

Matthew 1:18-25 - Jesus is the Saviour everyone needs

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[0 : 00] Good morning. We're going to read Matthew 1, 18 to 25. Thank you.

! It's on page 965 if you have a church Bible.! Joseph accepts Jesus as his son. This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.

His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and say, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 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. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophets. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not cause human to their marriage until she gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name Jesus. Amen.

Thank you, Alexandra. Let's pray together as we come to God's word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we want to just come to you now this morning, acknowledging the weakness of our own minds and hearts, and the seriousness of the task before us this morning. We long to hear from you in your word. We long to know you better, to love you more, to trust you more wholeheartedly. We long for you to increasingly shape the desires of our hearts and the ways that we live.

All of these things are beyond us, Lord, but they are possible by your spirit through your word, and so we pray that you might be at work this morning for the sake of your glory. Give me the right words to say. Give us all tender hearts to you this morning, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[2 : 53] Christmas, I think, by very definition, is repetitive, isn't it? We do the very same things each year. We get the same decorations down from the same shelves, put them in the same place.

Our Christmas tree was put up in the wrong place this year, and so we moved it yesterday to the same place that it normally goes. We watch the same Christmas movies, even though we know what happens.

We know that Kevin will eventually, his family will come back. We know that Bruce Willis will live to fight another day. We know that Scrooge will turn good in the end, but still we watch.

We do our shopping in the same overcrowded shops that have the same crowds as they had last year, and we look at each other and say, I can't believe we're doing this again. We listen to the King's speech at 3 p.m. on Christmas Day, which sounds roughly like the same speech he gave last year at 3 p.m. on Christmas Day. And then on Christmas Day, we find that the tubes don't run, which they never do, but we were as surprised as we were last year. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Now, I say that not to complain. I mean, it might sound like I'm complaining, but I'm not. In fact, the opposite. I want to show you this morning that repetition is built into Christmas. It's baked in there right from the very beginning, because according to Matthew, at least, the whole point of Christmas is not that Christmas is a new story or new news, but that the story of Christmas has been told over and over and over generations before. If you were with us last week, we looked at the list of names at the beginning of

Matthew 1 and saw that they all funneled down into Jesus. All of history comes to Jesus Christ. And now this week, we find that all of history has been telling the story of Jesus even before it happened. Let me try and show you how this works as we start together this morning. Look down at the passage we've read and just have a think. What do you think is the most important sentence in that passage? What do you think is the most important sentence? And how would you go about working out what is the most important sentence in the passage? Maybe you read it and you think, well, Jesus will save people from their sins. That's got to be an important sentence, right? That resonates with us. We recognize that Jesus saving from sins is an important idea. Maybe that's the most central sentence in the passage. Well, listen, for sure, that is vital, right? We are sinners. We do need saving. I don't think, though, it's at the center of what Matthew's getting at. Maybe you read on and you hear Jesus is called Emmanuel, God with us. Now, that seems very theologically significant, doesn't it? God the man in human flesh dwelling with his people. Perhaps that's the most important idea here.

[5 : 52] Now, again, that is vital here. It's really, really important. And both the salvation of verse 21 and the God with us of verse 23 are really important. We're going to think about them some more in a moment.

But neither of those are Matthew's central idea this morning. Instead, what I want to try and show you is that right at the center of what Matthew is saying is verse 22. That what he wants you to notice ahead of anything else, he wants you to understand that Jesus the Savior from sin and Jesus Emmanuel, that the meaning of those sentences is given by verse 22. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. Now, perhaps you're sitting there thinking, do you know what, Steve?

This is crazy, right? I knew that already. You know what? Why is this so significant? But this was actually a surprise to me when I saw it on Thursday this week. Let me try and show you how Matthew has organized all of his material in this section around that single sentence. So notice the way that Matthew begins and ends in the same kind of way. Jesus is named three times in the passage and once at the beginning and once at the end and once in the middle. Jesus, the birth of Jesus the Messiah is kind of acting like a heading of the whole section. And then at the end, he gave him the name Jesus is the conclusion of the section. That's what marks off this little piece of material. Then in the rest of verse 18 and the rest of verse 25, Matthew is telling you that Mary and Joseph had not had sex together before they came together, is how it's put in verse 18. And he did not consummate their marriage, is the phrase that he uses in verse 25.

And if you didn't know, both of those are a reference to sexual intercourse. And he's saying, no, there has not been any sexual intercourse. It's a shock, but it's true. After that, verse 19, Matthew tells you that Joseph is faithful to the law. Literally, the word there is that he is just or righteous. The sense there is not that Matthew is saying that Joseph has done nothing wrong. He's not saying he's perfect. Rather, he is obedient to God, is what he's saying.

He does what the Lord commands. And actually, that's exactly what you find in verse 24, isn't it? If you look down at verse 24, you read that Joseph did what the angel of the Lord commanded.

[8 : 16] Joseph is obedient. He is just. He is righteous. He is faithful. After that, in verse 20, you find Joseph is asleep, having a dream. And at the beginning of verse 24, what mirrors that is Joseph waking up. And in between, you get this visit from the angel who tells him not to be afraid.

Then in verse 21, you're given the name for Jesus that he will save his people from their sins, which is mirrored in verse 23 by an additional name, the name Emmanuel, God with us, which leaves you right at the very heart of the passage. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through his prophets. Or to paraphrase, hey, this is a story that you've been told before. A lot on repeat.

Now, there's more to this, and we're going to run through all of the detail of it in a moment. But what you need to see from Matthew here is that right at the heart of what he's trying to say to you is that Jesus does not come in a vacuum, but the story of Jesus has been explained over and over.

If you run through the cross-references, you'll find that even Matthew's phrasing is driven by Old Testament language, especially the promises of Isaiah. And then there are the connections between Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joshua. And then in the chapters that come, Matthew repeats this idea, this was to fulfill what was written. It's not a new story. It's one you've heard before.

Now, I'm going to hazard a guess that for everyone in this room, this morning was not the first time you heard the Christmas story as it was read. Some of you might be really, really familiar with it.

[9 : 59] Maybe you got to read one of the Christmas readings in a carol service as a child. Maybe you could even recite most of Matthew 1 off by heart, buried in your memory somewhere.

But that doesn't mean that there's nothing for you to hear today, because Matthew's point is not to be novel. Matthew doesn't think that you've understood what he's saying here if you know the words that he's using, or you've heard them before. Really, in a way, and let me try and say this carefully, Matthew's point is not the facts. Not because he doesn't believe he's being factual. He believes he's being factual. He is being factual. But the point is that you would not satisfy Matthew if you were able to recite back to him the words that are written here. He would say something to you, well, that's great. But that wasn't the point. Because really, his point is that you consider carefully, again and again, that Jesus comes as the culmination of history. That every story in the Bible whispers his name. That Jesus Christ stands as the fulfillment of a plan that's been repeated over and over. A message of history that cannot be ignored and must be considered.

I know illustrations give you like a little window, don't they, into just how boring my life and imagination is. But let me give you an illustration of this. Imagine you have a broken, smashed up car, right? It's been broken beyond all recognition, and you're trying to repair it. But you're not really even sure what kind of car it is. It's in that sort of a mess. You're not really sure who made it.

You're not really sure how it's supposed to go together. But you begin just taking the bits off this broken, smashed up car. And you just sort of wonder, oh, I'm sure where that belongs, and not sure what that's for, not sure where that goes. But then as you look more closely, you look and each part has a little logo on it. It has the words Ford written in the middle of it, and a little circle around the edge of it. You know, so for the bits from the bonnet, the bits from the inside, the bits from the back, they all have this same Ford stamp on them. What do you conclude? Well, you obviously conclude this is a Ford, right? Ford would know how to put this car back together.

It's not a VW, it's not a BMW, it's not a Mercedes, it's a Ford. So Ford will be able to explain to me what I need to do next. They will know. Now, in a sense, Matthew 1 verse 22 is saying that about Jesus, every story in history has Jesus' name stamped on it. And if you want to know what it's about, what it's for, where it goes, how it belongs, you need to refer to Jesus. Because all of the names of history funnel into him. All of the prophets of history speak about him. So Christianity doesn't start at Christmas, it starts at the very beginning. It has been building up to this point.

[12 : 56] Matthew says all of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophets. Now, that I think is Matthew's main point here. But let me try and show you two big implications, which will hopefully get us into some of the detail of the passage. The first implication is this, we have the same problem that people have always had.

If we've got Matthew's point right, then you need to read verse 21 in the light of verse 22, right? You need to read Jesus the Savior from sins in the light of what he's saying in verse 22 about the fulfillment of the prophets. Which means, doesn't it, that Jesus is the Savior from sin, is the Savior that all the Bible has been waiting for. And the salvation that he brings is the salvation that has been required by every generation before. You and I love to think of ourselves as complex and unique, as living in a significant, very different point in history. Now, there is a sense in which that might be true, but still you and I basically face the same problem that humanity has always faced. And Matthew's particular point seems to be that we're in the same state as the people of God in Isaiah's day. Isaiah is the one he is quoting here in verse 23. He quotes him again in chapter 3, verse 3, again in chapter 4, verse 16.

Now, that means, as far as Matthew is concerned, our sins are their sins. Our salvation is their salvation. So today, we are like the people of Isaiah's day who are, you know this, walking in darkness.

Not because Isaiah thinks that our main problem is ignorance. Darkness in Isaiah is not that we don't know. It's not like you're in the dark about the Christmas presents that you might receive. No, the darkness in Isaiah's book is the darkness of judgment. Isaiah says the problem is that people have rejected God. They've turned away from him. They've not sought after him. They've gone their own way. And God has responded. Listen to how he puts it. This is Isaiah 8, verse 22, just after the bit that Matthew quotes. He says this, This is it, right? Darkness is where God throws rebels. Rebels who have rejected him.

So that sense that you and I have that we don't really know, we can't really work it out, that life is not really working as it should, that we're not living as we should, that this world is kind of chaotic and full of trouble. This is this darkness, the darkness where rebels end, the darkness given to all of us because we've rejected the light of God's presence in his room.

[15 : 41] Maybe you've not thought about it this way before. I think perhaps we sometimes think of Jesus, the Savior from sins, in only a sort of moral category. You know, that our problem is that God has a set of rules. We break the set of rules. We have a thing called sins that need forgiving. Now, that is right as far as it goes. But actually, Matthew's point is that it's kind of bigger than that. Matthew reminds us that there is a deeper issue, which is the reason that we break God's rules. And that is that we're in the darkness of judgment. We're estranged from God and his light. We are guilty and condemned. We are cast out of the garden. We are ejected from the promised land. We are people in exile from the God to whom we were made for. And that has always been the problem facing humanity. You read a Bible and that is the problem you confront over and over and over again. Made for God, but outside of relationship with him.

Created by him and for him, yet living for ourselves and thrust into the darkness of life apart from him. It means, doesn't it, that the big problem in the Bible is a relational problem.

A relational problem between you and I and God. And now you know, don't you? You know that relational problems are always the big ones. And that's what we feel at Christmas. The ache on Christmas morning is not normally because you burnt the dinner or because you didn't get the right brand of socks that you were hoping for. The ache of Christmas is that the people who are not there that you would love to be there. That's the pain, isn't it? Maybe they passed away. Maybe they're no longer on speaking terms with the family. Maybe they've just chosen not to come because they didn't really want to be with us.

That's the ache. It's a relational ache. That's the pain, isn't it? And those are always the most significant. And each interpersonal ache that we have like that is a small shadow of this great ache of the universe, if you like, that we as creatures made by God and for God to live with God don't turn up for Christmas dinner. We choose Christmas on our own, assuming that the life that we were given is to be used as we choose, thinking that freedom is life without him, not with him.

And that brings darkness. And Matthew says that is the story of history. It was the problem of Adam and Eve. It was the problem of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of David and Solomon and Rehoboam and Asa.

[18 : 13] It's the problem of Isaiah's day. It's the problem of Matthew's day. It's the problem of today. Our big problem is the same as everyone else's. Secondly, though, Jesus is the savior that everyone needs.

It stands to reason, doesn't it, that if the story of Jesus is the story that history has always been telling, then Jesus is the one that everyone needs. He is the savior for everyone who went before.

And he's the savior for everyone who will come afterwards. And so the question that we need to ask is, well, what kind of savior is he that makes him so significant like that? Well, again, I think the point comes because Matthew is reminding us that our problem is a relational problem, estrangement, exile from God, then the kind of savior that we need is someone who is able to reconcile God and man, God and humanity, someone who is able to be a go-between, someone who is able to stand in the gap, a mediator. This is how this always works, isn't it? In the course of pastoral ministry, I have on a number of occasions sat down with couples who are no longer on speaking terms with one another.

At times it's been so bad that I've had one person in one room, another person in another room, and I have been the only person willing to speak and go between them. I've been trying to sort of stand in the gap and help them communicate. Now, I've not always done it very well. It's not actually a position that I like to be in. But there is one qualification for a mediator, which is why I think I've ended up doing it. And that is that you're trusted by both sides. And as the pastor of the church, that's often where you find yourself. You have to have a connection with both. You have to know the trouble from both angles. And that's the same here. Jesus, the one sent to save from the darkness of our sins, comes to us as one of us, flesh and blood, but also as what? Verse 23, Emmanuel, God with us. Now, notice this with me, because Matthew here is at pains to show you these two natures of Christ, two natures which qualify Jesus for this role of mediator between God and man.

So notice these contrasts. Notice that at one hand, Matthew is at pains for you to notice that Jesus is very ordinary, very normal. And at the same time, he is also extraordinary, that this ordinary man is extraordinarily divine. Take the pregnancy first, right? Mary's pregnancy is obviously very ordinary.

[20 : 43] You can tell that because Joseph's instant reaction to Mary does not give the impression that he thought she was pregnant by any other means other than ordinary means. He didn't assume that Jesus has sort of beamed down from space into her womb or appeared from nowhere. No, he knew from the circumstances that there was a baby in Mary's womb that was being carried in an ordinary fashion, like an ordinary man or woman, like you or me. In verse 25, you're told that Mary gave birth. I would assume that that was by very ordinary means. She pushed the baby out with all the pain, blood and mess that's normally involved. It's ordinary. But at the same time, it's also extraordinary. His mother was a virgin, says Matthew.

Matthew is so keen that you don't miss this. He repeats it three times. Verse 18, before they came together, she was found to be pregnant. Then quoting Isaiah's prophecy in verse 23, the virgin will conceive. Then verse 25, talking about Joseph, he did not consummate their marriage. Now let me break it to you. Matthew knows exactly what's involved. And so he has not been a prude here. He just wants you to know.

Virgins don't get pregnant, but this virgin did, because it's extraordinary. Jesus was not born through the ordinary sexual intimacy of a man and a woman. And his point is not therefore that Mary is extraordinary.

This section is not about the perfection of Mary, which Matthew actually denies directly later on. Instead, it's about the extraordinariness of Jesus, who though he was a baby in his mother's womb in an ordinary way, he got there by divine means.

Explained in verse 20 as being from the Holy Spirit. In other words, this is an ordinary baby with divine origin. You see it in the contrast in the details about family as well.

[22 : 43] Jesus here is born into a very ordinary Jewish family. Joseph comes across as just a very regular, normal young man. He's pledged to be married to a young woman.

And Joseph had the regular response that you would expect from a young man who was pledged to be married to a woman, who he discovers is pregnant and he knows it's not his. He's pledged to be married to a young man.

So verse 19, he is faithful to the law. Remember, just, righteous, not as imperfect, but as in good. He was a good man. And his intention is not to expose Mary to disgrace.

He's not wild like that. But he doesn't want to marry her either. He's going to divorce her quietly, which is the ordinary response that you would expect. The response that would be normal in those circumstances.

Jesus is born into the web of ordinary relationships, the normal family life where fidelity and honesty matter, where Mary and Joseph have very normal interactions with one another.

[23 : 43] That was home for Jesus. But notice too that Jesus is subject to a very different set of relationships. The arrival of the Lord Jesus is announced by the angel of the Lord in verse 20.

In other words, it's the Lord God who sends the news. This is the Father in heaven announcing the arrival of his Son. And the arrival of his Son announced from heaven is achieved in the Spirit's power.

So that the ordinary family of Mary and Joseph has this extraordinary child whose relationships are connected, not to their ordinary family, but to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The second member of the Trinity is the first son of Mary. Ordinarily human, extraordinarily divine, at the same time, indivisible, not blended together, distinct, but true of the same person at the same time, fully man and fully God.

Why? Well, because that's how the ancient prophecy goes. That's the exact kind of Savior we need. Because he alone is able to stand in the gap between God and man.

[25 : 03] Back in the book of Isaiah, when Isaiah speaks to Ahaz, who is the king at the time, he tells him that the virgin will be with child.

This is going to be a sign to you. He says the virgin will be with child and you are to call him Emmanuel. That's the verse that Matthew quotes here. What happens next in Isaiah's prophecy is that Isaiah's wife gets pregnant.

And the child is called Meher Shalal Hashbaths. And as he grows up, the promise to rescue King Ahaz from the Assyrian army is fulfilled.

Jerusalem doesn't fall. And so in a way, it seems as though what Isaiah has told Ahaz has been fulfilled. Except there's going to be a baby. And as that baby grows up, the promise to free you from the Assyrian oppression, that's going to go away.

That's going to be fulfilled. And as you read Isaiah, you're left with this impression, wait, wait, wait, wait. I mean, I don't know everything, but I know Meher Halal Shashbath does not sound like Emmanuel.

[26 : 11] There must be something else going on here. And also, you're really directly told that Isaiah went to be with his wife. And he knew his wife in a way which means that you know his wife is not a virgin.

And yet, the prophecy seems to be that she would be a virgin and the child will be called Emmanuel. And so what you're left with in the book of Isaiah is this sense that, oh, okay, this prophecy has been partly fulfilled, but not fully fulfilled.

There must be something else. And Isaiah begins to kind of explain that and carry on. And he tells us that this one who comes will be called, what, wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace.

That's not Meher Halal Shashbath, is it? And then you're told that this one who comes, who will have these great names and be exalted, will come as a servant, a servant sent from God who will be highly exalted and lifted up, but will also be disfigured and marred beyond all recognition.

The servant will, in the words of Isaiah 53, be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brings us peace will be laid on him.

[27 : 31] By his wounds we'll be healed. This then is the Emmanuel of Matthew 1. The reconciler has come. You and I are out of relationship with the God who made us.

And God himself has come in the person of the Son, putting on human flesh that he might be the perfect reconciler. And in that human flesh, suffers, dies, bearing the punishment that our sin deserves, fully God and fully man.

Knowing the weakness of humanity, the suffering of this life, yet victorious by the power of the Spirit, before paying the price on the cross for our sins that have estranged us from God.

This goes way beyond, doesn't it, me going between two rooms to communicate to two fighting parties. This is absorbing in himself all of the relational cost.

[illegible]

[29 : 48] Perhaps if you thought about your life in terms of a story, I don't know where your story is quite up to, maybe it has ups and downs, highs and lows, joys and triumphs, failures and sadnesses.

Maybe this morning you find yourself in a happy chapter. Maybe things have worked out really well for you. Perhaps you're successful or popular or you've just received some good news. Maybe you're in a different chapter. Perhaps in the chapter that you're in at the moment, there are sadnesses and struggles, problems and worries and losses and griefs and pains and anxieties. There are things that you think you need which you don't have. Well, whatever page you think you're on in your story, I think that the danger is that we begin to think it's just our story, right? We begin to think that actually life is about our book that we are writing with our life. And what Matthew is saying to you this morning and saying to me is, listen, that is not right. Your story is written into the book that God is writing. The story of all history. The chapters of our lives are woven into what he is doing.

The highs and lows of our lives are paragraphs in the story of what he is accomplishing in the world. And in that great story, there is one ginormous problem, the darkness of sins, and one big solution, the person of Jesus Christ. And so life for us is not about penning great chapters in our own book, is it? But the story of our life is really about finding ourselves in the story of what God is doing.

Finding the hero to be Jesus Christ, God the Son in human flesh, the one who all of history had been waiting for and whom all of history is now pointing to. And there is a sense in which you can say that every circumstance in your life, every part of the story that you are now experiencing is there to point you to the all-sufficient Jesus, that you might turn to him and find newness of life.

Let me pray before we sing as we respond. Let me pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that the Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect mediator between sinful people like us and you, a holy God.

[32 : 47] Thank you that there's nothing of our human weakness that he does not know, yet he is without sin. And there is nothing of your divine nature which is withheld from him in the person of the Son, so that he can be the perfect go-between, that we could be reconciled to you, our creator, our Father.

Lord, we pray, please would you help us amidst all the different things going on in our lives at the moment, to find meaning and purpose and significance, not in the things that we're doing, but in what you have done for us in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.