

## It All Begins with God – “With” [#1]

By Bob Young

Beginning 2022 with the basics! God. God with us, for us, in us, beside us, before us.

Four questions. Who is God? Who are we? What was God doing in sending Jesus? How should we respond?

If we do not know who God is, we cannot know who we are. If we do not understand God’s purpose, we will fail to understand our appropriate response. The message of Scripture can be summed up in five affirmations about God. In Jesus Christ, God declares that He is with us, for us, within us, beside us, and before us. Five affirmations—five sermons! Jesus’ coming to earth in the Incarnation continues and makes certain in new ways an Old Testament promise: “I will be with you.”

### Tracing this idea through Scripture

“God with us” is an Old Testament concept: check out Abraham, Joseph, Moses, on and on... “I will be with you.” In the New Testament, consider the promises of Matthew 1:23 and 28:20. Read about Paul’s experience in Corinth in Acts 18. Check your concordance: “I will be with you.”

What does “God with us” mean? This is not God beside us; this is not God within us. This is God with us! This is Hebrews 1-2: Jesus Christ accomplishing God’s purpose: Son of God, Son of Man, combined in Jesus.

### Struggling with this idea

We struggle with this idea. We hear people say, “And then God showed up.” Where was he before he showed up?

We talk about coming into God’s presence—are we not always in his presence? Where can we flee from his presence? Read Psalm 139 again.

We pray, “God be with them.” Is He not always present? We struggle with God’s “where” because we do not understand his “who.”

We sing songs that ask God to come near. What does that mean? Is it figurative language?

What does it mean that something is a “God thing”? Perhaps we mean that God was active providentially. I cannot accept that! But let us never think that God suddenly shows up.

We struggle with this idea—God with us—because of the times it seems he is not with us. How do we explain?

Why does God show himself and act in one instance and not in another? Why does it seem that God is “here” sometimes and not at other times? The idea that God is sometimes here and sometimes not leads to faith problems—the absent God, the dead God, the optional God.

### Clarifying this idea

God Present in the World. We can’t really see life clearly unless we understand God’s role in the world. God is with us—even when bad things happen. “I will never leave you.” For Christians, the presence of problems does not mean the absence of God. Even with Jesus on the cross, the Bible says that his prayer was heard.

God Transcendent above the World. The transcendent God balances the present God. We do not understand—how is it possible that he is both present and transcendent at the same time? Rob Bell is helpful when he explains that one way the Hebrews described God’s action and presence was in the Hebrew word *ruach*. If you know Hebrew, you may immediately think spirit, breath, wind. But making this quick connection may do us a disservice. *Ruach* is energy, creative, surprising, surging in and through everything, holding stuff together, like a cosmic electricity, power, divine energy. This is God ever-present and ever-sustaining. *Ruach* is breath, it is wind, and it is spirit (although our English word spirit has a lot packed into it that the Hebrews did not have). Spirit (and Holy Spirit, a study to which we will come later this year) certainly doesn’t mean less real, or unpredictable — jumping in and out of existence, jumping from here to there.

God in the World through the Church. God with us. What should we hear? What should we think? Jesus inhabiting hearts by faith, the coming of the Holy Spirit. The church is the fullness of God’s presence through Jesus.

### **Applying this idea practically**

God is present in his church, present in every moment. What are we supposed to learn? “God with us” helps us answer four questions.

- What is real? Where is the real world? In here, not out there. “God with us” says that there is a spiritual dimension to our existence. “God with us” transcends physical realities. We are spiritual beings—we are spiritually connected. This says something about who we are and how we should understand our existence in this world. God energizes us—he gives breath to our physical bodies.
- Where then should be our focus? “God with us” raises our view above and beyond this world. We see further, we see God, we begin with God. God’s “with-ness” does not affirm the importance of life in this world; God’s “with-ness” affirms that life with God can be a reality even in this world. This mixes the daily and the religious, the common and the uncommon, making clear that the properly centered life is centered in God, in Christ. There is more to this world than what we see because of God’s penetration and participation in this world.
- What is important? “God with us” says that what is going in our lives is supremely important, because in this life we integrate our dual nature, our physical being and our spiritual being. This life matters: it matters to God; there is no such thing as humdrum, everyday kind of stuff. Moses experienced it at a burning bush as he went about doing what he did every day, God always present, but one day suddenly both present and visible.
- What is the goal? “God with us” says there is hope, things can change, things can get better.