THEY WILL CALL HIM IMMANUEL

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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’).”

Immanuel means God with us. Immanu means “with us.” El is the name for God. So Immanuel means literally, “With us is God.” Even today, “God be with you” might be the best greeting to all helpless people. We cannot say to a dying patient, “Take care.” Often we hear “Take care” or “Have fun,” as forms of greeting. These reflect selfishness and self-centeredness in this society.

Of course, they never called Jesus Immanuel while on earth. The title reflects who Jesus is. He is God in flesh with us. The following story illustrates it: A small voice penetrated the stillness of the night from the bedroom across the hall. “Daddy, I’m scared!” The father responded, “Honey, don’t be afraid, Daddy’s right across the hall.” After a very brief pause the little voice spoke again, “I’m still scared.” The father thought and again responded, “You don’t need to be afraid. God is with you. God loves you.” After a long pause the voice returns, “I don’t care about God, Daddy; I want someone with skin on!” The logic used by the little child is precisely the reason for the Incarnation. After thousands of years of being unsuccessful in being able to convince his people that he really loved them, our Creator realized that the best way to demonstrate his love for us was to send “someone with skin on.” That is the meaning of Immanuel.

Look at verse 18a. “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph....” In Jewish society, the pledge of marriage was a legally binding relationship. According to Jewish custom, after the pledge of marriage there was one year waiting period before a couple could marry. During this period, the bridegroom and the bride continue to stay at their parents’ house, and the two of them were not allowed to come together. Although the two of them could not come together for a physical union, they were still called ‘husband and wife.’

One day an unexpected thing happened to them. Look at verse 18b. “...but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” As God had promised, a Savior of the world was to be born from the offspring of a woman (Ge 3:15). This Savior had to be a perfect man (Heb 4:15), and at the same time he had to be the perfect God. So Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit through the virgin Mary. According to science, a baby in a womb does not receive blood from the mother. A baby produces his or her own blood. One of the placenta’s jobs is to make sure blood from the mother and the baby never mixes. The placenta acts as an exchange surface between the mother and the baby. Nutrients and oxygen are passed over by diffusion only. If the mother’s and baby’s blood are mixed, it could be deadly for both of them. If the mother and the baby have different blood types, they might both die if their blood mixed. That is why a baby can have Rh positive (Rh+) type, but a mother can have Rh negative (Rh-) type. Since Adam’s sin, mankind’s blood has been sinstained. So Jesus the Son of God had to be born of the virgin in order to be sinless. In order to be a perfect sacrifice for sin, Jesus’ blood had to be sinless. Leviticus 17:11 says, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” This great work of God demanded that Joseph and Mary sacrifice their dream of happy marriage and a sweet home. Before marriage Mary had to bear a son—the Savior of the world. For this, Mary had to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit before she got together with Joseph.

What did Joseph do in this situation? Verse 19 says, “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” To our surprise, at the news of Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph did not give in to his emotional turmoil, nor was his love transmuted into hatred, saying, “How could she betray me?” If Mary were exposed to public disgrace, she might be stoned to death. Joseph would be the first to run to Mary’s house and stone her. In time of personal frustration, distress and anger, Joseph did not become emotional. Obviously he knelt down and prayed earnestly, asking God’s mercy on him. Then God helped Joseph to make a decision to protect Mary at any cost. There were two reasons for Joseph to get angry at Mary. First, her apparent unfaithfulness to him. Second, even though innocent, he would inevitably be accused of sleeping with Mary before marriage. It was a great shame to him and his family. He could have exposed Mary to public disgrace in order to get rid of misunderstanding and shame and put all the blame on Mary. But he made a tentative decision to divorce her quietly. We see in him the image of Jesus, who took up all our infirmities and transgression. We learn from Joseph how to think as Christians at a crucial moment. Joseph thought of God first. Then he thought of Mary, and then of himself—last. It was possible for him to think in this way, because he had a personal relationship with God. Joseph did not care about himself, if only he could save Mary.

What happened next? Look at verse 20. “But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’” When Joseph struggled with the problem of Mary’s pregnancy and tried to save her from public disgrace, he was afraid and tired. So he fell asleep. While Joseph was in a dream, God sent his angel to tell him to take Mary home as his wife. At that time, according to Jewish custom, it was beyond imagination for Joseph to bring pregnant Mary to his home; it was shame for his family; it was shame for his relatives. But Joseph took Mary home. Probably Joseph’s family members pushed him out to sleep in the stable of an animal. Look at verse 25. “But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.” Joseph was pure in heart. Even though he brought Mary home, he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. Humanly speaking, he was a carpenter. Spiritually speaking, he was a man who could see God. Matthew 5:8 says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Thank God that we can see God when our hearts are pure. God was pleased with Joseph and used him to make an environment for the birth of Jesus. In taking Mary as his wife, Joseph also took her child as his adopted son. This is how Jesus became the legal heir to the throne of David.

Look at verse 21. “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” The name Jesus means, “the Lord saves.” In this verse, “his people” refers to the people of Israel. At that time, the people of Israel were under the oppression of the Roman Empire. They lived in constant fear and misery. All of them thought they were miserable because of the Roman occupation. But they were miserable not because of the Roman occupation but because of their sins. What is sin? The Bible says that sin refers to man’s state of being, every inclination of his thought, his action or non-action, which falls short of God’s perfect standards. At the core of sin there is selfishness. Sin separates man from God and from fellow human beings. It breaks man’s relationship with God and with one another. These days many people suffer from broken relationships. And at the core of every broken relationship, there is always an element of sin of self-centeredness. These days many people say, “I am hurt” or “You don’t know how much I have gone through.” One evangelist said that people’s dominant attitude toward life is ignorance and indifference: “I don’t know” and “I don’t care.” These are a few symptoms that man suffers because of broken relationships. Is there any hope? Yes! There is hope. God sent Jesus to save his people from their sins! Jesus heals relationships! Just as fish cannot live without water, so man cannot live without relationships. Fish cannot live in stinky water. Likewise, we cannot live in a rotten relationship; we need relationships which are healthy and sound, and which are maintained by God’s righteousness and selfless love.

Another aspect of sin is living without creation order; namely, God first, man second, and created things last. When one of my Bible student’s mother saw that her husband was not working and was trying to depend on her, she got angry and divorced him and remarried. Later they found out that he was sick and dying of cancer. She was a selfish woman, putting money before their relationship, not to mention before God. And they are wondering why they are not happy.

Jesus came to this world to save us from our sins so that we can live with creation order in our hearts. But then why did he come to this world? Is there any other way to save men from their sins? In Psychology, they say that the more we see certain things around us, the more we begin to believe that those things are natural and normal. When my Bible student saw what his mother was doing, he became a selfish man. We too begin to believe that it is normal. When we see people not keeping the Sabbath, rather going to shopping or park, we begin to believe that it is normal. They say that there is an enormous pressure on a black student if he or she wants to study hard and finish high school, because he or she grows up watching others become drug addicts and criminals. It becomes norm. Breaking up the norm is a tremendous pressure. That is the reason why Big Brothers and Big Sisters organizations are there to show these kids role models. We are surrounded by sinsick people. This is the reason why Jesus had to come to this world in order to show us the holy way of life.

Look at verse 23. “’The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means, ‘God with us’).” God saves us by being with us. One of the founders of our church is Missionary Sarah Barry. She went to Korea as a missionary in early 1950s. It was right after the Korean Civil War and Korea was very poor. Many of them were starving. At that time there were many American missionaries in Korea. But they lived in mansion houses where they could live like American standards but to Korean people they looked like kings. They separated themselves from dirty Korean people. But Missionary Sarah Barry left the missionary compound and got a studio apartment near a university and began to invite students to her apartment and teach the Bible. Many students were moved by her sacrificial life of faith and there was a great revival. Her example shows why Jesus came to this world as a baby in a manger.

God became man to reveal to us what he was really like. For years God had spoken to his people through the prophets but the people had not listened to him. There is only so much you can know about a person without actually meeting them. God came to the earth as one of us to show us exactly who He is and how we are to live. It is one thing to tell a person how to do something but another thing to show them. In Jesus God came to show practically how we are to live. A little girl said, “Some people couldn’t hear God’s inside whisper and so he sent Jesus to tell them out loud.” John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Word Jesus came in flesh and told out loud his truth so that we may know who God is.

“God with us” is especially meaningful to Matthew. He was originally a tax collector. In modern terms, he was a drug dealer. He was the one who put money first before everything else. If only he could make money, he was willing to do anything, even betraying his own people. The result was that he was hated by everybody. Everyone despised him, even his own wife and children. One day Matthew was sitting in his tax collector’s booth all by himself. He was lonely-so lonely that he felt like dying. What was worse, no one approached him; everyone ran away from him. But Jesus came to him and said, “Follow me.” It meant, “be my disciple.” Matthew could not believe his ears. But it was reality. At the moment, Matthew could see God in Jesus. This is the reason he could follow Jesus immediately, leaving his tax collector’s job. But Matthew was a very difficult person to help because of his blind selfishness. Matthew made Jesus sick and tired every day. But Jesus was always with him, until he was healed of his blind selfishness. Jesus was with him until his greatness in God was fully restored. To Matthew, “God with us” was the good news of great joy for all the people, especially for himself. Obviously Matthew said again and again, “You know, nobody wanted to be around me. I was lonely. I was like a leper. But Jesus came to me and was with me until I was changed into St. Matthew!”

It was prophesied in Isaiah 9:6, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given....” This verse means that God would send his one and only Son to this world as a child to be born of Mary. Almighty God came down to this world as a helpless child. Why did God do so? It was so that he might be with all sorrowful people and save them from their sins. While on earth, Jesus was always with sorrowful people. While on earth, Jesus was always with helpless people. While on earth, Jesus was always with very fatalistic people. It was to save them from their sins of fatalism and bring them back to his glorious kingdom. All men are fatalistic because of the sting of death. But in Jesus there is no death and no fatalism, because he came to this world to save fatalistic sinners by being with us. Jesus is the God of Immanuel.