December 4/5, 2021

The Greatest Gift

Foretold: Advent 2021 Series

Matthew 1:18-25

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It's December, and all over trees are up and lights are on and we're singing Christmas carols. It is officially Christmas season. So, I'm wondering, have you made your Christmas list yet and if so, what's on it? I mean, if you could have any gift that you would want this Christmas, what would it be? Well, what if I were to tell you that every single one of us could have the greatest Christmas gift this year? But I wonder, "How many of us will miss out on it?"

If you have your Bible with you, would you turn with me to Matthew, Chapter 1. We're in the second week of our Advent series, which we have entitled "Foretold" as we're looking at the prophecies and the promises of Christmas. And in Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 through 25, we find this beautiful, amazing, and familiar Christmas story. And today I want to just remind us of a few things in this familiar narrative, and then I want to introduce you to some characters of the Christmas backstory, that you may have actually never even heard of before. Let's begin in Matthew chapter 1, verse 18:

> **Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.** (*NASB, Matthew 1:18)

In verse 18, we immediately are reminded of two very important things. First, unmarried Mary is pregnant. She is **betrothed** it says or *promised* or *engaged* to Joseph, but not yet married to him. And second, the source of this pregnancy is none other than the Holy Spirit. The text says **she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit**, meaning God Himself will be the Father of this child. Verse 19:

> **And Joseph her husband…**

Now in this culture, you would be called a husband upon betrothal, even though they have not yet come together in marriage.

> **And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.**

Here we find clear evidence that Joseph was not the father, and also, this was not two young people trying to cover up some indiscretion, for no one is more shocked and hurt than Joseph himself. But he then gets an absolutely incredible testimony of the truthfulness of Mary's claim. Verse 20:

> **But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."**

And then the angel goes on to tell Joseph the plan. Verse 21:

> **"She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took *Mary* as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called his name Jesus.** (Vs. 21-25)

So, Joseph does exactly as the angel instructs; he takes Mary to be his wife. But notice the Scripture is crystal clear that **he kept her a virgin** all the way until after the birth of Jesus. Four times in this short text, we are told that Jesus was born of a virgin meaning he had no earthly, biological father, but was in fact the Son of God Himself. And not only is that repeatedly told in Matthew, it was also foretold in Isaiah. But we'll come back to that.

First, we need to take note of one other thing. Look at verse 21. What did the angel tell Joseph to name the baby? He said, "**You shall call his name Jesus".** Okay, great. Now look at verse 25. So, what did Joseph actually name the baby? **He called his name Jesus.** Perfect! The angel says, "Name him Jesus." Joseph names Him Jesus. Why? Well, the answer was revealed by the angel himself. Verse 21 again: **"She will bear a Son; and you shall call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."**

You see, Jesus is a translation of Yeshua, the Hebrew name given to the baby, which means *The Lord saves*. Thus, the very name of Jesus indicates the mission of Jesus to save His people from their sins. But notice that the name is the *Lord* saves. This underscores why the identity of Jesus' father is so important, for only the *Lord* can save. Thus, to be the Savior, Jesus must be the Lord and He is. Born of a virgin, fathered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is literally the visible manifestation of the invisible God, and He came as Lord, to save us from our sins. So, in just a few short verses, we learned so much of such importance about who Jesus is and about how His birth came to be.

But you know, a 1st century Jewish Christian would not have read these words in Matthew the same way as a 21st century American Christian, because there is more to the story—much more—and what would have been extraordinary to the 1st century reader in Israel is just completely missed by us. So today, I want to introduce you to some of the characters of the Christmas backstory. But before we do that, let's focus in on our passage and the portion that will transport us even further back into the past. Look again at verses 22 and 23:

> **Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."**

Do you notice anything strange in these verses? Anything look out of place? Well, just before this, in verse 21, the angel says, "The name of the baby is to be Jesus." Just after this, in verse 25, we read that Joseph gave the baby the name, Jesus. But here we are told they shall call his name, **Immanuel**. Huh? So what is the deal with that? Well, it is actually pretty cool. For it is the

combined understanding of **Jesus**—The Lord saves—and **Immanuel**—God with us—that help us understand how the meaning of Christmas is completely life changing for you and for me.

But to help make sense of that, I need to take you on a journey, a journey to a time long, long ago, and a place far, far away. Well, actually, the place was less than ten miles from where Joseph, Mary and Jesus found themselves at the end of Matthew 1 on that first Christmas morn. But it is long, long, long ago. Interestingly, we look back on this first Christmas and we think of it as something that was ancient history—far, far in our past. But for Matthew, as he was writing this, he was declaring the good news of the present that would completely change the future. But he also understood that it was the fulfillment of the plan that began thousands of years in his past and was foreshadowed and illustrated over seven hundred years before the birth of Christ.

And now the story I want to tell you today is a true story with its center recorded in Isaiah chapter 7 and 8, and with detail found in 2 Kings 15 through 19, 2 Chronicles 26 through 32 and Isaiah 36 and 37. So, I would invite you to just listen, for our story is a story of kings and prophets, heroes and villains, a fair maiden, and signs, miracles and the awesome power and goodness of God. For you see, long, long ago, in a place far, far away, there was a people who were loved and cherished by an eternal King, the King of the heavens. But these people were ruled by an earthly king, a king who ruled from a throne, a throne referred to as the Throne of David, in Jerusalem, a city referred to as the City of David—given those names in honor of an earthly king, who was a man after God's own heart, a king who sought to lead this treasured people toward their eternal King, living under His rule and reign. But in the generations that followed, most of the people and their kings turned away from their eternal King, and they chose to live for themselves and under the rule and reign of their unfaithful kings and the abominable gods of the peoples right around them. Thus, the eternal King let this kingdom of His chosen and beloved people be ripped apart. But a remnant remains—the tribe of Judah—that would one day be ruled by the Lion of Judah.

Our story begins with an earthly king of Judah. His name was Ahaz. His grandfather was a king who did right in the sight of the eternal King. His father was a king who did right in the sight of the eternal King, but Ahaz chose to go a different way. He chose to walk in the ways of the evil kings of Israel's northern kingdom. He chose to worship gods who were not God's. He chose to forsake, abandon and rebel against the eternal King, who is the everlasting Father of all that is good and right. Ahaz chose wickedness, so much so, that he even offered his own son as a living burnt offering to one of the detestable idols of the nations that God had driven from the land. Ahaz was an evil king and Ahaz was in trouble.

For north of his kingdom of Judah were two other evil kings: Pekah who ruled from Samaria as king of Ephraim, the northern tribes of Israel, and Rezin who ruled from Damascus as king of Syria. And these two evil kings hatched an evil plot. You see, they were in trouble, for from the east was rising the unstoppable beast of the Assyrian Empire, and that empire was ruled by king Tiglath-Pileser III, which doesn't really roll off the tongue, so we'll just call him king T-P 3 for short. Well, Pekah and Rezin were terrified of T-P 3, and they knew they were no match for the might of his army and empire. So they met together to form an alliance and a plan. They decided that in order to resist T-P 3, they needed a larger army. But where could one be found? How about Pekah's distant cousins to the south, the kingdom of Judah? But there was a problem. They didn't trust, King Ahaz, and they didn't want him; they just wanted his army. So, they hatched an evil

plan. They would launch a syro-ephraimite invasion of Judah over the land, remove and kill Ahaz, and put in their own puppet king. Then they would use Judah to join them in resisting the mighty T-P 3. Well, Ahaz learns of their plan and how does he respond? Not well! We're told in chapter 7 of the message of the great prophet Isaiah, that King Ahaz and Judah were terrified, so much so that they were swaying and shaking like the tops of the trees in a mighty wind. But remember, this was the chosen people of the eternal King—the very King of the heavens—who loves and cared for this people. So, despite the great wickedness of Ahaz, the eternal King sends the great prophet Isaiah, and he comes with a message to strengthen and encourage his people and even evil, unfaithful Ahaz and the prophet's message is one of comfort and hope, as the eternal King tells them, "Take care and be calm. Have no fear, and do not be fainthearted over these attacking armies," who, to the King of the heavens, were but a couple of smoldering stubs of firewood. And the King of the heavens, through the prophet, tells Ahaz that their plan shall not stand, nor shall it come to pass and, in fact, he says that within sixty-five years, it will be the eternal King Himself who brings about the shattering destruction and exile of the unfaithful people of Israel's Northern Kingdom.

So, for Ahaz, there's good news of deliverance and hope, coming straight from the all-powerful King of the heavens. But this eternal King is so good and so gracious that he doesn't ask Ahaz and Judah to just take Him at His word. He literally offers Ahaz the opportunity to put Him to the test. Through the prophet, he says, "Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the place of the dead or as high as the highest heavens." Wow! Those in danger, and shaking with fear, literally have a chance to receive a promise sign of the goodness of the King of the heavens. But how does Ahaz respond? He says, "No thanks." He feigns piety, while actually rejecting humility. Even in the face of certain doom, he chooses pride and rebellion, and would rather take things into his own hands than to acknowledge and submits to the eternal King. But will the King of the heavens be deterred by the arrogance of an evil little man? Of course not! And through the prophet, the eternal King tells Ahaz, "The Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son and she will call his name, Immanuel."

Ah, the sign of Immanuel, more than 700 years before the birth of Jesus, the Christ, the King of the Heavens, gives the sign of Immanuel. What a strange sign, and what did it mean? Well, Immanuel means *God with us*. Therefore, this is a sign of the goodness, the power and the presence of God, for and with His people. The prophet tells Ahaz that a virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son who will be a sign of Immanuel, God with us. But here's the strange part of the story. The eternal King, through the prophets, says that before this Child is old enough to know the difference between good and evil, the land whose two kings Ahaz dreads, will be forsaken and wait! he has already said, as the eternal King, that the Northern Kingdom of Israel will be destroyed and exiled within 65 years. So, all of this, related to this sign, seems eminent in the days of Ahaz, and it was.

Interestingly, the eternal King led the great prophet to use the Hebrew word, *Almah*, in reference to the virgin who would conceive. But in Hebrew, there is a word that more expressly indicates virgin, also a word that more clearly indicates a young woman, but almah is best understood as a young woman who has yet to know a man. And in the days of Ahaz, the great prophet himself is called by the eternal king to marry an almah, who was a prophetess, and then she conceives and gives birth to a son. But before that takes place—in Isaiah 8—the eternal king commands the great prophet to write these words on a large tablet of stone: Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means:

"*Swift is the booty, speedy is the prey,"* for surely the King of the heavens will show himself to be Immanuel, God with us, to the people whom He loves, and God will actually use T-P 3, the mighty king of Assyria, to move *swiftly to the booty and speedy upon the prey*, which will be the enemies of Judah. Rezin, and Pekah, and just as he promised, the enemies of Judah will be quickly crushed. And to confirm the sign, the eternal King calls the great prophet to name his newborn son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, The very words written on the stone tablet will be seen through the living testimony of the child, for the eternal King is "God with us".

By the way, studying this reminded me that we really need to "up" our name game. I mean, I have not heard of any of you naming your kid anything like *Swift as the booty, speedy is the prey*. Now that is a name! I mean, that will get you some attention in school. What kind of names do we go with? Something like Joe. It reminds me of Meg Ryan talking to Tom Hanks in the movie, *You've Got Mail*, when she sarcastically says, "Joe! Your name is Joe—Just call me Joe—I mean, we got to come up with something better than that." Maybe if there are any couples here who are expecting today, you could work on this. How about a name like *Swift as the booty, speedy is the prey*. I mean, that will pop. You know, actually, I'm hoping this might inspire my son and daughter-in-law, who are expecting and sitting right over there. It ought to, after all, because when since Cynci was pregnant with that son, I remember she and I are talking about how incredible it was that we could literally name our kid anything we wanted to. One day while we were driving along, we actually talked about naming that son *Road Sign*. We ended up settling for Josh, but what a missed opportunity! Anyway, back to our story.

So, King Pekah and King Rezin are destroyed. But what about King Ahaz? Well, his story is a reminder of just how tragic any story can be. When one refuses to trust and obey the eternal King, in spite of the offer of even a sign of God's power and presence, in spite of the assurances of Immanuel, the sign of God with them, Ahaz chooses to trust in himself and in man. He turns not to God. Instead, ironically, he turns to T-P 3. He makes his own alliance with the Assyrian Empire and, in his attempt to be wise, he shows himself a total fool. For not only does T-P 3 consume Ephraim and Syria, but he also subdues and controls Judah. And Ahaz will no longer be a powerful king, but rather a powerless vassal. And then his evil rebellion against the King of the heavens, he will even copy the pagan worship of Assyria, building an abominable altar in the temple in Jerusalem, and even eventually completely locking the doors of the great temple of God all together. What's more, after his death, his son, Hezekiah, will face horrifying danger from the Assyrian army as they come to besiege and seek to destroy Jerusalem.

But Hezekiah chose to walk in the way of his grandfather and his great-grandfather, not in the evil ways of Ahaz. He chose to lead God's people back to worshipping and serving and living under the rule and reign of the King of the heavens. Even so, because of Ahaz's foolish sin, the Assyrian army assembles just outside of Jerusalem, and they loudly threaten such pain on the people that they say Jerusalem's inhabitants will be eating their own dung and drinking their own urine just to survive. And how does Hezekiah respond? Not like his weak and evil father, Hezekiah tears his clothes as a sign of mourning and humility, and he sends messengers to the great prophet Isaiah, looking for a word from the eternal King, just as the prophet had brought to his father, Ahaz. And once again, the King of the heavens promises to be a great and powerful God with and for His people, and Hezekiah takes this word from the prophet and goes to the temple and cries out to God for His presence and for deliverance. And the angel of the Lord, in the middle of the night, strikes

and literally destroys the army of Assyria in their camp. and the King of the heavens delivers His chosen people without them raising even a single sword.

For even seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, He was Immanuel; He was God. He was good, and He was with and for His people. And now in the first century, as Matthew writes, just a few miles down the road from where Ahaz rebelled and where from where Hezekiah prayed, this great King of the heavens, is now coming as the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of Immanuel. For now, God will become Man and He will give His own life to save His people from their sin. And through the incarnation, He will fully demonstrate the power and the wonder of Immanuel, *God with us,* and so in his accounts of the birth of Jesus, Matthew, led by the Holy Spirits, records with great wonder, and all joy, that the promise given to Ahaz has now been fully fulfilled. And this time, it will not be only an almah who marries and conceives, it will be a virgin who is miraculously impregnated by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the child will not merely be a sign of Immanuel, He will be the actual full manifestation of Immanuel. For the King of the heavens will come to be among us, as one of us, a tiny baby born in a humble manger, to show the full extent of the love and the power of the eternal King. Matthew 1, verse 21:

> **She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus…**the Lord, who saves.

Matthew 1, verse 23:

> **"BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."**

A story, hundreds, even thousands of years in the making, promised by God, foretold by the prophets, fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. And that is what Christmas is all about, and that is the greatest gift we could ever receive. And now the question is: "Will we receive it…or will we miss it?

You know, I would imagine that in a crowd of this size, that there are probably some here today who have never accepted the gift of Jesus. Jesus Christ came to be God among us, to die in your place to pay the penalty that we owe for our sin. And He offers us eternal life. He offers to enter into an everlasting kind of life, beginning now, and for all eternity He offers Himself to you. But he'll never force Himself on anyone. It's up to us. Each one of us must make a decision to accept the gift of Jesus and His salvation and presence as Immanuel, and, oh, how I pray that there is no one who leaves here today without taking a moment in the quietness of your own heart, to just say yes to Jesus. For if you do, it will change not only your Christmas, but the rest of your life.

Many others of us who have known Christ for many years, but do we realize that the gift of Jesus is not just a one-time offer? Every moment of every day He offers to be *God with us* in a world of darkness, fear, loss, struggle, and strife. We don't ever have to go it alone. In fact, we're fools like Ahaz if we do. Instead, like Hezekiah, we can recognize both our need and our opportunity and now, through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, every moment of every day, we can accept the gift of Immanuel, *God with us*. Not only this December, but all throughout the year, we can look to Him, seek Him, depend upon Him, trust in Him and live with His power and presence, keeping and sustaining and protecting us as we face the continual struggle of life in this present

age. And one day He will come again, and we will experience even more fully the beauty, wonder, power and certain hope of Immanuel. He is God. He is good. He is with us. He is for us. So, what will your Christmas be like this year? What gift is at the top of your list? Oh, how I hope that for you and for me, that we will seek and have the wisdom to seek Jesus as the greatest gift. Every moment of every day, trusting and depending upon the gift of Immanuel, living securely in the palm of His hand, being strengthened continually by the comfort and power of His presence. Will you miss it or experience it by pursuing and trusting in Him?

Jesus, thank You, that You came. Thank You, Father God, that before Jesus ever came, You continually demonstrated Your heart to be Immanuel, to be a good God for and with Your people. And thank You for the incarnation, where God became man and dwelt among us. Jesus, thank You for going to the cross to pay for our sin. Thank You for sending the Holy Spirit to indwell us, that every single day we might live in relationship, in connection, and in dependence upon You. Oh, God, may this Christmas be a Christmas where we seek You, and experience the gift of Immanuel. In Your name we pray, Amen.

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