

## Christmas Lesson

# God is With Us!

### MAIN IDEA

Jesus' birth fulfilled messianic prophecy as he came to be Immanuel, God with us.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How should we respond to the fact that Jesus has come to be “God with us?”

### STUDY AIM

To respond to Jesus' presence with faith and obedience

### QUICK READ

Mary's unexpected pregnancy was not what Joseph had in mind for the beginning of his family life. But through the fulfillment of prophecy and the message of an angel, Joseph discovered the meaning of Christmas: God is with us.





**24** When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. **25** But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

## Family Tree (1:1–17)

The Book of Matthew introduces the Christmas story by climbing around in Jesus' family tree. It begins by announcing, "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." The next fifteen verses tell us more than we ever wanted to know about the relatives of Jesus. It is a strange way to start a story; the action of verse eighteen seems more like a starting point. But genealogies were important to the Jewish people. They reminded them of God's work throughout history to bring about his plan.

This genealogy reminded people of the prophecies about the Messiah coming from the line of David. It reminded them of the covenants God had made with Abraham and how the Messiah was to complete those promises. There is an interesting observation that there were three sets of fourteen generations between Abraham and Jesus, a notation that has had scholars scratching their heads for centuries, but no doubt has theological meaning.

You do need to be careful when you start climbing around in this family tree. There are branches with cracks. You may have some less than savory characters in your family tree as well. Jesus certainly had a few.

There was Rahab, the harlot. She lived in Jericho when Joshua's army attacked. God spared her life because she helped the Hebrew spies. It is surprising enough that Matthew included several women in Jesus' genealogy, but you would think he would leave out the detail that one of Jesus' ancestors was a harlot. But there she is.

David appears in the tree. David was a great king in Israel, and prophets had foretold the Messiah would be from the line of David. But there is an odd addendum to David's name that reminds us David was not always a good guy. David was the father of Solomon "whose mother was Uriah's wife." That would be Bathsheba. David not only committed adultery with her, but

had her husband murdered so he could have her. You would think that story would have been pruned out of the family lore of the Messiah.

Manasseh is also mentioned. Manasseh was one of the most wicked and ruthless kings in the history of Israel. And there are other unsavory characters in this family tree. Yet through it all, God was at work. He was carrying out his plan to be with us, even through this less than ideal family tree.

Maybe you are dreading spending time with some of your family members this Christmas. Remember, no matter how unpleasant they are, God is still at work; God is still with us.

### Family Crisis (1:18–19)

Jesus' family tree ends with Joseph, his earthly father. Matthew made it clear, though, that Joseph was not Jesus' natural father because Mary was pregnant "before they came together." Mary and Joseph were pledged to be married, but they were not married. The custom of betrothal was more than a modern engagement. In our culture, an engagement can be canceled

#### The History of Betrothal

Mary and Joseph were betrothed but not yet married. A betrothal was a legal and binding contract, often arranged by the parents of their children, and consummated later after the wedding. Betrothal was as binding as marriage and could be dissolved only by legal divorce.

Betrothed couples did not engage in sexual activity until after the wedding. The Bible indicates that Mary and Joseph did not live together until after they were officially married, nor did they engage in sexual activity until after the birth of Jesus.

Joseph's decision to quietly divorce Mary was a merciful alternative to the possibility of stoning her for her suspected adultery. At first, Joseph must have thought divorce was the only merciful choice. God showed him another way.

The Apostle Paul used the metaphor of betrothal in 2 Corinthians 11:2 when he sought to explain the church as a virgin bride presented to Christ.

without repercussions, but a betrothal was a binding contract between families that could only be canceled by a formal divorce. Sexual intimacy was not part of the betrothal but was reserved for the actual marriage, which came later.

Joseph was a righteous man. He knew what God expected of him and others. It must have been an unpleasant surprise to discover Mary's condition. How would he explain this to his mother? Or to her father? It was not his fault. He had obeyed the rules. He had been faithful both to God and Mary. But his lifetime of faithfulness ended in disappointment.

Maybe you have had that kind of experience. You were a good parent who taught Christian values. You took your children to church every week. But they grew up to be scoundrels! Or, maybe you have done everything right in your marriage, but your spouse has rewarded you with unfaithfulness. Or, maybe you have been a faithful servant of the Lord. You are moral. You have gone on mission trips. You have tithed. But a doctor has given you a devastating diagnosis. What do you do when a lifetime of faithfulness ends with disappointment?

For Joseph the answer was obvious. Even in disappointment, he was determined to remain faithful. He had lived a righteous life, and he chose to continue to do so. He trusted that his obedience, even in the face of this crisis, would pay off in the end.

Joseph assumed Mary had committed adultery. Jewish law stated that an adulterous woman could be stoned to death. Fortunately, there was a provision in the law that said the offended husband could divorce her and send her to live in another town, where no one would know of her transgression. Joseph was a man who obeyed the law, but he also had a heart of compassion and would act in the most merciful way possible. He chose to remain faithful to how he perceived God's law.

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## **The Family of God (1:20–25)**

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One night, while Joseph was sleeping, an angel of God appeared to him in a dream. Dreams have a long history in the Bible as a way of God revealing himself to people. Obviously, we would not want to interpret every dream as God revealing his plan. But before the revelation of God in Christ, God

## Case Study

Your friend has told you that God told her she was supposed to marry a man who is not a Christ-follower and has a scandalous reputation. How can you help her recognize a message from God as opposed to listening to her desires?

occasionally used dreams to communicate new things. We might recall people like Joseph in the Book of Genesis, or Daniel.

As a reminder of his family tree, the angel called Joseph “Son of David.” This reminder would help Joseph make more sense of the message the angel was about to deliver. Prophets had foretold that the Messiah would come from the line of David. Nevertheless, the message from the angel was surprising.

“Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.” Joseph had not considered that alternative. It was a possibility that did not exist in the rulebook. In fact, it was against the rules. Considering this alternative must have made Joseph fearful. What would the neighbors think if he took Mary home to be his wife? Would it not be an implicit admission of guilt? Everyone would think he had given up on faithfulness, that he was no longer a righteous man.

The message from the angel was that all of this was a result of God at work in the world. The child Mary carried was the work of the Holy Spirit, and Joseph was to name the child “Jesus.” The name “Jesus” is the Greek form of the name “Joshua,” which means, “The Lord saves.” It would prove to be an appropriate name for the Savior of the world.

The mystery of the virgin birth is more than we can fathom. In our scientific age, this miracle seems inconceivable. It was inconceivable to Joseph as well. Matthew interpreted the virgin birth as a fulfillment of prophecy when he quoted Isaiah 7:14. Although Isaiah was referring to the birth of another child in his day, the Spirit revealed to Matthew that the true fulfillment of prophecy is in Christ.

The child would have the nickname, “Immanuel,” which is also a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. “Immanuel” means, “God with us.” It is the message of Christmas. God is with us!

It is hard to comprehend that God is with us. God, who created the heavens and the earth, who spoke a word and light came into being, who breathed his breath into lungs of clay and gave life; that God is with us! He did not simply create the world and set it spinning only to leave us alone, nor did God set us out in space and then wait for earth to wind down. God became flesh and lived among us.

Joseph responded by believing this preposterous story. He took Mary home to be his wife, and he named her child “Jesus,” just as the angel had commanded. Imagine how hard it must have been to believe. It was hard to have lived a life of righteousness only to be disappointed by the results. Nevertheless, Joseph believed. He chose to live by faith rather than law. He chose to live in relationship with God rather than regulation. He went from trusting rules to trusting God.

Joseph had descended from an imperfect family, and the family he was about to have was not at all what he had imagined. But because he was willing to live by faith, he experienced God with us.

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## **Implications and Actions**

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Today is Christmas. Your Christmas may not be perfect this year. It will be marred by family members who are not there and for some, it may be marred by family members who are there. In the midst of imperfection, God is with us. When the children are whining they did not get the presents they wanted, God is with us. When the crass uncle is telling inappropriate jokes that make your skin crawl, God is with us. When an empty chair is staring at you because of the death of a loved one, God is with us. It is, after all, what Christmas is all about. It is the preposterous story Joseph heard from an angel. Immanuel: God is with us.

## Questions

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1. How have your ancestors affected the person you are today? How have they influenced your faith either for good or bad? How can you positively influence the lives your descendants?
2. How does Joseph's response to the angel's message provide an example for our response to God? Does this mean any dream or intuition should be viewed as a message from God even if it conflicts with our understanding of Scripture?
3. Discuss how the message of Christmas—God is with us—can help you in times of disappointment and fear.
4. If God is with us, how can we explain the terrible things that happen in this world? If God is with us, why do bad things happen?

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