

God's Presence With Us Matthew 1:18-23

There was a man from India who belonged to a devout Hindu sect. He had a profound sense of reverence for life and wouldn't kill an ant, a cow or even a cobra. To him and his belief in reincarnation, he might be killing some past relative.

On a visit to America he was confronted with the claims of Christ, but couldn't grasp the biblical truth that God actually visited this planet in the flesh in the person of Jesus. He couldn't comprehend how the Great Creator God of the Universe could become a man, or even why He would want to do that.

One day he was walking in the field meditating on this new truth about Jesus being God, wondering how this could be when he came across a large ant hill with thousands of little ants scurrying around in their busy like manner. He was in awe of these little creatures as he stood watching them go about their activity. Suddenly he heard the threatening noise of a large tractor plowing the fields.

To his dismay the tractor was headed toward the ant hill. Their home would be destroyed, and thousands might be killed. Grippled with the same kind of concern you and I might feel for hundreds of people trapped in a burning building, he became frantic wondering what he could do. How could he warn them of their pending danger? If he wrote a note in the sand, they wouldn't be able to read it. If he shouted to them, they wouldn't understand. The only possible way to communicate the danger they faced would be for him to somehow become an ant, then he could warn them.

The light suddenly broke through his darkened heart and he understood the words of the Apostle Paul: **“though He was God, He did not demand and cling to His rights as God. He made Himself nothing; He took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form.”**

When I think about this great truth, that the God of the universe would become a man, I am brought

face to face with the words of the Psalmist who wrote: **“What is man that You are mindful of him, or the son of man that You care for him?” (Psalm 8:4)**

Think for a moment about some of the truths we have learned about God in this past year through our study of Genesis.

God spoke on six succeeding days and out of nothing He created the universe with just the power of His Word alone.

God brought an ark filled with all kinds of animals and eight survivors safely through the destruction of a global flood that would purge the world of its wickedness.

God rained down fire and brimstone devouring and destroying cities that had openly rebelled against Him choosing to live in wickedness.

God took an old man and his wife who were well past the years of having a child and gave them a son to carry on the promise of becoming a great nation that would carry on the line of the Redeemer.

God told Abraham and Sarah that nothing was too hard for Him.

With all that we read in Scripture about what God has done, it is nothing then for Him to step out of time for a time and become one of us.

There was a purpose for Him doing so. Despite our many, many flaws, His great love compelled Him to take on flesh and live among us for a time. The hymn writer captured that moment for us.

**Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown
When Thou camest to earth for me.**

Dottie Rambo adds to the mystery with her song He left the splendor of heaven, knowing His destiny.

Why would God do that? Of what benefit was it for Him to do so?

Today we are looking at God's presence with us.

Next week will consider God's pardon for us.

Christmas Eve will be God's praise by us.

December 29 will be God's power in us.

Without God's presence with us, there cannot be His pardon for us.

Without God's pardon for us, there cannot be His praise by us.

Without God's praise by us, we cannot experience His power in us.

During Christmas the best passage to consider God's presence with us in **Matthew 1**. The essence of the Christmas story is really condensed in the simple but powerful truth of **John 3:16** that **"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son."**

That God became a man encompasses both the cradle and the cross. Without the cradle, there is no cross. With no cross there is no pardon and without pardon, there is no hope.

C. S. Lewis wrote **"The Son of God became a man to enable men to become the sons of God."**

In every respect, the celebration of Christmas of when God became human born to a virgin is a love story like no other. Why did God do it? In His own words Jesus tells us why – because God loved the world. He finds us worth loving and dying for.

The words are unfortunately not in our hymnal, but I think most of you have heard it and know it.

Love was when God became a man,
locked in time and space, without rank or place.
Love was God born of Jewish kin;
Just a carpenter with some fishermen.
Love was when Jesus walked in history.
Lovingly He brought a new life that's free.
Love was God nailed to bleed and die,
to reach and love one such as I.

Love was when God became a man,
down where I could see, love that reached to me.
Love was God dying for my sin;
And so trapped was I, my whole world caved in.
Love was when Jesus met me now it's real.
Lovingly He came; I can feel he's real.
Love was God; only He would try to reach,
to love one such as I.

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With your Bibles turned to **Matthew 1**, would you stand to honor God's Word as I read **verses 18-23** as together we consider God's presence with us?

In **verses 18-19** there is a measured vacillation.

I. A MEASURED VACILLATION – vs. 18-19

Rome has been governing Judea since 64 B.C. when General Pompey conquered it. From 37 B.C. to A.D. 4 King Herod has been ruling Judea on behalf of Rome. There is political unrest. For centuries the Jewish people have been looking for the long awaited, promised Messiah. They anticipated his arrival to overthrow Roman rule and remove the shackles of political oppression. In spite of the hardships placed on the nation, life continued. People were married and people were buried. Families had babies. It normally works that way. A couple gets married and then sometime later they may expect a child. Under these difficult conditions people made the best of life. They worked, they worshipped, they wondered. But this is one of those occasions where God's ways are not man's ways. It is in **verse 18** that we first see a perplexing difficulty is revealed.

A. A Perplexing Difficulty is Revealed – v. 18

Matthew opens his gospel with a view of the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Abraham. It substantiates His birthright to be the promised Messiah through whom the nations would be blessed, Matthew is careful to underscore how He was born. It was not in the ordinary way by which conception takes place. His birth extraordinary. **"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about."** It is not a lesson on the birds and the bees. Matthew's explanation is that this conception was in the most unusual way, one that had never occurred before nor would it ever occur again.

Notice how Matthew describes it: **"His mother was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit."**

Anselm of Canterbury notes four ways God can make a man.

The first is what he calls the law of natural generation. A man and a woman come together in the natural act of a sexual union and, well, about

nine months later they have a little bundle. That's happened billions of time throughout history.

The second way is without the agency of a man or a woman. In all of history that has only occurred once and that was Adam, the first man.

The third is a man without a woman. Biologically and scientifically that sounds impossible, but then, with God nothing is impossible as it is evidenced in God making Eve from the rib of Adam. That also only happened one time.

The fourth way is through the divine empowering of a man and woman who are past age, like Abraham and Sarah, or in the case of a couple where she cannot conceive because of some medical condition but God miraculously intervenes to enable them to have a child.

If three of the four are miraculous, why not a fifth? That would be a woman without a man as is the case with the virgin birth and the incarnation.

J. Oswald Chambers poses a question for us to consider: "If we accept that Jesus was the incarnate Son of God, does not belief in the Virgin birth become logically inevitable? Who could be the Father of the Son of God but God Himself?"

Chambers goes on to say that while the Bible does not demand a belief in the Virgin birth for salvation, it does indicate that the fact of the virgin birth must be true if we are to be saved. In other words, if the virgin birth is not true, and Jesus was just or only a man, then we are still dead in our sins, because only by God becoming man is it possible for us to be saved. If we do not hold to the virgin birth, then our faith and in fact Christianity quickly unravels.

Verse 18 tells us three things.

The first is of Mary's engagement.

1. Mary's engagement

In that culture, engagement was as legally binding as marriage and required a bill of divorcement to break. A guy or a girl couldn't just send a text message or write a post on Facebook calling the

thing off. They couldn't write a dear John or dear Jane letter and cancel the engagement plans. It was serious stuff usually lasting about a year before the actual wedding and it was much more binding than an engagement today. It was a binding pledge to be married. They were committed to each other.

But second, notice Mary's exposure.

2. Mary's exposure

"She was found to be with child."

The NLT says that **"while she was a virgin, she became pregnant."**

The Message says that **"Joseph discovered she was pregnant."**

Put yourself in Joseph's sandals for a moment and consider how shocking that would be. According to the Old Testament Law a woman who was pregnant outside of marriage was to be stoned to death. There were serious consequences for her immorality. And then we read in Luke's account that after the angel visited Mary and told her about the miraculous conception she went to the home of her cousin Elizabeth and stayed with her for three months until the birth of John the Baptist. If anyone would understand, if anyone cared, if anyone had compassion, if anyone would believe her, if anyone could help her make some sense out of the news told her by the angel, it would be Elizabeth. But no matter how much counsel and advice she could give Mary there was nothing that could prepare her for the meeting she knew was coming between she and Joseph, the man she was engaged to.

There are some things we don't know. We don't know what Mary told Joseph about why she was going to stay with Elizabeth. Did she just up and leave or did she simply tell him that her cousin was pregnant and she was going to help her out? We don't know. Did they write back and forth during the three months she was away? We don't know. But when she returned something was obvious. It's difficult to hide. I've heard of actresses who are in the middle of filming where the director has to do some creative shots to hide the bump.

It's been out on Facebook, so I don't think it's a secret. So I'm going to step out on a limb if you didn't know and tell you that Hannah Carney is expecting. She had a cute little picture of her at 16 weeks along. I suppose even at three months there was an obvious little baby bump.

Something else we don't know is how Joseph found out. When Mary strode into town word got around and reached the ears of Joseph that was troubling. He probably didn't want to believe it at first, but when he saw her, it couldn't be mistaken. There's no hiding it. Did someone tell him? Did she tell him? Did he just notice she looked like she had put on some weight (but you can't tell that to a woman)? Did he ask her? Regardless of the how, Joseph is left with a perplexing difficulty. What should he do? From all appearances, it looks like she had been unfaithful. I'm sure that really shook his world. The reality of her pregnancy is exposed. What did she have to say for herself? We are not privileged to hear or read their conversation, but Matthew gives us a clue as to what was probably said. Notice her excuse, at least it was an excuse to Joseph.

3. Mary's excuse

“She was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”

Again, if you were Joseph, how would that sound to you? Without Scripture coming right out and saying it we know he didn't believe her. We'll speak to that in a moment. I imagine that through tears and pleading she wanted and hoped that Joseph would believe her. To him, it seemed like just an excuse and a wild one at that. If they had paternity tests back then, he might have wanted her to go to a clinic and get tested. He would have been surprised. What to do? In **verse 19** a purposeful deliberation is reasoned.

B. A Purposeful Deliberation is Reasoned – v. 19

Under ordinary circumstances the decision might have been easy, but Joseph gave some careful consideration about what to do. He teaches us to think before we react. His deliberation is first based

on his character. When you are walking with the Lord, your character plays a big role in your decisions.

1. Joseph's character

We are given a one-word description of his character that should speak volumes about the kind of man he was. Matthew tells us that he is righteous. He is moral, he is upright, he is ethical. He wants to do what is right. In how he lives he is careful to obey God and have a good reputation. To the Jewish people, to be called righteous meant you were zealous to keep the law. That's why this decision was met with such deliberation. He loved Mary, yet it appeared that she had not kept the law herself, so something had to be done, but what. He had his own reputation as a law keeping kind of guy to live up to. But more importantly he also thought about Mary's reputation. His character is hard at work trying to sort things out. He knew what the law said, but he also felt for Mary in this difficulty. **Verse 19** also reveals his contemplation.

2. Joseph's contemplation

It must have been a whirlwind of emotion and mental debate that swirled around his head. It all boiled down to two scenarios. One is public, one is private. One would help her, one would help him.

In their commentary, Walvoord and Zuck write **“His love for her was demonstrated by his actions.”**

As he contemplated what to do, his righteous character wanted to spare Mary and prevent public disgrace.

a. Prevent public disgrace

These days we hear a lot about public shaming. There's a lot of talk about anti-bullying. Someone posts a picture on social media and right away people shame them. In some cases, the person who is doing the shaming doesn't even know the person who posted the picture. They're a friend of a friend of a friend who happened on the post and feel they have to criticize.

It was supposed to be a day of fun for kids in a Florida elementary school. On a designated day, all the students were to wear a T-shirt of their favorite team. One boy didn't have a T-shirt of his favorite University of Tennessee Volunteers team, so he drew their logo on a piece of paper and pinned it to an orange t-shirt. When he got to school that morning, his team pride was quickly smashed to bits when all the kids made fun of him. He was crushed and humiliated. When students and fans of the college heard about what happened they came to his rescue and showered him with all kinds of school memorabilia even taking his diagram and making it into a T-shirt. All the proceeds of sales go directly into an anti-bullying campaign. It was reported on the news this past week that they have raised over \$1 million dollars so far.

How unfortunate that we live in a world that is so heartless, where it's easy to shame someone else just because of being different or after making a mistake. It was no different in Joseph and Mary's day. Public shaming was common and Joseph did not want her to endure any additional shaming by bringing her to the town gates where the judges met and decided cases that required the judgment of an infraction of the law. It would result in publicly stoning her to death. He wanted to prevent any further public disgrace. Knowing that he was not the father and not wanting to publicly shame her he was left with only one other option – pursue private divorce. Given the circumstances, this seemed like the best option to him.

b. Pursue private divorce

He would pursue the legal recourse of divorce but would not have her publicly stoned. Although it was going to be done privately, eventually everyone would know soon enough when the marriage didn't happen. But it would buy some time and protection for her.

It truly was a tough spot for him to be in as he vacillated on what to do. It was at his moment of decision that Joseph had a meaningful visitation.

II. A MEANINGFUL VISITATION – vs. 20-21

As a righteous man, I'd like to think that he prayed asking God for what to do. I'd like to think that he was familiar with passages in the Old Testament, and particularly in the Psalms where we read.

Psalm 34:4 “I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears.”

Psalm 34:6 “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him; and delivered him from all his troubles.”

Psalm 34:17-18 “The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; He delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

He was troubled. He was crushed. He needed help. **Where do you go when things don't make sense and you're left wondering what to do?**

Joseph had a lot on his mind when he went to sleep that night having made the decision about how to handle this situation and that's when the Lord answered.

Folks, when we trust the Lord and look to Him, that's when He shows up with an answer, that's when He surrounds us with His peace.

Now, I'm not going to speak specifically to these two verses today because we are going to come back to it next week, so let me just mention two things from these two verses. In **verse 20** God's part is revealed.

A. God's Part is Revealed – v. 20

Through a dream an angel is sent by God to alleviate any fears that Joseph had. He also altered Joseph's plans. The angel conveyed an important message to him and told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. I believe implied in this message is for Joseph to simply trust God and not worry about all the wagging tongues and the wondering looks. Don't be afraid about what others think. The reason there was nothing to fear, as the angel revealed, was that this whole thing was God's doing. God miraculously intervened to make Mary pregnant by the Holy Spirit. We can only imagine in that moment that Joseph breathed a huge sigh of

relief realizing that whatever Mary had tried to tell him was actually true. John MacArthur says the wording by Matthew is profound because they are the ultimate testimony of the virgin birth.

J. Oswald Sanders adds that if the virgin birth did not happen as Scripture says, then the New Testament narratives are all false and the Bible is robbed of its authority. Instead of Mary being the most blessed among women, she really did then commit adultery. Jesus would then be the child of sinful parents who acted immorally before marriage resulting in an unwed pregnancy. There is then no adequate explanation for Jesus's unique, sinless character and He was not miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit. The only other alternative is that He was born through a human father; He was not the second person of the Trinity; He therefore had no power to forgive sins, and He is a son of Adam with the same sin nature as we have because in Adam (who is our representative) all sin.

We are left with one very simple, but important question. Are we willing to accept the supernatural claims of Scripture regarding the circumstances of Jesus's birth and His then being both God and man? The angel said it happened through the conception of the Holy Spirit and God's Word declares it happened that way. Will we believe it?

The late Harry Emerson Fosdick once said "I want to assure you that I do not believe in the virgin birth." If I were a betting man, I'd say he believes it now.

God's part in the matter is revealed, He made it happen. But the news gets even better. Not only did God have a part that is revealed, in **verse 21** God's purpose is also revealed.

B. God's Purpose is Revealed – v. 21

Why did God become a man? Why the virgin birth?

The answer is to save His people from their sins. He was to be given the name Jesus. In the Hebrew it meant 'Jehovah will save.' He wasn't the only Jewish boy to have that name. Some are noted in Scripture. Every other boy who had that name

testified to God's saving power, but this Jesus, this one conceived by the Holy Spirit, was more than just testifying that God would save, it would be through this Jesus that God would actually save. He would be the Savior.

This certainly was a meaningful visitation by the angel which brings us to a magnificent verification.

III. A MAGNIFICENT VERIFICATION – vs. 22-23

In a parenthetical way, Matthew will attest to the authority of Scripture and to the divine origin in which it came about by pointing back in time to a prophetic word given by the prophet Isaiah.

A. God's Prophecy for Us is Accomplished – v. 22

We are reminded in **II Peter 1:20-21** that **"no Scripture (referring to the Old Testament) came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."**

Matthew says that what he just wrote about fulfilled a prophecy found back in the Old Testament. The word "fulfill" means to carry out as predicted or promised, to bring an end to, or to complete.

Isaiah wrote his prophecy 700 years earlier (**7:14**) and Matthew says this is the culmination of that prophecy. Matthew quotes the most from the Old Testament more than any other gospel writer. Twelve times in his gospel he writes about something being fulfilled that had been written in the Old Testament now completed in the New Testament. **As one author noted that this is "a powerful testimony to the divine origin of Scripture and its accuracy even in small details."**

What God promised has now come true in the baby boy conceived in Mary. God's Word can be trusted. It will happen just as He said it would. **Verse 23** concludes our message today by noting God's presence is affirmed.

B. God's Presence with Us is Affirmed – v. 23

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel – which means, ‘God with us.’”

Years ago there was an accident at sea. A submarine quickly sank to the bottom of the ocean after being rammed by another ship. The entire crew was trapped inside. Boats rushed to the disaster to assist in a rescue attempt. No one knew what the crew inside the sub was experiencing as they spent their final hours trapped inside. The oxygen was slowly giving out. One diver was able to swim down to the submarine. He placed his ear next to the sub to see if he could hear anything from inside. There was a faint tapping sound. It was a message in Morse Code. It was a question: “Is there any hope?”

That is the cry of humanity. Reading or listening to what's going on in the world today and people wonder if there is any hope? Is there any hope in my situation? Lost jobs, lost income, lost health, lost loved ones. In spite of the good things happening in our society, there is still despair. Is there any hope?

Within this verse is the hope mankind so desperately needs, yet so few are willing to admit and accept. Referring to the name Immanuel, which points to the baby Mary was carrying, hope is found in what Matthew Henry calls the deepest mystery and the greatest mercy. The child carried by Mary, attested to by the angel and now revealed to Joseph is the hope of all mankind for eternal life.

Immanuel, God with us. God stepped into time and became one of us. Immanuel is not so much a name as it is a characterization. This name is only used three times in Scripture. We refer to Him as Christ Jesus.

Christ would be his title, equivalent to the Old Testament term Messiah, which means anointed one or chosen one.

Jesus would be the name by which He would be known by.

Immanuel would be His characterization referring to God being with us.

Let me illustrate it for you this way.

Pastor is my title.

Howie is my name.

Shepherd is my characterization.

In **Philippians 2** Paul writes that Jesus set aside His deity to become a man. That doesn't mean that one day He was God, and then on another day He stopped being God to become man and then later on stopped being man to become God again. He was both God and man at the same time, but chose to set aside His ability as deity to fulfill His role as man.

There is an Old Testament symbol that depicts God's presence with the Israelites. It was the Tent of Meeting and then the Tabernacle. They represented God's presence. When Jesus became a man, born in the flesh, He did not just appear as a man, He was 100% verifiable man in every way. He was physically God with us. **John 1:14** says that He became flesh and made His dwelling among us. His becoming human did not alter His being God. At that moment God was with us or to put it more clearly, He tabernacled among us as one of us.

Another symbol in the Old Testament of God's presence was the table of Showbread. It was inside the Tabernacle and Israel of God's presence with them. In the New Testament the Bread of Life came to be one of us to give us eternal life. In a very real sense God is with us right now in the person of the Holy Spirit. So God is always with us.

Even though His tabernacling with us was only for a brief time, a little over 33 years, He continues to be with us through His Spirit who lives us. In that respect He will always be God with us and one day we will always be with God. Throughout Scripture we have the wonderful reassurance that God will always be with us. It truly is as we sing this time of year **“Joy to the world the Lord is come, let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare Him room.”**

Have you made room for Him in your heart?

Can you truly call Him Immanuel – God with you?

Make room in your heart to receive the king.