

Expecting Immanuel: Joseph

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[0 : 00] Oh, good evening, everybody. So nice to see you all. If you don't know me, if this is your first time, welcome. My name is Aaron Roberts. I look after this service. And today, this is the first time of Advent, we are starting a new series called Great Expectations. And basically, this is going to take us through to Christmas.

And each week, we're going to look at a different character connected to the birth of Jesus, like Mary and Herod and the shepherds, the angels, Elizabeth, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And each character is going to tell us something about who Jesus is and something about how we respond to him.

So who Jesus is and how we respond to him. This week, we start with Joseph. Now, of all the Gospels, I think you... I'm going to say this.

Luke and Matthew are really the only Gospels that deal with the birth. And Luke's Gospel is mostly told from the experience of Mary.

Matthew's Gospel, which we just heard read, tells the same story but from Joseph's perspective. In Luke, you've got Mary whose response to the news that Jesus is coming is joy and wonder.

[1 : 20] And she sings this amazing song. We just heard Joseph's response. It's quite subdued. Like, it's quite a... This whole thing's fairly sobering for him.

He's thinking this is going to be a very messy Christmas. So what we're going to do is let's go over the story quickly. And then we'll dig into the details, okay?

So we're just going to go over the story first. And then we're going to sort of dig down into the details of this. Right. Overview. So Mary and Joseph are betrothed. So they're engaged. And in those days, this is a very, very serious matter in the ancient Near East.

To break off an engagement, you actually had to get a divorce. So it's a pretty serious kind of situation. Verse 18 tells us that at some point during their betrothment, Mary gets pregnant.

And Joseph's obviously been told what's going on. When you look at the... When you sort of try and line up Matthew with Luke here, Mary's probably about three months pregnant at this point.

[2 : 28] So having a quick wedding and pretending the baby was conceived on the wedding night, that's not going to fly. That's not going to be an option, right? So Joseph's sort of thinking about... He's like, okay, what do I do?

What do I do about this situation? Verse 19 says that Joseph is a good guy. He's a good guy, you know. He'll just divorce her quickly or quietly. And what that meant is that a quick and quiet divorce was that he just had to write a letter and give it to Mary in the presence of two witnesses and then pay a fine, like quite a hefty fine.

Big money for a guy that's sort of a working class carpenter. So there's no paper trails or anything. No one else has to be involved. It's kind of like a no-fault divorce. And the passage says that he's a just guy, like a good guy.

And it describes him as that because the alternative was a public divorce, which was in front of the whole village, where everyone heard everything. It was all talked about.

And Mary would be publicly found guilty of something really bad. And she would be publicly shamed. And Joseph didn't want that for her.

[3 : 46] He's thinking, look, she's slipped up. It happens. We'll sort this out quietly. And we'll just get on with our lives. So Joseph, good guy.

But if Joseph had just stuck with being just a good guy, like a nice guy, just guy, kind guy, he would have missed Jesus. So what happens?

An angel speaks to him in verse 20. We sort of forget this, eh, that actually an angel spoke to Joseph. Like when you think about the angels in the story of Jesus' birth, you go, yeah, totally.

Angels spoke to the shepherds.

Angels spoke to Mary. The angel spoke to Joseph as well. And the angel addresses his big concern. See, the angel says, do not fear.

But it's not, do not fear me, because I'm like an angel. It says, do not fear to take Mary as your wife. See, sticking with Mary wasn't on his radar, even for a good guy.

[4 : 45] It wasn't on his radar. He was, if he'd had done that, he was kissing his reputation goodbye. This was a hard core shame and honor culture.

And there was a lot of shame attached to this situation. My mother was the child of two teenagers. They were 16 years old in New Zealand.

And the girl got pregnant at 16. And they wanted to marry, and their parents refused to let them get married. So the 16-year-old, this is my grandmother, was sent away.

So they got pregnant in the North Island. New Zealand's two islands, North Island, South Island. My grandmother was sent to the South Island to have the baby, and then she was forced to give up the baby.

And the story gets just sort of progressively messier after that. But my point is this. That happened in 20th century New Zealand.

[5 : 49] New Zealand is a pretty barbaric culture. It's not like we have much, you know, we're not like a polite, nice people. You know this, you know. And it happened in, like, just dirty old New Zealand.

And it happened in a non-religious family. But even in that context, the families couldn't handle the shame of it all. She had to go. The baby had to go.

How much worse would it have been in a very religious, small town in the Middle East 2,000 years ago? But the angel says, Joseph, stick with Mary.

Walk into a very messy situation. And the whole town's obviously going to do the math. They get married. Then a few months later, there's a baby.

And they're thinking, like, either Mary and Joseph slept together. Mary hooked up with some other random guy. Either way, their reputation is, I mean, they're just both completely hooped.

[6 : 54] And, of course, no one's going to believe. It's like, oh, no, it's, like, totally cool, guys. It's totally cool. It's like an angel. Save the world. Don't worry about it. It's going to be great. No one's going to believe that.

But Joseph did what the angel said. And he married a very, she would have been a heavily pregnant teenager. Joseph married a heavily pregnant teenager. So a good guy.

Now, let's dig deeper. And what I want to talk about is names. Names are very important in this account of the birth of Jesus.

I have a naming story. So when I was born, I was three days old. And I still, at this point, didn't have a name. My mom was in hospital, and I'm the youngest of five.

And I think at this point they just kind of lost interest in children and names and stuff. So this is a true story.

[7 : 54] So anyway, the nurse comes in and says to my mother, Lady, you have got to name your child. And she said, I've brought one of those books along that have baby names in it.

And she said to my mom, she says, I'm going to start reading out boys' names until you pick one of these names. So she opens the book and says, Aaron.

Yep, that'll do. There you go. Don't you feel sorry for me? Like, that is, that's seriously how I got my name.

So back in the ancient Near East, names were very, very important. You didn't just sort of casually throw a name at somebody. Names were meant to kind of tell you something about this child, your hopes for this child.

We, you know, as Christians, I think we believe this. Like, we named our child Beatrice as almost a protest against the prevailing attitude towards children with disabilities.

[9 : 13] People think these kids will ruin your life. Beatrice means bring out of joy. And if you know her, that's the truth. So this, this angel tells Joseph, says the child is coming.

Call him Jesus. Call him Jesus. It was the father's right to name the child. And that was usurped at this point here.

Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. It means God saves. So what's going on here? The angel is telling Joseph that this child will be on God's mission to save his people.

His name was his job description. I'll read the passage to you. Verse 21. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

So that's his mission. He's a baby. The baby's coming. The baby is born to have a mission, and the mission is salvation. This is why this Christ child was born. And you sort of fast forward 30 years later on the cross, and what do we see?

[10:27] John 19, the last words of Christ. It is finished. When Jesus had received the sour of wine, he said, it is finished. He bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

He doesn't say, I am finished. He didn't say, I'm about to die. He said, it is finished. In other words, the thing that I was meant to do, the mission that I was on, I've done it.

It's been accomplished. I've done the thing I was born to do. The word in Greek, it is finished. It's one word. It's tetelestai. It's a word from commerce.

It's when you paid a bill, you'd stamp the word tetelestai on it. It's been paid in full. It's been finished. These are the last words of Christ. I did it. And I think I've told you this before.

But this is the genius of Christianity, isn't it? Compared to every other faith in the world, the last words of Buddha were strive without ceasing. Now, the Buddhist faith has a lot of admirable sort of aspects to it.

[11:25] But salvation for Buddhists is strive without ceasing. It's very difficult, isn't it, to do that? It's actually impossible. It makes salvation impossible, I think.

Christ is the opposite. He says, I have done everything. I've done it. I've bridged the chasm between God and humanity. I have brought forgiveness.

See, that was the mission of Jesus, tied up in his naming. Back to the passage. And it's very particular, I think, isn't it, what he came to save us from.

It says there, he came to save us from our sins. That's what his name means. Save us from the sins, right? It's not save us from our loneliness or our lust or our anger.

It's our sins because sin is the root cause of all of these other problems that we have in the world. See, what we didn't need is somebody just to come into the world to spiritually enrich us because we're a bit broken and we need a little bit of a, you know, bit of fixing.

[12:33] We're not up to scratch. We need a bit of help. No, it's we have a heart problem. Now, heart problem is a deep rebellion against God.

It's a defiance. A defiance we can't sort of just sort of think our way out of either. It's a desire to be the captain of our own ship, to reject God's authority, to make all decisions for ourselves driven only by our desires and our drives.

We can't help ourselves. And as a result, we are separated from God. So what do we need? Not a little bit of fixing up. Not spiritual enrichment or empowerment.

We actually need a saviour. We need a saviour, not just a spiritual coach or like a spiritual handyman. We need a rescue. This is what Jesus came to do.

Save us from our sins, this heart problem that we have. Imagine going to the doctors with chicken pox and all she does is just put band-aids over all the spots.

[13:36] It's useless, isn't it? Jesus came to deal with the root problem. The root problem is sin. He came to save us from our sin.

And how does God save us? That's tied up in the second name given to Jesus in the passage. Do you notice that in the passage, Jesus is given two names? Jesus, which means God saves.

And the second one, Emmanuel. I'll read it to remind you. Verse 23. Behold, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

There's no record of anyone calling Jesus Emmanuel in the New Testament. I don't think there is. It's a title. It's this. If Jesus is what Christ will do, Emmanuel tells us how that's going to happen.

So God will save us, the name Jesus. How he will do it? By becoming one of us. That's how he's going to do it. That's the second name.

[14:38] God becomes this vulnerable human being. Fully God, fully human. But why? How does that help? Why does God become this kind of fleshy human?

So he can be hurt. So God can be hurt. So God can bleed. So God can die. Die for us. Die in our place.

See, God just didn't send a message from heaven telling us to pull ourselves together. Pull yourself together, guys. That's the God of moralism. God up there yelling down rules for us to earn our way into heaven.

See, the God of moralism wouldn't be bothered with Christmas. The God of moralism doesn't need Christmas. The God of moralism just keeps shouting down rules. Emmanuel comes down. Doesn't keep his distance. Emmanuel comes down. Emmanuel becomes one of us. Emmanuel comes down because we can't climb up. So we've talked about Jesus.

[15 : 45] God saves. We've talked about Emmanuel. How does that happen? He becomes one of us. Comes down and becomes one of us. Last thing I want to talk about for just one minute here is what's our response to all this?

Hope. That's a good response. Yes, we should have all the hope in the world. We should have all the hope in the world.

Because of this, we will be with God for eternity in paradise, completely healed. Not because of anything we have done, but because of something that Jesus has done.

And we can't mess that up. So hope and joy, yes, of course. But also, and this is what I want to finish on, we should be courageous people. So the passage gives us this great picture of who Jesus is and what he's come to do.

But how we respond, that's what we see in Joseph's life. I'll read you verse 24 here. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did, as the angel of the Lord commanded, he took his wife.

[16 : 49] But he knew her not until she had given birth to the son, and he called his name Jesus. He marries a heavily pregnant teenage girl, renounces his right to name the child.

His response was courageous obedience to the word of God. Everybody's thinking, man, this girl's been unfaithful. That's what everyone in town's thinking.

His reputation is hooped. But he was willing to walk into the messiness of that situation. And he was willing to take on the disdain of the world because God spoke.

And his response simply was obedience. Amen.