THEY WILL CALL HIM IMMANUEL

Matthew 1:18–25

Key Verse: 1:23

“‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means, ‘God with us’).”

Today’s passage is Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus. Luke writes the story from Mary’s point of view; but Matthew tells it from Joseph’s. Matthew stresses the importance of his names: “Jesus” and “Immanuel.” He also mentions how his birth fulfilled prophecy. So what does it mean that Jesus was born to be “Immanuel”—“God with us”? And what can we learn from Joseph’s example? May God open our hearts to the true meaning of Christmas through this study.

Matthew has just shown us through the genealogy that Jesus was the son of David and the son of Abraham; he was the Messiah God had promised. But the way Jesus the Messiah was born was really unusual. Read verses 18–19. What a hard thing to have to live through! When two people are pledged to be married it should be a really happy time. But God had a special plan for Mary and Joseph. This engagement suddenly faced a huge storm. Mary was found to be pregnant *without* her fiancé Joseph. But it wasn’t because Mary had cheated on him; it happened, Matthew says, “through the Holy Spirit.” It was a highly unusual, unique act of God. We’ll think more about it later. Verse 19 tells that the way they thought about being engaged was different from us. To them, it was like being married already. Though they were just engaged, Joseph is called “her husband,” and to break off the engagement is called “divorce.”

Verse 19 also tells us some things about Joseph. He was an unusual man. When he got news that Mary was pregnant, Joseph faced a dilemma. Most men would have felt hurt. Many would have lost their temper. Many, if they were deeply in love, would have just accepted the woman and covered everything up. But verse 19 says describes Joseph as “faithful to the law.” Here, “the law” is God’s law in the Bible. That sounds so outdated, so uptight, so uncool. There are so many laws in the Bible, we think it’s all just a bunch of legalism and excuse ourselves from knowing or living by them. We don’t take it so seriously. But Joseph took God’s words seriously. You might think the Bible doesn’t talk about a woman getting pregnant without her fiancé during their engagement. But the Bible actually *describes* such a situation. God gave a law: If it was rape, only the man should be put to death; if it was by mutual consent, both of them should be put to death (Dt22:23–27). God gave such a serious law because he wanted his people to be dead serious about infidelity and betrayal, and grow as his holy people. Being faithful to the law, Joseph probably knew even this obscure law. To be faithful to God’s law, for years he’d had to train himself in real life situations to think based not on his feelings or calculations but on what God’s word teaches. Why did he live that way? He wasn’t legalistic or self-righteous; he made his life *about God* and about pleasing him. He was faithful to God’s law basically because he loved God. More than anything else, he sincerely wanted to please God. So, even in this crisis he didn’t get emotional; he was carefully considering everything. When he thought about it, if it had been rape, Mary likely would have spoken up and sought to catch the guy. But her silence gave the impression she’d consented. If that were true, he couldn’t marry her and pretend the baby was his—that would displease God.

Verse 19 adds, “…and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace.” When we’re hurt, even slightly, most of us get vindictive. We want to see the person who hurt us suffer. We want to prosecute to the full extent of the law. Joseph was a real human being, just like any of us. He must have felt so hurt by the news of his fiancée’s pregnancy. He could have made it all about his pride and honor and sought to have her punished. But it says he didn’t *want* to expose her to public disgrace, though if she’d cheated on him she deserved it. Joseph was being not only just but also merciful. How could he be like that? His faithfulness to the law had brought him close to the heart of God, who doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve (Ps103:10). In deciding to divorce Mary yet not expose her to public disgrace Joseph was thinking first of God, then of Mary, and wasn’t even thinking of himself. In short, he was a godly person. In our self-absorbed culture there are not many people living as godly examples. Let’s pray that we can grow as godly persons like Joseph. They say a crisis reveals our true colors. In this crisis Joseph’s solution was the best one humanly possible.

But God had other plans. Look at verses 20–21. The first thing we notice here is that the angel calls Joseph “son of David.” It reminds us that Joseph’s name was listed in the genealogy (16). Legally, Joseph was born in the line of King David. So his marrying Mary and accepting her baby would give the child the legal status of a descendant of David. But Joseph was a spiritual “son of David” as well; he’d learned David’s faith and mercy, and this was shown in the way he reacted to the news of Mary’s pregnancy. Next, in these verses the angel cleared up for Joseph that the baby had been conceived not out of sin, but through the Holy Spirit. God did that for a special reason. Let’s read verse 21. Mary would have a son, and God wanted Joseph to name the baby, legally making the baby his. And the name itself is also very important. God chose the name “Jesus,” meaning, “the Lord saves.” They say it was a common name at the time. Many couples named their son “Jesus” in the hope that God would send the Messiah to save them. This time, the name came from God himself. In Greek, the emphasis in verse 21 is on the word “he.” It was Mary’s baby who really *would* “save his people from their sins.” And God’s purpose for this baby is the main reason why he *had* to be conceived by the Holy Spirit. If he were conceived in the ordinary way, he would have inherited a sinful nature just like the rest of us. If he were just another sinful human being, he wouldn’t be able to help us, because he would have had the same problem. But because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus uniquely was born without sin. And even more than that, because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was the divine Son of God (Lk1:35). Through the Holy Spirit, God the Holy, Eternal Son took on human form. At the same time, because he was born of a virgin, Mary, Jesus was also fully human. He was made like us in every way. He’s not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. He shared in our humanity so that he might destroy the power of the devil in our lives. He was tempted and suffered just like us, so that he might become our merciful and faithful high priest (Heb2:10–18). He became fully human so that he might empathize with our weaknesses, and so that through him we could approach God’s throne of grace with confidence (Heb4:15–16). Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin Mary, fully God and fully human, became the mediator between God and mankind (1Ti2:5); he truly *can* save us from our sins.

Read verse 21 again. As we saw in the genealogy, the history of the Jews shows that despite their best intentions they couldn’t be faithful to God; they failed again and again. Even their best king, David, fell into temptation. Because of their sins their nation was ruined. They really needed a Savior to save them from their sins. The same is true for us. We could never save ourselves from our sins by our decisions, our willpower, hard work or sincerity. If we’re honest, we have to admit that we’re totally enslaved by our sins. But it’s God’s promise that he sent Jesus his Son to save us from our sins. We can’t do it, but if we repent and accept God’s promise by faith, he does it. We all need to learn to depend on Jesus, not on ourselves, so that he can save us from our sins.

Finally, Matthew gets at the heart of what he really wants to say. Let’s read verses 22–23. Matthew alone among the Gospel writers highlights the prophetic sign of Isaiah 7:14 and applies it to the birth of Jesus. This prophecy took place when God’s people were under a threat from foreign enemies. King Ahaz their leader was so scared, and he made everybody else scared, too. The Bible says their hearts were shaking, “as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind” (Isa7:2b). God sent the prophet Isaiah to help Ahaz overcome his fear by asking for a sign from God. Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, because he already had his own plans. But God himself gave his people the sign of a virgin giving birth to a son and calling him Immanuel. In the next chapter this Hebrew name “Immanuel” is repeated two more times (Isa8:8,10). Finally, the child “Immanuel” is described fully in Isaiah 9:6. It reads: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” According to this verse, the child “Immanuel” would be the “Messiah” in the line of David (Isa9:7). In verse 23 Matthew says this child born of a virgin, “Immanuel,” the Messiah, is Jesus. In his Gospel, written primarily for the Jews, Matthew often explains how the life and ministry of Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. Especially in chapter 2 we see four other prophecies being fulfilled in the events surrounding Jesus’ birth (2:5–6,15,17–18,23). But Matthew’s quoting from Isaiah is way more than just the fulfillment of prophecy; it gets at the heart of what the birth of Jesus means to us. Let’s read verse 23 again. Here Matthew explains what Jesus’ other Hebrew name, “Immanuel,” means to us: it means “God with us.” The expression “God with us” at first doesn’t sound so spectacular. “God be with you” has been repeated so much over the years. It’s abbreviated in our English saying, “Good-bye.” But Jesus being God with us has profound meaning.

**First**, “God with us” means God never gives up on us. Israel had totally failed God. He stopped sending prophets to them for the past 400 years, because they never listened anyway. But it didn’t mean God had totally abandoned them. God was still with them in preserving the line of David and sending the Messiah Jesus through them. God was always with them, even in their darkest times. So Jesus’ birth means that, no matter how much we may have failed, no matter how much we may have sinned and rebelled against him, God never gives up on us.

**Second**, “God with us” means God sent Jesus to forgive our sins. Our sins make us treacherous, and really ugly, like spiritual monsters. But it was God’s plan all along to send the Messiah to forgive our sins. God had predicted his coming in Jeremiah 31, when he would come and make a new covenant with his people so that he would “forgive their wickedness” and “remember their sins no more” (Jer31:34b). This is exactly what Jesus came to do. He came to forgive our sins (Mt9:2,6). The new covenant is in his blood, which he poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Mt26:28). Matthew the author had experienced this personally. He’d been one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. But before Jesus called him he’d lived as a tax collector. His job had made him greedy for money and abusive to people. In modern terms, he’d sold his soul for money. Nobody could trust him. Nobody wanted to be with him. But Jesus called him to be one of his twelve disciples. It made the religious people mad, but Jesus did it anyway. In Jesus’ calling Matthew experienced “God with us” in his amazing grace of forgiveness of sin. Matthew is saying here that no matter who we are or how much we have sinned, Jesus was born to be “God with us,” to forgive all our sins.

**Third**, “God with us” means God sent Jesus to heal us. The Bible describes our sin like a disease. When we sin, we may not feel anything, but it makes our souls sick. We become sicker and sicker not only with guilt and more and more sinful desire, but also with an increasing incapacity to do anything good for God. In Matthew’s Gospel there are many teachings of Jesus. But Matthew especially emphasizes Jesus’ healings, especially his spiritual healings. Only Matthew quotes from Isaiah that Jesus “took up our infirmities and bore our diseases” (8:17; Isa53:4). Matthew says that when the Pharisees questioned why he ate with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus responded, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (9:11–13). He repeated it later in defending his ministry to his disciples (12:7). Jesus didn’t mind being with Matthew, even though he was really sick with sins of selfishness and greed. Because Jesus was always with Matthew, he could be healed of all the diseases of his sin. This was actually how Jesus forgave his sins practically. It wasn’t through just saying some words or preaching a message, but by actually living with Matthew in all his weaknesses and sins, quietly bearing with him, nursing him back to health with his mercy, until he could be healed.

And it wasn’t just for him alone. Matthew tells us that whenever crowds came to Jesus, he healed all that were ill. Then Matthew uniquely quotes the prophecy of Isaiah again and applies it to Jesus: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out…” (Mt12:15, 20; Isa42:3). Our sins make us like bruised reeds and like smoldering wicks—just about to go out. But Jesus, though he is as mighty as God himself, doesn’t crush us with his power. Instead, with his power he tenderly nurtures us until our souls are healed. Our souls become sick not only with sinful desires, but also with anxieties, fears and meaninglessness. Matthew alone describes the healing of our souls Jesus gives us in his invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt11:28–29). Jesus was born to be “God with us” to heal our sin-sick souls. The ugliness and chronic sicknesses in our souls are something we’d rather just not think about. At Christmas, we all tend to get obsessed with getting the latest gadgets or new clothes or toys or with decorations and cooking amazing food, and it’s all supposed to make us happy. But the best gift of all is the birth of Jesus to be God with us, to actually heal the deepest sicknesses in our souls.

Finally, let’s look at verses 24–25. Joseph had experienced God’s revelation through an angel. But he didn’t respond in his own way; he obeyed and took Mary home as his wife. Out of deep respect for God’s words, he controlled himself and didn’t consummate the marriage until Mary gave birth to her son. And he gave the baby the name Jesus. God used Joseph to protect Mary and her baby so that God’s will could be accomplished. May God help us learn to obey him practically in our lives so that he can use even us.