

A God Who Is Present (Immanuel)

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[0 : 0 0] And we come now to our Bible reading, and you'll find that in the Old Testament book of 1 Chronicles. 1 Chronicles chapter 17, page 3, 4, 8 of our church Bibles.

If you've been here over the summer, you'll know that we've been looking at this chapter, thinking specifically about what it teaches us about our great God, our covenant God. 1 Chronicles 17, and we begin reading verse 1.

Hear the word of the Lord. But that same night, the word of the Lord came to Nathan.

Go and tell my servant David, thus says the Lord, It is not you who will build me a house to dwell in. For I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up Israel to this day.

But I've gone from tent to tent, and from dwelling to dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people?

[1 : 3 2] Saying, why have you not built me a house of cedar? Now therefore, thus shall you say to my servant David, Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be prince over my people Israel.

And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.

And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall waste them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel.

And I will subdue all your enemies. Moreover, I declare to you, that the Lord will build you a house, when your days are fulfilled, to walk with your fathers.

I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever.

[2 : 5 1] I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, but I will confirm him in my house, and in my kingdom forever.

And his throne shall be established forever. In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

Then King David went in, and sat before the Lord, and said, Who am I, O Lord God? And what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?

And this was a small thing in your eyes, O God. You have also spoken of your servant's house, for a great while to come, and have shown me future generations, O Lord God.

And what more can David say to you, for honoring your servant? For you know your servant, for your servant's sake, O Lord, and according to your own heart, you have done all this greatness, and making known all these great things.

[4 : 01] There is none like you, O Lord, and there is no God beside you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. And who is like your people, Israel, the one nation on earth, whom God went to redeem with his people, making for yourself a name for great and awesome things, and driving out nations before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt.

And you made your people, Israel, to be your people forever. And you, O Lord, became their God. And now, O Lord, let the word that you have spoken concerning your servant, and concerning his house, be established forever.

And do as you have spoken, and your name will be established, and magnified forever, saying, the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, is Israel's God.

And the house of your servant, David, will be established before you. For you, my God, have revealed to your servant, that you will build a house for him.

Therefore, your servant has found courage, to pray before you. And now, O Lord, you are God, and you have promised this good thing, to your servant.

[5 : 21] Now you have been pleased, to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue, forever before you. For it is you, O Lord, who have blessed.

And it is blessed, forever. Well, amen. And may God bless to us, this, his word. Well, do you turn with me, if you would, to, uh, the reading we had, 1 Chronicles, chapter 17, uh, page 3, 4, 8, if you have one of the, uh, visitors' Bibles.

And, uh, we've been, dropping anchor, as it were, in this chapter, for a few weeks now, as an opportunity, for us, to, uh, look at some great themes, of the whole Bible story, which are expressed, here in this chapter, but of course, are found all the way, through the story.

Sometimes it's just helpful, to, to pause, to look at them carefully, and to just see, how clearly, these things, uh, are obvious to us. And we've been asking the question, who is, the God, and what, kind of God, is it, that we find, in our Christian scriptures, in our Bibles?

Who is the God, we proclaim? Uh, who is the God, that we're talking about, when we speak about, the, uh, the Christian God, the God of the Bible? And of course, that is very important today, because, well, the word G-O-D, can mean so many different things, to different people.

[6 : 51] I guess, for many, many people today, in our, uh, society around about, uh, whatever their conception of God is, whatever we are speaking about, they, they will say to themselves, well, it's pretty much the same, thing in the end.

Different people talking about God, but, we're really all talking about, the same ultimate reality. And what we've been seeing, even just from this chapter alone, is that that is just not so.

That, uh, the God of the Bible, the God we are speaking about, is very, very different, from so many popular conceptions, of what God must be like. And certainly, very different, from the ideas of other religions, the ideas, uh, of most, forms of religious thinking.

We've seen that, uh, contrary to, to the ideas of, human religion, and philosophy, our God is not, a God who is silent, a God who's hidden away, a God who's afar off, a God who's mysterious, who must be searched for, in order to be, clearly known.

And it can only ever be known, just in part, and in shadow. No. Our God, we've seen so clearly, is the God who proclaims, he's the God who speaks, in plain words. And therefore, he can be known, he can be loved, he can be obeyed, without fear.

[8 : 15] And we saw that here, in this very chapter, with David, uh, to whom the prophet, Nathan, speaks the very words of God, with absolute clarity, to him. Telling him what not to do, and telling him, what God wants him to do.

Just as he spoke to Nathan, to David through Nathan, then so also, God continues to speak, he speaks to us today, we have a far greater revelation, even than King David had, from his own personal prophet, we have the whole, of the Christian scriptures, we have the whole story, of the gospel, the whole revelation of God, made complete, in the revelation of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and preserved for us, in the apostolic scriptures.

But our God, is a God, who proclaims himself, to us. And secondly, again, unlike so many, religious conceptions of God, our God is not a God, who is constantly, demanding from us, so that we have to, constantly provide him, with things, in order to win his favor.

Offerings, and pledges, and vows, and all sorts of, religious paraphernalia. Quite the opposite. God, the God we're talking about, is the God who provides.

He's the God, who gives to us. That's what we mean, isn't it? By that word grace. David experienced it here, when he said, it was in his heart, to give God, to build a temple for God.

[9 : 32] And God said, no, no, no, it's not you, who built a temple for me. It is me. I am going to, build a whole household for you, a future, a destiny, which you're going to be part of.

And then again, so unlike, what is intrinsic, to our human nature, and our own unfaithfulness, our own infidelity, our God is a God of promise. He's the God of covenant.

He's the God of sure and certain promise, who can therefore have our sure and certain trust. I have done, says God. I have been faithful all through the past, and I will do.

As I have done for you, so I will do in the future. And we've seen all of these things very clearly, just in this one chapter of the Bible. God speaks to David the king.

God provides for David, his future, his promise. And he promises that wonderful future, not just for him and his household, but through him, and through his seed. A glorious future for his people in the kingdom, ruled by one who would be a son of David, who would himself be the son of God forever and ever.

[10 : 45] So verse 14, he says, I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever. But there's still more for us to see about what this God is really like.

Not just all of these things, but on top of that, I want you to see today very clearly that our God is a God who is present. And again, that's something that surprises us, or ought to surprise us really, as human beings.

Because our God is a God who displays the very antithesis of our natural understandings of power and of glory. Our God is not like the God of pagan conceptions, a God who asserts his rightful glory and power, aloof above his people, far away, separate from his people, demanding of his people.

Now our God is a God who tells us that he suffers indignity with his people, and for his people, until their very last enemy is overcome, and until every purpose of God for his people is complete.

Only then, only then will God dwell in the midst of people, revealing his full and ultimate glory to the world, in his unadulterated presence.

[12 : 18] Our God is a God who forgoes his own glory, until he can share that glory fully with his people, and making them into a people of glory.

And that's the astonishing thing about the story of the God that we read about in our scriptures. That is what he's like. And that's what we see right here, again, in this very chapter, 1 Chronicles chapter 17.

Aren't you staggered by verses 5 and 6? Have a look. God says in verse 5, I've not lived in a house since the day I brought up Israel to this day.

But I've gone from tent to tent, and from dwelling to dwelling. Our God, the God the Bible speaks to us about, is a God who is quite happy to camp out in a tent.

He's a God who's quite happy to be of no fixed abode, a sort of hobo God, who sleeps rough in the midst of the dust and the dirt with his people. Isn't that astonishing?

[13 : 21] To many people, in fact, that's unthinkable. It's outrageous even to suggest such a thing. Surely no human being, in thinking about inventing a God, would ever think of inventing a God who behaves like this.

What kind of God is that? Who would believe it? Can you think of any religions in the world who would demean their gods in that way?

Of course not. They put the images of their gods in magnificent temples. Or at the very least, they guard jealously the honor and the glory of their God in that way.

Go to India and you'll see temples everywhere, Hindu temples all over the land. Shrines even in people's houses for the images of their own little household gods.

Gods deserve to be honored in a special house of their own. I think if you asked any Muslim person to imagine their God, Allah, living in the desert, living in a smelly old tent made of animal skins, living in the midst of the dust and the dirt, I think they would say to you, that's blasphemous.

[14 : 35] Even to put a holy book on the ground is considered blasphemous. Far less the very presence of God himself. A blasphemous thing to even suggest that God could be demeaned in this way.

But the God of the Bible is a God who so wants to be present with his people wherever they are, that he will be present with them wherever they are.

Forever. And that's what all his promises all through the Bible and certainly in this chapter are about. Look at verses 9 to 14. That's what it's talking about.

A God who's promising a place of peace and prosperity and safety for his people to dwell with God. I will appoint a place for my people Israel and I will plant them that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more.

Violent men shall waste them no more as formerly from the time I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I'll subdue all your enemies. Moreover, I declare to you that the Lord will build you a house and he will dwell among them ultimately forever as verse 14 says.

[15 : 53] With a king on his throne forever and ever. The Lord in the midst of his people. But here's the extraordinary thing. Until all of that glorious future is brought to its fulfillment our God is a God who's going to dwell right in amongst his people anyway.

Wherever they are. Whatever the mess. In amongst the mess and the dirt and the untidiness that is a world full of human beings fallen creatures sinful creatures.

And so our God is a God willing to leave all his dignity behind. And happy to humble himself to come right down into a tent among his own.

Until at last his own kingdom is complete. Until at last his people will be established in their rightful place with him.

That's the kind of God our God is. He doesn't want to set up a permanent home for himself until he's made sure that all his beloved people are properly gathered around them and it is their home too.

[17 : 14] And that they are freed from their enemies and dwelling in peace and rejoicing in a permanent home. Because our God is far far more important far more interested in having a living home than in just having a house a building a religious temple.

He's far far more interested in the love for his people than he is in promoting his position. I don't you think that that was an extraordinary thing but a wonderful thing for God's people to understand to read of the first people who read these words they were the exiles weren't they coming back from Babylon back to the land of Israel.

and yes they had they had rebuilt Solomon's great glorious temple but we read in the Bible it was just a pale pale shadow of what it had formerly been.

But here they are reading about this episode that took place long before even Solomon's marvelous temple was built and the message is so clear isn't it that God doesn't really care that much about temple architecture.

Certainly not nearly as much as he cares about being near his people and in the midst of his people. What a great lesson that was for them to learn as they looked at their temple and found it so disappointing.

[18 : 35] What an important lesson for people to learn today in the Christian church to get a grip of that when so often people are far far more interested in the bricks and the mortar that's what they call their church than the living family of God who meet within that building.

Institutional religion is so taken up with the external temples isn't it and so little taken up with the life that's just draining out so often from inside those buildings.

Ask George McElvain he'll tell you all the things we had to deal with years ago when we were involved with redeveloping our previous building. The endless discussions with art and architecture committees whose only interest was what kind of pews we were going to have what was our communion table going to be how would we do this and that and the other I still remember one of them almost collapsing in apoplexy when I said well we're not going to have a communion table what will you do I said well we've got some fold up tables we bring them out we have communion we put them away again they almost died of asphyxiation at the very thought but God's concern is that he is near and in the midst of his people he doesn't care about church architecture at least not that much if a church has room for people and if it keeps the rain out well terrific most of the time our roof keeps the rain out occasionally it fails but that's okay a tent does just fine for this God that we're reading about here he's quite content but what an encouragement that must have been to the faithful people of God as they waited and waited for all these promises of God's salvation to at last be fulfilled for that ultimate glory that the prophet spoke of but to know that all the time of their waiting the God who had been with them in the past whatever the situation has promised to be with them still whatever the situation because he's that kind of

God he's a God who cannot help but long to be present with his people that's why our God is a God who calls himself Emmanuel God with us the God who will take a tent and travel even through desert places just so that he can be in the midst of his beloved people so it shouldn't surprise us should it when we turn over and we come to the New Testament we read in the very beginning of John's gospel John chapter 1 about the God who is just doing what he always did coming into the midst of his people the word the eternal word who was God in the beginning became flesh and tabernacled pitched his tent among us says John and we beheld his glory what was that glory what was the glory of the presence of the eternal God in the midst of his people visible in the flesh to human beings well again it was not the kind of glory that the religion of the world understands was it wasn't the pomp the ceremony glorious temples it was the glory of a

God who drew near into the midst of the mess and the filth of his people where was he born in a filthy cattle shed in the midst of mess and stink and manure where did he live he had no house to call his own home he was homeless and where did he die on that cross for our sins outside the city on the rubbish heap in the dump amid the stench of decay and of death but this is the glory of the God revealed to us in the Bible that he is Emmanuel he is God with us and that he is and he will be present with his people to save them right till the very end of the story that's the very heart of the covenant gospel promise right from the very beginning God said to his people I will be with you I will be your God and you will be my people and we will dwell together that's the hope promised in all the prophets it's a great denouement that we see the very last two chapters of the

[23 : 12] Bible in John's vision of the new Jerusalem coming down out of the heavens to the earth and we're told the dwelling place of God is with man forever and in that city there is no temple because he is his presence is the temple his people or the temple that's where the whole story is going and that's what God is doing right now all over the world he's building his household his church he's building human beings into a holy temple in which God delights to dwell by his spirit that is God's final purpose to have a dwelling place of his people perfected forever to be worthy reflectors of his glory but you see the wonderful thing is that until that job is finished as it shall be finished because he has promised until then and all the way until then our God is a God who is still willing to dwell with his people in very inadequate very unfinished temples in churches that are far from perfect

Paul says the Corinthian church far from perfect you you the people the church you are God's temple and God's spirit dwells in you that's why he goes on to say that if anyone destroys God's temple God will destroy him because God's temple is holy and you are that temple it's a tragedy isn't it it's a sad thing if a beautiful church building or cathedral goes on fire and has to be demolished it's a sad thing but it's an eternally tragic thing if a living temple of the people of God is damaged and destroyed precious to God but he lives even in unfinished imperfect church temples and he dwells with imperfect and unfinished Christians your body he says to the Corinthians your body is the temple of the Holy

Spirit remember he says to those Corinthian people many of you were filthy wicked opposed to God but you were washed you were sanctified you were justified by our Lord Jesus Christ by the Spirit of our God and he delights to live within the temple of his people he's God with us he's God who has been with us right from the very beginning of the story and he will be with us right till the very end he is Emmanuel present with us and that's true friends even when we may not feel that that is so just by way of reminder I want to read to you some just some of the reassurances that God gives of that and has given to his people right from the very start way back in in Genesis 26 when Abraham's son Isaac is under great pressure and facing enemies we read this the Lord appeared to him and said

I am the God of Abraham your father fear not for I am with you and I will bless you and make your offspring multiply for my servant Abraham's sake and later on in Genesis 28 when Jacob was fleeing from his brother and was all on his own and God appeared to him in that vision at Bethel with the heavens opening and the ladder coming down from heaven to earth and God says to him behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you are and I will bring you back to this land for I will not leave you until I have done to you what I have promised you and Jacob woke from his sleep and said surely the Lord is in this place and I didn't know it he felt abandoned and God said I'm with you even in the wilderness of his loneliness and then later on after his time with Laban in Genesis 31 we read that the Lord said to Jacob return to the land of your fathers and your kindred and I will be with you just as these 20 years

I have been with you to prosper him at the end of his life as Jacob faces going down to Egypt remember to be reunited with his son Joseph and God appears to him and says I myself will go down with you to Egypt and I also will bring you up again and Jacob your son will close your eyes and then centuries and centuries later to Moses do you remember in Exodus chapter 3 when God calls him to lead his people back out of Egypt to the promised land and Moses is afraid and God said but I will be with you and this will be the sign for you that I am with you when you brought the people out of Egypt you shall serve God at this mountain and then in the wilderness do you remember even after that terrible rebellion of God's people by making the golden calf and Moses has to implore the Lord to remain with him and God says to him yes my presence will go with you and I will give you rest and Leviticus 26 as we've said it encapsulates the extraordinary grace of God promising to dwell in the middle of his people despite all their sin all their mess

[28 : 48] I will make my dwelling among you and my soul shall not abhor you and I will walk among you and be your God and you shall be my people so it goes on after Moses the same thing to the people of God under Joshua just as I was with Moses says the Lord I will be with you I will not leave you or forsake you be strong and courageous don't be frightened don't be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go just as years later in the time of the judges he came to Gideon and said but I will be with you and you'll strike the Midianites as one man and then to David as we've read here as I've been with you wherever you went and cut off all your enemies before you so it will be in the future again to Solomon his son God said to him I will be with you and will build you a sure house that I built for David and I will give Israel to you and that was God's constant constant promise to his people even even when they were in the midst of exile when they'd been cast out of the land for their sin and God hadn't abandoned them he says in Isaiah 41 fear not for I am with you be not dismayed for I am your God

I will strengthen you I will help you I will uphold you with my righteous right hand when you pass through the waters I will be with you when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned I am with you I will bring your offspring from the east from the west I will gather you back to your home read through Jeremiah you'll find it again and again and again and there so specifically Jeremiah says do not be afraid of them for I am with you to deliver you I am with you to save you and to deliver you declares the Lord and as I said the very last verse of Ezekiel's prophecy when he sees God's return to the midst of his people in a new and beautiful Jerusalem the name of the city from all time shall be the Lord is there the Lord is there with his people that's why the great cry of the psalmist so often of faith and of comfort for God's people is what we have in Psalm 46 the Lord of hosts is with us the God of Jacob is our fortress you see the God of hosts the Lord of the great armies of heaven the transcendent the glorious one above all gods and yet he's the God of Jacob the God who comes down and draws near to dwell with even even those who by nature are so twisted so unfaithful so feeble so undeserving how can that possibly be that God should be like this well only because of course at last in the fullness of time the God who delights to dwell with his people came so close came so near to be with us as one of us and as Matthew tells us in the opening chapters of his gospel fulfilling all the promises of the prophets behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name

Emmanuel which means God with us with us to deliver with us to save us from our sins said the angel so that he can be truly with us and we with him forever and ever he came to take away the mess and the dirt and the sin and the shame to cleanse us forever so that we can at last be a people worthy to be called the temple of the living God so that he might build us as living stones born afresh by his own spirit build us into an everlasting home to share with us forever and ever that's why God the son came so that all these promises of God to be with us would never fail that's why he went to the cross so that we can be truly with him forever and ever in his glorious home remember what

Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room the very night in which he was betrayed in my father's house are many rooms if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you he said I will come again and take you to myself that where I am you may be also with me forever that is his wonderful promise for the future for everyone who loves him and yet even as we wait for that glorious future his promise is still that he's going to be with us anyway he'll never leave us or forsake what did he say just a little later I will not leave you as orphans I will ask the father and he will give you another helper to be with you forever even the spirit of truth you know him he dwells with you the lord Jesus himself and he will be in you the spirit of our risen savior that's what Jesus affirmed you remember as he gave the great commission to all his disciples go into all the world and proclaim the gospel he said behold

I am with you even to the end of the age read through the new testament read the book of acts he was with his apostles as they went out and proclaimed the gospel of God remember in acts chapter 18 when Paul is so cast down and surrounded by enemies in the city of Corinth and the Lord appeared to him one night in a dream and a vision and said do not be afraid go on speaking do not be silent for I am with you and no one will attack you or harm you for I have many in this city who are my people so Paul was unable to stay on a year and six months teaching the word of God among them and friends God gives us today the same reassurance of his presence what does the apostle say to the church in Hebrews 13 God has said to us I will never leave you nor forsake you and so we can confidently say the Lord is our helper I will not fear what can man do to me what does Paul say in Romans 8 nothing in all creation and he's included heaven and hell angels and demons life and death itself nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord he is with his beloved people to the end of the age he's Emmanuel he's the God who's present always today now forever with everyone who loves him he will never leave you nor forsake you if you're his and he is with us to lead us into that glorious place that he has prepared for us and which he is coming back from to take us to be with him forever but what you really need to grasp what you need to understand is this because our God is Emmanuel the God who will be with us it means dirt and mess and sin and stupidity and inadequacy and anything else you can think of cannot keep this God from being present with his beloved people with you and with me the world might look at us and say that's not a fit place for the living God to dwell religious people might look around at various other folk and say oh that's not a person that God could really have anything to do with the devil will certainly look at you and tell you the Lord could never come anywhere near you and even your own heart at times may make you doubt that that could ever be true that's why one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible is 1st John 3 and 20 when our hearts condemn us God is greater than our hearts now this God says that is the temple I choose to live in nonetheless I see the mess I see the sin I see the incompleteness but I will not move out until we all move together into the glorious eternal home that I'm building and until it is perfect and complete and fitted for eternity that's what God says about you if you're a Christian believer today that you are the temple which he will dwell

[38 : 42] in until that day isn't that something wonderful to know certainly is for me but until the long journey to glory is over for you and for me that our God is determined and he's going to camp out with you in the midst of the mess and the muddle and every aspect of that in the tent of your life he's never going to leave until the story is finished no matter how messy things sometimes get this is your God he's Emmanuel he says I'm the one who will never move out Jesus said behold I'm with you always even to the end of the age sometimes you know we get into a real mess don't we in our lives as Christians and sometimes I've heard people say to me things like this there's so much I need to do to get back on track with God so the

Lord will once again be with me listen it's not about us winning him back he's never left he will never leave you or forsake you he can cope with mess he's lived in the midst of his people's mess right from the very start of the story he doesn't like the mess he doesn't want there to be mess he's working in us to clear up the mess one day the mess will be gone forever and ever don't get the wrong idea but until then he's a God who is present even in the mess of your life and my life because the very end that's the God that we proclaim that's the God that we serve and I'm very very glad that that's so let's pray how we thank you oh

Lord our God that you are Emmanuel that you are the God who is with us with us to save and with us to shepherd us now and always and so our dwelling is really secure because it is under your almighty shadow and you are our refuge you are our fortress you are the God in whom we can truly trust now and always with us even in trouble to rescue us to honor us and to show us your great salvation in Jesus your son help us Lord to know that nearness help us to live every day in the light of that gloriously comforting truth until at last that day dawns until the morning star rises in our hearts until on the day of our

Lord Jesus Christ we shall see you as you truly are and we also shall be like you hear us and help us for Jesus sake Amen