

Jesus - the embarrassment

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[0:00] I'd like to speak for a few minutes about Jesus the embarrassment. I hope I spelt embarrassment. I'd be very embarrassed if I didn't spell it right.

! I looked it up. So thinking about Christmas, what with Christmas trees? Well, we've got a Christmas tree.

Christmas songs. What is an authentic Christmas song? Well, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer is an authentic Christmas song. What's the one by Slade? Merry Christmas. That one. Anyway.

Christmas concerts. Christmas cooking. Turkey. Stuff like that.

Christmas presents. Amazon. Whether to join Amazon Prime this time round. Delivery times. How much money you can afford to spend on Christmas presents.

Getting the family together. All that that involves. Some of it's very complicated. Sometimes very pleasant. Sometimes it's a bit of all sorts of things. And when you put all that together, you wonder whether fitting Jesus into it also is just going a bit too far.

[1:11] Somebody once said, they'll bring religion into anything these days. They're now bringing it into Christmas. Well, here's a strange thing because the very name of it actually is a religious thing. Christ is there.

So Jesus can be a bit of an embarrassment. There's the baby Jesus. Where does he fit into all this Christmas cards?

Father Christmas. Can we be comfortable if we bring him into the picture? Father Christmas. Father Christmas.

Right. Right. I thought there was something else I was going to click, but there it is. Right. So let's set some background. We're going to look at the bit which says in verse 18, This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.

[3:03] His mother Mary was called. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. But before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace.

He had in mind to divorce her quietly. So we need a little bit of background to that story. And the background is, first of all, the culture of getting together.

So our culture has got quite a number of ways of boys and girls, men and women, getting together and having children. In that culture, there was one way you did it, and only one way, which was that there would be a betrothal, so a promise given to get married, and then a period after which a man and woman were married.

And that was the way you did it. There wasn't any other way to do it. And after that came children. So that is the cultural context. Many, what we would say, conservative cultures would still have that same view.

And I invite you to realize that our culture is different. I invite you to step into their culture. That's how they would have seen it. There's a number of things that you perhaps need to know just to make a little bit more sense of it.

[4:28] In their culture, there wasn't a word for husband. We have a special word for husband. There wasn't a word for wife. They would use the expression, which I think is in French, isn't it?

Ma femme means my wife. Femme means woman. Ma femme means my woman, meaning my wife. And that's what they would have done in this culture, and that's what's expressed in the

original language.

So when it says, where does it say this in verse 24, to take Mary home as his wife. The original doesn't say home.

That's just put in there to make it a little bit more comfortable to us as we read it. It says he took Mary as his woman. So that's what getting married was, to take a named person as your woman, to take Mary as his woman.

And she would have taken him as her man. So verse 19 says, Joseph, her husband. And you might have read it and you thought, well, they're not married yet.

[5:40] So why does it say husband? And of course, what it actually says is man. And if it's her man, then to us, that's her husband.

So just a little bit of, I hope that doesn't confuse you. In that culture, there would have been no sex before marriage. No sexual union until married.

Also like you to note in the way that it's told, the modesty of the reproductive language that's used.

So I guess in our culture, we're used to all sorts of explicitly stated things about sex.

But in the way he tells it, it's worth noticing the way he does it. He talks about being betrothed, which is a rather, it has its own charm as leading up to getting married and having children.

And in verse 18, let's just see, it says, before they came together, before they came together, which is a nicely delicate expression, isn't it?

[6:51] Before they came together. In verse 18, she was found to be, now our English translation says, she was found to be with child.

Is that what it says? Found to be with child. That's an interesting expression, with child. In the original, it says, it just says this, in the belly.

She was found to be in the belly. Meaning, you know, something had gone on inside her, and you put two and two together, and you understand what's meant.

She was pregnant. But it's an interesting expression, isn't it? She was found to be in the belly. And that's the same expression that's used in verse 23. The virgin will be in the belly.

And then the expression that when they did come together as man and wife to have sex, verse 25, it says, our translation says, he had no union with her.

[7:58] But the original uses this Hebrew way of saying, he did not know her. So, it's a rather lovely expression to say the sexual closeness.

And it uses this, that they knew each other. They came together and knew each other. So, I'll just point that out sort of in passing. In the way the story's told, there's a certain delicacy and a certain charm about it.

And then we also need to know in context that we're going back into rural Judaism. It's a culture that has, as had for centuries, norms of behavior and culture embedded into it.

We're going back to the laws of Moses, which, as you know, would have covered food and things that are kosher, as we now say. It's a culture that was not atheistic.

It was a theistic culture. They believed in one God, monotheistic culture. They believed that this God expressed himself in moral and ethical standards, in laws and words.

[9:18] And as we realize, as we read the story, in prophecies. That over these centuries, their God had not only told them how to behave, but had made prophecies of what he would do and what actions he would take and what program he had down through the centuries.

And this is very much part of the context of this story. And one of the offshoots of that is that to fail to comply with the norms of behavior, and particularly the sexual norms, you see what's at risk.

Verse 19, Joseph, her husband, or Joseph, her man, if you like, was righteous. Now, that word has a lot of freight.

Righteous means in conformity to the laws of their God. And interestingly, he does not want to expose her to public disgrace.

So that's what's, as it were, in the offing, that because of the situation which we're considering here, the possibility was that this woman, this young woman, could be shamed, despised, publicly looked down on, public disgrace.

[10:44] And it's interesting that word is used only in one other place in Hebrews where it says that people who reject Jesus put him to public disgrace. But here is a, or they reject him after having known about him,

put him to public disgrace.

And here it's Mary who risks being put to public disgrace. And notice also, would you, the word in verse 20, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home.

That's interesting. I pondered the use of the word fear there. So why should he be afraid? Well, apparently, the angel thought that there might well be reason to him to be afraid, that he himself, we presume, would be open to ridicule and scorn and rejection if he protected this woman who, we remind ourselves, was in the belly.

Before she's married, before she's supposed to be anything in the belly, she was in the belly. Found to be with child. So I'll just highlight, that's the problem.

That's the cause of this embarrassment and acute difficulty. Okay, so that sets a little bit of the context for us.

[12:11] So let's see what Joseph does. Now in verse 20, it says, That's not a very common occurrence.

In the Bible, it's not painted as a very common occurrence. It's a rather unusual thing. The word that is not in our modern translations is the word behold.

So if you read it in the authorized version, it would say something like, after he'd considered this, behold, an angel came to him. So there's a sort of suddenness of the angel coming or a surprisingness because, well, he's been considering this.

That's always dangerous to do a clunky translation. But I will give you a clunky translation of this word to consider. It's only indicative.

It's made of two words, one which means in, and another word which means something like heat or anger. And the idea being, when he considered, I think it would be helpful for us to get the idea that he's inwardly burning and hot and tortured, perhaps torture is too strong a word, but he's inner indignation of what's going on here.

[13:44] Do you get the thought of that, that this situation that he's in leads him to inner hotness. He's all heated up inside. And that is, I think, an indication.

It's not a translation. Indication of this word considered. Can you get the situation that he'd be in where you get the feeling of where he's at with this? And it's made all the more intense because we're told he was a righteous man.

So righteous in the sense of the moral, spiritual, ethical framework of the God of Israel. So what's he going to do? And he, having heatedly, internally, you know, I'm imagining he's got sleepless nights.

I imagine he can't, he's pacing the floor. I imagine he's tearing his hair out. I think, what am I going to do? And he can't tell a lie on this.

He can't be untrue to his God on this. He's a righteous man. So what's he thinking? He's thinking, what's happened to Mary? Has she been a victim of something that she hasn't told me about?

[15:01] She's actually quite quiet in this, isn't she? We don't find her saying anything. But we get it from Joseph's point of view. What's happened to this woman I have such a high regard for? Has she been a victim of something?

Is she repeatedly lying to me about this? And presumably, one part of the equation is that Joseph knows it's not him. So the inner heat of, what am I supposed to do?

Can I bring myself to expose her to the public disgrace, which seems the only logical conclusion of this situation? And he says, I can't bring myself to do that.

And it seems to me very interesting that if our translations are giving us the right steer on this, it says, because he was a righteous man, he didn't want to expose her to public disgrace.

It's a very interesting take on righteousness, isn't it? He wasn't, righteousness didn't lead him to be just coldly strict and stern, and as we might say, letter of the law with his wife, righteousness makes him like his God, and his God is compassionate and understanding, as well as holy and upright.

[16:16] And as these things tussle around in Joseph's thinking and feeling, he says, I can't see how I can possibly expose her to public disgrace.

But I don't know what else to do. And the best he can come up with is to, well, it says, divorce her. Now, the word divorce, in English, it's a technical word.

In their speech, it was simply the word to send away. Now, if you sent your woman away, that was divorcing.

And he's minded, the only way I can think is remotely any sort of solution to this, is to send her away quietly.

To send her away quietly. This is the same word of what Herod does with the wise men. Now, let me just see. Somewhere, does he meet them quietly or privately?

[17:17] Yeah, in 2 verse 7, Herod called the Magi secretly. And he says, well, this is the best I can come up with is just we'll hush it all up. I can't, I don't have it in my heart to disgrace poor Mary.

And that's the best he can do. And then, look, behold, the angel comes and says, you're so steamed up about this. This is such an acute embarrassment.

It would be a sad thing to put her away quietly. Now, let's bring in this, the reasons not to be embarrassed about Jesus.

And God gives reasons not to be embarrassed about this unborn child. And I've just got three of them.

And I think that they were persuasive for Joseph. And I think they're still persuasive for us.

[18:26] So let's go through them. It's through an angel in a dream. So let's put the dream there. And there's the angel. And the angel says things. And he talks about Mary and what's in her belly.

And this angel is not a random angel. This angel, we're told, is, verse 20, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

So this angel is not like a fairy, you know, magic fairy, fairy godmother. This angel is fully in line with the God of Israel and his laws and his ways and his program and his person.

And it's this angel who comes, or one of these angels, who comes to say what he says. And he says, don't, well, interestingly, he says, Joseph, son of David, which is a very meaningful form of address because it links Joseph.

You understand, son of David is not just saying that's his dad's name. It's saying you are in the line of the only David that we ever pay any attention to, which is King David.

[19:42] So he's bringing in the kingly aspect of this, which I hope we'll touch on in a moment. And these, as we shall see, I believe, are reasons for us to not to be embarrassed, as it were, to take this child into our future lives.

So here are the three reasons. Number one, his supernatural origin. So this is where the angel comes in, isn't it? Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is begotten in her is from the Holy Spirit.

I'll just point out this word. We've got the word conceived. It's a funny word in the original because it can be male or female. In English, conceived is, no, which way round is it?

That's what happens in the woman, conception, isn't it? It is linked up with the word Genesis, actually. And in verse 18, it says this is how the Genesis of Jesus Christ came about.

And if you'd looked up in all the verses before that, you've got Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob. So we would, in the old version, say begat, Abraham begat, Isaac.

[21:04] And the begat is the word for conceive, generate. And this is all about the Genesis, the generation of Jesus. This is his origin.

Do you see what I'm saying? It's all the way through here about the conception, the begatting, the beginning, the origin, the birth of Jesus. So his supernatural origin.

And he says, now you see, this puts this embarrassment in a whole different level, doesn't it? What is begotten in her, what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the understanding of what is meant by Holy Spirit is something that Luke is going to develop.

But what he's saying is, because it would only make any sense if he says, this is not from an earthly father. Mary has not cheated on you, Joseph.

[22:08] There is an explanation. It's a very unusual explanation. But there is an explanation. And the father of this child is not a human father. This child is from the Holy Spirit.

And the word from is actually a very strong word. It's not sort of just generally by in some oblique sense. But from, in a very strong sense, this is from the Holy Spirit.

And obviously, it sets up a bit of a puzzle. But I would say that if you are prepared to look at the person of Jesus as he grows and develops, and in his later life, you would see strong, I think, inescapable evidence that he is, his origin is not just human.

He is human, but he is not just human. If you look at, you could sort of, or more or less, open any of the Gospels at a random page, and you would find this Jesus doing mighty works, doing signs. We would probably translate them miracles, but John's Gospel calls them signs. They indicate more than they actually are. They indicate of who this person is, and he is human, but he is not just human.

[23:34] He is origin from the Holy Spirit. If you look at the quality of his personality, read. I'd invite you to do that. Just read one of the Gospels in an open-minded way, and what sort of person could say the things that this Jesus says?

What sort of person could respond in the way this Jesus does? He's so... Well, words fail me. His wisdom, his acuteness, his reality, in the sense that this isn't a fictional, made-up, inconsistent, paper-thin person, you know, like James Bond.

There's no real James Bond. Have you ever watched a James Bond film? Do you think the characterization is really deep and subtle, especially with Roger Moore, the late Roger Moore, but that Jesus in the Gospels is so...

He's real all the way through. Anyway, words fail me to explain that. Think of Jesus' own self-awareness, where he can say of himself, the Son...

No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. What sane person could possibly say that unless they were... unless they were God?

[25:01] So I'm saying that the first reason not to be embarrassed is his supernatural origin. He's human, but he's not just human. He's more than human.

And we get a hint of it as that story developed, as Lindsay read it to us. The wise men worshipped him. Now, were they right to do that?

Well, the Gospels would say absolutely they were right. The only person that, in a Hebrew context, you are to worship is the Lord God.

Anything else is idolatry. And these people worship Jesus. So number one, his supernatural origin. Reasons not to be embarrassed, number two. The rich connections of his heritage. So let's just come back to the begatting and the family tree thing. Now, heritage is a strange old thing, isn't it?

[26:01] Heritage is a strange old thing. Do you ever watch that? Now, what's the program called where they work back who they're... Who do you think you are? Yes. Now, it's a funny thing, because we bear no responsibility for our ancestors.

So if you worked out that your ancestor was the man who invented steam engines, it doesn't make you any cleverer. If you work out that one of your ancestors was a fantastic politician, that doesn't make you a politician.

And yet, we feel that it does make us something, don't we? We feel that's, oh, that's who I am.

That's where I've come from. And of course, you could do it this way and say, oh, I've met people. Their dad's a banker, which means that they went to a public school, and you think, they know nothing of real life. You might put it that way around. Or you might, if your dad was a banker and you had been in public school, say, well, I understand a lot more than some of these other people who haven't had the benefits of my background and education.

So it does make a difference, and it's not untypical for people to feel. We were watching The Crown the other day.

[27:12] Have you ever seen The Crown on Netflix? We watched the bit where Lord Altrincham said of the Queen that she spoke like a hockey captain or something like that, and that she was in a different world to the rest of us.

It's good. I recommend that. I hope I don't get into trouble for recommending it, but The Crown. And that she ought to be more democratic and more like ordinary people.

You could also take pride and say, my grandfather organized the first strike in the shipyards of, you know, whatever. You might put it under a completely different social class, but heritage is a thing. It's a funny old thing, but it's a thing, and it matters. And as Matthew wants to tell us about Jesus, he actually gives us huge detail in the first 17 verses of who begat who and what Jesus' family tree is and what his heritage is and who was his grandfather and what his great-grandfather actually did do.

He gives us this family tree, and it's a very interesting family tree, this heritage of Jesus. In this tree, there are heroes, people like Abraham who struck out on his own under the leadership of God and went to a place where he hadn't been before, and he's a hero.

[28:37] In the Bible, he's a hero of faith. It says, if you want to know what faith is really like, you just see what Abraham was like. And there are kings in this family tree. There's David and Solomon and Rehoboam and Asa and Jehoram and Uzziah.

There's kings in this family tree, and there's wise men like Solomon. And there's also outcasts and exiles. So you notice, well, you might have noticed this.

Just cast your eye down to verse 12. It talks about, chapter 1, verse 12, the exile to Babylon, and it gives a list of people who are in exile. And of course, by the time we get down to Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, we've now got what is, in one way, a royal family tree, but what is actually is a carpenter in this obscure village just managing to, presumably, just about managing to survive and not a huge amount more.

So this heritage is enormously rich. There's outcasts and exiles, and of course, there are cheats, because, well, David, and this is pointed out, David was the father of Solomon whose mother had been Uriah's wife.

And David, I won't go through the whole story, but he'd stolen somebody else's wife. It's not a happy thing. There are foreigners in this family tree.

[30:08] Now, where's the foreigner? Whose mother was Rahab. Verse 5, Salmon, the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Rahab, whose profession was that of prostitute.

So there are irregulars in this. And you could study all of these people, but what I'm just going to say is that Jesus has a rich heritage.

And if you were to say to Jesus, well, you don't know anything about life at the top. He said, well, this is in my family tree. It's a royal family tree. And you say, well, Jesus, oh, well, you don't know anything about life at the bottom.

And he says, yes, I do. because in my family tree, there are exiles. And I was born in, not in a palace, but in a stable.

And whatever it is you say, well, he doesn't understand me. He doesn't understand my situation. He's understood all of it. In that sense, he's been there. And I say, there aren't many people like that.

[31:14] And I think that this is a very winsome thing about Jesus. That whatever you say, my lot is, you might say, I'm a stranger in a foreign country.

Jesus says, I know all about that. You might say, well, I've been misunderstood and I've been let down. And Jesus says, I understand all about that. And you might say, I've been given many gifts and many opportunities.

And Jesus says, yes, I know. I know about that too. He knows each of our situations. I think that's a very, very winsome thing.

Have you ever talked to somebody and poured your heart out and you've got, at the end of the conversation, you realize they have understood nothing at all. It meant nothing to them. And all you've done is embarrassed yourself.

Have you ever had that experience? Don't have to tell me now. But Jesus is completely unlike that. If you pour out your heart to him, he will say, I understand that completely.

[32:13] I think that's a reason. Reason number two, not to be embarrassed. Reason number three, his stated agenda. The angel says, 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. You are to give him the name Jesus. So in Greek, Yesu, in Hebrew, Yeshua, like Joshua, meaning he will, because he will save his people from their sins.

So his stated agenda. What will this child do, says the angel? He will save his people from their sins. In that context, let's go into the immediate context there.

Anybody who heard that would have breathed a huge, huge sigh of relief and said, at last.

And the reason being that in Israel's history, she, I use the word she for Israel, in her history, is a history of her failing and falling and being ungrateful and being obnoxious and sinning.

[33:39] And throughout her history, all the kindness that God showed, all the benefits that he gave, after all, historically, he gave her a land flowing with milk and honey, which they forfeited in the exile.

And even now, at the time of that being written, there was still this question, well, we're back in the land, we're back in the land that God promised us, but we're not free, we're under the oppression of a Roman occupying power.

Our sin is still really a burden on our shoulders. And if God says, you know, of all the things I've done for you in history, I've forgiven you, I've been kind to you, I've led you here, I've led you there, I've fed you, I've protected you, but to say, here is the one person who will save his people from their sins, it's a fantastic sigh of relief.

That's what we've been waiting for all the time. You know, we've had animal sacrifices and that, but it doesn't save us from our sins, and here's somebody who will. Now, I think that that, for them, would have been a huge, huge, huge thing.

And I think it's a huge thing for us today. Now, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I think I would not be too far off saying that psychological disciplines and social science disciplines are able, perhaps as never before, to analyze and pinpoint what goes on wrong in the human makeup.

[35:31] I was listening to something yesterday of somebody saying that they, somebody on the radio saying, there's something wrong inside. I think social science and psychological sciences can show that.

we can see sociologically, well, politically, I've put it, getting tough on crime and the causes of crime. Who said that?

Was it Jack Straw? So, politicians said that. Well, getting tough on crime and the causes of crime.

Who was it? You don't have to look it up.

It'll, it'll, it'll, and, well, my, my, my, my, my very point is, is that it's not, you can say it, but it's not so easy to do it, is it?

What are the causes of crime? And people can identify poverty, lack of education, deprivation, and so on. But I think it's pretty obvious that it goes deeper than that.

[36:38] And the Christian insight is that there is such a thing as sin. It needs dealing with and it is such a brilliant thing that Jesus is said by God to be the one who saves his people from their sins.

Many other helpful things can be done but no one and nothing can save people from their sins apart from this one person.

and this is my reason number three why he is not an embarrassment. What do you think?

Would you not value the one person who can save you from your sins? and this is that one person and he does it in this what should I say almost totally unacceptable way.

He does it by growing up as a human being and coming to the end of his life dying bearing in himself the wrongness the twistedness the cruelty the penalty the guilt the wrath for human sin all in himself and in doing this he saves us from our sins.

[38:23] now I think that's a breathtaking thing for God to do I think it's an astounding thing for God to do but I'm not embarrassed by it I say that's the best thing I've ever heard and that's what I need that's what I'm counting on and maybe it's the same for you isn't Jesus uniquely desirable for this third reason so there are the three reasons that were given to Joseph there was a lot more but I just picked out those three not to be embarrassed about the in the belligerence of Mary they were his origin as God his rich heritage as one of us understanding us and his agenda as saviour from sin and as we read the story of course if you read it the first time you'd read it you'd find it's mostly about

Joseph about his reactions about his problem about what the angel says to Joseph but the more you read it you realize it's actually not about Joseph it's about Jesus and we go from thinking with Joseph that Jesus is an embarrassment to realizing that he is absolutely the central point and the glory of the account isn't he you with me on that it's right isn't it it's actually turns out to be all about him so there's let's bring the baby into the picture so Jesus Joseph was convinced enough and it says he was convinced because it says he took Mary as his wife but had no union with her until she gave birth to a son and he gave him the name Jesus he took it all on board baby and all and I'm just asking the question whether in any sense you are convinced by the same I would love you to be convinced by that not simply to embrace Jesus now as Christmas in song and celebration I hope he'll do that hope we can all do that but if I may put it this way as Joseph took Mary home with him for the rest of his life that we might take Jesus home with us for the rest of our lives not just as something we leave for the moment but take on board not as an embarrassment but actually the be-all and end-all let's sing a song together