

The Incarnation: God Saves us, God with Us

Matthew 1:18-25

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Young people, are you fired up for two weeks off from school? This is an exciting time with so many events and celebrations, which is why it's critical for God's people to stay centered on what this is all about. The past few weeks we have done a series on the *Incarnation*. This is probably the best word we have at our disposal to describe the supernatural conception of Jesus in Mary's womb. *It's the process of becoming flesh*. As John 1:14 (ESV) says, "*the Word became flesh*." As we have seen, this is perhaps the greatest miracle of all miracles, greater even than the creation of the universe and the resurrection from the dead. Why? The Incarnation of Jesus is the uniting of two seemingly incompatible natures in one person. The divine with the human—infinite God with finite man. Yet this is what God did and the angel gave the explanation, "*with God all things are possible*." (Matthew 19:26)

Today we continue with the Incarnation and see its glorious result. It's one thing to marvel at it, it's another to get what difference it makes. So let's read Matthew's account. I want you to watch for two names that are given to Jesus; two names and two meanings.

"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. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." (Matthew 1:18-25)

Here we have Matthew's version of the birth narrative. Each of the four gospels has at least some reference to it, but Matthew and Luke are the most detailed. The story is a familiar one to many of us but let's walk through it. Mary and Joseph lived in northern Israel, in Nazareth. According to the custom of the day, Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married. The way this worked was that when a man and woman wanted to be married, they would declare publicly a promise for marriage. The engagement was very much a family affair and followed strict customs. The engagement period would be around one year. It was a much bigger commitment than our modern engagements. To break a first century Jewish engagement required an actual certificate of divorce. All the customs were followed and insured that the families were heavily involved and the couple was protected from sexual temptation of being alone together. Sex during engagement was strictly forbidden and sex with anyone else was considered adultery.

These cultural norms play into the story because during their engagement, it is discovered that Mary is pregnant. Luke tells us about Gabriel appearing to her in advance and telling her that she would be pregnant and that this conception would be from God. Matthew doesn't include this because he is telling it from Joseph's perspective. Joseph doesn't know

about an angel or a virgin conception. All he knows is that the woman he is engaged to is pregnant and he hadn't been with her.

Because he was a righteous man – we see Joseph's character at work here. He loved Mary and even with what he thought was her unfaithfulness, he still didn't want her ridiculed or punished. So he was putting together a plan to quietly divorce her in a way that minimized her shame.

As a side note, while we don't believe either Mary or Joseph were divine or perfect, God knew what he was doing when he selected them for their roles. Mary's Magnificat is the song she composed during her pregnancy and is a beautiful statement of her faith. Not many 15-year-olds today, or 50-year-olds for that matter, could write anything close to it. We find Joseph to be a man of integrity and compassion, not wanting to submit Mary to shame even though if he did, it might help clear his name which would always be sullied by whispers and innuendos from his critics.

Matthew tells us that Joseph has his own angelic visit. Gabriel explains that the baby in Mary's womb is from God and Joseph is to take her as his wife and to NOT have sexual relations with her until Jesus is born.

Matthew tells the rest of the story in a sentence or two. Joseph did what the angel said; he married her. Mary gave birth. They named the child Jesus. So much of what is associated with Jesus' birth, Matthew doesn't include. There's no mention of a long trip to Bethlehem because of a Roman census. No mention of a manger or shepherds or singing angels. We get all that from Luke. Matthew no doubt knew those details but he wasn't saying everything he knew. He was painting a portrait and including what were to him the most relevant details to the story.

So rather than shepherds or angels, Matthew's account focuses on two names. One is a *proper* name and one is a *prophetic* name. These must be important if Matthew chooses them over what is for us the magnificent story of the angelic announcement to the shepherds and their finding Jesus lying in the manger.

His Proper Name: Jesus (The Lord Saves)

"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins... And he called his name Jesus." (Matthew 1:21, 25)

This past year my wife and I went through the fun and torture of deciding on a name for our daughter. Many of you can relate. When I was single, I thought you just sort of picked it and then you were done. Nothing could be further from the truth. We made a hot list. We carefully researched each name. We thought about what the name rhymed with and how nasty boys with corrupt minds might tease her. We tried to anticipate all the contingencies, good and bad. Naming someone is a big deal. They will have the name their entire life. It makes you wonder what Kanye West was thinking when he named his daughter, *North*. Think about it. North West.

Today, people name their children for any number of reasons: family heritage; important person in their life; faith-based name or Bible character; a hero or inspiring person; liking the sound of the name. In biblical times, names most often came from within the family. This explains the bewilderment when Zechariah and Elizabeth announced the name for their son.

"Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, 'No; he shall be called John.' And they said to her, 'None of your relatives is called by this name.' And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And they all wondered." (Luke 1:57-63)

The family is shocked. *John? There's nobody in our family named John!* It was a break from convention. Yet, the angel told Zechariah to name him John and that's what they named him.

When it comes to Jesus, we are in a different category because Jesus pre-existed as the Son of God. In a sense, he already has a name, or at least a distinction within the Trinity. He was the Son in relationship with the Father and the Spirit. His name was so important that God didn't leave it to Joseph and Mary to choose his name. His name was chosen by his true Father, God himself.

Jesus is the Hebrew form of the Old Testament Joshua or *Yeshua*. It literally means, *Yahweh is salvation* or *"the Lord saves."* God is careful to give him a name that referenced the messianic destiny that his life forever would be. *The Lord who saves.* Matthew captures this missional purpose to Jesus' name when he adds, *"and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."* (Matthew 1:21)

His Prophetic Name: Immanuel (God with us)

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: '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)

Again, this was more important to Matthew than shepherds or singing angels (not that they weren't). Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience and was presenting Jesus as the prophesied Messiah and Savior. Every Jew would have had a working knowledge of the Old Testament and its prophecies. They knew well that Old Testament prophecy foretold of a Messianic figure who would come from the tribe of Judah; the Son of David. The prevailing opinion was that he would be a political figure who would restore Israel's fortunes. This was and continues to be a stumbling block for Jews to consider Jesus as Messiah. The gospel of Matthew was written to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He began with a big one here. *"The virgin shall conceive and bear a son."* (Isaiah 7:14) We covered the virgin birth two weeks ago.

The name and its meaning is Matthew's focus. *"And they shall call his name Immanuel."* (Isaiah 7:14) When Scripture assigns a name to someone, it does so to convey meaning, to say something about the character of that person's life. Even God's name, *Yahweh*, does that. *I Am*. It's a name with a metaphysical meaning.

So what about Immanuel? It literally reads, *with us is God*. That sounds a little like Yoda speak but the meaning is understandable and wonderful. Matthew says that the birth of this child means something. It means something prophetically and it means something spiritually. It means that from now on, God is with us. He will develop this theme throughout his gospel and he even ends his gospel with it. The final words of Matthew are Jesus' words:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Matthew begins the story with Jesus' presence and he ends with the promise that God is always with us. The presence of God with us. Jesus is his proper name and it means *the Lord saves*. Immanuel is his prophetic name and it means *God with us*. Matthew, what are you getting at here?

This Baby is Called Both *Immanuel* (God with us) and *Jesus* (God Saves Us)

These two names show us why Jesus is the perfect answer to our most basic need. Two names. Two meanings. Two wonderful promises. He is Jesus. He is a Savior. He will save his people from their sins. This assumes a basic biblical truth. We have sins we need to be saved from.

The news this week provides a perfect example of our culture's fundamental disagreement with God's definition of things. If you have been under a rock somewhere this week, then you may have missed that the father of the *Duck Dynasty* cast was asked a question for *GQ* magazine, "In your opinion, what is sinful?" He replied by stating a few sins, and then quoted generally from 1 Corinthians 6 a list of sins according to the Apostle Paul. One of those he listed was homosexuality. This created such a firestorm that it led to Phil Robertson's dismissal from the show. I'm not wading into the debate about it other than to point out that at the core of the firestorm was not whether this or that is a sin but whether there is such a thing as sin. Can anyone call anything absolutely morally wrong? If so, who? To see part of our culture go nuclear at the suggestion of a moral standard and moral accountability is an indication of where we are as a country, divided as it may be.

This is where the meaning of Jesus name itself is an affront. *For he shall save his people from their sins.* (Matthew 1:21) And the New Testament further explains that this "saving" he is doing is actually saving us from the wrath of God toward us. We are guilty. Jesus' very name says a lot about us and a lot about him. He is a Savior and we are in need of saving. He is Jesus. God saves us.

But he is also Immanuel. *God with us*. Here the majesty of the Incarnation blossoms as we realize that Jesus took on human nature to save us and by that human nature, he remains with us forever. "Remaining what he was, he became what he was not." (Gregory of Naziansen) He became one of us yet he never divests himself of this nature. He is always one of us and as such, God is always with us. This was Jesus' own emphasis in our mission purpose, *"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20)

We see these two names perfectly speak to our needs. He is Jesus, God saves us and Immanuel, God with us. His saving work on the cross perfectly meets our spiritual needs. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot reconcile ourselves with God. Praise God that Jesus has come as Savior, dying the death we could not die, paying the price we could not pay, gaining a victory we could not win. Jesus did this to *"save his people from their sins."* (Matthew 1:21)

But he is also Immanuel, the God who became one of us. Came to us. Lived among us. Experienced all our weaknesses and pains. Suffered in every way that we do. And is right now among us by his Holy Spirit. He intercedes for us with perfect knowledge of the agonies of humanity.

These perfectly balance don't they? Essentially, Matthew is saying, Jesus is everything we need and everything we want.

Today you may be here and your need is for a Savior. Good news. His name is Jesus. Can the name that God the Father gave to his son be for you a faith-giving reality? He came to save his people from their sins if you will see in his coming a statement about your need. Saviors show up for saving people who need saving. The fact that Jesus came says that we need saving and the message of the Bible is that all who repent and turn from their sins and trust in Jesus as their Savior, will be saved. Why not believe today?

But I know today that we've got another group here today. You've put your hope in Jesus and you love the fact that he's the Savior but you're living in this broken world and there is sorrow and there is pain and you come to church and you go to Bible study or small group and your heart is longing for somewhere you can find comfort, solace, and peace.

And at Christmas time in particular we are often thinking about who is not here. I know this well. I was single into my mid-forties. Somewhere in my twenties it began to bother me. I was always going to my parents' house for Christmas. Sometimes I thought about how great it would be to have a kid at Christmas. Then I went into my thirties and into my forties and I found myself thinking at Christmas time of who was not there. Maybe for you that is a spouse. A friend. A child. A parent.

And the message of the Bible is that in a broken world—where there are disappointments and unfulfilled expectations—is the message of who is here. His name is Jesus. He is Immanuel. He is God with us always. He promised in Scripture, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" (Hebrews 13:5) His abiding presence with us is what gives us courage in our trials and hope in our pain. And I don't know of a more encouraging word for somebody of faith in spite of the pain to realize that in the midst of this God is with me. And someday that will be a physical reality as I will be with him and he will be with me. We await that day.

If Jesus was either Jesus or Immanuel, we should celebrate him with all our Christmas joy. The fact that he is both Jesus *and* Immanuel ought to move our hearts to wonder and to worship and I hope that it does for you and your family this Christmas season.

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