

# Christmas 2015

<sup>22</sup> *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*  
<sup>23</sup> *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”*  
*(which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22–23 ESV)*

## **God With Us To Save**

**December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

**Rev. Paul Carter**

### **Introduction:**

Good evening. Please open your Bibles to Matthew 1:18. I want to read to you Matthew’s version of the Christmas story. This is God’s Word to us:

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup> but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18–25 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

It is sometimes said by Bible scholars that Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth from Joseph’s perspective while Luke tells it from Mary’s perspective; I think that’s probably true. Luke says that when he wrote his Gospel and the Book of Acts he went around and interviewed people and it certainly does seem like he got a lot of Mary’s perspective and recollection of events and so his birth narrative has a lot more colour and detail. Women remember things in a way that men don’t – they remember in detail and in colour and in smell – and there is way more of that stuff in Luke’s Gospel. It’s in Luke that we hear about the angels and the shepherds and the manger and the inn. Matthew’s birth narrative by contrast feels stripped down and very focused. Matthew is telling us what it means. I think that’s helpful because we can get lost in the smells and

sentiment of Christmas and we can very easily forget to ask what it means. The story is meant to be felt – I don't want to lose that – but it also meant to be understood. It has objective meaning – IT IS MAKING MASSIVE THEOLOGICAL CLAIMS. I want you to see that tonight. I want you to hear what this story is saying.

First of all this story is confronting us with the fact that:

### **1. God exists and he really does work miracles**

Matthew wants us to understand right from the get go that this is no ordinary baby. This is a miracle baby. He tells us that Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit – before she and Joseph came together as husband and wife – we call this the Virgin Birth. Now for some people this is just further proof that the Bible is a book of fairy tails designed to pacify and amuse the weak minded. We know that virgins can't give birth and people don't walk on water and nor do they rise from the dead. Because we know that, the Bible mustn't be true and Christianity can safely be rejected. When you ask these folks how they can be so sure of the things they claim they will say: "No one has ever been born of a virgin, no one has ever walked on water and no one has ever come back from the dead, therefore these things can't happen, therefore they didn't happen, therefore the Bible is a book of fairy tales."

That sounds very convincing to people in our culture but if you evaluate that line of reasoning you notice that it only works if you start with the conclusion and work your way backward. "It can't happen, therefore it didn't happen". And of course Christians come back on that and say: "But it did happen therefore it can happen" – and what this merry go round reveals is that all people must decide one thing before they decide every other thing. They must decide whether there is a God who can and occasionally does intervene in human history. The materialists have decided that there is no God or at least there is no God who intervenes in human affairs. Therefore everything must be explained by natural causes. So they say that Mary had a baby because she was unfaithful to Joseph and she invented a fairy tale and an angel story to cover her indiscretion and in the end Jesus is nothing more than the misguided love child of a promiscuous Jewish girl. End of story – or so they say.

But what if there is a God and what if he can and occasionally does intervene in human history? If that is true then the Virgin Birth isn't really that remarkable at all. Surely the God who created the universe can also create a little baby boy. In fact in the Bible those two miracles are very often linked together. When God first shows up to promise that he will one day invade human history and bring blessing back to the earth, he speaks that word of promise to a man and woman who were physically as good as dead. Sarah's womb is described in the same language as the world when the spirit of God hovered over it at creation. She was barren and void – but just like in the beginning the Spirit of God hovered over the waters and spoke a word of life and everything changed! That's what it means to believe in God! To believe in God means that we believe he exists over all reality and that he has the power of life within himself. If that's true then anything is possible.

Again and again in the Bible we are brought back to that fundamental crossroads. You have to decide whether you believe that God exists and involves himself in human history or you have to believe that what we see is all there is. And let's be clear science cannot make that decision for you. If God exists beyond the physical realm then he is quite obviously beyond the reach of the physical sciences. This is a decision you have to make BEFORE you examine the evidence. If you believe in God then you look at this Virgin and you see the long awaited invasion of God. If you don't believe in God then you see a silly Jewish girl who got knocked up by a neighbour and who invented a fairy tale to cover her indiscretion. Those are the only options; that's the crossroads and it comes very early in Matthew's story.

Secondly, this story is confronting us with the fact that:

## **2. We are sinners in need of a Saviour**

The angel is very clear about why Jesus had to come:

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21 ESV)

What's really interesting about that is that the Jewish people were expecting a Messiah but they were not expecting a Messiah who would save them from their sins. They were expecting a

Messiah who would save them from the Romans. That tells us something very interesting about ourselves. We want to be saved from our IMMEDIATE problems. God wants to save us from our ULTIMATE problem. We are always fixating on what's wrong now. I need God to help me be a better husband or to help me stop smoking pot or to get me out of this present difficulty. And God knows that because you are a sinner, even if he fixed your present problem you would just get yourself into a new problem tomorrow. That's what sinners do! We stumble like drunken fools from one mess to the next! To be a sinner means to have broken thoughts, twisted logic, wrong desires, bad attitudes and harmful habits – all of which are constantly creating friction and offence between us and God and us and each other. Solving one immediate problem is not going to get it done. We need to be saved ultimately and finally FROM OUR SINS.

Matthew wants us to understand that right up front because there is no point in going any further with this Jesus story until you get that. Understanding that you are a sinner and that you will keep sinning is a necessary precursor to saving faith. That's why Jesus in Matthew 5 when he begins to describe what kingdom life looks like says right off the top:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3 ESV)

Poverty of spirit is the doggy door to eternal life. You have to know that you are broken, you have to know that your sin is the ultimate and primary problem in your life and in this world before you can even begin to understand why Jesus is the Saviour that we need.

There is a sense in which gifts communicate – right? I mean if your wife gives you 4 sticks of deodorant this year for Christmas – that communicates right? She's saying that you stink. And so there is a sense in which THIS GIFT communicates. God so loved the world that he GAVE – he gave Jesus as the gift that we need. Here is what that says. It says that God doesn't believe that you can ever fix what's wrong with you. HEAR THAT. Jesus is God saying – you are a hopeless sinner and you need help. If you can't receive that, then you are very far from the kingdom of God. If you can receive that – if that resonates in your soul as indeed, by the grace of God, it resonates in mine – then you are at the very gate of eternal life. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Lastly, Matthew's version of the Christmas story is confronting us with the fact that:

### 3. Jesus is God with us to save

The babe in the manger is given two names in this story. We are told first of all in verse 21 that his name is Jesus. Jesus is the Greek spelling of the Old Testament name Joshua. The name literally means “Yahweh Saves”. There are two important Joshuas in the Old Testament. The first Joshua was the person who led Israel after the death of Moses into the Promised Land. The second important Joshua in the Old Testament is the high priest Joshua who is mentioned several times in the Book of Zechariah. He is called “an anointed one” and “the Branch” and he rebuilds the temple of God<sup>1</sup>.

So Jesus is a new Joshua – but he is also named Immanuel – we are told that in verse 23:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”  
(which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:23 ESV)

That name recalls a story about a special baby promised by the prophet Isaiah. In that story, told in Isaiah 7-9, the prophet Isaiah looks far into the future past the destruction of national Israel to a time when the sons of David have lost the throne and the people of God seem abandoned to perpetual darkness. As a sign that God has not forgotten them a child is promised – born to a virgin – who will be God with us. This, the angel says to Joseph, is that child. The prophet Isaiah went on to describe this child, he said:

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:2-7 ESV)

This baby, the angel says, is that baby. He is Immanuel – God with us and Son of David – he is GOD and he is KING come to save his people from their sins.

Putting that all together; taking these two names at face value, the angel is saying that this babe in the manger is the Savior that we need. Like Joshua he will defeat our enemies – sin, death and

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<sup>1</sup> As per D.A. Carson in *Matthew* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 76.

the devil – and he will bring us into all the promises of God. This baby will deal with our sin – like Joshua the high priest – he will stand between God and us and make atonement. He will rebuild the house. There will be a family – with brothers and sisters and God over all. He will be our peace. And this baby will be more than a good king like David, he will be a God King. The house of David fell into ruin but of the increase of his government, there will no end. He will establish and uphold his kingdom in righteousness forever.

THIS is no ordinary baby, the angel says, this is GOD with us to save.

And Joseph believed – he received and accepted the angelic interpretation of Christmas!

We talk a lot in our culture about the true meaning of Christmas and how important it is to hold on to the true meaning of Christmas but the truth is that for most people “the real meaning of Christmas” has almost nothing to do with the authoritative interpretation of Christmas given by the angel to Joseph! We talk a lot about family and good cheer and being generous to others – and all of that is really important but let’s be clear it is not the meaning of Christmas. The meaning of Christmas is that God exists, he has not forgotten us, he has come, he is doing miracles, and he is doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. He is fixing our sin problem so that we can be again the people of God, under God, enjoying God forever. That’s what this story is about – that’s who this baby is and what he came to do –that’s the real meaning of Christmas; thanks be to God! Let’s pray together.

*Heavenly Father we bow before this babe in the manger. By your grace and through your Word we know what this means. It means that you are God, and we are not, and that you alone can save. It means that in Christ you have done for us what we could never do for ourselves. And it means that you have paid for what we have done in the body of Christ upon the cross. Thank you. Now Lord, make of us a faithful and grateful people and help us this season to speak to our loved ones and to share with them what you have done for us, we ask in Jesus’ Name, amen.*