

Precious Names of Christmas

☆ *Jesus* (vv.20-21)

☆ *Emmanuel* (vv.22-23)

In the name of *Jesus-Emmanuel*, dearly redeemed family of God:

Most people's preparation for Christmas is limited to decorating their home. Movies depict neighbors competing for best house on the block. Few show the trauma of the ER where victims land after decorating mishaps. One friend this year walked away from a "light fall." He took a tumble off the roof setting out Christmas lights. Four other "light falls" were not so fortunate. Two are in casts, one is a quadriplegic, one is an organ donor. Decorating can be dangerous.

On a lighter note, another man was sure he could beat out all his neighbors. Hours of planning, installing and wiring...finally he was ready. Gathering his family across the street, he proceeded to display his masterpiece spelling out his favorite Christmas word: "Noel!" "Here goes!" he said and flipped the switch. Clearly in the night sky emblazoned across his roof it read: "L-E-O-N" ! And, no, his name wasn't *Leon*! Sometimes you can have it all so right and still be all so wrong!

To come out of sin's night into God's light of Noel we need more than a ladder and electricity. We need the **Precious Names of Christmas** and a clear understanding of what they mean. Remember:

☆ *Jesus* (vv.20-21)

If you have trouble remembering what this name means, it might help to put yourself in the sandals of a man named Joseph in the months leading up to the first Christmas. The older bachelor had not even brought her home, yet he feared he needed a divorce. Under Moses' law, engagement was tantamount to marriage. They could not live together until after the wedding day, but she was legally his wife. And they had a problem. Without a doubt Mary was expecting. This he knew. He also was certain the baby did not belong to him. Nor was she saying it did. Mosaic penalties for premarital sex included death by stoning. "*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.*" Under the circumstances that was pure mercy.

It's hard for our English to capture the sense of Joseph's distress. Movies tend to make men look so heartless that when you find a man like Joseph, you almost can't imagine how he felt. He obviously loved Mary. Everything we know about her was sweet and dear. How could he sleep at night thinking she cheated on him? Fitful fretting disturbed his dreams. You see, his heart was broken. And brokenhearted people know there's not much distance between hurt and anger. Joseph just wanted out.

Have any of you been on a stage crew for a major production? All is dark as the audience hushes for that moment when you throw the master switch. It's not just the sudden shock of blazing brilliance across the stage. There's a loud pounding bang of electricity locking in all the circuits. Boom! go the lights in Joseph's soul as the angel shatters the darkness of his bad dream. "*Joseph son of David,*" the angel says, reminding him of his royal bloodline. "*Do not be afraid,*" or, "Stop being afraid," is the kind command revealing his feeling that very moment. "*Take Mary your wife*" – is the literal, legal wording of God's will. That would be dangerous for Joseph too if everyone thought they had a child out of wedlock. But now the message of the miracle pierced his darkness! "*What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*" Imagine! God did this! "*She will give birth to a son,*" revealing the gender without an ultrasound. "*And you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*"

The footnote in my NIV84 Bible reads: “*Jesus* is the Greek form of *Joshua*, which means *the LORD saves*.” These names *Joshua* and *Jesus* mean *Deliverer*, or more literally, *Wide Way Maker*. Every Christian can relate because the Bible says, “***We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.***” (Acts 14:22 KJV) ***Tribulation*** traps you *between a rock and a hard place*, or as the Chinese picture it, *between two jagged rocks*. Life keeps pressing in from all sides. You’re *between the devil and deep blue sea*. There is no escape. You feel like Joseph whose heart was breaking to let Mary go, not seeing how he could keep her! Then the angel bursts through with God’s truth. No, Joseph, you’re not the father. God is! Just as Jesus breaks the bonds of sin, He shatters our chains of fear.

My dear ones in the Lord, you know there are no heavier chains than crushing guilt and sorry regret. You play the tape a thousand times in your head, but the outcome is always the same. You can’t take back your angry words. You can’t undo your evil deeds. Hardest of all are the *should-a, would-a, could-a, if only* that cannot save your soul. Don’t deny your part. Don’t blame someone else. Jesus came to take all your blame on Himself, to bear your guilt on His innocent head all the way to the cruel cross and victory over the grave. It was God’s plan to send His Son for us all. He cleans us deep inside of guilt and fear, to make us one again with God and each other. *Jesus* is our peace, our reconciliation complete. Now that you know *Jesus* means *Savior* and *Deliverer*, treasure His other **Christmas** name:

✧ ***Emmanuel*** (vv.22-23)

My kids were small when a new Christmas hit captured the heart of a world at war. So much said in so few words and a melody that stirred the soul. Do you remember Bette Midler’s voice, “From a Distance”? Early 1990’s, during the first Persian Gulf War, for many a longing heart: “*From a distance there is harmony, And it echoes through the land. And it's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves, It's the heart of every man.*” “*It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves. This is the song of every man. And God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance. Oh, God is watching us, God is watching. God is watching us from a distance.*”

Many believe the world cannot get along without war; many insist it can – and they will fight you, sue you, or persecute you to prove their point. Problem is, man is the problem. And God is not “watching from a distance.” God came to be one of us. Joseph’s stepson is also called ***Emmanuel***.

Whether you transliterate the Hebrew to ***Imm-***, ***Emm-***, or ***Emanuel***, all mean *God with us*. And how could God come closer to us than to be born a baby to the virgin Mary in poverty and lowliness? How could God come closer than to walk the dusty roads of our lives, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, strength to the lame and speech to the dumb? How could God come closer than to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows all the way to the cross? How could He come closer than to suffer the grief and shame of every man’s sin whether they confess or deny? Give God a chance to prove His power and love in your life. Every longing heart finds rest in God alone. ***Emmanuel*** is “*the hope of hopes,*” “*the love of loves.*” He alone deserves to be “*the song of every man,*” woman and child in humble repentance and joyful hope of heaven’s brighter day.

Translated close and intimate into our lives, ***Emmanuel*** means the pressing load of sin is lifted off your shoulders. Let it be gone from your heart. Grief must flee as joy divine takes its place. ***Emmanuel*** means for the meek and lowly God fills their home with sweetest peace. Calm contentment rules hearts once divided, that now can love again. ***Emmanuel*** means that every land and nation which honor His Name will be changed to a land of love, filled with kind persuasion instead of legal battles and angry demonstrations. God’s truth and blessing alone can give us peace and rest. ***Emmanuel*** means that your heart and life change where God rules inside by His Holy Spirit. There man and wife yield to God and each other in faith-born love that grows by Word and sacrament. ***Emmanuel*** means that Christmas is always as close as the **Precious Name** of ***Jesus-Emmanuel***. Prepare a warm spot for Him in your heart and home. You are never alone. Amen.