

Matthew 1:18-25

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[0 : 00] It seems to me that Joseph is an unsung hero of the Christmas story.

In the verses that we read in Matthew chapter 1, Matthew records with striking simplicity one of the duties that was performed by Joseph as part of the event surrounding the birth of Jesus.

In the final verse of the first chapter, Matthew records the following fact, and he, that is Joseph, gave him the name Jesus.

Why did Joseph give this name to the child born to Mary? Well, we know the answer. Joseph was faithfully obeying the instructions given by the angel of the Lord.

So he had been instructed, and so he obeyed. 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.

[1 : 10] And he gave him the name Jesus. Yes, we could learn much from that unquestioning and faithful obedience on the part of Joseph.

But Matthew also makes reference to another name by which the newborn child would be known, the name Emmanuel. In verse 23 we read, And this is the name of the baby born in Bethlehem that I want us to consider this morning, this name Emmanuel.

And in considering this name, I hope we'll be able to take a step back from the manger and discover the big picture within which the manger in Bethlehem occupies such a beautiful part.

Now the meaning of the name Emmanuel is simple enough. There's no great mystery to what the name means. We're told in the passage, They will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. So that's very clear, the meaning of the name, God with us. The coming of Jesus, the life of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, all declare this simple yet profound truth, that God is with us, that God is for us, that God is on our side.

[2 : 49] And I want to think a little bit about that reality, and all of what I say revolve around this name and what this name declares, Emmanuel, God with us.

And there are five truths that I want us to explore in reference to the name Emmanuel. But before we do that, before we look at each of them in turn, I think we do need to, if only very briefly, comment on the origin of the name Emmanuel, as Matthew himself acknowledges the origin of the name.

Matthew there in the passage that we read is quoting from the prophet Isaiah, from chapter 7 of that prophecy and in verse 14.

Now we're not going to go to that passage and give any great thought or consideration to it. But just to mention as background, on that occasion the prophet Isaiah speaks of a son that is to be born. The year when this was taking place was roughly 735 B.C. And the son that is anticipated, that is prophesied, that will carry the name Emmanuel, is presented as a ray of hope for the kingdom of Judah.

[4 : 09] The kingdom had already been divided. You had the northern kingdom of Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah. And this prophecy was directed to God's people in the southern kingdom of Judah.

It was a time when Judah stood threatened by the northern kingdom of Israel and by Syria, with whom an alliance had been made. And the king of Judah, Ahaz, had very foolishly put his trust in an alliance with Assyria, hoping that in that way to provide protection for Judah from the enemies at the doorstep.

And it's in that context that there's this prophecy about a son who will be born with this name, Emmanuel, God with us. Now, the prophecy there in Isaiah and Matthew's use of it, perhaps in particular, has generated considerable debate.

Firstly, concerning the meaning of the word translated virgin, and secondly, concerning the manner in which the prophecy finds fulfillment. The controversy, if we want to call it that, surrounding the word virgin, relates to the fact that the original Hebrew word used by Isaiah, the word *Alma*, can be translated, and often is translated, young woman or maiden.

So, the word itself doesn't necessarily have to be translated with the word virgin, the word that Matthew chooses to use as he quotes from the passage in Isaiah.

[5 : 45] And so, because of that, Matthew is sometimes accused of accommodating the original text to his purposes. Well, that's the accusation that is made, and hence a measure of controversy in the eyes of some.

But this accusation really is rather easily dealt with. In the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, a translation that was produced around about 130 B.C.

So, it was available at the time that the New Testament was written. It was a version of the Old Testament that Jesus was familiar with, that Paul was familiar with, that was in circulation, if you wish, at the time when the New Testament was written.

In the Septuagint, the Hebrew word *Alma*, there in Isaiah chapter 7 and verse 14, is translated by the Greek word *Parthenos*, which means virgin.

So, those translators, for reasons that they considered fitting and appropriate, chose to translate the word in that way. And so, all that Matthew is doing, he's not trying to accommodate things to some agenda that he has concerning the manner in which Jesus was born.

[7 : 03] All Matthew is doing is quoting from that version of the Bible, that translation, that Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. And that's often done in the New Testament.

In fact, probably about two-thirds of the Old Testament references that we have in the New Testament are quotes from the Septuagint. Jesus Himself, on occasion, when He quotes from the Old Testament, it's evident from the words that He uses that that's what He's doing.

It's the Greek of the Septuagint that He is referring to. There's also the matter of the fulfillment of this prophecy. Now, it's very clear in the light of what Matthew says, and we don't need to dwell on this, but it's very clear that the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy there in Isaiah is to be seen in the coming of Jesus.

Jesus is Emmanuel. But, of course, that that is the ultimate fulfillment doesn't preclude the possibility of a partial fulfillment in the time of Isaiah.

And presumably, there must have been, or else, perhaps for those who first heard the prophecy, it would have been something they simply wouldn't have been able to get their heads around or understand.

[8 : 16] What that fulfillment was is not something we're going to dwell on this morning. Let's move on to the five truths revealed by the name Emmanuel.

Let me just suggest what they are, and then we can just think about them in turn. And I think they follow a certain logical order. First of all, the name Emmanuel presupposes a problem.

And I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. But the name Emmanuel also declares an intention, an intention on the part of God. The name Emmanuel also identifies a person.

And then fourthly, the name describes a new reality. And then finally, I want to suggest that the name Emmanuel constitutes a promise for us as God's people.

So, let's think about these five different ways in which we can give thought to this name by which Jesus is to be called, as Matthew explains to us.

[9 : 20] They will call Him Emmanuel, which means God with us. First of all, the name presupposes a problem. The need for one sent by God, named God with us.

So, God sends His Son with His name, God with us. The very fact that God would send His Son and give Him such a name presupposes, or at the very least suggests, that there's a problem.

It implies that without His coming and acting, men and women are without God, or at least far from God. Without Emmanuel, God is not with us.

Or even more solemnly, God is against us. Now, it is true, and I readily acknowledge, that the name by itself does not explicitly reveal or declare this problem or predicament of men and women.

Namely, that we are without hope and without God. But the Bible certainly does declare that to be our condition and does so very explicitly and very clearly.

[10 : 33] The Bible presents the story of how men and women find themselves in this predicament. Our sin has driven us far from God.

We go back to the very beginning. We go back to the Garden of Eden to witness what happened. For Adam and Eve, the garden was paradise. It was, if you wish, a permanent Emmanuel.

That's what the Garden of Eden was, a permanent Emmanuel. God with Adam and Eve in an unbroken fellowship. We remember the beautiful language that we find of Genesis that speaks of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. In the garden, Emmanuel, God with us, was the 24-7 experience of Adam and Eve.

But then we know what happened. Adam and Eve sinned, and they were cast out of the garden, far from the presence of God. And outside, their reality changed. Their new reality was God not with us.

[11 : 44] Of course, this was true not only for Adam and Eve. All of us who have descended from them by natural generation, to use the language of the catechism, have inherited the corruption and status of our first parents.

And in our own lives, on a daily basis, we are guilty of the same sins of pride and selfishness that separated Adam and Eve from God.

As the Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

We're far away from God. That is our natural condition. Sin alienates us from God. God is not only not with us, but He is against us.

He is, in a very real sense, our enemy. Sin has made us enemies of God. And the name Emmanuel recognizes that this problem exists, if not explicitly, implicitly.

[12 : 49] But the name also points us to the one who can provide a solution, who can provide an answer to our problem. And that leads me on to the second thing that I want to consider concerning this name Emmanuel.

And it is this, that the name declares an intention. In the face of man's rebellion and sin, in the light of the enmity that separates us from God and God from us, what is God's response?

Does God observe impassively from afar our predicament? Does God sit back and let justice run its course? Does God look on in curiosity at the futile attempts of men and women to sort out their problem and to find that they're incapable of doing so?

Well, no, on all of those counts. Emmanuel, the very name Emmanuel, declares God's intention and desire to seek out a way of reconciliation, to become friends with His enemies, to bridge the chasm created by our sin and rebellion, to be a God with us.

God does not want to be in conflict with humankind, with you. God doesn't want to be your enemy. He wants to be your friend, to be with you and for you.

[14 : 17] And the name Emmanuel declares that divine intention. Emmanuel declares simply but eloquently this divine purpose.

Emmanuel grants to us all the hope that what was lost in the garden can be recovered. There is hope for us. So the name Emmanuel presupposes or hints at or suggests a problem.

It declares an intention on the part of God, but the name also identifies a person. If it is God's intention to seek reconciliation and to be friends with us, how does He do that?

How does He secure that intention? We all know what it's like to have good intentions. We all have good intentions on so many fronts, but it's a big step from the intention to the reality.

Well, in the case of God's intention to reconcile us to Himself, how does He fare? How does He go about making that a reality?

[15 : 27] How does He bridge the chasm? How does He secure reconciliation with us? This, of course, is where the story of Jesus comes to the fore.

The coming of Jesus, the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, demonstrates to us the radical manner in which God has achieved this intention.

God has come in the person of His Son. The divine intention has taken flesh in the person of Jesus. Jesus, born of a virgin, a man.

Jesus is a man, but He is also God. The miraculous nature of His conception points to His divine origin and nature. He is, in the words of John at the beginning of his gospel, He is the Word made flesh.

He is very man of very man, very God of very God. One person, two natures. The coming of Jesus into the world. The incarnation of the internal Son of God serves as a kind of visual aid, powerfully

portraying the coming of God to our encounter.

[16:44] This mysterious and irreversible union of God and man reveals Jesus to be Emmanuel, God with us.

So the name identifies the person, the one entrusted by the Father, to secure the reconciliation that He so deeply desires.

Jesus is the way by which we can enter into a new relationship of friendship with God. He is the way and He is the only way for that to be secured, for that to be experienced by us.

So this name, Emmanuel, identifies the person by whom God will secure this divine purpose of reconciling men and women to Himself.

The name presupposes or suggests a problem. The name declares an intention on the part of God. The name identifies a person, God's own Son, who has been entrusted with this great task of securing God's purpose of reconciling sinners to Himself.

[18:00] I think also we can say briefly that the name describes a new reality. With the birth of Jesus, the plan conceived in eternity by the Godhead, the plan is carried out.

And the whole world finds itself in a new situation. And this new situation, this new reality, can be described as Emmanuel, God with us, God for us, God by our side, God close at hand.

And let's be very clear, the name Emmanuel identifies Jesus as God. Jesus is not simply an emissary, a representative, or ambassador of God.

In the person of Jesus, God is in our midst. This is no dream or fantasy or work of science fiction. This is the new reality. This is the new reality. And the name Emmanuel declares or describes this new reality.

So, the name describes a new reality that comes into play with the coming of Jesus. I think there's a final thing that I think we can say about the name Emmanuel, or what truth it points to, or in some measure reveals for us.

[19:21] And it is this, that the name Emmanuel constitutes a promise. As we remember the Christmas story, as we do at this time of year, and we'll be doing over the next week or so, and we remember the birth of Jesus, and maybe beyond the birth, we think something of His life, and death, and resurrection, we, of course, are conscious that all of this happened a long time ago.

All of this happened some 2,000 years ago. And given that that is the case, there could emerge, and reasonably so, a legitimate concern, a concern that might even lead us to a conclusion. And so, our thinking might be something along these lines. Well, 2,000 years ago, Jesus came, and with His coming, God dwelt among us.

And we might be willing to concede that that's true, and say, well, that's amazing. You know, that's wonderful that 2,000 years ago, God came and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus. 2,000 years ago, a new reality reigned. God in Jesus, walking the dusty roads of Galilee. God in Jesus, eating with His disciples.

[20:35] God in Jesus, healing the sick, and encouraging the downcast, and even raising the dead from the grave. But all of that was 2,000 years ago. 2,000 years ago, that was the reality.

And what an amazing reality. But what about now? Did not Jesus return to heaven? If we're persuaded by the truth of the gospel accounts, is that not what we're told?

That His time on earth was a fleeting time? He came, but then He returned to heaven. Did He not leave His disciples? Are we not back to where we were before He came?

This, of course, was the great fear of the disciples when He anticipated His leaving them. And they were distraught, and they were full of fear and premonition.

What will happen once you've gone? And what did Jesus say to them in those circumstances? Well, Jesus gave them a promise that we find at the end of Matthew's gospel.

[21:37] There's a very interesting way in which Matthew's gospel is constructed, if you wish. Matthew's gospel begins with the announcement, God with us. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

So, at the very beginning of the gospel, you have this announcement, this declaration that God is with us. But then the same gospel ends with the promise, God with us.

We turn to the very end of the chapter. Having seen that declaration in the very first chapter, we turn to the final chapter. We read from verse 18. And what do we read there?

Then Jesus came to them and said, Jesus is about to ascend to heaven. He's about to leave them. He came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore,

go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. The very last words recorded in the gospel, God with us. I'm with you.

[22 : 48] I will be with you to the very end of the age. So the gospel begins with this declaration, the creation of God with us. It ends with this promise, God with us. What beautiful bookends, if we can call them that, to Matthew's gospel.

The reality of Emmanuel, the reality of God with us. But how is that? You know, that's what Jesus says, but how is that? How is Jesus with us now?

Let me just read a couple of verses that allow us to hear Jesus Himself explaining how that is. In John's gospel in chapter 16, and from verse 5, listen to what Jesus says to His disciples and to us. Now I am going to Him who sent me. Yet none of you ask me, where are you going? Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth, it is for your good that I am going away.

Unless I go away, the counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you. Jesus here explains how it is that He will be with them.

[23 : 59] There, as He was about to ascend to heaven, He says, I'll be with you to the end of the age. And you say, well, how will that be? Well, here's the answer. When I go, I will send another. I will send the counselor.

I will send the Holy Spirit to be with you. So that the reality of Emmanuel continues for God's people.

Jesus in the person of the Holy Spirit is with us. The new reality, inaugurated by His coming, continues to prevail. God is still with us.

Emmanuel holds today as our reality. So, Emmanuel, what a beautiful and revealing name. A name that identifies a problem, a name that declares an intention, a name that identifies a person, a name that describes a new reality, and a name that constitutes a promise for God's people.

[24 : 57] In the words of the carol, O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel, shall come to thee, O Israel. Well, He came, and He died, and He ransomed, and we rejoice.

But let me close with a final and a necessary question. Is Emmanuel the reality of all?

And the answer we need to give, the only honest answer to that question, is no. Emmanuel is not the reality for everybody. God has come near, and God continues to stretch out His hand of friendship.

The way of reconciliation has been opened and remains open for all. But we have to grasp that hand. We have to walk that way. And if we fail to grasp His hand and walk that way, then we remain far from God.

[26 : 04] Without God and without hope, God is not with us. Emmanuel is not our reality or experience. And how can we grasp that hand of friendship and that way of reconciliation?

Well, the Bible is clear as to the manner in which we can do so. We need to repent and believe. We need to repent and trust in Jesus. As we recognize our condition, as we recognize our problem, our predicament, that we are sinners and rebels, and as we turn to the One provided for us, as we trust in Jesus and seek and receive the forgiveness that only He can grant, then we will discover, then we do discover, the reality of Emmanuel, God with us, God for us, God by our side.

And what better way to mark, to celebrate Christmas than to embrace Emmanuel, to trust in Jesus, in the One provided by God, to bring us back to Himself.

And let me just close with a final word for those of us who by grace have experienced and continue to experience this new reality of Emmanuel. Emmanuel. Jesus has assigned to us a task.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians and in chapter 5 towards the end of the chapter, that task is outlined for us. And I'll paraphrase somewhat what we find in that portion of Scripture.

[27 : 42] God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, has given us the ministry of reconciliation. He has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

We are Christ's ambassadors. As though God were making His appeal through us, we are to implore on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

So we who have experienced Emmanuel, we who are the objects of God's grace and have come to know what it is to have God as our friend, God for us, God with us.

We are then called, we are then tasked, we are then commissioned to share with others that good news, to extend to others that invitation to experience the reality of Emmanuel.

This is the message that we have been given and this is the calling that is ours. Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your Son.

[28 : 46] We thank You for Jesus. We thank You for the One who will be called, who is called, Emmanuel, God with us, God for us.

We thank You that You are indeed a God who is with us, that You are a God who is for us. We thank You for the evidence we have of that and the evidence that we have most powerfully in the person of Jesus, in the giving of Your only Son to be our Savior.

What greater evidence could we seek to the reality and to the truth that You are a God who is for us, that You are a God who is with us. And we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.