

What's in a Name?
Immanuel
Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23
Bruce Miller

Names are fascinating. After my wife Tamara and I had our first three children, all boys, we were a bit excited when our fourth child was a girl. Tamara was thrilled, so she wanted to name her, "Halleluiaah," I said no. Our daughter is Melanie Joy Miller. And she has lived up to her name bringing so much joy to our home.

I looked up the meaning of my name this week. Do you know my full name? It is actually Bruce Barnett Miller the second. I'm named after my dad. Bruce comes from the Old French meaning "Brushwood grove." Not real exciting, but that's ok. Barnett comes from Old English meaning "nobleman or leader." That sounds better than "Brushwood grove." "Miller" is an occupational surname referring to a person who owned or worked in a grain mill, so I see where I got my love for bread.

Names are powerful. Many of you parents spent months searching for just the right name for your baby. Today branding has become a science. Consultants are paid top dollar to help you brand your enterprise or product. When you give a name, you want something original, something unique and identifiable.

Today we are starting our Christmas series: What's in a Name? We are going to look deeply into the four names Jesus was given at His birth. As important as names are today, they were even more significant in ancient times. In Hebrew your name and existence were almost the same. Your name is who are you, your identity, reputation. In the Bible, names are crucial to grasping a person's significance.

I appreciate Rafe's message last week. He challenged us to celebrate Christmas with thoughtful intentionality. I've been talking with Tamara about how we could celebrate Christmas in our family this year. We are looking at reading the lyrics to a different Christmas carol each day through the season.

Some of you hate the holidays. You just want to get through them as emotionally unscathed as possible. Others are too busy to slow down and

celebrate. Or worse the holiday accelerates your busyness catapulting you into excessive consumerism. We can too easily miss the deep significance of Christmas. We know the story, but its very familiarity dulls us to the life changing truth. And so not only do we miss Christmas, but worse we miss out on the power of Christmas in our lives.

This Christmas I am taking us on a study of the Baby's names that will deepen our grasp of Christmas, and if we are open to God's Spirit, just might change our lives.

The first name is the least known, least understood, Immanuel. Do you know where this name comes from? It's from an ancient story. Immanuel taps into a deep, major theme that runs through the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Today we will discover rich truths captured in the name, Immanuel.

“True security from all danger (even judgment) comes by faith in God's supernatural provision of Immanuel” (Ross). Jesus is Immanuel who fulfills Isaiah's prophecy by entering this world to redeem it so we can once again be fully in God's presence. In troubled times, true security and peace are found in Immanuel.

The origins of Immanuel come 700 years before the Baby was born. Open your Bibles to Isaiah chapter 7, right in the middle of your Bible. Let me prepare you. We are entering a deep topic and challenging truth. Our God is Lord of history. He arranges events so that prophecies can have multiple fulfillments. The prophecy of Immanuel was fulfilled both partially in Isaiah's day and fully by Jesus at Christmas.

Go back in time with me to Isaiah's day. Under Kings David and Solomon the nation was united, but by Isaiah's time has divided into two countries: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In 735 B.C., Isaiah found himself thrust into the middle of an international political crisis. For almost a decade, the Assyrians, under Tiglath-pileser III, had been expanding their empire. Syria and Israel formed an alliance against Judah. In this crisis God sent Isaiah to address Ahaz, the king of Judah. You need to know Ahaz is not a godly man. He does not want to hear the word from God. Isaiah gives the prophecy of Immanuel to Ahaz and the house of David.

Immanuel in Isaiah: a sign of blessing and judgment

Immanuel in Isaiah is a sign of both blessing and judgment. The most famous verse is Isaiah 7:14 where we find the prophecy, but we need to see it in its context. Let's walk through the story. Isaiah 7:1-17 (NIV)

¹ When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram [Syria] and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. ² Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Syria had formed an alliance with Ephraim and were threatening to invade Judah. When Ahaz and his people heard of the Syrian-Israelite coalition, they were struck with fear, shaking like trees in the wind. At this point the Lord instructed Isaiah to assure Ahaz of God's protection. Put yourself in Ahaz' shoes. He is freaked out. An alliance of three nations is about to come after his country. He is scared. Just north of the alliance are the Assyrians, a large empire. Humanly, in his fear, it makes total sense to Ahaz to form an alliance with Assyria and actually pay them to attack the alliance threatening him. But God says, He will protect Judah. Ahaz should trust in God, not Assyria. Continue in verse 3

³ Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. ⁴ Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. ⁵ Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, ⁶ "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." ⁷ Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "It will not take place, it will not happen, ⁸ for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. ⁹ The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.' " ¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."

In this paragraph the prophet puts Ahaz to the test. Although he tells Ahaz to test God, it is really the king himself who is being tested. Isaiah challenges him to ask for evidence that God's promise is true. But Ahaz

does not want such evidence. Why? Apparently his mind is already made up. He is going to trust his and his nation's future to Assyria, and he does not want evidence that his decision is wrong, so he attempts to avoid the dilemma by an appeal to false piety. There is indeed a sin of 'testing God'. Essentially it is the sin of unbelief. Characteristically it says, "I will trust God if He does a miracle to prove to me He's for real." But to refuse an offered sign is proof that one does not want to believe. The moment Ahaz refused the command to ask for a sign he sealed his fate. God gives a sign anyway, not just to Ahaz, but to all Judah, called the house of David and he switches pronouns from "your" God to "my" God. The sign shows God's severe displeasure with the king's choice to trust Assyria rather than Him. ¹³ *Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?"* ¹⁴ *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.* ¹⁵ *He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right.* ¹⁶ *But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.* ¹⁷ *The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."*

A young woman would soon give birth to a boy whom the mother would name Immanuel (meaning "God is with us"). Before the child grows up, the Syrians and Israelites would be defeated. But then the very Assyrians in whom Ahaz was trusting would come and destroy him in a terrible way.

Some have argued the prophecy only relates to time of Isaiah; others that it only relates directly to the baby Jesus. I join a third group in arguing for both. It is common for Old Testament prophecies to have both a partial fulfillment in history and a complete fulfillment in Jesus Christ. We see God-designed patterns in history. If you really know your Bible you may remember some of the following. God provided a ram to take Isaac's place, but Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice who takes our place. Jesus is the lamb of Passover; He is the rock, the snake lifted up in the wilderness, the water, the ultimate prophet, priest and king. Moses is the promised deliverer of Israel from Egypt, but Jesus is the ultimate Deliverer from slavery to sin. David was a great king, but Jesus is the Greatest King. Isaiah's prophecy of Immanuel is partially fulfilled in his day and completely fulfilled by Jesus at Christmas. Amazing!

In Isaiah's time who was the young mother? Who was the child? Biblical scholars have wrestled with these questions at length. Depending on your translation Isaiah 7:14 may say a *virgin* will conceive or a *young woman* will conceive. Which is correct? Was there a virgin birth before Jesus? Studies in Hebrew, the original language of Isaiah, show that the word, *almah*, while generally meaning "young woman," is never used of a married woman in the Old Testament. So the word denotes a post-puberty, but unmarried, young woman. It would be understood in Hebrew society that such a woman would be a virgin. The older English word "maiden" comes very close to the same meaning. Thus *almah* could include both the meaning of a young woman who conceives in a natural way for the first time and a virgin who miraculously conceives without a man.

Who was the child born in Isaiah's day? I believe chapter 8 gives the answer. Apparently Isaiah's first wife died and he remarried a prophetess who was a virgin. After they married, she bore a child with two names, Immanuel and Maher-shalal-hash-baz. In chapter 8, verse 3 Isaiah writes,³ *Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the LORD said to me, "Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. ⁴ Before the boy knows how to say 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria."* Maher-shalal-hash-baz, whose name means "quick to plunder," is the child also named Immanuel. Dual names were not uncommon in the ancient world. We may think of Jacob who is also Israel. The prophecy came true. Before the child was grown, in 732 B.C., Tiglath-Pileser III, the king of Assyria, destroyed Damascus, conquered Syria, and killed Rezin, the king of Israel. A few years later, the Assyrians destroyed Judah, carrying away thousands of captives.

Ahaz was in danger, serious trouble. Foolishly he trusted in the Assyrians rather than in God. Under pressure we too can be seduced into finding security in something or someone other than God. Forming a partnership with someone who has more power, market share or cash makes human sense. Flash back to growing up years. If a bully is threatening you, it makes sense to make friends with the biggest, baddest guy in the school. When danger, trouble and fear overwhelm us, we get tempted to look for security in this world. But God provides us security from danger in the supernatural promise of Immanuel.

The sign of Immanuel given to Ahaz and the house of Judah foretold God's miraculous blessing of military salvation from the attack of Israel and Syria and His judgment of destruction by the Assyrians. But the sign was not only for that day. It looks forward to a future messiah who will be born not just of a young woman, but of a virgin without a man, who will not only be a sign of God's presence, but will literally be the presence of God. As you keep reading in Isaiah chapters 8 to 11, you see that this promised child will be called *Wonderful Counselor*,^b *Mighty God*, *Everlasting Father*, *Prince of Peace*. *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end*. Obviously this child is more than a mere human baby. Isaiah's prophecy is both an initial sign of blessing and judgment in his day and a future sign fulfilled in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. Then and now, true security from all danger comes by faith in God's supernatural provision of Immanuel. We are to trust in God's Immanuel rather than "Assyria."

700 years later Matthew refers to Isaiah's prophecy at the birth of the Christmas Baby.

Immanuel in Matthew: the incarnation of God

In Matthew we will see that Immanuel is the very incarnation of God. This story is much better known than Maher-shalal-hash-baz, but it is the ancient story that gives context to Christmas. Turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 1 and verse 18. Let's stand for the Christmas story:

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

¹⁸ *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.* ¹⁹ *Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.* ²⁰ *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* ²¹ *She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* ²² *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:* ²³ *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."* ²⁴ *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded*

^b Or *Wonderful, Counselor*

him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

There are great distinctions between the Immanuel of Isaiah's day and Immanuel, the son of Mary. The one symbolized deliverance from foreign oppression, the second is the Deliverer from the devil. The first represented God's presence for a few years; the second Immanuel abides for ever. The first Immanuel was a reminder of God's presence. The second Immanuel is "God with us" in an infinitely superior sense. He "fulfills" Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy completely.

The Christmas baby is the God-man. This is radical, deep truth. God invaded earth. The all-mighty, infinite God became a man. Immanuel is the truth of incarnation. Without incarnation there is no salvation. We could not get back to God. He had to come to us. Jesus is utterly unique. He is God and yet human. In one person full deity and full humanity are united. This is why later Immanuel could pay for the sins of humanity on the cross. He could stand in our place as our substitute because He was one of us. His death carries infinite significance because He is fully God. God did not send a representative. He came Himself. God became one of us and yet remained God.

You have probably never heard of the island of Molokai. Well, it's located in the state of Hawaii. And it has quite a history. You have to go back to the late 1800's to understand its significance. You see, back then, there was no cure for the highly contagious and deadly disease called leprosy. A horrible dreadful disease which today is curable, But, it wasn't back then. So, in order to keep the disease at bay. In order to keep it from spreading and creating an epidemic, the government would send lepers to a colony on the island of Molokai where they would be secluded and isolated from those who were not infected with the disease.

- In 1873, a young, brave Catholic priest named Father Damien volunteered to spend his life serving the people secluded on the island of Molokai. When he arrived, he was startled to see people who were not only suffering physically, but socially, and emotionally, and spiritually. In the leper colony he saw extreme drunkenness, immorality, abuse, and an overall sense of hopelessness. What he saw were people who desperately needed to know the answer to a question we all ask... where is God? They needed God's

presence in their life.

- And so, in 1873, Father Damien lived among the 700 lepers. Knowing the dangers, realizing the inevitable results of so much personal contact with a highly contagious disease. He built hospitals, clinics, and churches and built some 600 coffins. And the whole while he was giving them the answer to that question... where is God?

- And whenever a church service was held. He would stand up in front of the lepers, and he would warmly and lovingly address them as "my dear brethren." But then one morning in 1885, at the age of 45, in a calm clear voice, instead of "my dear brethren," he began with, "My fellow lepers, I am one of you now."

- You see it was out of love that a humble priest became one of the them. Out of love he gave those lepers a gift that would change their life for all of eternity. He shared with them the answer to the ever present question... "Where is God?" And the only way he could give them the answer is by becoming one of them.

The Christmas baby is Immanuel. He became one of us to save us from our "leprosy." God came to be with us. True security from real danger comes by trusting in God's supernatural provision of Immanuel. There is no more astounding truth than Immanuel: God with us.

What does Immanuel mean for us today? We've seen in Isaiah Immanuel is a sign of blessing and judgment. We've seen in Matthew Immanuel is the incarnation of God. What is Immanuel for us today?

Immanuel for us today: the promise of presence

Today we have the promise of presence: Immanuel, God with us. At the start I shared that Immanuel ties into a deep, major theme in the Bible. The theme is the presence of God. In the Garden of Eden we enjoyed God's presence as Adam and Eve walked and talked with God. A central consequence of the Fall is losing our connection with God. We were banished from His holy presence in the Garden. On our own we could never find the way back to paradise. We could never reopen the doors to the Garden to once again experience the life giving presence of God.

Since then God has reached back to us. God manifested His presence by pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness; He dwelt in the tabernacle and in the temple, especially the Holy of Holies. But salvation could not come until He came. At Christmas, God came. Immanuel. The Christmas child is God with us. He alone can reopen the doors to paradise. He alone can bring us back into His holy, life giving presence. In a sense, “God with us” is the story of Scripture in summary. The key covenant statement of relationship, “I will be their God, and they will be my people,” is sometimes called the “Immanuel theme.”

In a sense salvation is restoring us to the presence of God. When you trust in Immanuel, He promises to send God the Holy Spirit to dwell with you always. If you have never done so, I urge you today to

***Accept God’s invitation to be present in your life**

In the busyness of the holidays, in the rush of the shopping, in the midst of the despair and loneliness, in the middle of the turmoil we all face from time to time. God invites you to receive the gift He has given the world, a gift He gave by becoming one of us. He became a human. He took on our leprosy, our sin. And He ultimately and eternally answered the question that plagues all of humanity. Where is God? God is with us. That is the gift of Christmas, a gift we can accept or refuse, the gift of Immanuel, God with us. Today, this Christmas accept God’s invitation to be present in your life. He will. If you do not accept God’s gift of Immanuel, God is not with you. Isaiah told Ahaz, if you do not stand in faith, you will not stand. If you do not express faith in Immanuel, you are away from God.

Once you accept God’s gift, He sends His Spirit to be with you as the presence of God. In the Spirit, Jesus is with you always. He promised in the last line of the Gospel of Matthew: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*”

If you are a Christ-follower, if you have the Spirit of God in you, are you living in the presence of God? Like Ahaz, in the face of fearful trouble, we can look to “assyrias” for security. God promises you His presence. He is with you. The concept of “with you” is richer than merely occupying the same room. Think what it means in a persuasive speech, when the speaker asks, “are you with me?” The point is agreement. Think of what it means when the captain of the team gives a stirring speech at half-time and then

asks, “are you with me?” Obviously the players are in the same locker room. The point is commitment. The truth that God is “with you” conveys more than simple presence. He is on your side. He fights for you. He is with you. Immanuel came for us to save us from all danger. This Christmas,

***Trust in God’s promised presence to be “with you”**

God is with you to comfort you in trouble; to bless you in trials and to sustain you in suffering. God will never leave you or forsake you. You need not fear because God is with you. You need not be discouraged because Immanuel. When you are attacked by an alliance of enemies, do not look to “assyria,” look to Immanuel. Isaiah told Ahaz, *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.* Ahaz chose Assyria over Immanuel. Don’t make his mistake.

This Christmas God is with you. He is with you when your money runs out, when you are depressed, when family lets you down and hurts you. You will not find true peace and security outside Immanuel. This season many will turn to alcohol to dull the pain; many will spend money they don’t have to find joy; many will look for satisfaction in illicit sexual intimacy. All these will leave you empty and worse. What is your “Assyria” that you are tempted to trust instead of God. Turn to Immanuel for true security.

On a global scale things do not look good in Iraq or Iran or North Korea or Afghanistan. Terrorism is rising. Along with parties, sadly Christmas also brings increased alertness to attacks from enemies who might chose this time to strike fear. Where will we find security? In Immanuel. He is God with us.

We have confidence that one day we will be with the Lord in the fullest sense. The Bible ends in Revelation 21 with the theme of presence begun in the Garden. The Scripture assures us in John’s vision:³ *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.* Revelation 21:3.

Do not let this Christmas fly by without stopping to reflect on what it all means. Names are a big clue. Names matter. Meditate on Immanuel. What’s in a name? We celebrate Christmas because of Immanuel. God came to be with us.

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