

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christmas Series 2016: Joseph's dilemma and Scandal (Matthew 1:18-25)

It's a real pleasure to be able to wish all our listeners this morning a Happy Christmas on behalf of the *Truth for Today* team. Our prayer is that you and your families would have opportunity to reflect on the truth of Christ's birth and experience God's blessing this Christmas. Christmas is a time for Christians to celebrate, and what good reason we have to celebrate! We mark the birth of the Lord Jesus who came to "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). For many people, Christmas is a time to rejoice in this truth and to take advantage of the season to spend time with family and friends.

But for some people, Christmas is not all about celebration. Some suffer from loneliness over Christmas; others find the stresses of the season overbearing. Too much food, and too much time with extended family sometimes leads to arguments and strife amongst families. Some are disappointed if their haul of presents isn't quite what they had hoped for. In short, sometimes, despite our best planning, things just don't work out as we would have liked.

I suppose Joseph might have felt a bit like that the first Christmas. He is generally reckoned to have been quite a bit older than Mary and would have developed his trade as a carpenter to the point where he was established enough to be able to support a wife and a family. Now the time had come and better still he had found a nice bride. All seemed to be going to plan and perhaps Joseph thought that it wouldn't be too long before they were happily married and could enjoy the rest of their lives together.

Let's pick up Matthew's account of Joseph's situation in Matthew 1:18-19: "*Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.*"

What a dilemma for Joseph! What was he to do? All of a sudden his dreams had been shattered. His betrothed wife, Mary, is found to be pregnant. And Joseph was the only one other than Mary who knew the child was not his. What devastating news! You can only imagine what would have been going through his mind.

It says a lot about the character of Joseph that he is so thoughtful about this incident. Under the law of Moses, Joseph would have been within his rights to have Mary stoned for suspicion of adultery. It's not hard to imagine an embarrassed and angry husband wanting to get revenge for his hurt. But Joseph is described as "*a just man*" (Matthew 1:19). He had no desire to make a public example of her. He felt he couldn't go ahead with marrying her, but had no desire to publicly shame her any more than she would already be bound to endure. As an aside, Joseph is an example to us as to how godly people respond to hurt. No desire for revenge, no seeking retaliation. If there must be consequences, let them be as mild as possible for the offender. If someone close to us wrongs us, let's try to react like Joseph does here, with kindness and compassion.

So Joseph spends some time wondering about what he should do. During this time God sends an angel to give him a message and, having heard this message, Joseph's outlook completely changes. Matthew 1:24-25 put it like this: "*Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.*"

You'll probably have noticed that Joseph completely changes course from what he had planned to do. When we read Matthew 1:18-19, we saw Joseph, the disappointed man, unsure about what to do having found out that his engaged bride was pregnant. Now, following his encounter with God's angel, he takes Mary to be his wife and takes a role in naming her firstborn Son.

Here we see another lesson for us from the life of Joseph. When God speaks to us, we must obey. For Joseph, the cost of this obedience was likely to be significant. Although God had revealed to Joseph that the baby Mary was carrying was God's Son, and everything was part of God's great plan to bring salvation, not everybody else knew this. Even when they would have been told, most would not believe.

It's likely that Joseph's reputation would have taken a hit by being obedient to God. Although Joseph knew that there was nothing improper about Mary's conduct, most other people would not have believed that. How many people today would believe claims of a virgin birth? Perhaps even worse for Joseph, his neighbours and the people he came into daily contact with would likely assume that he was the father of Mary's child and that Joseph, that man with a reputation for being "a just man", had behaved sinfully. When Jesus was addressing the religious leaders of the day later in His life, as recorded in John 8:41, they respond, "*We were not born of fornication; we have one Father - God.*" The implication was clear. Most of the people around about were of the opinion that Mary had disgraced herself by becoming pregnant outside of marriage.

Before we continue, I need to stop here to be absolutely clear that this was not the case. The birth of the Lord Jesus Christ was absolutely unique. The truth of a "virgin birth" may be ridiculed by many but it is an essential Christian teaching. It is vital to the teaching of the Bible that the Lord Jesus was born of a virgin. Although we might loosely speak of Joseph as Jesus' father (see Luke 2:48), we must be clear that he wasn't. He certainly performed a fatherly role in bringing up the young Lord Jesus, but in no way was he the Lord's biological father. I'm not emphasising this just to split hairs. The Lord's virgin birth was necessary to show that He didn't inherit the sinful nature. Because He not only lived a sinless life, but also wasn't born with a sinful nature, He was able to offer Himself, not to face the consequences of His own wrongdoing, for there was none, but in place of our wrong doing (see 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:22, 1 John 3:5). Take away the virgin birth and you attack the reliability of God's great salvation.

Let's move on. I want us to think this morning about what it was that changed Joseph's mind. What made him decide to marry Mary after all, despite his obvious hurt and concern? What brought about this remarkable act of obedience to God, even in the face of the damage it might do to his reputation? I think we would have to say that it particularly was what the angel had to say about the baby Mary was carrying. As the significance of the events that were unfolding around Joseph became clear, he was able to be obedient to the Lord's command and take Mary as his wife and play a role in the upbringing of the Lord Jesus.

In particular, Joseph is given two names for Mary's child. Each of them is instructive and we will spend the rest of this Christmas day message considering the two names recorded in Matthew 1. The first was Jesus, which reminds us that "*He would save His people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). The second is "*Immanuel*", which means "*God with us*" (Matthew 1:23). These two names lie at the very heart of the Gospel message and reveal to us the good news that makes Christmas worth celebrating.

Let's return to Matthew 1, and read the first part of the angel's message, recorded in Matthew 1:20-21. "*But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.'*"

Joseph learns an important message from the angel. Everything was happening according to God's plan. God was behind all of the events we've been thinking about. This must have been reassuring. It wasn't that Mary had been unfaithful to him. In fact, everything she had no doubt told him was true. Joseph learnt that God was doing something remarkable through Mary. The child Mary was carrying was no ordinary child. For this reason, Joseph was to carry on with his plans for Mary. He was to marry Mary and treat her as his wife, and he was to look after the Child as if He were his own. As we've already mentioned, it says a lot in Joseph's favour that he was ready to be obedient to this command from God.

But Joseph wasn't left there. He wasn't just told to take Mary as his wife because God was going to do something special. He is told more. He is told to call the Child Jesus. This name was important. It means "Saviour", and the angel announces that this was fitting, "*for He will save His people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21).

Right at the beginning of the New Testament, God sees fit to announce the birth of His Son, and to explain in no uncertain terms why He had come. He had come to save people. There are a number of things to learn from this simple sentence, "*He will save His people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21).

Firstly, I'm reminded that God is interested in people. God didn't send His Son to gain power and respect, or to amass a huge wealth or to make some ground breaking scientific discovery. He sent Him to save **people**. God's interest is in people. A sad reality, that perhaps is particularly evident at Christmas time, is that some people feel as if no one is really interested in them. God is! God cares so much about you, and me, and all people, all over the world, that He sent His Son to save His people from their sins (see John 3:16). Whatever else you think about today, spend some time thinking about the fact that God is interested in people, and that includes you.

Secondly, people have a problem. That's evident from the verse isn't it? He will **save** His people from **their sins**. At the start of the New Testament, God reminds everyone that sin is a big problem. Sin is the word the Bible uses to describe our turning away from God. It describes our inability to follow God's laws. We sin when we decide we know

better than God and choose to act according to our own desires, and do as we please, rather than listen to, and obey, what God says. Paul writes to some Christians in Rome and puts it like this: *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). He is saying that we all fail to measure up to God's standards.

The worrying thing is that, as we read the Bible, we discover that it's not just some people who have this problem, like those people whom society considers "really bad". In fact, the Bible teaches us that we all have this problem. None of us have never sinned (see Romans 3:23). That means all of us have a problem. The great news of the New Testament is that Jesus came to save His people from their sins!

That's a very sombre thing to think about on Christmas day, this day for celebration isn't it? If you're listening to the broadcast this morning, have you ever stopped to consider that when the Bible talks about people who have sinned, it's including you? Have you ever realised that your sins are something you need saving from? I pray that many of you have already realised this and put your faith in the Lord Jesus to save you from them. But if you never have, I'd love to remind you this morning of the verse we're considering - *"call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins"* (Matthew 1:21).

That's the third thing I want to point out to you about this name Jesus, and all it reminds us of. It reminds us that it's possible to be saved. Jesus came to **save** His people. So the Bible doesn't just teach us that God is interested in people. It doesn't just teach us that we have a problem because of our sins. It teaches us that it's possible to be saved. It's possible for you and me to be spared from the consequences of our sins. We don't need to endure the awful punishment they deserve. It's possible to be saved! That's incredibly good news, and one of the reasons why Christmas is a time to celebrate.

Anyone who has read the Old Testament part of the Bible, will have realised that over and over again, people demonstrated their inability to live as God had intended them to live. Time after time they rebel against God and think they can do better without Him, often with disastrous consequences. We are left in no doubt that people need saving from their sins. But in the Old Testament, no real solution is given. There are hints and shadows of a coming rescuer (or Messiah), but no direct answer is given to the problem of mankind's sin. But then, right at the very start of the New Testament God introduces us to the answer. "JESUS will save His people from their sins". Here was God's answer. That's the fourth point for us to notice from this verse. "**He** will save His people from their sins". God's solution to man's great problem was His Son, Jesus. The Child Mary was carrying was no ordinary Child. He was God's Son, and He would save His people from their sins.

It's an obvious point, but a crucial one in the teaching of the New Testament, that God's answer to our problem of sin is His Son Jesus. Peter expressed it like this when he was preaching: *"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

Many religious groups all over the world present ways of being saved. But God is clear. "**He** will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). So if you are listening to the programme this morning and have realised as you've been listening that your sins are a big problem, can I point you to God's solution, the Lord Jesus Christ? You might be tempted to think that if you just try harder to be good and kind, surely a loving God would accept you. Maybe you wonder if you can be saved by attending church, or by giving money to the church. Let's remind ourselves again of God's solution - *"He will save His people from their sins."* God says that the only way for us to be saved is through faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Although Christmas celebrates the birth of the Lord Jesus, it's only as we read through the Gospel accounts that we learn how this salvation would come about. When we get to the end of the Gospel accounts we read that this same Jesus, who at Christmas time we think about in almost too idyllic an image, is nailed to a cross. It was no ordinary death for all of the Gospel accounts record that He rose again from the dead. Paul explains the significance of this in 1 Corinthians 15 when he writes: *"Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."*

The Bible teaches us that when Jesus died, He bore our sins on Himself. He took the punishment we deserved for them. Because the punishment has been taken God offers to us today the chance for forgiveness. God says "Accept My Son", "Believe in My Son" "Trust My Son" and we can be forgiven. We can be saved from our sins!

This Christmas would be the best Christmas ever if some listening to the broadcast this morning were to realise that Christ died for their sins and that Jesus came to save them from their sins. If you're listening this morning and have realised that your sins are a big problem, what's stopping you from accepting God's solution, *"JESUS, who saves His people from their sins"?*

So that's the first name. If you read Matthew 1:22-23, you might at first glance find them a bit puzzling. Let's read them.

“So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’” (Matthew 1:22-23)

Joseph had just been told that Mary was to have a Child. This Child was from God and Joseph had been told to call Him Jesus. We've spent a long time this morning considering together the implications of that name. But then we have recorded that this was all to happen to fulfil an Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah (see Isaiah 7:14). But when Matthew announces which prophecy has been fulfilled, it's a bit confusing. The bit that says, *“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son”* is no problem. It's clear how that bit of the prophecy had been fulfilled in Mary and the Lord Jesus. It's the bit that comes next that doesn't seem to fit: *“...they shall call His name Immanuel.”* What's happened here? Did Joseph get the name wrong? Wasn't He supposed to call the Child Jesus? How does this bit fit in with Isaiah's statement?

I'll try to suggest an answer to this conundrum before we finish the broadcast, but first let's just think about this second name, Immanuel, and what it teaches us about the Lord Jesus.

Immanuel means *“God with us.”* I suspect that for some of us we're so familiar with this passage in Matthew's Gospel, especially at this time of year, that we can gloss over the significance of this name. Matthew is saying that Jesus is *“God, with us”*. Let me say that again. Jesus, is God, almighty Sovereign God, who is over and above all things, with us! Take a moment to think about how remarkable this verse is. Solomon caught something of the wonder of God dwelling with His people at the dedication of the temple recorded in 2 Chronicles 6:18, *“But will God indeed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!”*

Solomon was amazed to think that God, who was so big that the heavens could not contain Him, would dwell with men on earth. Rightly so! And yet what Matthew announces here is even more significant. For all the wonder of the fact that God would dwell with His people in the temple in Solomon's day, it was nothing like the Lord Jesus coming to live in our world. In Solomon's day, God dwelt in the temple in some kind of spiritual way, His presence was there. But you couldn't just walk into the temple and see a physical being that looked like a human. You couldn't stroll into the temple and touch God. But you could with Jesus. He really was God become a man. Philippians puts it like this: *“Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”* (Philippians 2: 5-8).

The Lord Jesus became a man and was *“God with us”* (Matthew 1:23). We read in the Gospels of occasions when He was tired and hungry. When the Apostle John thought back over the things he had experienced with the Lord Jesus, God made man, he writes: *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life - the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us”*

It's clear that John's experience was of a real man, whom we could touch and hear and see.

Although it's a remarkable thing that the Lord Jesus became a man and dwelled among us on earth, if we stop to think about it for a moment it's actually a terrifying thing. Here was an example to us of exactly how God wanted man to live. Here was someone who measured up to God's standards all of the time. He never let God down. He never did anything wrong. The Gospels record a life of perfection and one can't help but admire the character of the Lord Jesus presented to us in the Gospel accounts.

Whilst admirable, it actually serves to highlight our own problems. We might think we measure up well compared to most people, but compared to the Lord Jesus, we don't have a hope. We're nothing! We don't even come close. That's why I think Joseph is given two names for the Lord Jesus. If we only had Isaiah's message of *“God with us”*, all that would be accomplished would be to confirm our guilt and our need to be saved. But by giving the name Jesus, God announces at the start of the New Testament that there is hope and a way to be saved. If all we knew was *“Immanuel”*, we could admire God and rightly so, but we would be forever condemned by God being with us. We would only have highlighted and underlined to us our failings, and our deserving of judgment. How wonderful that God introduces us to Jesus, who would save His people from their sins! May the Lord open all our eyes to appreciate this glorious truth!

So then, as Joseph learnt of the truth of *“God with us”* and *“God the Saviour”*, his outlook changed, even if his practical circumstances of shame and dishonour were unlikely to anytime soon. That's the changing power of the

Gospel. That's the kind of life changing message that God introduces to us on the first page of the New Testament. That's the good news that could be yours to celebrate this Christmas.

I want to finish by wishing you all a very happy Christmas, and pray that all who listen this morning will know Jesus, who was "*God with us*", and "*saves His people from their sins.*"

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