

## God with us: Part 2

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, today we are focusing on the beautiful and wonderful words of Matthew chapter 1 verse 22 and 23. We spent a wee bit of time on this this morning and we're going to spend a wee bit of more time on it tonight. Reading again verse 22 and 23 of Matthew chapter 1, all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.

And in particular, we are focusing on the last three words, three little words. It's only nine letters and yet it's just an abundance of amazing teaching. God with us. And if you weren't here this morning, don't worry because tonight we're sort of going in a different direction, but we'll just remind ourselves very briefly that this morning we said that with us can mean a lot of things. When you talk about being with somebody, it can refer to a whole host of scenarios. You can be with them in terms of location, you can be with them in terms of understanding them with them in terms of sharing the same experience with them in terms of expressing your solidarity towards them. Lots and lots of different ways.

We identified seven, location, experience, emotional understanding, intellectual understanding, relationship, solidarity, intervention. In all of these ways we can be with people and it is in all of these ways that Jesus is with us. And I don't want to just repeat myself from this morning, but it is amazing to think of all the different things that Jesus has come to be for us. But we didn't really kind of cover all the ground, in fact we barely scratched the surface with this whole idea of God with us. And so I want us to think a little bit more together tonight about these three remarkable words. Because they are highlighting for us some really precious truths and we're going to look together at four things and these four things are actually going to take us from the very beginning to the very end of God's plans for us. It points us to the big picture of God's work of salvation. So we'll go through these four things together. First of all then, God with us, that phrase sums up what God wanted from the very start. If you go back to the beginning of the Bible you're going to see many, many amazing things. You're going to see some remarkable characteristics of God being revealed. You're going to see God's power in creating the universe simply by speaking. You're going to see God's wisdom where he takes this chaotic world and he puts it all into order and it's all just beautifully crafted together. You see God's splendour and the fact that everything is so beautiful and we see the remains of that today. Those of you who saw the sand that was playing before the service, so many beautiful scenes of God's creation reminding us of the splendour of the one who made it all. We see God's goodness and that he abundantly provides for us with so many things and I'm sure today we have all known abundance in terms of provision and we see God's sovereignty because it's his creation. He reigns over it all. He's the one who started it. So all of these amazing truths, God's power, his wisdom, his splendour, his goodness, his sovereignty are all emphasised before you even reach the end of Genesis chapter one. But the beginning of the Bible also emphasises a very simple but a very profound truth. God wants to be with us. Now that's so simple, but it is so amazing and it's actually a really, really important thing to grasp because very often people are stumped by the question, why are we here? That's a question that has been going through people's minds for generations. Maybe it's something that you've thought over time, why are we here? What is the point in life? What is the purpose of our existence?

And many, many different answers are given and the most depressing answer of all is the answer that says, well, why are we here? No reason. We're pointless. That's the most depressing answer of all. For some incredible reason, it seems to be the most popular view in Britain today. And I think it's just a masterstroke of work by the devil if you could use that term to describe something that the devil has done because he can make something so depressing, be so appealing. Anyway, I'm not going to get side-tracked on that, but it's hard to understand really when you think about it. Why are

we here? Well, the Bible gives us an answer that is not depressing at all. The Bible tells us that our existence is rooted in the desire of God. Now, that's something that's a good thing to think about. Our existence is rooted in the desire of God. So that means we can say we are here because God wants us to be here. And that's true, isn't it? God chose to make the world, chose to make us. We are here because God wants us to be here. We could say that that's what the Bible says, but although that's true, it's not the whole truth. Because the truth is not simply that we are here because God wants us to be here. The truth of the Bible is that we are here because God wants us to be with him. Now, that's different, isn't it? And it's more amazing. God with us, these three words, it's actually the underlying purpose of the whole of creation. That's why the creation of humanity is the crowning moment of Genesis chapter one. And that's why the Garden of Eden is actually a glorious temple where God and humanity are with one another. So God with us is how it was meant to be from the very start. It's what God wanted for us from the very beginning. Now, that's really, really important to remember because when we are thinking about God, we have to remember God does not need to be with us. God by definition is God. So he is not dependent on anything, least of all on us. God is not dependent on us. God is not forced to be anything by anyone. Nothing can constrain God apart from his own character and his own nature.

[ 7 : 28 ] God is not forced to be with us. God does not need to be with us, but God wants to be with us. And if you are struggling to find purpose in your life, then you need to lay hold of that truth. If you're struggling for purpose, then think about the reason for your existence. You are here because God wants you to be with him. In other words, you have been made, you have been created to be a friend of God. Now, that is definitely something to live for. It is an absolutely amazing truth. So God wants us with him. But as I'm sure you know, in Genesis chapter three, Adam and Eve sinned against God. And at the heart of that sin was a defiant attitude that said, we can get on fine without God. Do you see the difference there? What we were made to be is with God. But Adam and Eve thought, no, no, no, no, no, we can live without God. And that's actually exactly what happened.

Because they were expelled from the garden and they lost their fellowship with God. And the relationship that they once enjoyed was now marred and spoiled. And that reminds us of an incredibly important biblical truth. The person who says, I can live without God will get exactly what he wants. He will get exactly that. God will not stop you from rebelling against him. Now, that's a really terrifying thought if you think about it. But God will not stop you if you want to push him away. And that actually makes perfect sense. And that is perfectly reasonable. And it's perfectly fair. Because at the heart of the relationship between you and God, there is meant to be love. You can't force anyone to love you.

Not even God does that. And this emphasizes the fact that we are responsible. That's part of what it means to be human. Part of what it means to be made in the image of God. We are responsible for what we do with God. Adam and Eve were responsible for the fact that they pushed God away. And sometimes you can think to yourself, well, that seems a bit, you've been a bit harsh, Thomas. But if you think about it, I would say probably every parent in here knows something of what this means. Because, well, I'm certainly sure many, many parents love their children to their very core. And yet they have had to look on helpless as their children have rebelled against them. That's true for a lot of parents. And the only thing the parent can do, the parent can't say, I'm going to force you to love me and to start being the way you should be again. That doesn't work. That's not how it is. What can a parent do? Well, all a parent can do is wait with open arms for the day that that child will come to their senses. And I'm saying that that is what God is like. And if you think about it, that's exactly what the message of the prodigal son is, isn't it? The father of the prodigal son could not prevent that child from rebelling. He could not go and force that child to love him. But he waited and waited and waited. And on that day when his child returned, he ran to meet him. God will not prevent the rebellion. God will not stop the person who says, I can live without God. But he will wait longingly for the return.

But the solemn thing is, is that the return doesn't always come. Because Romans 10 21 says, of Israel, he says, all day long, I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people. God's great desire is for us to be with him. God with us is the original intention. But our sin, our rebellion, our mindset that says, I can live without God has spoiled that. So that's the first, that's point number one for tonight. If you go on in the Old Testament, you will read that the rest of the account through from Genesis to Malachi describes the consequential devastation that has resulted from the rebellion of Adam and Eve. And in many, many ways the Old Testament is not a positive story, it's a

negative story because people are continually rebelling against God. So at one level, we just have the aftermath of the disaster throughout the rest of the Old Testament. But at another level, the Old Testament is a glorious unfolding of God's plan to put things right again. And in that plan, God gives many great and precious promises. And one of them that we find again and again from God in the Old Testament is this, I will be with you. I will be with you. And so our second point is that God with us is what God has promised in the Old Testament. And there are lots of people to whom that promise is given. I picked four or five examples for us to look at. First of all, Isaac, Genesis 26, the Lord appeared to him and said, Do not go down to Egypt, dwell in the land of which I shall tell you, so turn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you. Jacob, Isaac's son, then the Lord said to Jacob, return to the land of your father and to your kindred, and I will be with you.

[15:37] Moses, Exodus 311, Moses said to God, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children out of Israel? He said, bring the children of Israel out of Egypt. He said, But I will be with you. Joshua, just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. And then Jeremiah much later on, do not be afraid of them. For I am with you to deliver you, declare the Lord. Now, these are all promises that say, I'm going to be with you. Now, the really interesting thing is for all of those people, when these promises are made, will start at good times or at bad times? Were these promises made when things were going well or when things were going badly? The answer is that it's all when things are going badly. All of these promises are given not at times of prosperity, but at times of crisis. For Isaac, there was a famine. For Jacob, he was under threat from his uncle, Laban, who had become hostile to him. For Moses, he was terrified because

God had just said, you're going to go and tell Pharaoh that my people are going to leave Egypt. Joshua, his leader and mentor, Moses had just died and he was about to conquest or attempt to conquest and conquer the promised land and a huge task lay ahead of him. And Jeremiah was just a young man and was given a very difficult calling at a very difficult time. And at all these points, God's promises this, I will be with you. And of course, that is a huge comfort for us when we face times of crisis. And going into 2017, I am sure every one of us at various points will face times of crisis. When we do, let's remember what God said to Isaac, to Jacob, to Moses, to Joshua, to Jeremiah and to us. I will be with you. And so God gives these personal promises of comfort and of help. But overarching all of these is a kind of bigger message and a bigger promise that once again, God is going to come and dwell with his people. Remember, that's how it was at the very start. And God is wanting to put things back to the way things were meant to be. God is going to come and be with us. And we can find a good example of that in Zechariah chapter two, verse 10.

Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, and you will be with me. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. God's great promise is that he is going to dwell in your midst again. And that brings us on to point number three, the fact that this promise – God with us – in the New Testament has become a reality. And that's what we focus on in the morning, the fact that in the birth of Jesus, the Old Testament promises from places like Isaiah chapter seven are fulfilled. And now God himself is with us in the Person of Jesus Christ and with all the fullness of what that means. That's what Matthew emphasizes in the verse we read. The Virgin shall conceive and bear our son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. John says exactly the same thing in chapter one of his gospel. The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth. Some of you will remember that recently we looked at the temple theme that runs through scripture. And the word dwelt in John 1.14 is a really important word in that context because it basically means to tabernacle, to dwell, to tabernacle, to make a tent, to tabernacle, which is pointing to the fact that Jesus is God in our midst in exactly the same way as when God dwelt in the temple and in the tabernacle in the Old Testament. So what the Old Testament promised is now a reality in Jesus Christ. Christ has come as God with us, and through his death and his resurrection, a relationship with God is restored. And it's beautifully summed up in Colossians 1.19. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Again, that's a God with us statement, that, isn't it? He is God, the fullness of God dwelt in him. In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross. So he's come to put things right, to restore things. And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind, you who once had that mindset, I can live without God, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you wholly and blameless and above reproach before him. That's all

God with us language, isn't it?

God with us in terms of all the fullness dwelling in God, and in the last sentence before him in his presence with him, Jesus, in Jesus, God with us is no longer just a promise, it is now a reality. And so we're saying that all through the Old Testament, God is saying, I will be with you. And we're saying that come the New Testament, Jesus is born and God is now with us, it's become a reality. And so the promise has been fulfilled. But you may ask the question, and maybe you are asking the question, what about the fact that Jesus has ascended? Jesus has ascended back into heaven, hasn't he? He is not here now.

[ 22 : 08 ] He's not walking on earth now. So how can we say that he is with us? Well, this is where we come to the wonderful work of the Holy Spirit. As John 14 says, Jesus said, I will ask the Father, He will give you another helper to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. So at the resurrection, Jesus ascends to his Father and is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high. But he is still with us because his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, has come to dwell in our hearts. So God himself was with us as God the Son, but God the Son is now back in heaven. So God the Spirit has been sent to remain on earth and to be with us. And the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in the temple of God. And where is the temple of God? In your heart. And that's why Jesus said in John 16 verse 7, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the helper, that is the Holy Spirit, will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. Now notice what Jesus is saying. Now that's really important. Jesus is in the upper room here. Now the upper room is probably the most intimate scene that we see in terms of Jesus in the presence of his disciples. They are in that room. They are so close.

They are having their meal together. Jesus washes their feet. It is the closest, closest that we see Jesus to his disciples in that upper room. But Jesus is saying to his disciples, I have got something better than the upper room waiting for you. And that's telling us that what we have as Christians is greater than what the disciples had. Yes, they had that meal with him, but we have his spirit in our hearts. And I think this is part of the reason why if you look at the disciples, they went along with Jesus for three years.

They were with him. They were close to him. They were spending time with him. And they kept on mucking everything up. And the disciples in the gospels are full of mistakes. But then you get to the book of Acts and you read the book of Acts and these disciples who are a bunch of catastrophes in many ways, they all of a sudden become incredible men of faith.

And you think what's changed? Well, what changed is that the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost to dwell in their hearts and the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in the heart of every single Christian ever since. And that's why these disciples were able to go on and do amazing, amazing things. And that's why Jesus could say, it's two-year advantage. It's better for you if I go away because I've got something better for you. And so the point that's been emphasized is that Jesus makes a promise here that I will send the Holy Spirit. And then in Acts chapter one and two, we read that he keeps that promise. And on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out and he now dwells in our hearts. And I want you to notice a couple of things here. First of all, I want you to notice the Trinitarian emphasis of this. God the Father desires and promises to be with us. God the Son has come to do the work of reconciliation. And now God the Spirit dwells in our hearts and remains in us. God with us is now an amazing reality. But the second thing I want to notice is the question that I asked you when we were doing the reading, the Gospel of Matthew. Remember we read at the very beginning and we read at the very end. Did you notice what I was hoping you would notice? At the very start, it says that his name shall be called Immanuel, which means God with us. And what do you find in the very last sentence of Matthew? Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and behold, I am with you, O, to the end of the age. Did you notice that? I'd love to ask you that.

[ 27 : 36 ] I hope you did. I think it's really interesting that that with us is at the start. And it's at the end. And these point to a couple more things that I want to highlight. First of all, these are words of great comfort, aren't they? How wonderful is it to hear these words of Jesus? I am with you always. And it's such an encouragement for us. The same promises that these Old Testament figures got, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Jeremiah, you're getting the same promise. I never think that these

guys are in a league that you're not in, that the Joshua's of this world and the Moses's and all these people are kind of the elite and we are just the useless ones down at the bottom. There's none of that in God's kingdom.

And the promise is that these men got you are getting as well. And so they're a great encouragement to us. But the second thing I want you to notice, and this is, I think, a really, really important point, is that these are words of theological fact. Jesus is emphasising an absolutely certain theological truth. When he says, I am with you always, he is stating a theological fact for every Christian. Because if you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit dwells in your heart through our union with Christ. Now I want you just to think about that logically, very simply, very logically. The Holy Spirit is dwelling in your heart as a Christian. Now, wherever you go, and whatever you do in your life, your heart goes with you. You can't go anywhere without your heart with you. And the simple logical conclusion to all of that is that you cannot be anywhere. And you cannot do anything at any moment without God with you. And that's why Jesus can say, I am with you always. These aren't just kind of vague, hopeful words. They are expressing a theological fact. And that gives us immense comfort, doesn't it? As a Christian, no matter where you are, supposing you are sitting at your desk, stressed out with all that you have to do, you're sitting there with a list of things to do and you're thinking, I have no idea where to start. I have no idea what to do. I just want to go home, or I just want to hide under this desk.

But God is with you at that moment. You might be waiting for a hospital appointment, and you might be desperately, desperately scared of what that is going to bring. But God is with you at that moment. You might be lying in bed at night worried, and I think every single one of us knows that worries are ten times worse at night. And you might be lying in bed at night with everything going through your head. God is with you at that moment.

And you might be worried about what tomorrow is going to bring, or what next year is going to bring. But Jesus is saying to you, there is never a moment when I am not with you. And that is immensely comforting to all of us. But that should also strike a note of caution in our minds as Christians. Because no matter where you go, God is with you. So that also means that if you go somewhere, or if you do something that is inappropriate, maybe an inappropriate form of socialising, or maybe going into a conversation that is dishonest or just not that nice, or maybe it's going among company that you know is not really that great. If you do that as a Christian, you're taking Jesus with you. Now that should make us think twice about some of the things that we do, shouldn't it? God with us is an amazing privilege. But it is also a holy responsibility. What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. So point number one, God with us is what God has wanted from the very beginning. Point number two, God with us is his promise in the Old Testament. Number three, God with us has now become a reality in the New Testament through the coming of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem and through the sending of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Lastly, God with us is our final destiny if we are believers.

[ 33 : 48 ] And that takes us back to the words that we read at the very beginning. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an abdnential and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. No wonder it says therefore encourage one another with these words because our future, your future, if you are trusting in Jesus, your eternity, your destiny is us with God. That's our destiny. And here we see that these three words, God with us, they are the beginning, they are the middle and they are the end of our salvation. And that makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Because God with us is what God has always wanted. That's what he's always wanted. God wants you with him. And that's why that's your destiny, if you're trusting in Jesus Christ. Jesus has come to make that possible, to make God with us and us with God, your eternal destiny.

Jesus died on the cross to make that happen and the Holy Spirit now dwells in our hearts as a guarantee of that future. That future is sealed and guaranteed by God. He has said, I am dwelling in that person's heart because one day that person is coming to be with me forever. And it's a reminder that for everyone who trusts in Jesus and for everyone who starts trusting in Jesus tonight because you can do that tonight, doesn't have to be on any other day, it can be right now. If you do that, you have an amazing future. And it's a future that makes the struggles and the disappointments of this life so insignificant.

That's what Paul reminds us of in these words. And I want you to really let these words sink in. For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan.

And I'm quite sure you have all grown a lot in this past year and in all the years that we've gone by. We groan longing to put on a heavenly dwelling. If indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan being burdened. Not that we will be unclothed, but that we will be further clothed so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are home in the body, we are away from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage and we would rather be away from the body and home with the Lord. God with us is our destiny. God with us and all of us with God if we are trusting in Him. And I hope, I hope that you can see how amazing all of that is. How from beginning to end, God with us is what God wants for you and what He offers you. And I really, really hope that you can see how simple it is because it is simple.

You put your trust in Jesus, you simply say, yes Lord, please, that's all I want. That's all you've got to do. God with us is us as we are. Not us as super people or whatever we're supposed to be, whatever. Us as we are, which most of the time isn't great. But God just wants us with Him. He will do the rest and He just waits with open arms for us. So I hope you can see the simplicity of it, but I really, really hope that you can see the urgency of this as well. Because this is an urgent matter. God has taken the initiative.

[ 39 : 23 ] God has done all the work. God now stands with arms open, but you and I have got to respond. And we have got to respond by trusting in Him. Adam and Eve said, I can live without God. I hope that we are all saying, God, I cannot live without you. I cannot live without you. And we must never forget that there isn't a middle ground when it comes to this. Because Jesus said, whoever is not with me is against me. And that should make us all think. God with us is the beginning, the middle and the end. It is the reality that we now have and it is the destiny that awaits us. God is ready to be with you forever. But the vital question is this. Are you with Him? Amen. Let us pray.