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 meaning of Christmas through this study.

Through the genealogy Matthew has just shown that Jesus was the son of David and the son of Abraham. Jesus was the Messiah God had promised. But Matthew tells us that the way the Messiah was born was so unusual. Read verses 18,19. What a rough beginning to their relationship! When two people are pledged to be married, it’s usually such a happy time. But this couple is suddenly experiencing a major crisis. Mary is pregnant *without* her fiancé Joseph. It isn’t because she’s cheated on him; it’s happened, Matthew says, “through the Holy Spirit.” It’s an extremely unusual, unique act of God. We’ll think more about that later. In any case, it tells us that God has a very special plan for them. These verses also show us that they’re thinking about engagement differently than we do. In verse 19, though they’re only engaged, Joseph is already called “her husband,” and to break off the engagement is called “divorce.”

Verse 19 especially shows us that Joseph has some of the best qualities a person can have. As a man, he’s really unusual. Most men would be so hurt if they hear their fiancée got pregnant without them. Many would totally lose it. On the other hand, if a man is deeply in love, he might just take the young woman home and cover everything up. But verse 19 says describes Joseph as “faithful to the law.” Here, “the law” is God’s law in the Bible. It sounds outdated, uptight, uncool. There are so many laws in the Bible. We tend to think it’s just a bunch of legalism and excuse ourselves from knowing or living by them. We certainly don’t take it so seriously. But Joseph took God’s words seriously. We might think the Bible wouldn’t mention such an extreme case of a woman getting pregnant without her fiancé. But the Bible actually *does* describe such a situation. God said that if it’s rape, only the man should be stoned to death; if it’s by mutual consent, both the man and woman should be stoned to death (Dt22:23–27). With this law God was teaching his people to be dead serious about infidelity and betrayal. Of course God doesn’t want us to be stoning people today, but he does still want us to be growing to be his holy people (e.g. 1Pe1:15,16). Joseph, who’s faithful to God’s law, surely knows about this law about sexual unfaithfulness. But to remember it at such an upsetting time shows that he’s been training himself in real life situations to think based not on his feelings or calculations but on what God’s word teaches. The news of Mary’s pregnancy has hurt him in such a personal way, but his first thought isn’t about himself; his first thoughts are about God and about pleasing him. He’s trying so hard to be faithful to God’s law because basically Joseph loves God. His love for God gives him the presence of mind to think carefully. He’s not like the typical guy who’s afraid of commitment, looking for the first reason to get out of the engagement. As he thinks about this situation, Joseph realizes Mary could have been raped. But, if *that* were the case, she would have screamed and tried to catch the guy who violated her. But Mary is quiet. It gives the impression she consented. If *that’s* true, Mary has committed a serious sin. In that case, Joseph could *not* marry her and pretend the baby is his—that would displease God. Joseph's way of thinking is such a good example for us. He's serious about not displeasing God in his life choices.

Verse 19 adds, “…and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace.” This Joseph’s other amazing quality. When we’re hurt, even slightly, most of us lash out. Joseph was a human being just like us. He could have made it all about his pride and honor and sought to have Mary punished to the maximum degree. But it says he didn’t *want* to expose her to public disgrace. Joseph is not only just, but also merciful. His faithfulness to the law has brought him close to the heart of God, who doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve (Ps103:10). As most of us know, a crisis reveals our true colors. In deciding to divorce Mary yet not expose her to public disgrace Joseph is thinking first of God, then of Mary, and isn’t really thinking of himself. It reveals he’s a godly man. In our self-absorbed culture not many people have a godly character. Let’s pray that through being faithful to God’s word we can grow as godly persons who please God and protect others.

In this crisis, Joseph’s solution was the best one humanly possible. But God had other plans. Read verses 20,21. The first thing we notice here is that the angel calls Joseph “son of David.” What does it mean? It reminds us of the genealogy (16). Legally, Joseph was born in the lineage of King David. By marrying Mary and accepting her baby he’d be giving the child the legal status of a royal descendant of David. But it’s more than physical and legal; Joseph is also a spiritual “son of David.” In other words, he’s grown in what David is best known for, being “a man after God’s own heart,” (Ac13:22; cf. Jer3:15) a man who truly loves God and truly loves others, a man careful to do what God wants, and especially, a man of God’s mercy.

The angel comforts Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary home as his wife. And he explains that Mary’s baby has been conceived not out of sin, but through the Holy Spirit. God has caused this pregnancy in this way for a special reason. Read verse 21 again. God chose the baby’s name, “Jesus,” meaning, “the Lord saves.” In Greek, the emphasis in this verse is on the word “he.” Mary’s baby was the one who would “save his people from their sins.” David saved his people from their enemies, but he couldn’t even save himself from his own sins. But now, God had had sent a descendant of David, in keeping with all his promises, who would be a true Savior, who wouldn’t just solve people’s human problems, but save his people from their real problem, their own sins.

God’s purpose for this baby is 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 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 we have. But because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus uniquely was born without sin (2Co5:21; Heb4:15; 1Pe2:22; 1Jn3:5). Also, because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was the holy Son of God (Lk1:35). He was in very nature God (Php2:6a). Colossians 2:9 says, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” In an amazing, mysterious way, one of the three Persons of the Trinity, God the Son, was taking on human form. By being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, Mary, he was giving up his glory, power and honor as God and taking on all our human limitations and weaknesses (Jn1:14a). God was becoming fully human. The Bible says that he was made like us in every way. He shared in our humanity. He was tempted and suffered like us (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, is fully God and fully human. Thus he became the one and only mediator between God and mankind (1Ti2:5). He truly *can* save us from our sins.

Read verse 21 once more. As we saw in our study of the genealogy of Jesus last week, despite their best intentions the Jews couldn’t be faithful to God; they failed again and again. Even their best king, David, fell into temptation. Because of their sins the 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, our 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 save ourselves, but if we repent and believe his promise, Jesus saves us. We all need to learn to depend on Jesus, not ourselves, so that he can save us from our sins.

Finally, Matthew gets to the heart of what he really wants to say. Read verses 22,23. Among the Gospel writers Matthew alone quotes the prophesy of Isaiah 7:14 and applies it to the birth of Jesus. To understand this, we need to take a brief look at the context. Isaiah prophesied when God’s people were living under the threat of 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 plan. But God himself gave his people the sign of a virgin giving birth to a son and calling him Immanuel. In the next chapter of Isaiah 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).

Here in verse 23 Matthew says this child born of a virgin, “Immanuel,” the Messiah, is Jesus. In his Gospel Matthew often explains how the life and ministry of Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. In chapter 2 we’re going to see four more prophecies fulfilled in the events surrounding Jesus’ birth (2:5–6,15,17–18,23). But Matthew’s quote here from Isaiah 7:14 is more than just a fulfillment of prophecy; it gets at the heart of what the birth of Jesus means to us. Read verse 23 again. Jesus’ other name, “Immanuel,” means “God with us.” Over the years so many people have said to each other, “God be with you.” Our English expression “Good-bye” is actually an abbreviation of it. “God with us” doesn’t sound like such a big deal. But Jesus being God with us has profound meaning. We can break it down in three ways.

**First**, “God with us” means God never gives up on us. As we’ve seen, Israel had totally failed God. For the past 400 years God had actually stopped talking to them, because they never listened anyway. But it didn’t mean God had abandoned them. Even in those years of silence God was still with them, to preserve the line of David and send the Messiah Jesus through them. God was always with them, even in their darkest times. The same is true for us. No matter how much we’ve failed, no matter how much we’ve sinned or rebelled against him, God never gives up on us.

**Second**, “God with us” means God sent Jesus to forgive our sins. Today people act like sin is no big deal. Some even argue there is no such thing. But sin is a big deal. Our sins make us evil. Our sins make us ugly, like spiritual monsters. Our sins make us treacherous. But it was God’s plan all along to send the Messiah to forgive our sins. God had predicted it in Jeremiah 31. He said he would make a new covenant with his people, “forgive their wickedness” and “remember their sins no more” (Jer31:34b). This is what Jesus came to do. He came to forgive our sins (Mt9:2,6). The new covenant is in Jesus’ blood, which he poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Mt26:28). Matthew the author had experienced it personally. 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 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’ve 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. Sin makes us powerless. Matthew’s Gospel records many teachings of Jesus, but he 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 tells us 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 sin. 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 at him, 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 Matthew. He quotes another prophecy of Isaiah 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 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. Only in Matthew do we find Jesus’ invitation that describes the healing of our souls: “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 best Christmas gift is Jesus’ promise to be Immanuel, God with us, to actually heal the deepest sicknesses in our souls.

Finally, let’s look at verses 24–25. Joseph obeyed God and took Mary home as his wife. Out of a 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 like Joseph, so that he can use even us.

Today we especially thought about Jesus’ special name, “Immanuel—God with us.” Jesus never gives up on us. Jesus forgives our sins. Jesus heals us. May God bless each of us this Christmas to experience his inner healing and give us a new heart and new spirit to begin a new year.