

God with Us

Matthew 1:18-25

Christmas is, as holidays go, the greatest celebration of the year. You would think that the genealogy of Jesus Christ would lead to a magnificent birth story full of pomp and circumstance. Instead we find scandal, confusion, disappointment, fear, and near disaster—exactly what God planned (v. 22). God came to save us, and He did so by becoming one of us.

A Different Genesis

The beginning of Matthew's Gospel provides a panoramic view of history, 42 generations leading up to the messiah (vv. 1-17). Now Matthew zooms in to one betrothed couple in the Judean countryside, of no particular importance to anyone. *This* is the genesis of Jesus: after Mary and Joseph were betrothed, but before they came together in marriage and sexual union, she was found with child by the Holy Spirit (v. 18). If a woman suddenly "finds" herself pregnant, issues of denial and self-deception are apparent. But Mary actually did find herself this way, and she was the only one who knew the truth other than almighty God. She was pregnant and to all appearances not taking any responsibility. Betrothal was a stronger bond than engagement as we practice it and required legal action to dissolve. Because Joseph was a righteous man, he wanted to do what was right and kind, to divorce her quietly rather than publicly humiliate her (v. 19). He was thinking about this when an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him not to be afraid to marry Mary since she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit (v. 20). She will have a Son, and He will be called Jesus because He will save His people from their sins (v. 21). Shallow interpretations of the birth of Christ liken it to other miraculous religious foundings, a myth that ignorant people without basic understandings of biology would accept at that time. This is the fallacy of chronological snobbery which assumes ancient or earlier people were less intelligent, and it's refuted by Joseph himself. He plans to divorce her because he knows that virgins don't get pregnant. It's not the honor or miracle that overwhelms to him, but devastation and disgrace. The creation history of Genesis goes from glory to glory. God speaks and creates the earth without form, void, and dark, and then speaks light in existence. He divides and fills repeatedly, shaping the world and calling it "good" over and over. When the second person of the Trinity, the savior of world makes His entrance, He doesn't come to a new Eden on a remote tropical island where a new civilization can be built. He comes right into the Middle East, to His disobedient people controlled by the Romans, into the mess a sinful people have created. And then He makes His own holy mess. Mary and Joseph do not know why God is doing this, but it's likely they wonder why He couldn't have waited a few months until after they were married! He has His reasons, some of which they would learn, but at this point in the story they have their Bibles (Old Testament) and their faith in God. We need to be victims of grace like this.

By the Holy Spirit

Twice Mary is said to have become pregnant "by the Holy Spirit" (vv. 18, 20). We confess Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit" in the Apostles' Creed and was "incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary" in the Nicene Creed. In order to redeem us from sin, Jesus could not be born dead in sins and trespasses like we are (Eph. 2:1), so He had no earthly father. This is a reasonable interpretation from Scripture, but not stated in Scripture. But in this context of the genesis of Jesus, the reference to the Spirit points to the Spirit's work in the original creation. The Holy Spirit hovers over the world to form and fill it (Gen. 1:2). God breathes the breath or Spirit of life into Adam to make him a living being (Gen. 2:7). The Holy Spirit incarnates the second person of the Trinity in Mary and begins a new creation. Adam rises from sleep and God brings him to his new bride (Gen. 2:22). Joseph awakes from his dream and takes Mary to be His wife (v. 20). Salvation comes from outside of us, from God alone. We cannot save ourselves. There is no people group (family,

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church, town, region, tribe, nation) or program (school, education, philosophy, diet, technology) that we can employ to make humanity straighten up and fly right. The virgin birth smashes all man-centered humanism and exposes our attempts at self-salvation as hopelessly corrupt and doomed. Even when God intervenes to save us, we try our best to ruin it. Every two years Ligonier Ministries publishes The State of Theology survey reporting the beliefs of evangelical Christians in the U.S. Evangelicals are defined by allegiance to the authority of Scripture, the importance of evangelism, the exclusivity of salvation through Christ's death on the cross, and the belief that salvation is the gift of God received only by trusting in Christ. The 2020 report shows that 46% of evangelicals believe people are good by nature. It's like we haven't been celebrating Christmas every year! God came into our darkness to shine the light. Jesus was begotten by the Holy Spirit.

Emmanuel

Matthew quotes from the Old Testament, assuming we know (or will learn) the context of the reference: "So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us'" (vv. 22-23). Isaiah gives this sign during a crisis in the eighth century B.C. The Assyrians are threatening the northern kingdom of Israel, led by Pekah, and Syria, led by Remaliah. They join forces and then threaten to attack Ahaz and the southern kingdom of Judah because they won't help. Isaiah tells Ahaz not to fear because God will crush both Syria and Israel (Is. 7:4-8). He commands Ahaz to ask for a sign, but Ahaz refuses to "test the Lord", which is annoying both to the prophet and the Lord (Is. 7:12-13). The sign would come anyway: a young woman will have a child, and before he will "know to choose the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings" (Is. 7:16). That happened and ultimately in 722 B.C. the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom. Ahaz was a pretender who really didn't honor God, but flattered and relied on king Tiglath Pileser of Assyria and copied the altar in Damascus (2 Kgs. 16:7, 10). Similarly at Jesus' birth, king Herod pays lip service to Yahweh and wants to come "worship" the messiah (Matt. 2:8), but really he is only interested in preserving his power. Joseph is called "son of David" (v. 20) and he acts like a true king. He repents of his fear, trusts the Lord, marries and protects his bride (vv. 24-25). Both Josephs are betrayed by their people and flee to Egypt. When the world suffered famine in Joseph son of Jacob's time, they came to him for food. Joseph, Jesus' father, protects Him who is the bread of life for all, whose body will be given on the cross for the life of the world. Herod's soldiers are ready to search and murder Jesus while the Gentile wise men from the east come to worship Him (Matt. 2:2). The year 2020 has nothing on A.D. 1. *Emmanuel* means for us what it did for Mary and Joseph: that in the midst of confusion, uncertainty, danger, and violence we know God is with us, and we know this because Christ has come. Jesus didn't just come into a broken world for a little time and get out. He lived a complete human life, suffered and was tempted in every way, but always resisted sin so that He could take death and the wrath of God upon Himself. He saved His people from their sin. This is why God doesn't despise or reject you because of the mess you are in. He comes with grace, calls you to repentance and new life, and then to stick with Him in the righteous trouble He is making. Like Joseph, don't be afraid, but trust the Lord, and do what He says. Look to Emmanuel, the Lord who is with you.