that God announced through Isaiah that He would send a child to deliver and restore. The fact that the child, a son, would be “born” indicated his link to humanity. The fact that the child would be “given” indicated his link to God’s supernatural activity.

The fact that the “government will be on his shoulders” referred to the authority and power and sovereignty of this child to rule over everything. Verse 7 explains that there would be no limits to the ability of this ruler, either qualitywise or timewise. The phrase, “the zeal of the LORD Almighty,” informs us that it would be God Himself, the eternal, omnipotent, sovereign God of the universe, who would be behind all this action.

Isaiah 40:3-9 “A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’ ... You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

When Isaiah spoke these words, he knew that the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed and the people of Judah were to be taken into exile because of their rebellion against God (even though it didn’t happen for another 120 years!). However, God wanted His people to look beyond the miseries that were in the immediate future to the more distant future when the glory of the LORD would be revealed. The imagery in verses 3 and 4 is of the preparations for the arrival of a visiting dignitary such as a king. The dignitary referred to in this passage is the LORD God Himself. Notice the phrases, “prepare the way for the LORD;” “make straight ... a highway for our God.”

To some extent, this prophecy was fulfilled when the people returned from the Babylonian exile, but, in a more specific sense, Isaiah was speaking about the coming of the future Messiah. From our reading of the New Testament, we understand that John the Baptizer became “the voice” calling to the people. In his ministry, he pleaded for the Israelites to repent, to change their sinful ways, to prepare for the coming of the Lord. The arrival of Jesus meant that the glory of the LORD God was revealed, and that He was present with His people. Isaiah said that this would be such good news that people should shout it from the mountain tops. The good news, referring to Jesus, would be: "Here is your God!"

Isaiah 42:1-7 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations’ ... This is what God the LORD says, he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

There are four prophecies in Isaiah which refer to the Messiah as “servant”. This is the first of these passages. In this passage God the LORD introduces His Servant. Notice that the Servant was chosen by the LORD and given His Spirit.

Servants are expected to work to accomplish the purposes of their masters. Notice that this Servant was given the task of “bringing justice to the nations” — of making the circumstances of the world what they should be; of bringing all things into conformity to the character of God.

There is no doubt about the identity of the master who would send His servant into the world — He is the absolute Sovereign of the universe, the One who created the heavens and gives breath to its people. It is He who will guide the Servant, and walk with Him in an intimate way, holding Him by the hand. For His part, the Servant will be the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to His chosen people, as well as the light of salvation to the Gentiles. We know from the New Testament Scriptures that the Servant not only conveyed the truth of God but also actually instituted a new covenant through His death.

These three passages spoken by Isaiah were among the examples of God’s revealed plans to redeem, restore, and relate to mankind. We know from our vantage point in time that God’s most dramatic effort to reconnect with mankind was through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The amount of information about Jesus Christ revealed in the Old Testament is quite significant, and when Jesus Christ, the physical manifestation of God Himself, entered history, the impact He made on humanity was also quite significant. Jesus vividly displayed the power of God through the signs, wonders, and miracles He performed. He taught the truth of and demonstrated the character of God. Everything He did was authoritative and conformed to the reality of the Godhead.

Unfortunately, very few of the Israelites recognized the truth about the Messiah in the Scriptures, and hence they did not recognize the true nature of Jesus during His years on earth. Jesus Himself declared to the religious leaders, “The Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. ... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” (*John 5:37-40, 46-47*).

Even the followers of Jesus were slow to understand the many references to the Messiah in the Old Testament. Perhaps you remember the statements of Jesus when, on the day of His resurrection, He chided two of His disillusioned and disappointed followers: “How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And then Luke reported that Jesus, beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, “explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (*Luke 24:25-27*).

Fortunately, after His resurrection, the disciples of Jesus were able, with perfect hindsight, to look back at the Old Testament and quickly fit together in their minds the relevant information that they had previously failed to grasp. The Apostle John summed up the Old Testament prophecies in the following words, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (*John 1:14*). The literal translation of this sentence is, “The Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ among humanity” or “‘pitched his tent’ among humanity.” This is the theme we are thinking about — Immanuel, God dwelling among people in the person of Jesus.

Read John 1:1-18

The Apostle John did a wonderful job in explaining this thought in the first verses of the Gospel written by him. He began by explaining who Jesus really was: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was (God) with God in the beginning” (*John 1:1-2*).

These statements signify that before time, before there was anything physical and material, the Word already was because “the Word was God.” Our appreciation of the deity of the Word can be enhanced when we compare the first verses of the Gospel of John and the first verses of Genesis. Genesis chapter 1 begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth. John 1:1 goes back even further. John 1:1 describes circumstances before the beginning of creation. This means that Bible information effectively begins with John 1:1, in what we call “eternity past.”

The next verses in John explain what happened: “Through him (that is, “the Word”) all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (*John 1:3*). This means that Jesus is the Source, the Fabricator, of the physical universe. As the Apostle Paul later explained: “For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ... In him all things hold together” (*Colossians 1:16-17*).

In the Gospel of John we read these words: “He (the Word) was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (*John 1:10-11*). This is a particularly sad commentary on the Jewish people. They should have known their Old Testament Scriptures, should have been receptive to the truth as spoken by the prophets, should have been ready to welcome God their promised Messiah. Instead, the Jewish people rejected Jesus from among their midst — did not recognize that God had come in human form to be with His people.

Scripture makes it very clear that the Father was not surprised by the public rejection of His beloved Son. It had been predicted more than 700 years earlier that Jesus would be “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their faces,” (*Isaiah 53:3-4*), and that He would be despised, and that His life would be “cut off from among the living” (*Isaiah 53:8*). It was in fulfillment of prophecy that Jesus “appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (*Hebrews 9:26*).

Before His birth, Jesus was given the name “Immanuel, God with us” (*Matthew 1:23*). During His earthly sojourn, the Lord Jesus was God dwelling among men.

Let me sum up the incarnation by looking at it from four perspectives. 1) we need to remember that the person involved in the incarnation was “the Word,” that is, One of the members of the Godhead, who existed with the Father from eternity and came from the Father, and the One through whom all things were created. God’s appearance on earth is remarkable, but it fits perfectly into His desires and plans to have a connection with His human creation.

2) The indispensable necessity of the incarnation was that the “Word become flesh.” The term “flesh” connotes human nature. Sinful humans cannot become God-like, but it was within the ability of God to become like humans. Scripture indicates that the Word did not cease to be what He was before His appearance on earth, even though He assumed the physical characteristics of mankind and adopted the human mode of existence, albeit without the fallen innate sinful nature of humans.

3) The incarnation was the most important, essential step in God’s program to bring fallen humanity back into relationship with Himself. The Son of God left His abode in heaven in order to “tabernacle” among people for a time. Through His life He made it possible for people to recognize and understand the reality of God, and through His death He was the means by which the sins of people could be atoned and the lives of people could be redeemed.

4) The incarnational presence of Jesus displayed His glory. John wrote, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (*John 1:14*). John and other eyewitnesses observed the glory of the heavenly God both shining through and working through the human body of Jesus. According to John, Jesus embodied the fullest possible revelation of the invisible God. He wrote, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him (the Father) known” (*John 1:18*).

Jesus’ time on earth was a temporary situation for a specific purpose. First, it was proof of God’s desire to be intimately connected with His human creation. We know that He “loved the world so much that he gave His One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (*John 3:16*). Second, the life and death of Jesus represented the pivotal moment in history when God accomplished everything necessary to insure that His ultimate purposes would be achieved.