

God With Us

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[0:00] Toilet I love you.

[2:32] I love you.

But for Roy, it wasn't just twice. In 1970, he's hit again standing in the yard. In 1972, he's hit again at a ranger station. In 1973, he was hit again while patrolling the park, burning him severely.

In 1976, he was hit again while walking a trail. In 1977, he was hit again while fishing. Bro, stop going outdoors. In fact, he holds the Guinness World Record for the most verified lightning strikes.

It's what gave him the nickname, it's what gave him the nickname, but he was never the same. Everybody said he was lucky.

Everybody said he was lucky, but Roy didn't think so. He said, quote, I don't feel lucky. I feel hunted. I never want to see lightning again.

[4:04] Faith family, has that ever happened to you? I don't mean have you ever been struck by lightning seven times. I mean, have you ever been through a time in life where you felt like it was one strike after another?

It wasn't lightning after you, but suffering sure was. You've experienced it, right? You fix one problem only for another problem to go wrong.

You pay off one bill only to be given another one to pay. You get through one loss or tragedy only for another to appear.

And if you're a Christian, one of the very common questions we ask in these moments is, where is God in all of this? In my trials, in my disappointments, in my struggles?

And that is precisely the question that Matthew answers here in Matthew chapter 2. Now, let's be honest, faith family. We tend to view the Christmas story through rose-colored glasses.

[5:08] It's the most wonderful time of the year. Not for Mary and Joseph. In fact, if you take an honest, contextual look at the story in Matthew chapter 2, you will begin to realize this is one of the most horrifying, humanly speaking, stories that anybody could face.

It is one lightning strike after another. Take, for example, the fact that Mary is a pregnant teenager. That is hard enough on its own.

Amen? I mean, that has its own set of challenges. Add to that that Joseph wanted to divorce her and would have, had it not been for a vision he received from an angel.

Everybody in town is gossiping about them. They are socially ruined. And as if Rome hadn't squeezed them enough the past 50 years, according to the Gospel of Luke, Caesar Augustus has just raised taxes, and Joseph is nothing more than a poor carpenter.

They are forced to make this 80-mile journey to Bethlehem on donkey. It would have taken about 10 days for them to travel. I am assuming they didn't have cruise control.

[6 : 25] And you complain about a 15-minute delay and the middle seat on an airplane. When they get there, they don't know anyone, and Mary is forced to give birth to this child in a cave.

Shepherds, who by the way are not known for their personal hygiene, show up and they want to touch your baby. The only good thing really that happens thus far is there's a group of astrologers that show up and give you a bunch of money.

That's pretty cool. But other than that, everything seems to be going wrong, and it just gets worse. Word on the street is Roman soldiers are on their way from Jerusalem to do what?

To kill your baby. So you have to flee in the middle of the night to Egypt, now traveling not 80 miles, but 300 miles to the deserts of Egypt.

There they are stuck for the first few years of their baby's life in a foreign land. Eventually they hear word that Herod is dead. They think it's safe to return.

[7 : 31] So they travel those 300 miles back, only to discover that Herod's son is now in charge, and he's even worse than his father, forcing them to have to hide out in their hometown of Nazareth.

Where the rumor mill is still churning about this mysterious pregnancy. Welcome to the first three years of marriage. And add to that the fact that they have been given the responsibility of carrying the weight of parenting the son of God.

How's your day going? How are you feeling about your life right now, Faith Family? This is a horrifying story. Matthew 2 is a story of terror, and tragedy, and struggle, and worry.

It is one strike after another. And I have no doubt, as sure as I am standing on this stage, that Mary and Joseph many times, throughout this whole journey, is asking, where is God?

Where is God in all of this? This is not how I thought my life would go. And yet through this very human narrative, Matthew does something that is absolutely brilliant.

[8 : 49] He takes the events of Jesus' birth, and he weaves them into stories that his original readers would have known to answer the question, where is God in the struggles of life?

Here's the first story. Look at verse 13. Now when they departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt.

Remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him. And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.

This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, Out of Egypt I called my son.

Here's what Matthew does. Matthew takes the sufferings of Jesus' birth, the sufferings that surround this event, and he connects them to probably the most well-known Old Testament story there is.

[9 : 57] In fact, he's essentially saying, does anybody remember a time when God's people were under the reign of an evil dictator like Herod? Does anybody remember when that evil dictator ordered the death of children?

And do you remember how God's people were delivered from the suffering? And you as a reader are supposed to say, Oh, yeah, I remember a story like that. I remember in the Old Testament a story very much like that.

In fact, I see the similarities now. That of struggle and hardship. That of an evil leader. That of Egypt. Both involved the deliverance of God's Son.

Because that's right. It was the prophet Hosea. In Hosea chapter 11. That referred to Israel as God's Son brought up out of Egypt. Yes, I know that story.

And what do you remember? What did you learn from that story? What was the answer then to where is God in my struggle?

[11:04] That's right. The answer in Exodus and the answer in Matthew chapter 2 is the same answer for us today.

He is with us. He delivers His people. He is with them in the hardships of life.

Emmanuel. And then Matthew does it again. Verse 16. Now then Herod, when he saw that he'd been tricked by the wise men, became furious.

And he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem. And in all that region who were two years old and under. According to the time that was ascertained by the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. A voice was heard in Ramah. Weeping in loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children.

[12:00] She refused to be comforted because they are no more. The story continues. Herod is angry. He's angry because he's been tricked by the wise men.

Like Pharaoh in the Exodus story. He orders the death of male children. And if you're Mary and Joseph. And you know they're coming for your baby. You are freaking out. You are absolutely nervous.

And asking God, where are you? Where are you in this? And Matthew tells you. He quotes Jeremiah.

A prophet living just before the exile of Israel. Jeremiah references a story from Genesis 35 about a woman by the name of Rachel.

Now Rachel as you know was one of the matriarchs of Israel. Wife of Jacob. Father of the twelve tribes. And in Genesis 35 Rachel dies giving birth to a child.

[12:59] She wanted to name him Benoni. That is son of anguish. But Jacob did not want to be reminded every day of his wife's death. So instead he named the child Benjamin.

Or Benjamin. Son of my right hand. And that story took place. Get this. Just outside Bethlehem.

It's a story of a mother who's weeping for her children. And listen. What's interesting is that Jeremiah uses Rachel's story in Jeremiah 31 to describe God comforting his people when they are taken into exile.

Another time of great hardship and suffering. And then Jeremiah adds this. Thus says the Lord. Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears.

For there is a reward for your work declares the Lord. And they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future declares the Lord.

[14:05] What is Matthew doing here? He's answering the question. Where is God in my suffering? Where is God in the hardships of life?

Faith family. The answer for Rachel. The answer in Jeremiah's day. Is the same answer today. He is with us. He is with us.

He mourns with you. He comforts you. And He gives you hope. Emmanuel.

And then Matthew does it again. Verse 19. Verse 19. Verse 19. But when Herod died. Behold an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt saying rise take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel for those who sought the child's life are dead.

And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in the place of his father Herod he was afraid to go there.

[15:09] And being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee and went and lived in a city called Nazareth. That what was spoken by the prophets might be.

There it is again. Fulfilled. He shall be called a Nazarene. The story continues. Mary and Joseph begin to head back from Egypt. They think the coast is clear only to realize it's not.

They're forced to have to hide away in a small little country town called Nazareth. And again I have no doubt that Mary and Joseph's thinking like how many times can lightning strike?

This has been one strike after another. It's been three years of hiding and loneliness and worry just trying to survive. Where is God in my struggle?

And Matthew answers that. Matthew mentions that they end up in a town called... We just read it. Nazareth.

[16:13] Nazareth. As was spoken by the prophets. There's just one problem Matthew. No prophet ever said that. And this is where the biblical skeptics will come in and say see the Bible is full of errors.

Here's what I've learned faith family. I've learned that biblical skepticism is simply the result of biblical laziness. What I mean by that is don't criticize a book you haven't taken the time to study in context.

Amen. Matthew is not referring to a verse. He's referring to an idea. He's not referring to something a prophet said. He's referring to something that many of the prophets said.

Look at what Isaiah says in Isaiah 11 verse 1. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse and a... Everybody say it with me. A what?

A branch from his root shall bear fruit and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him. That is Isaiah describes the Messiah as a branch.

[17:14] As a tree coming from the stump of David. And Jeremiah uses the exact same imagery as well. Look at Jeremiah 23 verse 5.

Behold the days are coming declares the Lord when I shall raise up for David a righteous what? Branch. And he shall reign as king.

In other words, one of the common themes throughout the prophets was referring to Messiah as this branch. Guess what the word Nazareth means?

Branch. Brilliant! He's brilliant! He's just totally brilliant. Now, as you likely know, this little stick town, literally, this branch town, was the laughing stock of the area.

You remember, it's a place of reject. Remember in the Gospels when they say, What can anything good come from Nazareth? What's the point? I'm going to let Isaiah put it together and we're done.

[18:21] Isaiah 53 verse 2. Listen to this, faith family.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with his wounds we are healed. Here it is.

And I'm done. Right here, faith family. If you've zoned out on Christmas Eve, what do you do? I've taught you well. Look. Look. The tree man, branch, will grow up in a rejected tree town, Nazareth, to one day be rejected and crucified on a tree.

Look at me. For the first three years of Jesus' life to the final three hours of his life, he bore our griefs and he carried our sorrows.

[19:56] So when you ask, where is God in my struggle? The answer then and the answer now is he's with us.

Emmanuel. So if you're here today and you feel like Roy Sullivan or like Mary and Joseph and life has been nothing but one strike after another, take comfort in this this Christmas.

There is one who knows what it's like to be struck over and over and over again. Listen. So that in your suffering, you will know you are not hunted.

You're loved. Emmanuel. God is with us. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much for the real Christmas story.

Past all the sentimentalism and glamour of the season are two people in the midst of a very, very difficult three years.

[21:15] Bouncing from here to there. Wondering how it would all work out. Struggling with all different types of situations.

And in all of that, you were with them. And you are with us. This is the best news in the world.

The good news of Christmas. The good news of the gospel. Is Emmanuel. That God, you are with us in the person of Jesus Christ.

That's our hope. And all God's people said, amen. Amen. Thank you.