

The Way of Immanuel (Matthew 1:18-25)

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Expectations are powerful things. If you expect to receive a gift from a family member and don't, how do you feel? Disappointed, right? What if you don't receive a gift, but never expected one in the first place, how do you feel? It's not a big deal. What explains the difference in your emotional experience? It's all about your expectations. They either multiply or mitigate our experience of suffering in a broken world.

Some attempt to inoculate themselves against the disappointment of shattered expectations by cynically expecting the worst. Others try to entirely eliminate the desires that give rise to our expectations. It's the nirvana Buddhists pursue, expecting nothing because you want nothing.

In contrast, Christianity says both the presence of expectations and the desires that drive them are exceedingly good things. They're part of what it means to be created in the image of God. They may be corrupted by sin. They may be distorted by willful rejection of his Word. But the solution isn't to expect the worst or nothing at all. The solution is to embrace expectations that are informed by the Word of God and rooted in the character of God.

Because God's Word is true, it is good to expect of God and men what Scripture tells us to expect of God and men. And because God never changes, it is good for our strongest desires and greatest expectations to be fixed on him and him alone. People will change. People will disappoint you. God will not. He never changes and always does exactly what he says he will do. Ps 25:3, "Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame..."

One of the sweet blessings of studying the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, is the opportunity it affords to examine our expectations of who God is and the way he works. Look at Matt 1:18. "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place *in this way*." When God works in the world (and he is always working), we can expect him to do so in a certain kind of way, a way that is consistent with his unchanging character and sovereign purposes.

The purpose of his work in this passage is found in v. 23. The birth of Christ is all about God revealing himself as "Immanuel," or God with us. But there are times that's hard to believe, isn't it? We wrestle with questions like, "Lord, are you really

present? Are you really at work in my life?" If we see what we expect to see, we conclude he is. If can't discern his activity anywhere, we conclude he's not. Our expectations become the functional score card we use to evaluate whether he is present or absent, mightily at work or missing in action.

Here's the good news. Though the incarnation itself is unrepeatable, the way in which God brought it to pass back then is the same way he delights to work today. So let's follow the gospel writer's lead in considering the "way" in which the birth of Christ took place, so that our expectations of God's work, and the criteria we use to discern his presence, might be governed by what God himself has told us to expect. First, God works in a way that...

1) APPEARS FOOLISH IN THE EYES OF MEN (vv. 18-19)

From a narrative standpoint, Matthew's goal in vv. 18-25 is to explain an enigma at the very end of Jesus' genealogy in vv. 1-17. You have a repeated formula. So and so the father of so and so. And so and so the father of so and so. Until you get to v. 16. "And Jacob the father of Joseph, and Joseph *the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born*, who is called Christ."

What do we expect in v. 16? "And Jacob the father of Joseph, and Joseph the father of Jesus." But that's not what Matthew says because Joseph wasn't Jesus' natural father. V. 18 tells us why not. "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."

In the ancient near east, betrothal was a legally binding relationship in a way American engagements are not. Even before the wedding ceremony took place and the marriage was physically consummated, v. 19 confirms Joseph was considered Mary's husband. And Mary was considered Joseph's wife. They were formally pledged to one another such that the only way to end a betrothal was to issue a certificate of divorce.

So imagine what Joseph must have thought, along with Mary's family, and his family, and their entire community, when they discovered Mary was pregnant *before* the wedding? Don't read 21st century, western morality into the text and think no big deal. It was scandalous. It was disgraceful. It violated Jewish cultural expectations rooted in biblical sexual ethics.

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes for a moment. He knows he's not the father. So who is? Never in the history of the world had a woman become pregnant without having

sexual relations with a man. Joseph's response in v. 19 reveals the only logical conclusion he could draw. Mary's been unfaithful to him.

The penalty for adultery under the Mosaic law was death, unless the betrothed woman was taken by force. By the 1st century, however, the Romans occupying Israel had reserved the death penalty for their own court of law. Issuing a certificate of divorce in accordance with Deut 24 was the only available option.

And being a "just" or "righteous" man, Joseph saw no other option. He couldn't marry her in good conscience. To do so would be to communicate that adultery and sexual immorality wasn't a big deal and that his wife's faithfulness to God and men wasn't a significant matter. He knew it was. Besides, if he did marry her, the entire community would perceive the wedding as an implicit admission that he impregnated her, which he did not. Both outcomes, turning a blind eye to sin and confessing sin he did not commit, rightly violated Joseph's biblical sense of justice.

At the same time, he was also a compassionate man. He doesn't want to heap shame on Mary. So, he resolves (v. 19) "to divorce her quietly." Joseph's integrity doesn't change the fact that the whole situation looked like a mess. In the eyes of men, it was scandalous. It was godless. There was nothing commendable, praiseworthy, or promising afoot. It was a lead story for the tabloids.

"But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:27-29).

Do not look at a situation, no matter how godless it appears, and conclude, "Now there is a situation in which God is most certainly *not* at work! Nothing good coming to pass over here!" His ways are higher than your ways. His thoughts are greater than your thoughts. The birth of Christ humbles and encourages us by reminding us God delights to work through what appears foolish in the eyes of men.

2) DEMONSTRATES HIS SOVERIEGN AUTHORITY (v. 20)

I love the simplicity of v. 20. "But as [Joseph] considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife...' There is nothing passive about the biblical portrayal of God's actions in human history. He doesn't wind up the world and let it



tick away in deference to the free will of man. He actively, personally, and decisively intervenes in the affairs of men to bring his sovereign purposes to pass.

Exactly when we want him to? No. It's usually when we least expect it! Exactly the way we want him to? No. If Scripture tells us anything, it's usually through situations we would never choose if given the opportunity. He doesn't take his cues from the wisdom of men. Nor does he exist to fulfil our wishes. He created us to fulfil his.

And his purposes will stand. Why? Because he is God and there is no other. He is the Only Sovereign, the Lord of Hosts, the King of Kings. Before him, all men are like grass and the nations are like dust on the scales. You do not live in a universe that is out of control. You live in a universe that is firmly under the sovereign authority of God.

So what was God's sovereign purpose for Joseph? Here's where we need to remember one of the covenant promises God made in the Old Testament. In 2 Sam 7, he promised the Messiah, the Lord's Anointed who would bring all God's redemptive purposes to pass, would be born in the line of David, the king of Israel.

Matt 1 establishes Joseph as a descendant of David, not Mary. But if Joseph takes Mary as his wife, naming her son as his own, what does he become? He becomes Jesus' adoptive father. Though not his natural son according to the flesh, Jesus becomes Joseph's legal son in the eyes of the law. Which means Jesus is what? A legal descendant of David. Nothing less than the fulfillment of God's covenant promises hinges on Joseph making a different decision than the one he originally resolved to make.

So what does God do? He transforms Joseph's will through the sovereign authority of his Word. God's Word does not return void, my friends. It accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent. Notice several things about the way God's Word exercises authority in Joseph's life.

First, God's Word is personal. The Lord calls him by name and reminds Joseph of his identity. You are Joseph, son of David. Though your life may seem insignificant, you are part of a much bigger story I am writing in the world. God's Word comes to us in the same way today, friend. When you open the Bible and read, God is personally speaking to you. He knows you by name just like he knew Joseph. And through his Word, he locates us in his big story, sinners, and saints alike.

Second, God's Word is comforting. I love the fact that the angel of the Lord didn't begin with a freak out history lesson. "Ok, Joseph, so here's the deal. You're presently going down path B. My boss needs you to go down path A. So get with the program and marry Mary, ok? Time is running out!" No. God's Word expressed the Lord's care for the man in midst of his emotional distress. "Joseph, Son of David, do not fear..." I know you're afraid, Joseph. And I'm here to comfort you.

If you think of God's Word as primarily a list of rules to help you stay in line or remain on God's good side, then you do not know the Bible. This book overflows with words of comfort and consolation from our King. He knows your fears, including the fears you haven't told anyone about. And he is faithful to identify our fears and give us better reasons to trust him.

Finally, God's Word testifies of the mighty deeds of the Lord. Do not be afraid, Joseph. That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Mary hasn't been unfaithful. The child in her womb is the Son of God. He comforts us in the same way today. Sometimes he changes our circumstances. More often than not, he opens our eyes through his Word to see who he is and the work he's accomplishing in the midst of our circumstances. Such is the way God delights to exercise his authority in our lives.

3) MAGNIFIES THE SUPERNATURAL POWER OF THE SPIRIT (v. 20)

It's at this point that we come face to face with the glorious, mind-shattering, mystery at the heart of the incarnation. It's not a mystery in the sense that we cannot understand what God has done. It's a mystery in the sense that what God has done exceeds the finite borders of our understanding.

So what did God do? The Eternal Son of God, begotten of the Father, the One who created all things, for whom all things exist, and in whom all things hold together, took to himself a fully human nature, yet without sin, and became a human embryo in Mary's womb. As our Statement of Faith declares, "In this union, two whole, perfect, and distinct natures were inseparably joined together in the one person of the divine Son without confusion, mixture, or change."

How could such a union come to pass? Through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that hovered over the waters in the first creation overshadowed Mary's womb in the new creation, enabling a virgin who had never known a man to conceive a child. At the heart of the Christian faith lies an absolute miracle, something no man could imagine or bring to pass.

But why come to earth in a virgin's womb? Why not just show up on earth as a fully grown man? There are many reasons. I'll mention two that are especially important. **First, the virgin conception of Christ enables full deity and full humanity to be united in one person.** Kevin DeYoung says it well: "If Jesus had not been born of a human, we could not believe in his full humanity. At the same time, if his birth were like any other human birth – through the union of a human father and mother – we would question his full divinity. The virgin birth is necessary to secure both a real human nature and a completely divine nature."

Christ's humanity enables him to represent us, to live the life we're supposed to live and die the death we deserve to die. And Christ's deity ensures his obedience to the Father in life and death is sufficient to atone for our guilt, cover our shame, and destroy the power of Satan. Both are mission critical. Sacrifice his full humanity or full deity, and the good news of the gospel comes crumbling down.

Second, the virgin conception of Christ assures us Jesus' human nature is unstained by original sin. All who are natural descendants of Adam inherit both Adam's guilt and Adam's corruption at conception. We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. We're born that way.

If Jesus had been conceived in the normal way through a human father and mother, his human nature would not have been sinless and he would have had to die for his own sin, incapable of atoning for the sin of the world. As it was, the Spirit prepared a body for the Son that, in the words of Francis Turretin, had "nothing in common with sin." As Lk 1:35 declares, "Therefore the child to be born will be called holy." Heb 7:26-27 explains why the absolute sinlessness of Jesus' humanity is so important.

"For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself."

So how does the virgin conception shape our expectation of God's work today? It reminds us God accomplishes his work through actions that are manifestly supernatural. We all too quickly shrink God down to size in our own minds until he become a souped-up version of ourselves. We stop expecting him to act in supernatural ways.

When a friend is sick, we ask him to give the doctors wisdom, forgetting he has supernatural power to heal. When we lack financial resources, we ask him to give us strength to work more hours, forgetting he has supernatural power to provide for all our physical needs. When a child begins making foolish decisions, we argue and plead with them until we're blue in the face, forgetting God is more than able to turn their heart back to him in an instant. When our spouse has stumbled in the same way for 40 years, we think and act as if God's ability to transform them is restricted by the force of human habits. Friends, it is not!

The miracle of the incarnation is a loud, flashing sign that the power of the Spirit, the power of God, is infinitely greater than our own. His ways are not confined to the laws of nature, to what we have seen him do or not do in the past, or to what we can understand or envision with our feeble minds. We are creatures. He is the Creator. He isn't confined to the "laws" of science or biology. He created science and biology!

Few Christian disciplines reveal our functional theology more clearly than our prayers. Do you temper your spiritual expectations, betting against the supernatural, by bringing small prayers to a small God? Or do you pray big prayers to a big God, for that is who he is? We serve a big God, a mighty God, a God who rends heaven and earth, who delights to accomplish supernatural work through the Spirit to redeem his people.

4) PROVIDES FOR OUR GREATEST NEED (v. 21)

Look at v. 21. What does the Lord tell Joseph? "[Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The name "Jesus" is a Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh saves".

I don't know all the troubles you carried into the room this morning – the trouble in your body, the trouble in your mind, the trouble in your heart. I do know this. No matter what that trouble is, Jesus is the answer. What you most need in that area, that lack, that weakness, that anxiety, that intractable problem, comes from Him – not you or another man or woman.

And here's where we have to be really careful. Getting back to the importance of expectations, it's so easy to expect or even demand God save or provide for us in a way that makes him a servant of our felt needs and desires. We turn him into the ultimate therapist who exists to make our lives easier and more comfortable. We expect him to meet our needs as we perceive them instead of humbly looking to him

to reveal our true needs and meet them in ways that are immeasurably better than all we could ask or imagine.

What is your greatest need, friend? What is the one thing you need in this life more than anything else? God himself tells you in v. 21. You need Him to save you from your sins. I'm not talking about the consequences of a bad decision here or there. I'm talking about the fact that we are born into this world as sinners. We are separated from God. We deserve his judgment. And we will perish in hell unless he does for us what we could never accomplish for ourselves. You need God to forgive your sins and reconcile you to himself, rescuing you from the clutches of death.

Here's the good news! That's exactly what Jesus came to do. He came to turn your gaze to the cross. See my body broken for you. See my blood, shed for you. Repent and believe there is salvation in no one else that you might hear his voice declaring over you, even today, "Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven" (Matt 9:2).

If the place you most long for God to work salvation is the place God says you most need salvation, you will never feel spiritually poor or that God has failed to come through. You will feel spiritually rich through the forgiveness he has lavished on you in Christ Jesus! You will be amazed by grace. Grumbling and complaining will cease. And you will live with the happy assurance that if he did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things!

5) FULFILLS THE PRECIOUS PROMISES OF HIS WORD (vv. 22-23)

If you study the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel, it's clear he isn't inserting random quotations from the Old Testament to fill out a preexisting birth narrative. Rather, he's selectively reporting parts of the birth narrative that demonstrate the fulfillment of specific Old Testament promises. Case in point, Isaiah 7-9.

Things were not looking good for the southern kingdom of Judah during Isaiah's ministry in the 8th century. Judah was under attack from the northern kingdom of Israel who had formed an alliance with the king of Syria. They were outmanned and outgunned. Jerusalem seemed doomed to fall. Isa 7:2, "The heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."

But Isaiah told Ahaz (Isa 7:7), "It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass." Within 65 years, both Israel and Syria would be overrun by the king of Assyria.

Trust me, Ahaz. The Lord tells him to ask him for a sign. Ahaz refuses and receives one anyway.

Isa 7:14–17, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria!”

It was both an assurance of salvation and a warning of judgment. The promised sign came to pass in part through the birth of Isaiah’s own son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, in Isa 8. His name means, “Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” His birth confirmed to Ahaz and all Judah that salvation and judgment through the king of Assyria was at hand. God was indeed Immanuel, with his people, yet he was present to judge as much as he was present to save. The initial fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy came in his own day.

But in the same way that a single mountain range contains many peaks, so too a prophecy like Isa 7:14 has multiple fulfillments. And over 700 years later, it came to pass in an immeasurably greater way. Only this time, it wasn’t a sign of judgment. It was a sign of salvation! Jn 3:17, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

And what do those who come to Jesus for salvation from sin discover to their joy? That he is indeed Immanuel, which means God with us. The people who experience salvation from sin in v. 21 are the people who enjoy God’s presence in an intimately personal way in v. 23, who know him as Immanuel, which means “God with us.”

Christmas is not an assurance that God is with everyone. Christmas is a promise that if you confess your sins, receive the forgiveness of sins, and bow your knee to King Jesus as a result, then you can add your voice to the multitude of the redeemed who rejoice in knowing God is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt 28:20).

How is that possible? Because after he rose from the grave and ascended to heaven, Jesus poured out the gift of the Spirit on his people. Through the Spirit who dwells within you, Christian, you wake up every morning of your life *with God* in a way saints in the Old Testament could scarcely have imagined! As Ed Welch says, “This is

the goal of the forgiveness of sins. Scripture is the story of God's plan to be close to his people."

Matthew quotes Isa 7:14 and emphasizes the joy of knowing Jesus as Immanuel, "God with us," because he wants us to know God delights to work in a way that fulfills all the precious promises in his Word. Yes, Christmas declares, "God is with us." But in the context of the bigger story of redemption, and all the messianic prophecies in Isa 7-9, Christmas says the God who is "with us" is a particular sort of God who works in a particular sort of way. He's a God who keeps his promises.

Trust him, friend. Trust him to do what he has said he will do. When God says, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion," you can count on him to do it. When God says, "My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness," you can count on him to do it. He works in a way that fulfills his precious promises.

6) REQUIRES FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE (vv. 24-25)

One of the most remarkable things about the way Jesus was born is what it required of an ordinary man like Joseph. What the Lord told him to do was far from easy. It would come at the cost of his reputation, crucifying the fear of man. It would eventually force him to flee his homeland. Little did Joseph know all that was coming.

But notice how he responds in vv. 24-25. "When Joseph woke up 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." His obedience was immediate. His obedience was costly. His obedience was complete. Such is what God requires of all who would walk the path of righteousness and holiness.

God still works in the same way today, my friends, through men (and women) who are willing to take up their cross and follow him – even when what God asks you to do, looks foolish in the eyes of the world. Why would you sacrifice a promising career and the esteem of your coworkers to disciple your kids? Why would you invest your money in the mission of the gospel instead of buying a vacation home? Why would you correct your brother or sister in Christ, or talk about Jesus with a neighbor, at the risk of losing their friendship?

Why indeed? Because Jesus is worth it. Because the path Joseph chose to walk is the only path of joy and life. And because there is no greater joy than participating in the work of God in us and through us.

CONCLUSION

The ways of the God who is with us are exceedingly glorious. They are higher than our ways. But they are not unknowable or beyond our understanding. God has revealed the character of his ways in the gospel of Jesus Christ, starting with the very way his Son came into the world. Expect him to continue working in the same way.

Expect him to work in a way that seems foolish in the eyes of men. Expect him to work in a way that demonstrates his sovereign authority. Expect him to work in a way that magnifies the supernatural power of the Spirit. Expect him to work in a way that meets you at the point of your greatest need. Expect him to work in a way that fulfills the precious promises in his Word. And expect him to act in a way that requires your faithful obedience.

Such is the way of Immanuel, God with us. Let's pray and ask for his help to behold the glory of his work and respond with grateful hearts.