

SESSION 3

EMMANUEL IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

Session Objectives

This session will equip participants to:

- Understand what Isaiah’s prophecy about “Immanuel” meant in its original context.
- Appreciate why early Christians like Matthew found new meaning in Isaiah’s prophecy when reflecting on their experience of Jesus.
- Reflect on theological questions raised in the doctrine of the Incarnation.
- Articulate the practical benefits of the Incarnation, guided by passages from Hebrews.
- Identify images of “putting flesh on” God’s love that can inspire them to similar action.

Biblical Foundations

- Matthew 1:22-25
- Hebrews 1:1-4; 4:14-16

Leader Preparation

- Carefully read *Incarnation*, chapter 3, as well as this session’s Biblical Foundations, noting any topics you want or need to investigate further before the session. Consult trusted Bible dictionaries, concordances, and other resources as desired.
- Preview session 3 video segment; make sure your video sharing setup is working.
- Prepare these links to share in the chat:
Matthew 1:22-25
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+1%3A+22-25&version=CEB>
Hebrews 1:1-4
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+1%3A1-4&version=CEB>
Hebrews 4:14-16
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+4%3A14-16&version=CEB>
Alternatively, put the Scriptures on slides to share with participants.

- Prepare a slide of the prayer at the end of *Incarnation*, chapter 3; the prayer at the end of this session; or a prayer of your own.

Starting Your Session

Welcome each participant by name as each enters the virtual meeting. Ask those who attended the previous session to talk briefly about what they found most interesting, encouraging, or challenging from it, and how it affected their relationship with Jesus and others.

Invite participants to think and talk about how the Advent and Christmas seasons of 2020 are different because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Acknowledge all contributions to the discussion, modeling acceptance of and respect for participants' emotions.

Tell participants this session explores how the message of “Emmanuel”—“God with us”—was a message of hope in times of sadness, doubt, and fear in the Old and New Testaments. Ask whether it can still be a message of hope in similar times today.

Pray this prayer or one of your own:

Who is like you, God Most High, drawing near to those who are low and in need to raising them up? In your Son Jesus, you entered human life for a time, that we might forever enter yours. May we sense you near us even now, through your Spirit, that we may take heart in our darkest and most fearful times, trusting that you abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. Amen.

Video Viewing

Screen-share Adam Hamilton's session 3 video segment. After the video, invite comments and questions. You might prompt discussion by asking:

- What did you think and how did you feel reading Hamilton's account of the earliest effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S.?
- Hamilton doesn't think God caused the pandemic, but that God brought good out of it, changing the world in many ways for the better. What good, if any, do you believe God has brought from the pandemic?
- Why does Hamilton think the message of “Emmanuel” is one people living in times of fear need to hear?

Finding New Meaning in an Old Prophecy

Ask volunteers to talk about a time when they discovered different or new meanings in a song, poem, story, or work of art with which they had long been familiar. Ask:

- What prompted your new appreciations and understandings?
- Did these new or extra meanings invalidate ones you previously had? Why or why not?

Explain that Matthew, in his account of Jesus’s birth, calls Jesus “Emmanuel” because Jesus’s followers found new and additional meanings in a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah. Review the historical background to Isaiah 7 found in *Incarnation*, chapter 3 (in the section titled “Isaiah’s Prophecy,” especially pages 95–96). Read aloud for participants Isaiah 7:14-16. Read aloud from *Incarnation*:

“The child, Immanuel, whose name meant, ‘God is with us,’ was a living sign of God’s promise to Ahaz both that God was with him, and that God would protect Ahaz and the people of Judah....

“[E]very generation of Jews that followed Isaiah’s time looked at his words in light of their own time, and heard in them a picture of how God might work in their time as well.” (page 98)

Put in chat the link you have prepared to Matthew 1:22-25, or share the slide you prepared with the Scripture displayed. When everyone is looking at the text, recruit a volunteer to read the Scripture aloud. Ask:

- What new and different meaning does Matthew find in Isaiah’s centuries-old message for King Ahaz?
- Why might Joseph have been feeling afraid (refer back to Matthew 1:18-21)?
- Matthew, who wrote in Greek, used the Greek translation of Isaiah, which is why 2:23 speaks of a “virgin” while Isaiah 7:14 speaks of a “young woman.” Does this difference in translation affect your beliefs about Jesus’s birth? Why or why not?

Contemplation of the Incarnation

Read aloud from *Incarnation*:

“Matthew alone found in this somewhat obscure verse [Isaiah 7:14] a powerful picture of who Jesus is and why he came....

Jesus’s conception by the Holy Spirit seems to be Matthew’s way of pointing to his unique identity... somehow... both Son of Man and Son of God.”
(pages 100–101)

Tell participants that Hamilton is summarizing the classic doctrine (teaching) of the Incarnation: in Jesus, the essential nature of God became one of us. Ask:

- Hamilton writes that trying to understand fully the Incarnation will make your brain hurt. What are some helpful and/or unhelpful ways you have heard the Incarnation explained—or perhaps have even used yourself to explain it?
- Christianity teaches “God in Jesus did not simply assume human appearance,” writes Hamilton, “but . . . actually was born and lived as a human being” (page 106). By its fourth century, the church officially rejected the idea that Jesus only seemed human. What’s the difference between a Jesus who *appears* human and a Jesus who is human? What’s at stake?
- What things in life do you find mysterious yet still trust are true? Why? How are these things like and/or unlike the mystery of the Incarnation?

Seeing the Son of God in Hebrews

Put in chat the links you have prepared to Hebrews 1:1-4 and 4:14-16 or share the slide you prepared with the Scriptures displayed. Recruit a volunteer to read each Scripture aloud. Ask:

- What, specifically, does the author of Hebrews mean by calling Jesus God’s Son? Why does Jesus’s identity as God’s Son matter to us, according to these verses?
- How does Jesus, God’s Son, allow us to see God? What distinguishes him from idols?
- In your personal faith, do you tend to think of God as distant and judgmental, or as approachable and sympathetic? Why?
- How do you respond to the idea that, because of the Incarnation, God is, as Hamilton writes, a God who has “experienced what we experience as humans. In Jesus, God experienced temptation, love, hunger, joy, fear, friendship, grief, doubt, rejection, a sense of abandonment by God, and death” (page 102)?
- Hamilton’s professor in seminary told him to avoid telling people, “I know how you feel” or “I understand what you’re going through.” How do you feel about such words? How have you responded when people have said them to you? How can the Incarnation shape a different Christian response to people who are enduring difficult experiences?

Closing Your Session

Read aloud from *Incarnation*:

“As Emmanuel, he [Jesus] seeks to remind you that he is always with you and you don’t need to be afraid. He calls you to go in his name to incarnate God’s love to others.” (page 114)

Encourage participants to think about people they have known who have “incarnated” Jesus’s love for them. Ask volunteers to talk about their experiences. Ask:

- How are you “putting flesh on” God’s love for others this Advent and Christmas season, especially those living in sadness, doubt, and fear?

Screen-share the prayer slide you prepared so participants can together pray either the prayer at the end of *Incarnation*, chapter 3, the prayer below, or one of your own.

Jesus our Emmanuel, you came among us as one of us, and you promise to be with us always, transforming us to be more like you. By your grace, may others know through what we do that God is with them. Amen.

Optional Extension

In chapter 3, Hamilton mentions the song “One of Us” (1995, written by Eric Bazilian, first recorded by Joan Osborne).¹ Hamilton says this song, for him, is a Christmas carol, capturing the essence of the gospel. Find a recording of the song and share your computer’s audio and/or video so your group can listen to the song and discuss its lyrics together. Do you agree with Hamilton’s assessment of the song? Why or why not?

Breakout Room Option

As Hamilton points out (page 101), Matthew “does not offer us a fully developed Trinitarian theology” of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (nor does any other New Testament author). The word *Trinity* doesn’t appear in the Bible. What Matthew (like other New Testament authors) does offer is evidence of how Jesus’s first followers experienced and responded to him. This evidence, combined with that from the other New Testament authors, led the church to develop the doctrine of the Trinity.

Send participants into two virtual breakout rooms. Ask one group to brainstorm and discuss all the biblical evidence for Jesus’s humanity—in other words, how he was like us. Ask the other group to brainstorm and discuss all the biblical evidence for Jesus’s divinity—in other words, how he was like God.

After a few minutes, bring the whole group together. Ask volunteers to report highlights from their groups’ discussions. Ask: How would you respond to someone who says, “If the Bible doesn’t teach the Trinity, I can’t believe it”?

¹ <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/joan-osborne/one-of-us>. Accessed August 26, 2020.