

Matthew 1:18-25

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[0 : 00] It was clearly quite the few days for Joseph. It started with a thunderbolt from his fiancée in verse 18 of chapter 1 of Matthew's Gospel,!

When Jesus' mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child.

Joseph knows how babies are conceived. He knows that he hasn't done what's necessary for a baby to be conceived, so there's only one option, betrayal, infidelity.

You can imagine the mix of emotions, anger, sadness, humiliation. So he makes his plans to disengage Mary.

We're told that they were betrothed. Betrothal was a bigger deal back then than engagement is today. It's not the same thing. Betrothal was based on both parties actually making legal binding promises, and so it wasn't just a case of him going, demanding the ring back, and them going their separate ways.

[1 : 17] So verse 19, he resolves to divorce her, but he is a righteous man, so he's going to do it quietly. Even in his hurt, he wants to protect her reputation.

He wants to be discreet. That's the first thunderbolt. The poor man's head is spinning. The future that he thought was going to map out in front of him is going to take a very different course.

What are people going to think? How is he going to tell the story? But while his head is spinning with all of this that's going on, another thunderbolt comes his way.

I can imagine him lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling, hasn't been able to sleep much because of all that's been going on, and he does finally manage to drift off, and the effulgence of heavenly glory flashes across his trembling body and speaks to him.

Verse 20, Joseph, son of David, have I not got enough to worry about at the minute? If I could have not got enough on my mind?

[2 : 28] Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. It is quite a few days.

Well, we're not told how long it is. It might have been longer than that, but it's been quite a period for him. Initially, he thinks that his fiancé has been unfaithful because there can be no alternative and then he gets a visitation from one of the heavenly angels to tell him that it's actually a miraculous conception in the womb of his fiancé and that God is at work in this whole thing.

The story of Advent this season that we're in at the moment is the story of the extraordinary breaking into the ordinary. God the Holy Spirit has acted miraculously in the womb of this girl, Mary of Nazareth.

But this morning, in what will be a familiar passage to many of us, what I want to do as we dig into it is to consider a theme that I think runs through everybody involved, and the theme is this.

It is the theme of incredible humility. The humility that we see all the way through this passage. And that starts with, number one, our first point, the humility of God. If we can say that, the humility of God.

[3 : 51] What is taking place here is most clearly seen in verse 23. Look at verse 23, verse 22. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Verse 23, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

The human life growing in Mary's womb is conceived by God in order that God would come and dwell among his people.

It was promised centuries earlier by Isaiah the prophet, as we've been hearing in the evenings over the last few weeks. The heavenly spokesman is telling Joseph that this baby is the divine Son of God.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! We sing that theology every Advent season. We'll sing it at our carol services.

He's pleased as man with man to dwell. Jesus our Emmanuel. We sing it, but it washes over us. The magnitude of it washes over us.

[5 : 02] Stop for a moment and think of the humility. Without any loss of deity, the uncreated, all-powerful creator of the universe took on a human nature, took on flesh and blood.

Here's how the theologian J.R. Packer puts it, quote, God became man. The divine Son became a Jew. The Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child.

The babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as the truth of the Incarnation.

I would suggest that nothing in fiction also or anywhere else for that matter displays greater humility than this. God becoming man in all the weakness and dependence of a baby.

The supreme miracle of the Incarnation has at its heart infinite condescension. From the highest heights to the lowest lows, the humility of God.

[6 : 23] I keep saying it's a miracle, the miraculous, the supernatural. I keep saying that because that's exactly what it is. I want to say if you're here this morning and you're looking into the Christian faith and you have difficulties with this concept of miracles, although I will say that's an issue that I come up against less and less in our day.

We're much more comfortable with the supernatural nowadays. We know that the world is a magical place that is beyond our control and things happen that we can't explain. We know that. But if these are issues for you, the fact that you see in the Gospels Jesus walking on water, healing the sick, raising the dead, well let me encourage you.

Start first of all with the Incarnation. Interrogate the Christmas story. Here's Packer again. It is from misbelief about the Incarnation that difficulties at other points in the Gospel story usually spring. But once the Incarnation, that is the theological word that we use to describe God taking on human flesh, once the Incarnation is grasped as a reality, these other difficulties dissolve.

[7 : 34] He's saying if there is a God, look, if there's no God, there's no conversation. He doesn't exist. He couldn't humble himself to be born as a baby. But if there is a God, and he has supernaturally taken on human nature, being born that first Christmas, why should it be a problem for him to do any of the other miracles that we see him do?

If you do have a question about miracles, interrogate the Christmas story. This story tells us that God the Son took on humanity in Jesus the Son of God.

God the Son took on humanity in Jesus the Son of God, and he did it in order to come to you and me. Now, there are a few things that necessarily follow from this.

The first is this. The first is this. This means that God is really not far away. God is really not far away.

Back in the 80s, which I remember well, my decade, Sting or Police, the band, wrote a song. The song was called, Oh My God.

[8 : 48] They say this, Everyone I know is lonely, and God is so far away, and my heart belongs to no one. So now, sometimes I pray, please take the space between us and fill it up some way.

Take the space between us and fill it up some way. Do you know that feeling? Especially when our culture is as turbulent as it is at the minute.

Especially when our lives are such a struggle, and in many cases our pain is so real. When life is hard, we are at least tempted to ask the question, Where are you, God?

You seem so far away. There is this vast space between us. Where are you? Christmas tells us that He isn't far away.

In fact, the opposite is true. In the one born at Christmas, the infinite became finite. The invisible became visible.

[9 : 58] Emmanuel is God with us. God is really not far away. The second implication is that God then can be really known.

You can really know God. Of all the things that God gives us, of the benefits that come to us from our relationship with Him, and there are many, and we'll hear about some of those a bit further on in the passage, here we see that supremely above all of that, God gives us Himself.

We get God. So often we talk about God, we talk about the benefits that He brings into our lives. A bit like He's something of a service provider.

With Vodafone, you get extra this, and you get super-duper that. Well, with God, you get all these great life-changing things. And that's true. That is true.

We'll see that in a moment. But above all of the things that God gives, God gives Himself. It's like marriage.

[11:05] When my wife Louisa married me, she got care and affection, and she got protection, she got a provider, she got a long list of great things.

But above all of that, she got me. And she's very, very thankful. She reminds me all the time.

But that's true in marriage, isn't it? In marriage, ultimately, you get the person. You get the things, but you get the person. And that's actually what you want. Well, in Jesus, the ineffable, unapproachable God becomes a human being who can be known and loved.

And through faith, we can know His love. Because we can know Him. If you're not a Christian, putting your faith in Jesus Christ, yes, you will get forgiveness for sin.

You will get eternal life. You will get peace with God. You will get God. Astonishing, life-changing things, but above everything else, you get God. And if you're a Christian, God has given Himself to you.

[12:16] In Christ and by His Holy Spirit, God has given Himself to you. The incarnation means that you can really know God. By the way, in setting aside the glory of heaven to become human means that true godliness follows that same pattern.

Whatever our situation, however privileged or ambitious you might be, Christmas tells you to go to the people without power, without money, the unlovely and the ordinary people like Mary and to serve them.

The humility of God should be visibly reflected in the lives of His people. God is really not far away. God can be really known.

God gives you hope. God gives you real hope. Because of this, God gives you real hope. We see this hope in the name. Verse 23.

We heard this in Isaiah 7 a couple of evenings ago, but it's worth repeating. Emmanuel. God enters our world. He breaks into the ordinary and the broken with a goal in view.

[13:19] And that goal is that He has come to put things right. Across this city, as we are gathering here, children are suffering.

Marriages are crumbling. Lives are being lost to terminal diseases. Dementia is robbing loved ones of the family members they once knew. Livelihoods are being ruined by addiction or exploitation. And all the rest, even as we gather here, those things are going on. Life is hard. Expressions of that are true in all of our lives. Life is hard.

When I see an addict in the street, zonked on whatever it is they take, I get why they do it. I get it. Just get me out of this mess for a moment. This time of year, Christmas parties that get out of hand. I can see why people blow out the way they do. Just let me forget my complicated life just for one night. Even something as banal and trite as Christmas playlists.

[14:21] I can see why we do it. Just distract me for a while. Let me go off into this fantasy land of trite Christmas songs just so that I can forget about this harsh and difficult life for a moment.

The Christmas story changes all of that. The Christmas story completely reorients our perspective because God has come down to put all of that right.

And that gives us all real hope. Real hope. Not just cross your fingers, hope for the best, but real hope. And the way he does this then flows from our next point.

The second expression of humility in the passage. Point number one, the humility of God. Second point, the humility of Jesus. Verse 21. It would have been humble and astonishing enough if the Son of God had come to us.

If he'd lived for a while and then left. Perhaps leaving us a set of teaching to follow. Perhaps here is a moral code that I've brought you from heaven. Follow this. But his plans were far bigger.

[15:31] And this is where the child's name is significant. Verse 21. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Jesus means the Lord saves. Jesus means the Lord saves.

Jesus means the Savior that you think you need from the hell that you fear. What you value is the Savior that you think you need to save you from the hell that you fear.

Retailers know this. That's why they spend so much on advertising. Because what they're doing is trying to convince us that their product will save us from our perceived hell.

Now whether that hell is just being ordinary or lonely or poor or uneducated or badly dressed or unemployed or low self-esteem or whatever it is, you can take your pick.

[16:56] That's the hell and their product is the Savior. That's what they're selling us. Here is the thing that will rescue you from the very thing that you fear more than anything else.

Christmas has better news for us than that, but it starts with worse news. The worst news is this. Those things aren't our biggest problem. We have a much bigger problem. The bad news is that whatever we think our perceived hell is, we can't get the Savior ourselves.

And our biggest problem is our sin. And by sin, we're not saying being like the bad guys. Whoever your version of the bad guys are, you know the people that you point at and say, those people, they're sinners.

That's not it. Nor are we saying, as people tend to at this time of year, that sin is a bit of a sinful pleasure. Oh, that was a bit naughty. Oh, you know, a bit of a sinful pleasure.

[17:59] We're not saying that. No. Sin is rejecting God in the world that He has made. Sin is taking God's good things and using them for ourselves. Sin is making us the center of the world.

Sin is making us the center of the world. And living like that leads to all the problems that we face. You see, if we can go back a stage and recognize that our problem is deeper, and be honest with ourselves and recognize that if God defines the problem, the biggest problem that all of us have is that we have lived according to our rules in His world, and He is angry about that.

If we can admit that, well, then all of a sudden, we're open to the good news. Sin isn't just that our lives get messed up.

It is that we have rejected God and His world. In fact, when you think of anything sad or bad or messy or difficult in your life, it can be traced back to the selfishness that lies at the heart of the problem of sin.

But Jesus then comes to fix that. That's the good news. Christmas is God breaking into the world so that He, in the person of His Son, can live the life that we should have lived but didn't, can die the death then that our sin deserves, and can rise again in vindication and victory, defeating death for His people.

[19:37] See, God doesn't just humble Himself by becoming a man, but in Christ He goes further. He humbles Himself to the lowest point, to death, and the lowest form of death, death by crucifixion.

He lays down His life to save us from our greatest enemy, our sin. The news about us, by nature, is far worse than we want to admit.

It is, we cannot fix ourselves according to our own efforts. No one else can do it for us. No other human being can do it for us. We can't buy our way out of our problem.

We can't influence our way out of our problem. No, we need God to fix it for us, and He has come at Christmas with that goal in mind. The One who is born in the manger has come to save us from our sin.

And here's the thing. Because of that, you can be forgiven, and so can I. You can know peace with God, and so can I. You can be redeemed from the power of sin.

[20:47] You can be cleansed and made new. You can experience joy even through the hardest times because you have been given new life for eternity. The worst that can happen to you in this life is that you die.

And death for the Christian is no longer a problem. It is a bump in the road for eternity. However long we get here, whether it is moments, days, weeks, or a long life.

What would we call a long life? A hundred? A hundred and five? How old is the oldest person in the world? I don't know. Not much more than a hundred. It's just a tiny little flash in respect to eternity. And so however long we get, when we cross that line, when our physical life dies, for the Christian, we have an eternity open before us because God came at Christmas, and Christ humbled himself to die for our sins and to rise victorious.

In the Old Testament, God visited his people in a pillar of fire, or he came as a hurricane in the book of Job. When Moses asked to see God, he was told that he could only see his back because he was so holy it would have killed Moses to see God face to face.

[22:04] But in the incarnation, God visits us as a person. Why does he do it? Why does he do it like that? Well, because on this occasion, he hasn't come to bring judgment, but to bear it, to pay for

our sins as a human.

That was the only way he could do it for humans. He could bear that sin as a human in our place and reconcile us to God. Jesus' humility brings us near to the God who has come near.

Because Jesus was humble, we can experience all of those implications of God coming to us. Do you know this? Do you know this? Do you believe it for yourself?

Imagine if Moses was here today and he was listening to this. I can imagine that if he heard what I'd said earlier, the Christmas story tells us that Jesus is God and Jesus is human and Jesus has come to us, he would be amazed at how reserved we all are.

I could see him say, are you listening to this? Do you realize what this means? This is the very thing that I wanted and I was denied. You can know God and you can know his forgiveness.

[23 : 18] You can come right into his presence without terror. I think he would say to us, where is your joy? Where is the wonder?

Yes, Moses, I know what you mean. It is all very good, but what is all of that if I can't have the things that I want in this life? If I can't have them now? How many of us have lost the wonder of what this is because we don't have perhaps the life that we want, or worse, the life that we feel we deserve? Christmas tells us that we can have God. We can have God, and we need to repent if we think that's not enough.

If everything is taken from you, everything, whatever, career, health, spouse, children, money, if all of that is taken from you, but you still have God, you have enough, and you have enough for eternity.

This time, this brief little sojourn that we have, it might be painful, hard, a struggle, but you have eternity, and all of that struggle is on a timer, and when you cross the line into eternity and its fullness, they're gone.

[24 : 43] Well, what about those of us who aren't convinced? Perhaps you're here, and you're looking into Jesus, and you're drawn to Him, but you're keeping Him at arm's length, because, well, let's be honest, I've thought about this, I've seen what He says, and truth be told, it's inconvenient.

Because He is God, He has all authority, and so you're obliged to obey Him. That's awkward, if I'm honest. It's awkward socially, it's awkward culturally, it's awkward personally. Secondly, well, this is where we need our third example of humility.

Humility of God, the humility of Jesus, and then thirdly, we have the humility of Joseph. We're back where he started. Think what this is going to mean for him.

Thunderbolt or no thunderbolt. Even though he's convinced by the word of the angel, the way ahead isn't going to be easy. It's a shame and honor culture, and, well, people will know that this child was not conceived by Joseph, when it's born less than nine months after they marry.

People will start to think, hmm, okay, well, either she was unfaithful to him, that would be shameful, or they were immoral before they were married, that would be shameful as well.

[26 : 00] Either way, they're going to be excluded, and they're going to be rejected. How do you think it's going to go down with Joseph's friends and family when he says, no, guys, actually, she's pregnant by the Holy Spirit?

People won't fall for that. Think he's either gullible, he's believed her story, or he's mad. So they're going to suffer, socially, culturally, personally.

But verse 24, look at verse 24. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus.

Joseph was humble because he understood that the stakes were too high for him to do anything else. You see, here's the thing. When you truly grasp who Jesus is, and when you let the truth of what he has done get hold of your heart, you will humble yourself before him.

Yes, it takes courage to follow Christ. It takes courage to relinquish control, to hand over the keys of your life. And this is especially the case in our day when the culture is pushing the other way.

[27 : 16] It takes courage to accept opposition. Following Jesus necessarily means you need to change. It's going to mean that you will inevitably be unpopular with some people because of who he is, though you cannot come to Christ with any demands or conditions.

You can't say, I will obey you, I will follow you, if, and after the if, whatever you put in there is not allowed. You can't do that. It doesn't work. And it's also the case it's also fair to say that in our day the idea of self-denial is perhaps an act of treachery as much as anything else is in our culture.

But that is what we're called to. And nothing less than that. Above all, though, it takes courage to admit that you are a sinner. When you look yourself in the eye, are you prepared to say, I am a moral failure?

I do not love God. I do not love my neighbor as I should. I am guilty and I need forgiveness before I need anything else in life. Top of the list of my needs is forgiveness from a holy God for living on my terms in his world.

It takes courage to do that. It takes courage to do that because it means giving up your old identity and self-image and it means being willing to receive a new one in the Lord Jesus.

[28 : 36] But that is the foundation of absolutely everything else that Jesus gives us. all of the comfort, all of the joy, all of the hope, even the humility that we're called to as we are to emulate him.

All of that starts with being in Christ, being defined by him and not by anything else. And the truth is, all of us, wherever we are, whether we're considering coming to Christ or we've been a Christian for a long time, all of us need this courage at one level or another and you get the courage that we need by looking to Jesus.

You see, he is the foundation of all of this. But it is only by going to him in the first place that we get the courage, looking into his face.

Don't get distracted from that this Advent season. Whatever busyness is going on, whatever celebrations we have, yes, enjoy them. Yes, we do celebrate.

Christians should celebrate this time of year like no one else. Light your lights. Eat and drink and celebrate, but do not lose sight of the fact that the center of it all is the Lord Jesus.

[29 : 56] And if you want to live faithfully for him in this world, go to him. Go to him again and again and again. Always Jesus. Only Jesus. It is in the face of Jesus that we are transformed and we get the courage and the humility that we need.

When you see who he is, when you ponder all that he has done for you, it changes you. It changes your heart. It grows in you confidence to set aside your sin, to stop playing around with the Christian life, but to go full force after Jesus.

Look to Jesus. As you look to him, it draws out your love for him. It draws out your love for others and it enables you to put him at the center of your life, right where he belongs.

And the more you do that, the more you go always to Jesus and only to Jesus, the more that he is pushed by faith into the center of your life and your sin is squeezed out to the sides, the more you do that, the siren calls of the culture won't turn your head.

In fact, you'll be able to sail past to safety. He will bring you through all the way to glory. Let's pray. Let's pray.