

“God with Us”

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Matthew 1:18–25 (ESV)

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.¹

On December 2, 14 people were killed in a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. And, as so often happens in the wake of such an attack, several politicians said that their “thoughts and prayers are with the families of the victims.” Now, that’s not a great phrase. Your thoughts can be with people, but our prayers are *to* God. But the point was that these politicians—who happened to be Republicans—were reacting to the news with prayer. The next day, the New York *Daily News* ran a cover story with the title, “God Isn’t Fixing This.” The article said that these politicians were hiding behind meaningless platitudes instead of working on real solutions.

That headline—“God Isn’t Fixing This”—received a lot of backlash. But I wonder if many people feel that way in the face of tragedy. When innocent people are murdered, or when a natural disaster occurs, people may wonder, “Where is God? What is he doing? Why doesn’t he come and clean this mess up?”

At the time when Jesus was born, many Jewish people wondered when God was coming to fix their problems. Their land had been under foreign rule for a long time. First, they were under the rule of Greece, when Alexander the Great conquered Judea in 332 BC. Then the land

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

was under the rule of Alexander’s followers. Finally, the land was under the rule of the Roman Empire, beginning in 63 BC. The Jewish people believed that God had given them the land. They looked forward to a day when a Jewish king—an offspring of King David—would come and set up a political kingdom. They thought the answer was to get rid of the Romans. They expected the anointed king, the Messiah, to free Israel from foreign enemies. According to one scholar, at the time when Jesus was born, most Jews thought the Messiah would be a “warrior king who would destroy the enemies of Israel.”² They had some reason to believe this. The prophet Isaiah said this Messiah would break the “rod of [Israel’s] oppressor” (Isa. 9:4).

So, many people today expect that God should “fix” things, and Israel in the time of Jesus expected God would “fix” the problem of Roman occupation.

But there’s a problem with our expectations today, just as there was a problem with many Jewish expectations over two thousand years ago.

If God fixed the world right now, he would have to fix us. If God removed evil from the world right now, he would have to remove us. Paul Little, in his book, *Know Why You Believe*, writes:

If God were to stamp out evil today, he would do a complete job. We want him to stop war but stay remote from us. If God were to remove evil from the universe, his action would be complete and would have to include our lies and personal impurities, our lack of love and our failure to do good. Suppose God were to decree that tonight all evil would be removed from the universe—who of us would still be here after midnight?³

We like to think of God judging the evil *outside* of us, but we tend to forget that there is evil *inside* of us. If we’re being honest, we have to recognize that we contribute to the evil in the world. We may not be murderers, but we all battle selfishness and pride and envy.

Similarly, the Jewish people who wanted a Messianic king to defeat their enemies didn’t understand that their greatest enemy wasn’t the Roman Empire. Their greatest enemy was themselves. They had a long history of disobeying God. They had a long history of turning from God to false gods. They, like everyone since the beginning of human history, had a broken

² John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 68, quote in John Dominic Crossan, “Jesus and the Challenge of Collaborative Eschatology,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 119. The full quote is: “This concept of the Davidic messiah as the warrior king who would destroy the enemies of Israel and institute an era of unending peace constitutes the common core of Jewish messianism around the turn of the era.”

³ Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 169.

relationship with God. This relationship needed to be repaired. That was their greatest need, and it's our greatest need today.

We've been learning about important moments in the story of the Bible over the last three months. It all began with God creating the universe to be a theater for his glory. And he made humans to reflect who he is in the world he made. They were supposed to relate to God as obedient children, and they were supposed to rule over God's world by obeying his word. But they didn't listen to God. They didn't trust God. And because they didn't trust God, they were separated from God's presence. The relationship between God and people was broken.

One of my favorite pieces of Christmas music is "Fantasia on Christmas Carols" by the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958). It's a medley of traditional British Christmas carols. It begins with these words:

This is the truth sent from above,
The truth of God, the truth of Love:
Therefore don't turn me from your door
But hearken all, both rich and poor.

The first thing which I will relate
Is that God did man create,
The next thing which to you I'll tell,
Woman was made with man to dwell.

Then, after this, 'twas God's own choice
To place them both in Paradise,
There to remain, from evil free,
Except they ate of such a tree.

And they did eat, which was a sin,
And thus their ruin did begin,
Ruined themselves, both you and me
And all of their posterity.

That's a pretty good summary of what happens in Genesis 1-3. God made the first human beings, Adam and Eve, and he put them in Paradise. But they turned away from God, ruining themselves and everyone else who came after them. Adam and Eve were like children who got a wonderful Christmas present from their loving Father. Instead of showing love and thankfulness to the Giver, they ignored him and turned their attention to the gift. It's like the kid who gets a video game system from his parents and then proceeds to ignore his parents and spends all his time playing video games. But it's far worse than that. The reason we exist is to relate to God and

represent him in his world, and we fail to do the very thing we were made to do. The punishment for this failure is separation from God, which leads to all kinds of evil. That is bad news.

But Christmas is about good news. Though we live in a world that is spoiled, a world that is no longer Paradise, God had a plan to fix things. Even in that old English hymn, we find the promise. Here's the last stanza:

Thus we were heirs to endless woes.
Till God the Lord did interpose,
And so a promise soon did run,
That he would redeem us by his Son.

In Genesis 3:15, God promised that someone would eventually defeat evil. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised David that he would have a son who reigns as the King of Israel forever. In Isaiah 9 and 11, there is a promise that this King, this Son of David, would remove Israel's enemies and bring in an era of unprecedented justice. And in Isaiah 53, there is a promise that someone would pay the punishment for his people's sins and make his people righteous.

The story of Christmas is that God made good on these promises. He sent his Son, Jesus, into the world to save his people. This morning, I'll talk about three important things: one, the character of God; two, who Jesus is and what he came to do; and three, who Jesus' people are.

It's hard to separate those first two points because the Bible teaches that Jesus is God. So we can't really separate the character of God—what God is like—from who Jesus is. So I'll say up front that Jesus is God in the flesh. God became man—without ceasing to be God. Of course, Jesus is more than just God. He's also the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, and the Savior. But I'll talk about that in a moment. It's enough to know that Jesus is God in the flesh who came to rescue his people.

Now, if you know the story of the Bible, particularly the story of the Old Testament, this is astonishing. The basic story of the Old Testament is that God makes good things and people mess them up. That's basically what sin is. Sin is turning away from God. It's taking something good and ruining it—usually by using it in the wrong way, or by making it, instead of God, the ultimate thing in life. Sin is also a power inside of us that causes us to turn away from God. Sin is disordered desire. That disordered desire causes us to use things in the wrong way. We make a mess of God's good gifts, and we ignore the Giver.

The amazing thing is that God doesn't give up on his people. Though they are a disobedient bunch of ingrates, God doesn't just remove them from his good earth. God could

have wiped out the human race. He could have started over with a new species, or he could have just done nothing at all. But God chose to be patient with his people. He is merciful; he doesn't give us the punishment we deserve. And he's gracious; he gives us good things that we certainly haven't earned and don't deserve. Throughout the Old Testament, we can see that God works through people that are flawed. He even works through people that are failures.

We see that rather clearly in Jesus' genealogy at the beginning of Matthew 1. The beginning of Matthew tells that Jesus is "the son of David, the son of Abraham." In other words, he's the promised king who would come from David's line, and he's the offspring promised to Abraham, the one who would bless the whole world. But if we look at Jesus' genealogy, we are reminded of some pretty sketchy characters in Israel's history. For example, there's Judah and Tamar (v. 3). Tamar was married to Judah's firstborn son, who died. Then she married Judah's second son, but he died, too. Tamar wanted a son, so she disguised herself and had sex with Judah, who thought she was a prostitute (Genesis 38). They had twins, one of whom was Perez. Rahab (v. 5) actually was a prostitute who put her trust in the God of Israel and was saved (Joshua 2).

Then there's David himself. Though he was in many ways a godly man, he wasn't perfect. And Matthew wants us to know that. So he writes, "David was the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah*" (v. 6). If you know the story, Matthew is referring to Bathsheba. She was another man's wife, but David committed adultery with her. David also had this man, Uriah, put to death (2 Samuel 11).

We also see a number of wicked kings in this genealogy. Solomon (vv. 6-7) turned away from God and worshiped idols (1 Kings 11). Manasseh (v. 10) was the worst of the kings. He led the nation into idolatry. He even burnt his son as an offering to a false god (2 Kings 21). So, in Jesus' family tree you have prostitutes, adulterers, murderers, and idolaters. (And you think *your* family is dysfunctional!)

But that's really the point of Christmas. God steps into the mess that we have made. This is well illustrated in a passage I once read in an Advent devotional. The author said that Jesus was born among animals. Then he spends some time painting a picture of the food these animals would eat. They ate grass, which may have contained beautiful wild flowers. The grass and the flowers were cut and dried to become hay. The animals ate the hay and then turned it into dung.

Then this author writes:

This is the real stable where Jesus was born. The filthiest place in the world was the first room of the only pure man ever born of woman. The Son of Man, who was to be devoured by wild beasts calling themselves men, had as his first cradle the manger where the animals chewed the cud of the miraculous flowers of spring.

It was not by chance that Christ was born in a stable. What is the world but an immense stable where men produce filth and wallow in it? Do they not daily exchange the most beautiful, the purest, the most divine things into excrement? Then, stretching themselves at full length on the piles of manure, they say they are “enjoying life.” Upon this earthly pigsty, where no decorations or perfumes can hide the odor of filth, Jesus appeared one night . . . armed only with innocence.⁴

Jesus was probably born in a cave, not a stable or a barn,⁵ but the point remains: he was born in a filthy place. And that is a great metaphor for the world: stinking of sin, reeking of pride, heaped full of the manure of an endless series of selfish choices. God enters into this mess to save his people, because they can’t clean themselves up and find their way to him. God stooped down to our level because we can’t climb up to his. This tells us something about God’s love and grace and the extent to which he would go to bring his people back to himself.

So, that’s God’s character. Now let’s think a bit more about who Jesus is. The passage for today quotes Isaiah 7:14 (in Matt. 1:23), which promised that a child called “Immanuel” would be born, and this would be a sign that God would save his people. In Isaiah’s day, God’s people needed to be delivered from foreign enemies. But as I said earlier, the true enemy is our own sin. It’s that selfish power of distorted desires that metastasizes like a giant tumor, threatening to kill us. “Immanuel” means “God with us.” And Jesus is just that. Jesus is God in the flesh. There are many ways that we are told that Jesus is God. Sometimes, it’s quite direct (John 1:1; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13). Other times, it’s more subtle. In the Gospels, we are shown that Jesus has the power to forgive sin committed against God (Matt. 9:1-8; Mark 2:3-12). Jesus says that the eternal fate of everyone depends on whether they obey him or not (Matt. 7:24-27). He says he will judge everyone who has ever lived at the end of human history (Matt. 25:31-46). He controls weather (Mark 4:35-41) and brings people back from the dead (Matt. 9:18-26; John 11). Who else can do these things but God?

⁴ Giovanni Papini, “Ox and Ass,” in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 236-237.

⁵ Sarah E. Dahl, “That Most Familiar Story,” Christian History Institute, <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/that-most-familiar-story>.

Since Jesus is God, he is also the creator of the universe (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-16; Heb. 1:2). The creator entered into his own creation to save his people. I don't think I'll ever understand the depth of that truth. Or perhaps I should say I won't ever *feel* the depth of that truth. But we can imagine what it's like. It's like William Shakespeare writing himself into his own play so Hamlet or Othello doesn't have to die. It's like J. K. Rowling writing herself into her Harry Potter books. But the story that Jesus wrote himself into, the world he came into as a baby, is real. God entered into history in the person of Jesus.

The birth of Jesus shows that God didn't give up on his creation. It shows how far he would go to bring his people back to himself. It shows how vulnerable God made himself. He became a baby. The deliverer was delivered, not in a sanitary hospital, but among filthy animals.

Jesus is not only God, he's the savior. The angel tells Joseph that Mary "will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21). Jesus' name means "the Lord saves." In Hebrew, it would be *Yeshua*, or "Yahweh is salvation."⁶ So Jesus comes to save his people. How does he save them? Does he save them by defeating the Roman Empire? Does he save them by improving the economy? Does he save them by giving them a better education?

No, Jesus saves by taking on the punishment for our sin when he died on the cross. He died for the sins of his people. Jesus was born to die. And this is the amazing part: Jesus is the only person who didn't deserve to die. Jesus had a perfect relationship with God the Father. Jesus never turned away from him. Jesus never disobeyed. Yet if God was going to crush the sins of his people without crushing them, someone else had to absorb the penalty they deserved. Someone who was not just a human dying for other humans, but someone who was also infinite, able to absorb all the evil of the past, present, and future committed by his people. That's what Jesus did. That's why he came.

One of my favorite theologians, Don Carson, writes about our greatest need and what Jesus came to do:

If God had perceived that our greatest need was economic, he would have sent an economist. If he had perceived that our greatest need was entertainment, he would have sent us a comedian or an artist. If God had perceived that our greatest need was political stability, he would have sent us a politician. If he had perceived that our greatest need was health, he would have sent us a doctor. But he perceived

⁶ In Greek, the language of the New Testament, it is Ἰησοῦς.

that our greatest need involved our sin, our alienation from him, our profound rebellion, our death; and he sent us a Savior.⁷

Our greatest need is not a better economy, or better education, or better national security, or a better environment. Our greatest need is to be reconciled to God. We need to be put back into a right relationship with God. To do that, God needs to come and get us. God needs to punish sin because he's a perfect judge. He can't just sweep our evil under the carpet and call it good. So someone has to take our sin for us, absorb the punishment our evil deserves, and bring us back to God. Jesus does this. And Jesus gives his people the Holy Spirit, the third Person of God, so that they are changed from the inside out.

Of course, there's much more I could say about him. If you want to know more, you can find a series of a sermons I preached beginning a year ago called "Who Is Jesus?" I talked more about his virgin birth, his identity, his teachings, and his works.⁸ But today, don't miss this: Jesus is "God with us" and Jesus came to save his people from their sins. If you miss that about Jesus, you've missed the point. You can call Jesus a great man and a great teacher. He was those things, to be sure. But if you only call him those things, it's like only calling Tom Brady "Gisele Bündchen's husband."

Jesus came to save his people from their sin. That brings me to my third point: Who are Jesus' people? Who are these people he came to save? He didn't come to save everyone. He didn't come to save people of one particular ethnicity or skin color. Even in the history of ethnic Israel, we see that many, if not most of those people didn't know God. They weren't God's people. And we also see that many foreigners, people like Rahab and Ruth, become part of God's people. So it's not a matter of ethnicity, skin color, gender, economic status, or anything like that. The people who are Jesus' people are people who trust God. They are people who, now that God has revealed himself in the person of Jesus, put their trust in Jesus.

In this story, Joseph is a perfect picture of someone who trusts God. We don't know a lot about Joseph, but he was probably a young man, though it's possible he could have been a bit older.⁹ And we know he was from David's tribe of Judah, and he was from David's town,

⁷ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992), 109.

⁸ <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

⁹ We really don't know how old Joseph was, but we do know that he must have died sometime after Jesus was 12 and before he was 30, while Mary was there when Jesus died on the cross. Joseph could have died at a relatively young age from a disease or an accident, but it's possible that he was older and died of natural causes.

Bethlehem. Joseph was betrothed to Mary. Being betrothed was more than being engaged. Being engaged isn't very official, and if you want to, you can easily break it off. But being betrothed was different. It was sort of like a pre-marriage, before the formal wedding. So Joseph was considered Mary's "husband," but they had not yet officially married. Among other things, that meant they hadn't had sex yet. The time of being betrothed could be a year, and the betrothal could only end in marriage or a divorce.

Now, when Joseph became betrothed to Mary, he probably imagined their lives together. She was probably a teenager, and perhaps she was beautiful. The culture at that time and place was different from ours, but men remain the same. Joseph probably looked forward to his wedding night, when he could finally be with Mary. He probably looked forward to starting a family with her, and having his own biological children. Perhaps he dreamed of having a son who looked just like him.

But when he found out that Mary became pregnant, he must have assumed that she had been with another man. After all, he knew that he had not been with her. So we're told that Joseph was going to divorce Mary. Since he was "a just man and unwilling to put her to shame," he decided to divorce her quietly. If she had committed adultery, he could have divorced her publicly. But it seems he was going to divorce her quietly, privately, so that she wouldn't be shamed.

Joseph's dreams must have been dashed. The story is told in such an economical fashion that we're not told a lot about how he felt. But he must have felt crushed. Yet something amazing happened: An angel told Joseph that the child was the product of a supernatural conception. Mary was still a virgin. She became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as God created the universe out of nothing, he was going to create a special child out of a virgin's womb.

When Joseph found out that Mary had not cheated on him, that this child was the product of a miracle, and that he was going to save his people from his sins, he had a decision to make. Joseph could have thought: This is all a bad dream. There's no angel. He could have divorced Mary anyway. But he didn't do that. Verse 24 says, "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife." The text makes it clear that Joseph was not the biological father—he didn't have a sexual relationship with Mary until after Jesus was born. Yet Joseph obeyed God's messenger, the angel. He decided to take Mary as his wife and

raise Jesus as his son. He took on the responsibility of raising and caring for the Savior of the world. He adopted Jesus as his own son.

He must have done this because he trusted God. As a Jewish man, he must have known the promise of Genesis 3—that an offspring of Eve would crush the power of evil. He must have known the promise of Genesis 49—that someone from the tribe of Judah would rule over his brothers. He must have known the promise of 2 Samuel 7—that one of David’s sons would reign on the throne forever. He must have known all the promises in the book of Isaiah—that a son would be born who would be called “Wonderful Counselor” and “Mighty God” and “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). Perhaps he had some sense that this child would also be the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, who would die for the sins of his people.

Joseph may not have understood all the angel told him, but he knew enough about God to trust him. He knew that God makes good on his promises, and that God is good. Joseph must have had his own agenda, his own hopes and dreams. But he was willing to put aside those dreams in order to do what God wanted him to do. He knew that God’s plans were bigger than his own. He knew that the salvation of God’s people was more important than his own agenda. So Joseph obeyed. He did what God wanted him to do.

And that’s what faith looks like. Faith isn’t against reason, believing what is illogical. But faith isn’t just believing a fact. Faith is trust. Faith in God is trusting that God is good. Faith in God is trusting that his word is true. Faith in God is trusting that he can meet our greatest need, which is to be saved from our sin.

I said earlier that some people don’t think that God is fixing anything. But he is. He doesn’t fix things the way we would want him to. God can’t be controlled or domesticated by us. He’s under no obligation to do things the way we would expect him to. After all, who would expect that God would become a baby? But God is fixing our greatest need. He’s taking care of our sin problem so we can have a restored relationship with him.

When a mass murder, or a terrorist attack occurs. We often think, “Someone must pay for this!” We want justice. But when we ignore God, when we believe he doesn’t exist or act like he doesn’t exist, are we not killing God in our hearts and minds? Doesn’t God have the right to say, “Someone must pay for this!”? And someone does. Jesus paid for the injustice of his people.

One day, God will remove all the evil from the world. When Jesus comes a second time, there will be a final reckoning, a last judgment. But when that day comes, God will punish all

evil. All evil will be paid for. It will be judged. And there are two ways God will punish evil. For those who have put their trust in Jesus, their sins have already been paid for. They were punished almost two thousand years ago when Jesus died on a cross, when the innocent God-man dying for his guilty people. But those who have rejected Jesus will pay for their own sins, and they will pay eternally. They will be separated from God and anything good forever.

God hasn't fixed the whole world yet because he is patient. He is waiting for his people to come home. He's waiting for his people to put their trust in Jesus, to find their shelter in him. Again, if God removed all evil from the world right now, where would we be? For those who have put their trust in Jesus, they will be sheltered from that storm. For those who reject Jesus, they will be swept away.

Jesus came to rescue his people. If you don't know him, you can become one of his people today. Turn away from own agenda and turn toward him. Be like Joseph and see that God's plans are greater than your own. Be like Joseph and trust that what God does is right. Be like Joseph and respond in obedience.

If you do know Jesus, pray for those people who are not Jesus' people. Tell others this story. Invite them to church on Christmas Eve.

Jesus came to save his people from their sins. Turn to him, become one of his people, and be saved from an eternity of emptiness, loneliness, isolation, and meaninglessness. Joseph became part of Jesus' family because he had faith. You too can become part of Jesus' family if you put your trust in him.