

Merry Christmas.

One memorable Christmas we already had a full house. We were hosting family and friends, and some guests dropped in unexpectedly from overseas, and then even more friends popped in. What a delight to have a house filled with laughter and love. While Connie fretted about having enough food, the food was secondary to being together.

Today, I would like to tell the overall story of Christmas and focus on why Immanuel, why God became flesh.

In preparation for today, the Lord gave me a dream of a word picture that covers the entire Christmas story.

It is the most powerful word picture in the book of Revelation. 'Despite the sickening condition of the church in Laodicea,'¹ Jesus says, 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me (Re 3:20 NIV).'

- He stands and knocks not because of anything good in Laodicea, but because he desires a close relationship.
- In John's gospel Jesus said, 'I am the way (Jn 14:6),' meaning he was the door, the only way, and we take initiative to walk through. But here in Revelation it is flipped, we see God pursuing us.
- The concept of eating reminds us of when Jesus took off his outer coat and wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the disciple's feet; it was God serving humanity (Jn 13).
- The meal also reminds us of friendship, intimacy with God.

Roughly seven hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah prophesied, 'The Lord himself will give you a sign: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (Is 7:14 NIV).'

Immanuel means 'God with us (Mt 1:23).'

Immanuel is our theme this Christmas.

Immanuel



¹ John Christoper Thomas, *The Apocalypse: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2012), p. 196.

God with Us

It is well known that we celebrate Jesus' birth at this time, but why? Why does God need to come as a baby? Why the Christmas story?

To answer we must go back even further, all the way to the beginning and hear the metanarrative - the overall story between God & mankind. Christmas is a great time to tell stories, especially a great, true story.

1. Setting.

In the beginning 'God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Ge 1:27 NLT).' We were created in God's image to have relationship or friendship with God Himself. In the beginning, God walked in the garden and talked with them (Ge 3:8). This was the ideal state, having ...

- A relationship with God,
- Eternal life, eating off the tree of life.
- And they could eat anything, except off the tree of good and evil.

But that fruit was so desirable to them. They were enticed to believe that 'You will be like God, knowing both good and evil (Ge 3:4 NLT).'

Immediately there were consequences. Everything changed: death, pain in childbirth, and drudgery in work. But most of all, they were now separated from God because of the selfishness and evil that resided in their heart.

God longs to be with those who want to be with Him.

Even in that dark moment, at the dawn of creation, there was a Christmas prophecy.

Speaking to Satan, God said, 'I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel (Ge 3:15 NLT).'

- Those who did as they pleased would be hostile to those who wanted to please God.
- And the one born of a woman will crush Satan, and he in turn will be injured, too. The incarnation and crucifixion became God's plan.

Let's create a list of the important takeaways of the story.

The theological take away.

- God cannot overlook sin (Hab 1:13). 'Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing (Hab 1:13 NIV).'

This is where we begin to see the parallel with Jesus standing outside our heart's door.

Imagine God standing outside your door longing to come in.

2. Longing.

It is very American to say, 'I made a personal decision to follow Jesus.' And while we do decide – because of free will - salvation starts with God longing for us and choosing us.

Like the Laodicean church, despite sin, God still desires restoration, a renewal to the way things were before sin. He longs to have a relationship with you and me.

He pursues us because He longs to be with us.

We cannot restore the relationship on our own. After the fall, with the capacity to know God, we are left with ...

- A knowledge of God.
- A knowledge of sin (wrong).

We are lesser creatures and all our attempts to please God are like giving Him garbage, 'filthy rags (Is 64:6 NIV).' Paul says, 'I know nothing good dwells in me (Ro 7:18 NASB).'

Christmas comes during the coldest and darkest season. That is a word picture for the human condition that longs for light, warmth, and relationship with God. The prophets prophesied about a time that would someday come.

Even our Christmas Carols reflect a longing for God.

- Come, O Come, Emmanuel – a mournful yearning for the Messiah.
- Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus – emphasizes the anticipation of the Messiah's arrival.
- Little Town of Bethlehem – anticipation of Christ's birth in it.

I was a paperboy for many years. I had to knock on people's doors to collect for the Daily Chronicle. Between my knock and them answering the door, there was the

waiting. I had to take the initiative to collect. God takes the initiative to adopt us into his family (Ep 1:5); He approaches the door and knocks on the human heart with a nudge or whisper.

The theological take away.

- God cannot overlook sin (Hab 1:13).
- Only God can save (Ep 1:4-5). 'Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes (Ep 1:4 NLT).'

God longs to be with those who want to be with Him.

Thousands of years go by as God waits for the time to be just right. Nations come and go while God watches for the perfect time to launch His plan.

Then, God knocked on the door of His fallen creation.

3. Knocking, Hearing, & Opening.

'God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin named Mary ... ²⁸ Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you (Lk 1:26-27 NLT)!"'

Gabriel did not knock, he just appeared. I would imagine having an angel suddenly appear caused her some fear. However, it says Mary was troubled at Gabriel's words; she is listening carefully. Gabriel said, "'Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High (Lk 1:30-32 NLT)."'

- Mary had a practical question, 'how? I am a virgin (Lk 1:34).'
- It was a complete mystery how and why this was happening.
- Gabriel says, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (Lk 1:35 NLT).'
- Mary hears the Holy Spirit's knocking on the door.

The theological take away.

- God cannot overlook sin (Hab 1:13).
- Only God can save (Ep 1:4-5).
- God reveals His plan (Ga 4:4-5). 'But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship (Ga 4:4-5 NIV).'

For thousands of years ‘many prophets and righteous people longed to see (Mt 13:17 NIV) this and understand God’s plan – but it was a mystery.

- Paul says, ‘God has chosen to make known ... the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col 1:27 NIV).’

The story simply says, ‘Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” And then the angel left her (Lk 1:38 NLT).’ She opened her heart’s door to the angel, to God’s plan – even though she did not fully understand it – and she allowed her body to be used for one of the greatest and riskiest rescue missions.

She opened her heart’s door, we should, too.

God gladly enters where He is welcome. Here we pick up the most important part of the Christmas story. God Himself enters human history as a baby.

4. Entering (Immanuel).

There are two reasons why God became a human.

First, God cannot enter human history with all his glory, or our free will would evaporate – ‘every knee will bow’ and ‘every tongue will acknowledge God (Ro 14:11).’ God wants relationship with those who also desire friendship. He had to take off his ‘Godness’ and become a man – God in disguise.

Paul describes it like this: ‘Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8 NIV)!’ He emptied himself of his divine nature and became a real human.

This revealed mystery – from the virgin birth to God emptying Himself of ‘godness’ – is still difficult to understand. Please allow me an analogy to help us.

Suppose I am Beatrix Potter, and I imagine a story about a rabbit named Peter. I create a world of loveable characters. Then, one day, I want to be a part of the story as the author. Would you expect me to be just another object in the story? No. I am a real human, and Peter is an imaginary rabbit. C.S. Lewis wrote, ‘If God created the universe ... to look for Him as



one item with the framework which He Himself invented is nonsensical.² So God emptied Himself of His divinity.

Here is how one Connecticut believer imagined that moment when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary: 'Power. Greater power than we can imagine, abandoned, as the Word knew the powerlessness of the unborn child, still unformed, taking up almost no space in the great ocean of amniotic fluid, unseeing, unhearing, unknowing. Slowly growing, as any human embryo grows arms and legs and a head, eyes, mouth, nose, slowly swimming into life until the ocean in the womb is no longer large enough, and it is time for birth ... the maker of the universe ... willingly and lovingly leaving all that power and coming to this poor, sin-filled planet to live with us for a few years.'³ - Madeleine L'Engle

God once again touching his creation. He formed Adam out of the elements of creation, and once again touches the soil He created.

The second reason God became human is that only an obedient human could restore what was lost in Eden.

Christmas is all about the God-baby, the human-baby that was born to reverse sin's curse and restore the relationship between heaven and earth, creator and creation.

- One man's disobedience on a tree brought death to all of us, but Jesus' obedience on a tree brings life to all who believe.
- He was a real human. The disciples knew he was God & man; they saw him with their eyes, 'and our hands have touched (1Jn 1:1 NIV).'
- John wrote, 'We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world (1Jn 4:14 NIV).'

The theological take away.

- God cannot overlook sin (Hab 1:13).
- Only God can save (Ep 1:4-5).
- God reveals His plan (Ga 4:4-5).

² C.S. Lewis, *The Seeing Eye* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1967), pp. 226-230 (226).

³ Madeleine L'Engle, 'A Sky Full of Children,' in *Watch For The Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2001), pp. 80-81

- Only an obedient man can reverse sin's consequences (Ro 5:19). 'For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (Ro 5:19 NIV).'

The final parallel with Jesus knocking on the door, is the entering in and eating with us.

6. Eating.

God longs to be with those who want to be with Him.

This is where we have a choice today. You can either open the door and let God into your heart, or you can ignore the knocking.

God has cleared the way for a restored relationship, for peace with Him through the work that Immanuel did. Paul gives us the key to opening the door for Jesus to enter, 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ep 2:2-9 NIV).'

We open the door by repentance, by faith, and by welcoming Jesus in. This is a Christmas present, a gift of grace.

- If you have been a believer any length of time, you know the peace and joy of relationship with the Holy Spirit.
- There is something special about sharing a meal together. A common table and meal melts divisions. Jesus said we are to 'remain in Him and He will remain in us (Jn 14:3 NIV adapted).'
- We shared a great meal with some delightful new friends, I believe we could have chatted all night.
- Jesus prayed for us, 'That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me (Jn 17:21 NIV).'
- Yumm. Sweet fellowship with God and those who love Him.

God has a wonderful future planned. God's story has run from Genesis to Revelation, the last book of the Bible. Just look at the placement of today's passage ...

- Rev 3:20 - 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me (Re 3:20 NIV).'
- Rev 19:9 – The wedding supper of the Lamb. 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:19 NIV)!' We are not told a lot about this meal, but I am sure it will be tasty.
- Rev 21:3-4 – God and humankind dwelling together.

- Rev 22:2 – The tree of life reappears.

Clearly, God has a plan to restore us to Eden again. It came at a great cost to God's son, but God is standing at the door of our heart, longing to enter. But we hold the power – the free will - to let him in or not.

The theological take away.

- God cannot overlook sin (Hab 1:13).
- Only God can save (Ep 1:4-5).
- God reveals His plan (Ga 4:4-5).
- Only an obedient man can reverse sin's consequences (Ro 5:19).
- God desires to live with us (Re 21:3-4). 'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Rev 21:3-4 NIV).'"

It will be like the garden of Eden again, everything restored as it ought to be. Only this time, we will know the depths of his grace. Now, let's look at this passage considering the overall story: 'And God raised us up with Christ ... ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Ep 2:6-7 NIV).'

Conclusion.

God longs to be with those who want to be with Him.

You have heard the overall story and the reasons why we celebrate Jesus' birth. Now, Jesus is knocking on your heart's door. Will you let him in today?

Prayer.