
Immanuel - God with Us

Matthew 1:18-25

Introduction The Christmas story is the center of history. Secularists and liberals and the irreligious may be making a concerted attempt to remove the celebration of the advent of Jesus Christ from public realm. And they may well succeed. But denial of the fact of the sun just because we are blind in no way means the sun does not exist. Jesus was born. Jesus was born the way the Bible says. Jesus was born for the reasons the Bible says. It may well be that the disappearance of public celebrations of Christmas may well open up wonderful opportunities for Christians to explain this private, personal and powerful celebration.

Matthew tells the Christmas story as the background to answer a very important question. When and how will the Old Testament promises and prophecies be fulfilled? We encounter the first “fulfillment” here in our text today which sets the stage for the rest of the book.

Our text this morning tells us how it is that Jesus is at the center – He is Immanuel, God with us. Since He is Immanuel, God with us, all that God planned and purposed will come to fulfillment in Him. The grand lesson of Matthew is that all the promises and prophecies for Israel will be fulfilled in Christ. He is the center of God’s redemptive plan. The kingdom begins when Jesus comes and will reach its consummation when He comes again.

The genealogies that have come before our text trace Jesus’ lineage through Joseph. This is why the Advent story centers on Him. This genealogy is very important as it traces the legal line through to David. This part of the family tree makes Jesus a true royal descendent with the right to the throne. Interestingly, in verse 16, after a long repetition of “was the father of”, the language changes to “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.” Joseph then is not Jesus’ father. This wording is what is going to be explained as we hear this part of the Christmas story.

A Difficult Situation

(v. 18-19)

The paragraph opens with an explanation of how Jesus is born. In a sense, Matthew is going to explain why Jesus is born of Mary. So the story starts with Joseph and Mary.

Their Relationship

They are betrothed to be married. In our culture, we would say they were engaged. There is one very important difference. Betrothal in Jewish culture was a sacred promise. The vow to marry and the covenant was already entered into. The marriage ceremony later made the marriage publicly legal. While we tend to treat engagements with a certain casualness, they were (and ought to be) treated with a deep respect.

Before they are intimate, she discovers she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. What is difficult to know here is whether this “discovery” is her telling Joseph what Luke has recorded. It is possible he finds her story too hard to believe. She may not have told him. We only know that Joseph knows she is expecting and not by him.

His Dilemma

This puts Joseph in very difficult spot. Should he just marry her? Should he charge her with adultery and have her punished? Should he exercise his right to divorce her and clear his own name? What about protecting his family's inheritance?

Joseph is torn as a result of his godly character. He is both just and merciful. He knows that he has the right to put her away. But he does not want to destroy her by making her a public example. He has two clear alternatives. Public charges would destroy her and possibly subject her to the sentence of death. Private divorce at least does not subject her to the public humiliation.

I am struck by how odd this sounds in our culture. If his care and love for her is so great, why not simply marry her? Is he just a cold legalist who is weighing the better of alternatives under the law? If he is such a godly man, why is he even willing to consider the two alternatives he does? Wouldn't a godly man who really loved his betrothed simply marry her? But I want you to notice what makes Joseph the godly man he is. He is determined to do what is right and just. He is committed to righteousness regardless. This commitment keeps his love for Mary from becoming an idolatry.

His Decision

He finds a third way. He will put her away, but privately. This means that he will divorce her, but not publicly denounce her. He will protect her while doing what is right and not jeopardizing or polluting his family line. This seems to be the best course as he can see it. Notice that he is in consideration of these things. He weighed them and thought about them. He did not jump to snap decision either way. He does not act out of anger. He does act out of sentimentality. He is a man of deep principles who ponders carefully the right decision.

A Divine Revelation

(v.20-23)

God then steps in directly.

The Messenger

(v.20)

As God has done all through the Old Covenant, He sent an angel to bring particular revelation to Joseph. In this dramatic fashion, God highlights both the rarity and the uniqueness of this way of communicating. This is understood to be unusual and different. God did not (and does not) communicate directly to people as an ordinary course of life. God wants to say something to Joseph that is direct and particular, so He sends an angel.

The Message

(v.20)

The message the angel gives is one that is commanding, clarifying and comforting.

It is commanding. He is to do what the angel says. God is not here making some divine suggestion that Joseph can take or leave. God's revelation is to be obeyed. Joseph and Mary know what this baby is to be named and what his life will mean.

It is clarifying. It explains what is going on. Mary is with child by the Holy Spirit. She is still a virgin. This is God's plan. It is in these words, so like what Mary was told, that it seems that he has been told this by Mary but may find it hard to believe.

It is comforting. It is comforting for he is addressed in a way that means this son will in the line of David. It is comforting to know that Mary has been faithful. It is comforting to know that he need not fear. It is comforting to know that the birth will take place.

The Meaning

(v.21-23)

The angel gives the meaning of the message in Jesus' name. Call His name Jesus. Jesus is the Greek for the Hebrew name, Joshua. Joshua led people into the promised land, delivering them from the wilderness wandering and the enemies in the land. So Jesus will deliver His people from their sins.

Matthew gives the message meaning by connecting to Isaiah 7:10. What is happening to Joseph and Mary in the birth of Jesus is the second and far fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah. The first fulfillment is the shadow, the metaphor of a young woman in Ahaz' household whose birth would signify and certify the judgment on Israel in captivity. But this fulfillment in Jesus is the substance, the real thing.

Brothers and sisters, do not miss the importance of this. Matthew follows a very important principle in handling the Bible. Jesus is the substance of what has been promised and prophesied. There may be other near and possibly far fulfillments. But they are metaphors and shadows, even when they are strikingly literal. The true reality and fulfillment is in Jesus. Over and over again, Matthew crosses up the standard hermeneutical grid used by the Jews of His day and by many Christians today.

Finally, the most important element of fulfilling the Old Covenant is "God with us." He is called Immanuel. Jesus is God with us. This is what the Old Covenant was heading toward. The kingdom, the temple, the throne, the priesthood will all reach their fulfillment in Christ. Then, at the resurrection, all believers of the past were placed into Christ. At our conversion, we are placed into Christ. Thus, what happened to the kingdom? What happened to the throne? What happened to all the promises and prophecies? Their fulfillment is inaugurated, is begun in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They will be consummated, brought to their highest glory and completion, when Jesus rules and reigns over all throughout eternity.

The message also means that the birth of Jesus is about our salvation, our deliverance from our sins. The sentimentality that pervades much of our celebration masks the stark core truth. Jesus was born because you and I are sinners. Jesus is born to deliver His people from their sins. God is with us, not because we are so wonderful, but because we are so awful. Advent does not affirm the worth of man, but highlights the need of man. And glory to God, advent brings us our salvation from sin.

A Decisive Obedience

(v. 24-25)

Matthew records the deliberate and decisive obedience of Joseph. He highlights it as obedience. Joseph is a godly man who lives by principle and obeys the revelation of God.

In their Marriage

(v.24)

The morning he gets up, he goes and gets Mary and finalizes their marriage. I don't know what kind of difficulty this causes for the family. Normally this ceremony was a time of great celebration. It required enormous planning. But Joseph recognizes what is at stake. His marrying her immediately will do much to protect her reputation.

In their Intimacy

(v.24)

He also understands the importance of what Isaiah wrote. He will in no way jeopardize the virgin birth of Jesus. Mary's is not only a virgin conception, but also a virgin birth. His firm resolve is to authenticate Jesus' standing as fully man, fully God and without sin.

Listen, let's also recognize the what this would have meant. For nine months, the newlyweds do not have physical oneness. This took an enormous commitment to carry out God's plan with great patience. I marvel at the grace of God in such patience.

In their Child

(v.25)

The final act of obedience is in naming Him at birth. When the boy is born, he is called Jesus. This is faith, believing God in an obeying way. This is a stunning affirmation of what God has promised. This boy, this baby, will deliver his people from their sins.

Application of the story:

Conclusion

Godly character can itself create dilemmas and the need for wisdom decisions. Having godly character does not mean that all decisions now have clear black and white paths. Walking with God may in and of itself bring difficult decisions.

Trouble comes as both testing and temptation. Notice that Joseph (and Mary as well) are faced with temptations. God is testing them through this trial. Will they believe God and His Word? Will they do so in a way that obeys? Will Joseph succumb to anger and vengeance? Will he love God and Mary in such a way that God is glorified in what He chooses? Will you? What will you do when the emotions of your relationships clash with the clear principles from God's Word? How will mercy still uphold justice?

God's revelation is where we learn to solve our problems. Now I want to be very, very clear. You will not have an angel come and solve your personal dilemmas. The age of that kind of direct, external speaking is done. And, we do not believe in the kind of authoritative inward revelation functioning as some sort of "leading" that you "must do" or "must obey" or you are sinning. You have the Word of God. Its revelation is all you need. Where it does not speak directly or personally, you must make wisdom decisions.

Our great trouble is that we do not know our Bibles well enough to make these kind of wisdom decisions with much sense of confidence. It is simply easier to follow impressions and other internal guidance. Be careful. How will you then know the difference between the voice of God and your own voice? Ah, brothers and sisters. Learn God's Word well. Trust God implicitly. Obey God with delight. And walk in wisdom.

Careful, thoughtful obedience is not legalism, but the essence of righteousness. When you are scrupulous in your obedience to the commands of God, and you do so with humility and joy, you are not being legalistic. I fear that we are losing our discretion and our sense of what is righteous and holy. We are overwhelmed on one hand by the shaping power of the world. And we are often overcome on the other hand by the critical pressure of other Christians. Walk with God in holiness and in wisdom.

Transition to the Lord's Table:

God is with us in the coming of Christ. Jesus is our Immanuel. And so we remember and celebrate that He is God in the flesh, our Redeemer come to save us from our sins.

God is with us in our union with Christ. God has sent the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, to dwell in us. In our union with Christ, we receive the life of Christ and are born from above. Even greater, we are all together the dwelling place of God, His betrothed.

God is with us in our communion with Christ. Our union with Him produces our communion with Him. In the Advent season we remember and celebrate His birth. But since He has come to save us from our sins, let us join together in communion with Him and with one another to remember his death.

