

Matthew 1:18-25 “What’s in a Name?”

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! It's a special nature, God's supernatural work in the world.

Perhaps just as remarkable as His special nature is the mission that this special baby is given for His life.

Notice as we read this time what He is born to do. Matthew chapter 1 at verse 18.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

[1:48] Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel. Which means, God with us. When Joseph woke 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. Thus far, God's holy word.

Let's ask for His help. Father, thank you for the reminder of this passage. Thank you for the reminder of who this child we celebrate is.

By your Spirit, would you speak your truth to us that our hearts would hear what they need this morning, would know Him, and find hope and life in Him.

For we ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. What's in a name? Shakespeare's Juliet famously asks that as she feels kept from the man she loves because of his family name.

[3:02] Right? It's the person, she says, not the name that really matters. But in the Bible, names are often really significant. Abraham gets a new name that means father of a multitude because of God's promises to him.

Naomi's name means pleasant. But she goes through really tough seasons where she feels she needs to change her name to bitter.

God's names. God's names often reveal aspects of his character. Like the God who sees. The God who provides.

The God who is strong. And then here, our special, supernaturally conceived child gets two names. Before he's even born. Before he's even born. And Matthew explains, these are coming from God. God, his father, has significance for both of them.

[4:05] So we want to look at this morning. Who is he? What do his names tell us? First, there's the name Emmanuel. First given by the prophet Isaiah.

But Matthew, you'll notice, goes out of his way to define for us what Emmanuel means. And so he highlights that this Jesus is the long-awaited promised one.

This is the arrival of God with us. Maybe you already knew that. Maybe you already filled in the blanks before I even told you.

You already sang Emmanuel this morning. I know. Not new information. But I want us to consider for a minute what it means about Jesus. First of all, don't skip over the fact that Matthew is telling us that this baby is God.

God. God. With us. This is a stupendous claim, right? But it's repeated all over the Bible in many different ways. Some people will tell you these days that this is just something that Jesus' followers made up.

[5:19] You know, they wrote in these claims of divinity on Jesus' lips as an adult. His receiving of worship. The accusations of blasphemy and all

of that.

It was just made up by his followers. I've got to tell you, that explanation is incredibly far-fetched. It requires a remarkable amount of faith to believe contrary to all evidence.

Something like that. See, first century Jews are among the least likely people in the history of the human race to have believed that a man could be God.

Nothing could be further from their imagination. They're not polytheistic like many of the peoples around them. Who would have believed that sometimes the gods showed up in human form.

They scoffed at that. They were passionately monotheistic. Believing in one God who can't be seen. Who is far above, distinct from his creation.

[6:20] They would not have believed that Jesus was God without extraordinary evidence of that very fact. On the other hand, they wouldn't have made it up when all that most of them got for sticking to that story was what?

A death sentence. I mean, you'd think if they have just made it up, someone would have given up the hoax to save his hide, right? But no, not a one.

Instead, those who lived with him, walked with him, ate with him for three years are absolutely convinced that he's God. Matthew says, God come to be with us.

That's who this is. Now maybe the Jews at this time didn't anticipate exactly how it would happen.

But this idea of God being present with his people has been his plan from the very beginning, hasn't it?

This is not new when we turn to Matthew. It's a plan, listen, it's an amazing plan. To remove loneliness forever. To end hopelessness once and for all.

[7:36] To cure insignificance in every single one of us. Because the creator, the ruler, the God of all is with us.

You're here, God. God. We talk about this a lot. This relationship with God, right? Remember scripture's grand narrative where God creates us to walk and talk with him.

That's why we exist. We're there in his good creation with him until we rebel against him. And the penalty of our sin is what? Separation from God.

So all along, we're longing to get back to what we were created for. Back to Eden. Back to God.

And more importantly, more hopefully, God is working through this whole story to be with us.

Just think about Moses early on. Leading God's people towards the promised land. And he moves only when God's presence moves.

[8:46] Because God, it is only your going with us that makes us special. Yahweh, you're the one that sets us apart. When they're fighting in the promised land under Joshua, it is the Lord with them that makes them strong and courageous.

It's God's presence in the ark that brings blessing. God lives and journeys with his people in the tabernacle and then eventually in the Jerusalem temple.

For his exiled people then far away from the temple. It is only his promise through the prophets, I will be with you, that keeps them from fear, from despair in that far away place.

That is part one of the story that God gives glimpses of this presence, this relationship. God being with them, being restored. But it's just glimpses, isn't it?

Then there's the first Christmas. The word who was God became flesh and made his dwelling for a while tabernacled among us.

[9:59] Jesus in the flesh as God with us in a brand new way. In a way that he takes on our sorrows and our infirmities.

That he understands our struggles. That he actually feels our pains. Emmanuel. In a brand new way, Emmanuel. And then, that God with us idea is not only God's plan from the beginning, but also, it's where it's all headed.

It's his goal at the end. It's what Jesus prays for, that we will be with him where he is with his father. It's what he promises the thief on the cross, right?

Today you will be with me in paradise. It's the hope for all of us as we consider the brevity of life here and the eternal future that we have.

The promise, so we will be always, what? With the Lord. That's the promise of which the birth of Emmanuel into our world is the dawn of the fulfillment.

[11:14] It's started. It's only getting more brilliant, right? As this child grows up and lives and dies and rises. God with us. Now that's big picture.

That's the big story. I want us to think more personally about Emmanuel. God with us. How does that really transform every situation you face?

What difference does that make in your life if God is with you? The great pastor and hymn writer John Wesley was on his deathbed when he said, the best of all is God is with us.

Clarity. When you're dying, isn't it? I was with dozens of people at the hospital this week as a friend of ours died.

And we looked to God with us for comfort even in the valley of the shadow of death. Psalm 23.

[12:20] With us. Y'all, there's no other comfort. If he's not, then this is the end. It's over. But it's not just when we die that we need this.

There are many of us who are certain that God has abandoned us and left us alone. That he's not with us. And for those of us who struggle, he assures us he will never leave us nor forsake us.

When we try to run away from him. Any of you tried that for a season? Amen. Just as the mother of the runaway bunny, God assures us.

Psalm 139. Everywhere we are, he leads us and he holds us. Can you remember feeling afraid? Maybe you don't have to think back very far. Fearful for yourself. Fearful for your kids. Fearful about our world.

[13:28] What do we do when we're afraid? What does God's word say over and over? God knows there are situations that cause fear to rise in us. And so he repeatedly over and over says, Do not fear.

Not because it won't hurt. Not because it's all going to work out just the way you hope. No. What does he say? Over and over. Because I am with you.

When we're gathered as his people, even two or three of us, he is with us to confirm the unity of our purpose.

Matthew 18. When we sing to him, we rejoice together in that truth that he is with us. For instance, Psalm 46, a very present help in trouble.

We delight. God with us. When we're sent out. When we're sent out by Jesus on mission to the world that may seem overwhelming, may seem like an undesirable mission.

[14:30] He promises what? To be with us always. If God himself is actually with us, then we can't be lonely, alone anymore.

Then your day at home, your day at work, your day at the retirement community, or at the nursing home, or the hospital, or the hospice room is never insignificant.

And no matter how bad things are, they are never truly hopeless. The best of all, God is with us.

It kicks out the loneliness and the insignificance and the fear. He's with us. At least that's what we say this time of year, right?

Emmanuel, and what do you do? Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel. Rejoice! It's good news, isn't it? Is it?

[15:41] Sometimes when I'm leaving the house, I will say, hey, y'all, I'll be back in just a few minutes. Or, I'll be home for dinner tonight. I'll be with you tonight.

I'll say, and my witty wife is known to respond with a twinkle in her eye. Is that a threat or a promise?

Is that a threat or a promise? That's a good point, isn't it? Because my, my, yes it is. It's a rhetorical question.

My being with you could be a threat or a promise. It all depends on our relationship, doesn't it?

Right?

Whether I'm for you or against you, it's going to make a huge difference. In the movie Braveheart, there's a great scene that is not historically accurate, shockingly.

[16:54] But it portrays this reality really wonderfully. The Scottish rebels are lined up for battle against the English king and his soldiers.

They're already outnumbered. In addition to all the English troops, all of a sudden, here come the Irish. Weapons drawn, threatening, racing toward the Scottish line, yelling.

Just watch. Irish. Irish.

Irish. The Irish are coming. Is it a threat or a promise? It turned out for the Scots to be a promise. They'll fight for us, not against us, even though it looked like it. See, back in Isaiah's day, when this prophecy about Emmanuel is first given to God's people, it started as a threat.

[18:15] Let me just explain briefly. I won't get too confused with a bunch of crazy kings you don't know about. But Ahaz was the king of Judah, the leader of God's people.

But he had no regard for God. There were two nearby kings, Pekah of Israel, Rezan of Aram, and they allied against Judah to attack Ahaz.

So Yahweh, through his prophet Isaiah, came to King Ahaz and said, trust me. It will be okay. I will be with you.

Ahaz said, I'm not so sure. So Isaiah said, listen, it's true. God will give you a sign so that you'll know that.

Ahaz said, no thanks. I'm actually, I'm going to take what I can see. I'm going to get help from the current superpower, Assyria.

[19:17] They will protect me against Israel and Aram. I can see them. That's what I'll trust. And so that's when God ends up saying, I'll give you a sign of my presence anyway.

Emmanuel, a child. But what's going to happen, Ahaz, is that you're going to be delivered from Israel and Aram as I promised.

But because you won't trust me, I will be with you for judgment. My presence with you is a threat. And sure enough, as you read through chapter 8, that's what happens.

Assyria is not only going to protect them from those other two kings, but then they're going to swarm through Judah, take charge. God's people plunged into thick darkness.

And it's only when you reach chapter 9, and another child promised to be born, a son given, that Emmanuel will actually then lead to rescue of God's people through the wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace that we read about earlier.

[20:33] God with us can bring great fear, can't it? Just ask the Israelites who knew God's presence as a cloud or fire, who were told they couldn't see God or be in his holy presence, or they would certainly die.

Who learned when the high priest went into God's presence once a year, they would tie a rope around his ankle. Even though we've seen all of these wonderful truths, and they are about Emmanuel, God with us.

Whether God's presence with you is a threat or a promise, all depends on your relationship. So here's where I think we live.

Some of us rest peacefully, when we hear that, in the loving arms with God, with rarely a struggle at all. We knew all along the Irish were on our side.

There were no doubts at all. I always am comfortable with God. Some, some of us. Others of us, we know that we're at war with God.

[21:55] Attacking his ways, actively preferring to find life in our own paths. We are quite certain that the Irish are against us.

And it's scary. Sometimes we're afraid. But I think actually most of us are somewhere in the middle. Most of us, most days, live just kind of at a distance, a bit uncertain, needing reassurance of God's acceptance, of God's delight, of God's nearness to me and my life.

Kind of wondering how we would get something like that. Kind of hoping that we're standing close to someone who's worse than we are so that we'll look pretty good in comparison.

Maybe God will pass me over. I really don't need to get too close to God, most of us feel. I mean, if he got close, he might see what I did or hear what I said or read into my mind.

[23:00] I just need to, you know, get by. Get on with my life. I'm going to keep my weapons drawn but my head down and then hope that the Irish go after someone else.

That God stays at a safe distance, maybe. If you feel that way today, if you recognize relating to God like that or if you've ever felt like that, welcome to the club.

We struggle with that. Emmanuel could go either way, threat or promise. And so we need to hear the second name. Verse 21.

You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. Jesus.

The Hebrew word Yeshua. Joshua. But this time, not just another Joshua. There were many. Another reminder that Yahweh saves.

[24:09] No, no, this time the Redeemer who actually saves his people from their sins. From their sins.

See, sin alerts us to our problem, doesn't it? For those of us wondering whether God is for us or against us, we should recall that sin was the very thing that first separated us from God.

It is our problem. God cannot countenance sin in his holy presence. We are in big trouble. God with us rightly sounds like a threat.

Except, except, except that Jesus comes to save his people from their sins.

Jesus comes to save us from our sins. Notice that we don't avoid all the outgrowths of sin, the death and brokenness of the world that we experience. I mean, God's people then likely thought that what they really needed to be saved from was Rome.

[25:23] Right? From physical struggles, from oppression. And Jesus certainly does some of that. But the primary thing that Jesus comes to do is to attack the root problem.

Where all that comes from. The sin that separates us from God. If he can kill the root once and for all, then death will lose its sting.

Curse will be replaced in time by blessing. Blessing and tears will one day be wiped away. We'll be with God again. That's big picture.

Let's make sure we make this personal as we did with Emmanuel. Sin is certainly the powers arrayed against us and crouching at our door.

The broken systems of the world that lead us away from God. It's not less than that. But sin is also your personal failures to spend time with God.

[26:27] Our coveting the possessions or positions or relationships that others have. It's our neglecting to serve our neighbors because we're thinking only of ourselves.

It's our lustful thoughts, our lost tempers, our loose tongues. It is any time for the sake of our own comfort, we disobey God's commandment.

It is a personal disaster for every one of us because it moves our hearts away from the God of perfect holiness. It separates us from the one that we were made to be with and there's nothing we can do about it.

Until Jesus. What's in a name? Friends, in the name Jesus, there is an eternity.

An endless supply of comfort and joy in the name Jesus. John 3.16, you've heard it before but just hear it again.

[27:44] God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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. He comes to save, doesn't he? From the very beginning.

Not coming as a threat but as a promise. He comes to save him. His people. Not just saving generally or hypothetically throwing some saving around.

But saving the ones he has called by name because their names are written on the palms of his hands. Hands that we will be held in securely.

Because the sin that separates us from him is paid for once for all on the cross of Jesus Christ. Where the sin bearing one is forsaken by his father.

[28:52] So that we who deserve to be forsaken apart from God. Separated forever. Never will be separated from him. Amen. Jesus. Jesus.

Jesus. Jesus. The one that I need. Because Christ Jesus came into the world. Why? To save sinners of whom I am the foremost.

That's why Christmas. That's why you can rejoice at Christmas. So that Christmas happened. So that God could be with us. And amazingly, people like us could still be safe.

Y'all, the longer I live, the more aches I feel, the more griefs I experience, the more disappointment I endure, the more problems I can't solve, the more amazed I am that God's solution for our problem involves him personally coming into this world himself.

This painful, broken, difficult world. He enters in, doesn't he? He must really want to be with us.

[30:22] Otherwise, he'd come up with another way. It's hard to believe, isn't it? But it's true. He enters in and does so as what? As a baby.

Could he be any clearer that he comes not as a threat, but as a promise? Not to destroy, but to deliver.

Not against us, but for us. Oh, how he longs to be with us. Let that reality of Christmas sink into your heart for just a minute.

The best of all is God is with us. It really is a promise. It really is true.

God so wanted to be with you. God so wanted to be with you, not just once, but always, that he crossed heaven and earth, that he fought your greatest enemies, that he removed every obstacle keeping you from him.

[31:28] May we not respond to that with a halfway, half-hearted reply to him. May we not just consider him every so often and show up once in a while when it's convenient.

May we daily make time to be with him. Friends, he made time to be with you. May we learn how to live in step with his spirit while we live every day with the things he puts before us, whatever they are.

See, the reality that Jesus has saved you from your sins at your very worst and at your least deserving has got to mean something practically.

It means that there is no time that you can't trust him, right? It's never going to come. You're not going to be bad enough. You're not going to be undeserving enough that you can't come to him and trust him.

You know what else? There is nobody that you can't bring to him. He loves to be with sinners. He knows how to handle sin.

[32:45] There's no situation that you can't turn to him in. No matter how big a mess you've made of it, no matter how unfair they have been to you, no matter how far away God feels, just you remember Christmas.

You can remember that. Christmas, Emmanuel, God with us, came all the way in order to be Jesus to save us from our sins.

If you ever start wondering whether Emmanuel, God with us, might be a problem for you, might be a threat to you, just remember Jesus and God's delighted embrace of you when you deserve to be chased away.

You know what happened when God got really close to you? When he saw what you did?

When he heard what you said? When he read the thoughts of your mind? Can you imagine? It can be fearful. You know what actually happened?

[33:49] He gave his son for you, who gave his life for you, which gave sin the boot in your life, removed far away as far as the east is from the west, so that he could stay close to you, where sin wouldn't be anymore, so that he could draw even closer and have you with him forever.

Don't you want to be with someone like that? With someone who treats you like that, who loves you like that at your very worst? You can.

You can come actually this morning to this table where God is with us in order to save us. Both of those things. Listen, listen, remember, look at them right here.

It is the body and blood of Jesus. He's really with us by his spirit. But it's his body broken.

And it is his blood shed, not yours, because he came to save us from our sins. It's what he was explaining to his disciples that night he was betrayed.

[35:07] When he took bread, he broke it, and he gave it to them. As I'm ministering in his name, give this bread to you. He said, take and eat. This is my body given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. And then after the supper, he took the cup and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Drink from it, all of you. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. You proclaim that he came once for you.

And he's coming again to be with me forever. If that is what you proclaim. That God is with you. And that's not a promise. That's not a threat.

