

Matthew 1:1-25

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 December 2023

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Do sit and turn to Matthew chapter 1. Matthew 1. We're going to look at this really, really famous part of God's word from Matthew 1, 18 to 25.

! No introduction, four points. Four points. You know the story, don't you? You're familiar with the story of Jesus' birth. As we look at this passage, I want us to see four things that are revealed to us. The first is this. Jesus' birth reveals to us the turmoil of God's ways. The turmoil of God's way. Can you see it there in verse 18?

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother, Mary, had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Two words that are going through Joseph's mind that seem completely incompatible. The words Mary and pregnant.

[1 : 03] You can imagine him holding his head in his hands as he paced around his carpenter's shop, trying to make head nor tail of the situation. Mary.

Pregnant. Somehow Mary and adultery didn't fit together in the slightest. It would be adultery. So if you think of Jewish marriage, there was a betrothal. That's what it talks about in verse 18. And the betrothal was as good as marriage. So when a couple is betrothed or pledged to be married, that was the commitment.

The commitment's been made. The consummation of the marriage, the physical sexual union, might be as much as a year later, when the groom took the bride back to his home.

But if in that intervening period, from the commitment to the sexual union, if after that commitment had been made, even though they weren't living together, if there was infidelity on the part of one of them, it was adultery, not fornication.

[2 : 15] And therefore that marriage could be subject to a divorce. And you had to divorce if you wanted to separate as a result of an infidelity. If one of the spouses died in between the commitment and the oneness of sexual union, the one who was left would be called a widow or a widower.

Even though the marriage hadn't been consummated yet by a sexual union. So it was before that time that they'd come together. But the pledge had been made, the commitment had been made, and Mary was found to be pregnant, can you see it?

Through the power of the Holy Spirit. But Joseph didn't know about that part with the Holy Spirit. Because as the story reads, he finds that out in verse 20 and following.

All he knows is that Mary is pregnant. And you can imagine what he must have gone through because of that. We read, don't we, this Advent story again and again and again each year.

And somehow, for those of us who church goes, it can become a ho-hum affair. And you never get disturbed by it. It never grabs you, never shocks you.

[3 : 32] And the reason for that is because you're not in Joseph's sandals. But think what he was going through. Surely, surely, he knew, didn't he, he hadn't been the one.

And he didn't think Mary could or would. She wouldn't have. But she must have. In his mind, he must be thinking Mary has given herself to another man.

And the mere thought of it makes Joseph slam his fist into his workbench in anguish. You see, when God brought his Messiah in his way, it almost wrecked Joseph's life.

He didn't know why Mary was pregnant. He could only infer and everyone else must know. And you say, well, yes, later on he'll find out, verses 20 and following, what the real story is.

And the angel of the Lord will give him that additional info. But he doesn't have it at this point. And all he can think of and all he can deal with is just what he knows.

[4 : 44] And the time when God was going to bring his supreme gift and the way that God brought it almost drove Joseph to utter despair. The turmoil of God's ways.

That plunged Joseph into gut-wrenching turmoil. And so I want to ask a question. I don't think I'm declaring this.

But I think you as God's people, as listeners of his word, you need to think and ponder about this. Could it be that this pattern is something that God may use at other times?

Could it be that when God does his finest work in our lives, that he may initiate that work by placing and driving us into intense confusion?

Is it only Joseph that knows this pattern of God's work? I don't think it is. Could it be that some of you know this as well?

[5 : 49] And could it be that even though tonight you do not understand God's ways, you are confused at what God is doing?

It may yet be a prelude to some of God's best gifts. It's not only the turmoil of God's way. Can you secondly see the model of God's servant?

You see that in verse 19 and then verse 24 and verse 25. There's a danger, isn't there, when you read the gospels, particularly the infancy narratives, that you focus too much on the human characters of scripture.

Because the Bible doesn't normally look to them for their own sake. But Matthew, in his narrative, in chapters 1 and chapter 2, he draws attention to Joseph. Matthew mentions him four times and he never calls him Jesus' father.

But he seems to set Joseph up as something of a model. You see him here as a model of God's servant. Look at his character in verse 19.

[7 : 00] This is before he's got the additional info. In verse 19, he's made up his mind and he's doing his best with what he's got to work with. And Matthew describes him, can you see it, verse 19, as a righteous man.

He's a just man. And he's unwilling to put her to shame. And he resolved to divorce her quietly. He's an interesting character, isn't he? Righteous.

He wants to do the right thing. He's a just man. And yet he doesn't want to put Mary to disgrace.

He's compassionate. He decides to divorce her quietly. He's righteous.

You see, he doesn't say, well, Mary slept with some other guy. What's the big deal? Live and let live. Sex is no big deal at all. But you see, he's a righteous man.

And sexual purity matters to him. But he also doesn't want to put her to disgrace. It's beautiful. Joseph is righteous.

[8 : 03] But he's compassionately righteous. And Joseph will do what is right, but he will do it kindly. He's a righteous man, but he cares for Mary.

It's a great combination, isn't it? Or that we would be a church like that in our character. But can you see there's a costliness to what Joseph does? He gets additional information.

The angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him basically three things. He says to Joseph, what is conceived in Mary is not because she's been unfaithful. What's conceived in Mary is due to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notice the restraint. There's no fantastic details there. It just says, by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit touched Mary.

That's why she is pregnant. That's all we're told. It's God's power. The power of the Holy Spirit. And I wonder if you've ever thought about that.

[9 : 05] I wonder if you've ever thought of the role of the Holy Spirit in the conception of the Lord Jesus. Think about it for a moment. The Holy Spirit made the pre-existent second person of the Trinity into a human being.

By the power of the Holy Spirit. Human life is created miraculously in Mary's womb. And at that point we are full of awe but not understanding.

We are full of awe and worship but not understanding. And that's very important. And the child to be born will save his people from their sins. And this is all a fulfilment of prophecy from Isaiah.

To Joseph about this child that was to be born. And that must have been a great relief to Joseph, isn't it? A burden lifted from his shoulders. But he still isn't without problems.

The angel says, do not be afraid. Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Don't be afraid. Why? Because it will cost you. It will cost you something. Don't think that Joseph didn't count the cost.

[10:27] Don't you suppose Joseph talked to himself and said, Look Joseph, you go ahead and do that. But you know what will happen, don't you? People will begin to talk. And they are going to say, Joseph must have been the one that slept with her after all.

Or he wouldn't go ahead with it. He wouldn't complete the marriage with Mary if it was really someone else. Joseph would surely divorce her if it was someone else.

But he's not doing that. So Joseph had his choice. And it would be a costly obedience. What do you think? There are other answers to this.

And this isn't the only one. But why do you think Jesus, Joseph, took Mary to Bethlehem? One reason would be for the census.

But why did Joseph take Mary to Bethlehem? When strictly speaking, actually, Mary wasn't required to go to Bethlehem. Why did he take her with him?

[11:31] Could it be that in part he wants to save her from ridicule and abuse? There was being heaped on her in Nazareth. And what do you think those Jews meant in John 8, 41?

When later they're debating with Jesus and they say to him, we were not born of sexual immorality. What they didn't say was as important as what they were saying.

And when they say with a sneer, isn't this the carpenter's son? What are they trying to imply?

They're saying to Jesus, we were not born of fornication. But we hear there were some shady, unknown details around your birth cheaters.

And Joseph realises he could do one of two things. He could divorce Mary and he could exonerate himself. And people say, well, Joseph did what was right. He's a just man. He's a righteous man. He could come out with his reputation intact. Or he could take Mary as his wife and share in the suspicion and the shame and the innuendo and the town gossip.

[12:40] For the rest of his life. And so what does he do? We're told Joseph rose from his sleep. And he did as the angel of the Lord directed him.

It is just quiet obedience. Quiet, costly obedience. I don't know if you've noticed this, but Joseph never talks.

Joseph never says a word in Matthew 1 and 2. He never says anything. He just does whatever God tells him to do.

He never talks. It's like Noah in Genesis 6-8 in that flood story. I know Noah talks after in chapter 9 about the curse on Canaan. But that isn't in the flood story, isn't it?

In Genesis 6-8 in that flood story. All the details of it. And it refers to Noah in so many ways. But Noah never speaks. He just does what God tells him to do.

[13:47] And so here you have quiet Joseph. Believe it or not, no one ever interviewed Joseph on Christian TV to ask him what it would have been like.

No evangelical publisher ever put out a book describing Joseph's trauma. No one ever described Joseph as a dynamic Christian personality.

He actually disappears, doesn't he, after the infancy narratives. He just quietly obeyed. He did what was righteous according to God's command.

And even though men wouldn't think it was righteous at all. And that is because Joseph loved the praise of God more than the approval of men.

And he just did quietly what God told him to do. No fanfare, no glamour. And maybe not even any recognition.

[14:48] There's a model of God's servants. The turmoil of God's ways, the model of God's servants. And thirdly, the birth reveals the stress of the need of God's people. Look at verse 21.

Verse 21. She will bear a son. And you shall call his name Jesus.

For he will save his people from their sins. It's interesting, isn't it, how he describes that. Saved from their sins. The way that it's described there is their sins are a kind of power that holds them under its influence.

They are kind of under the control of their sins. And they need to be rescued out of them. And there is an element in which their sins have control.

And these people, they need to be taken out of that control. Out of that realm. Out of that sphere.

And that dominance. And we don't always think about sin in that way. We don't always think of sin as a power.

[15:59] We often think of it in things that we do and don't do. But sin is not like clothes that we put on and put off. It's not something that is there.

That we can take or leave. But sin is a power that has a hold of us. Sin is a power that exercises power over us. You've probably done this, isn't it?

This has happened to me a few times, isn't it? You can be sleeping at night. And you're sleeping the wrong way. And you fall asleep on your arm. Or your hand. And then the magic moment goes when the alarm goes off.

And it seems to be so loud. And you roll over. And you reach over. And you try to move your arm to turn off the alarm clock. Or to flip your phone. But your arm is asleep. And your hand won't grip anything.

And your arm is flopping around because you've slept on it. And you can't get hold of it. It's out of your control. It feels like it's under someone else's control.

[17:04] You don't have control of it. It won't do what you want it to do because it's falling asleep. It's a terrible feeling. Do you know what it is to be like that? To be helpless.

To be in bondage to something. I was going through the park at the bottom of my road. And there was a mum pushing a child on a bike.

Trying to get him to learn to the bike. And it's a great moment, isn't it? When you see that. And the mum is running along. And she's running with the bike. And they're going faster. And then the mum kind of launches him off. And then you hear the words, turn, turn, turn.

And. The child says, why didn't you turn? Why didn't you turn? The child says, I can't.

I couldn't do it. I can't do it. Of course he could do it. He could move the handle. Why couldn't you do it? I just can't do it. Why can't you do it? Just do it.

[18:10] Isn't sin so often like that? Why do you do what you do? Why can't you stop doing it? Because I'm in bondage. It's irrational.

It's the way that sin works. I really hope you don't think that sin is rational. Sin is irrational.

And so we talk about the sin behind the sin. And that's really helpful, isn't it? Seeing the kind of idols behind the sin. But when you get back to it, why do we sin? It's utterly irrational. So you go to the Garden of Eden. Why did Adam and Eve sin? You say pride.

Why did they suffer pride? We don't know. And that's what it's like to be in bondage, isn't it? And you say, well, if Jesus came to save people who are in bondage to their sin, they must be very, very desperate people.

And we are. Notice that it says, doesn't it, really quite interestingly, he will save his people from their sin. It's got more meaning when you get to the end of Matthew's Gospel.

[19:16] But when Joseph heard those words, save his people, he would be thinking of the people of Israel. Jesus will save his people from their sins.

These were the ones who had been given the promises of God, the covenants of God, the prophecies of God, the promises of God. These are the folks that went to synagogue, they went to church each week.

And they were the ones who needed to be rescued from their sins. They are the people who are in such desperate need and bondage. They are the religious folks, people like you and I.

People who claim to be part of the covenant people of God. And today there are Presbyterians among them. And it's saying that the Israelites needed to be saved from their bondage of sin.

And so here's the truth. You can be an Israelite. You can be a fully paid up member of the people of God and be a slave of sin. And you can be a Presbyterian and be a lost soul unless Jesus saves you from your sin.

[20:30] And that is my need and that is your need. The need of God's people. Let me read to you from J.C. Ryle. The name Jesus means Saviour. It's the same name as Joshua in the Old Testament.

He saves from the guilt of sin by washing them in his own atoning blood. He saves them from the dominion of sin by putting in their hearts the sanctifying spirit. He saves them from the presence of sin when he takes them out of this world to rest with him.

He will save them from all the consequences of sin when he shall give them a glorious body at the last day. From sorrow, cross and conflict they are not saved.

But they are saved from sin forevermore. Jesus is a very encouraging name to heavy laden sinners.

He who is king of kings and lord of lords might have lawfully taken some more high sounding title.

But he did not do so. The rulers of this world have called themselves great, conqueror, bold, magnificent and the like. The son of God was content to call himself Saviour.

[21 : 35] Fourthly and lastly, Jesus' birth reveals the arrival of God's presence. Look at verse 23. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel.

It's a quote from Isaiah 7.14. And the context of that passage is that Isaiah throws in the teeth of King Ahaz a promise from God. That the Assyrians, the great big enemy was going to come and they're going to decimate the nation of Judah.

And they're going to bring it low. And out of this future time, when Judah is in a desperate condition, there would be born a child. A child who's going to be king.

And the name of this child would be Emmanuel, which means God with us. We can't go into it further tonight, except to say that this is all that ever sustains God's people.

And it sustained Isaiah and his fellow believers. Just the fact that God is with us, that he holds us up. And now Matthew is saying, Emmanuel has come.

[22 : 53] It's not just a statement of faith. God is with us. A personal, Emmanuel God with us.

Has come in warm flesh, living colour. And Jesus is Emmanuel. He is God with us. He is both human and divine.

Jesus has a human mother, but a divine father. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. He is God with us. God with us.

And that makes all the difference. And so children, when you're walking in the dark, on the street, on the pavement, with your mum or your dad, and you're walking in the dark, and you feel slightly scared, it makes all the difference in the world, isn't it?

When the parent grabs your hand, because you know that they are with you. What a difference it makes that God is with us.

[24 : 00] I'm eight years younger than my next oldest brother or sister, and then another older brother who's older than I am.

I was kind of, in many ways, a bit of an only child in a way. And I had an imaginary friend called Sam. Sam had lived a terribly sad life. His wife had died.

All his children had died. He was forever getting into trouble. And I would tell my family about Sam, much to my father's annoyance. He was an imaginary friend. One day, we're driving through Gosinan, and I said, that's where Sam lives.

My father stopped the car, turned the car around, pulled the car over. Let's go and see Sam, he said. Sam never made an appearance again.

He killed him off. Many people think, don't they, when we think God with us, they think we're talking about some imaginary friend. But Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us in history.

[25 : 08] He is with us tonight by his spirit. He supports us in the midst of afflictions, in the midst of suffering.

The only thing that steadies us in the midst of our fears is that we have this strange conviction from the testimony of God's word.

That God is with us by his spirit. Jesus is Emmanuel. And that's why we confess, don't we, and with God's people throughout the ages, with the rest of God's people, believing people.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Why? For you are with me. And if I ascend to the heavens, you are there.

And if I make my bed in the depths and the grave, you are there. For you are Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us.

[26 : 09] Let's pray.