

Receiving Jesus

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[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. Welcome to church this morning. My name is Steve. I've not met you before. Lead pastor here at St. Paul's. I'd be grateful if you had your Bibles open at that point at Matthew 1.

As we enter into this Christmas season, a season of presents and joy and Christmas pageants. In fact, I read the story this past week of a boy who was desperate to play Joseph in the Sunday school pageant for his church.

And he sort of planned for it. I think he'd been working on it for a little bit and he figured he was the prime candidate to be Joseph. But instead, the head of the Sunday school cast him as the landlord of the inn in Bethlehem, you know, with one line. That's it.

And so this, you know, poor boy was just so, so disappointed. He protested, you know, the fact that he had this role and he should in fact be Joseph. But to no avail, he was stuck being the landlord of the inn. And all, he was really disappointed, but he really didn't let it show too much due to all the rehearsals.

So, you know, when it came time for his little bit, he would say his famous line, you know, with a bunch of enthusiasm. No, there is no room in the inn for him.

[1:35] However, on the day of the Christmas pageant, he got his revenge. So, packed house. And when it got to his moment in the spotlight, Mary and Joseph, you know, knocked on the door, asked if there was any room.

And the boy smiled and said, yes, we have lots of room in the inn tonight. And apparently, it was just pause.

You know, everyone was just silent. The Sunday school, you know, director was all like, big gasp in the room. Everyone was shocked. And then awkward silence until all of a sudden the audience erupted.

We laughed because Mary and Joseph, look around, what do we do now? Anyway, I suppose if you want to, if you're a male and you want to party at a Christmas pageant, you know, Joseph is the guy who, on one level, has more of a spotlight on him than anyone else.

Even though, on the most part, he's sort of sitting there in the background. He doesn't say too many things at all. Although, he is at the centre of the action.

[2:49] What is a bit unusual, though, is that in the biblical text, we see a slightly different picture. And it is a little bit odd, if you like, that in a patriarchal society like first century Palestine, Joseph, on the most part, plays a passive role in all the biblical narratives and the Christmas narrative in particular.

In fact, once we are clear of the Christmas scenes, Joseph is hardly mentioned at all in the New Testament.

And yet, an angel did come to Joseph and told Joseph something that, in fact, only Joseph was told this.

Only Joseph. And that is because Joseph, as the male, had naming rights to the child. And the angel said, verse 23, the child is to be called Emmanuel, God with us.

And so, here's what we learn from the name Emmanuel. Well, three things, it's on the St. Paul's app, which you can download, if you haven't got it.

[4:15] But on the St. Paul's app, Jesus is God, Jesus is human, and Jesus is with us. And that's our trajectory today. So, first thing we learn is that Jesus is God.

In verse 20, the angel tells Joseph that the human life growing inside of Mary has come not from any human being, but from God, from the Heavenly Father.

And Joseph will be Jesus' father, if you like, in a secondary sense. That is, God is the real father of this child.

However, the most direct statement of Jesus' identity comes in that verse 23. And in that, Matthew is quoting, himself a Jew, is quoting from Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14.

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us. Now, for centuries leading up to this moment, ever since Isaiah wrote those words, that Jewish scholars had known about it, but they had never thought to take those words literally.

[5:30] And so, what is promised here in Matthew 1, what is declared here, is greater than anyone would imagine, even for Jewish scholars.

Jesus Christ, this baby in this manger, is God with us. And that statement is absolutely startling for the Jewish worldview.

In fact, for any worldview. Eastern religions believed God was an impersonal, infinite force, which permeated all things in the created order.

It wasn't unusual for Eastern religions, and still isn't today, to regard some human beings as being particularly great manifestations of the divine, such as Buddha, a manifestation of the divine.

Western religions, on the other hand, and believes that gods could disguise themselves as human beings for their own purposes.

[6:56] And so, they believed in a personal God on one level. And therefore, a personal God in the Western religion could appear to a degree, in some form, momentarily, amongst human life.

And so, there is references throughout Greek religions in the past, the Greek history, that this particular person was a manifestation, or potentially, it was Zeus amongst us for just this moment. Jews, on the other hand, were neither Eastern or Western, but they believed that God was both personal and infinite.

God was not a being within the universe, but was that God was outside of the universe and the source of the universe. And so, the Hebrew worldview was, in fact, against the idea that a human being, in any way, could be God.

In fact, Jews would not even use the name of God. They still don't to this day. Won't even spell it. And yet, Jesus Christ, by a Jew, by his life, by his claims, by his resurrection, managed to convince his closest Jewish followers that he was much more than a prophet telling them about God, how to find God, but that he was, in fact, God himself, come to find us.

[8:53] He blew the categories of Eastern, Western, and Jewish worldview. And, in fact, all of his main Jewish followers declared it in his lifetime.

And, of course, the opinions of these authors would not mean a whole lot at all if Jesus hadn't declared himself his divine identity all through the biographical accounts, which is what sets Jesus apart from the likes of Buddha.

Buddha never declared that he himself, even though characteristics of the divine never declared himself to be divine, whereas Jesus did. And what we have with Jesus is his constantly forgiving sin, which the Jews knew that only God could do, and he also claims, I'm going to come back and I'm going to judge the earth, and they also knew that only God could do that.

And so, at many times and in various ways, Jesus Christ, a Jewish man, declared to his Jewish audience, I am God.

And thousands, thousands believed him and came to worship him as God. Acts chapter 2, verse 41.

[10:20] And so, every Christmas, people all over the world give lip service to that reality without actually thinking through what the implications are for it.

What does it mean? We've just sung it just then. What does it mean? If Jesus really is God, what does it actually mean for us practically?

So, first, it's an intellectual turning point. Now, some have argued that the supreme miracle of Christianity is not the resurrection of Jesus, but the incarnation of Jesus, the coming of God into his world as a human being.

So, the late theologian J.I. Packer puts it like this, God became man, the divine son became a Jew, the almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than just lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this. The only way that we can know God is as if God comes and writes himself into the story of history so that the rest of us, the characters of history, could know the author of the story.

[12:05] The claim of Christmas, the claim of Christianity, is that God is not the author of history, but he's also written himself into the storyline of history so that we might know the unknowable.

And so, the claim that Jesus is God is an intellectual turning point, but it also causes a personal crisis. You see, whenever you see Jesus acting in the Gospels, what he does is he evokes extreme responses from people.

People are so furious with him at points that they want to throw him off a cliff. They plot to kill him.

Others are so terrified by his presence, they tell him to depart, get away from me.

Others fall down before him and worship him as God. What you have here with Jesus is extreme reactions recorded. And those extreme reactions are not because of the good things he does.

Like telling people to love their neighbour as you might love yourself. Those extreme reactions are always because of who he claims to be.

[13:38] He claims to be the God who created all things, the source of all life, the one who defines all reality. And if he is, then what that means is it's all about him.

And it means that our lives, as he is our creator, are defined by him and our life must be centred on him. However, if Jesus is not who he says he is, if he's not God, then he's not someone to be admired at all in any way.

He is someone to be hated. He is someone to run away from, to escape, because he is the greatest fraud in history and he is extremely dangerous for your life.

What we see in the Gospels on the claim of who Jesus is is not this passive middle area where we can just admire the guy. That category does not exist.

He is either God or he isn't. He's either crazy and dangerous or he is infinitely wonderful to be worshipped. That's the only two responses. And it's a personal crisis for us all.

[15:14] But, thirdly, the claim that Jesus is God gives us the greatest possible hope. You see, the one who creates, the one who determines, the one who defines all reality says that our world is not all that there is.

That there are a life and there is love after death and that evil and suffering will one day end.

And that is the hope that we need in 2025. Hope in a world with all its unending problems and hope for you and me with all our unending failings.

That's what makes Christianity so unique and it's what makes the biblical accounts of Jesus and what he says so crucial that we do not redefine it.

That we make God something different in our minds and in our hearts. You see, a God who was, a God who's just perfect, a God who's just all about justice, a God who's gonna smite evil and make everything right that's wrong.

[16:34] You know, the God who is a hard taskmaster would not have come down to us this God would not have arrived.

He would have simply demanded that we pull ourselves together, do a bunch of moral good, obey a bunch of laws and earn the right to be loved by him.

On the other hand, a God that was an all accepting, God of all accepting love would not have come down to us either.

Would never have arrived. You know, the God of the modern Western imagination would have just, there's no point of him coming into his world because he's just gonna overlook every sin and every wrong and every evil and just embrace us for who we are and just let us do our thing.

Neither of those gods would have bothered with Christmas. The biblical God, however, is infinitely good and perfect and so our sin could not just be shrugged off as if it doesn't matter but he's also infinitely loving and he knows that we could never ever climb up to him.

[18:11] We could never be good enough to get to him and so he had to come to us. God had to come down and do what we cannot do and so Christmas is

full of hope for us.

The second thing we see here that Jesus is human. This interaction between Joseph and the angel reveals the humanity of Jesus and what difference does that make in the way that we live?

Let me just quote Packer again on this one. For the Son of God to empty himself and become poor meant a laying aside of glory, a voluntary restraint of power, an acceptance of hardship, isolation, ill treatment, malice and misunderstanding.

Finally, a death that involves such agony, spiritual even more than physical that his mind nearly broke under the prospect of it.

It meant love to the utmost for unlovely people. And so, the Christmas spirit does not shine out in the Christian snob.

[19:32] For the Christmas spirit is a spirit of those who like their master live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor, spending and being spent to enrich their fellow humans giving time, trouble, care and concern to do good to others and not just their own friends in whatever way there seems need.

You see, the fact that God became human and emptied himself of his glory means that we should not want to hang out just with people who are going to enrich us and advance us in some way.

People who are just going to open the doors for us. We need to be willing to go to the people without the power, without the beauty, without the money all because God became one of us.

And the fact that he became one of us human it means that there's infinite comfort in our suffering right now.

Hebrews chapter 2 verse 17 says that Jesus made like us fully human in every way and the very next verse tells us what that means for us because he himself suffered when he was tried and tested he is able to help those who are being tried and tested.

[21:16] You see when something bad happens and real suffering comes to us one of the consequences of suffering in our world is this a deep sense of loneliness that comes with it.

You know as if I'm walking this myself no one's been on this journey the way that I've been on this journey and what happens in the midst of suffering is that people around us express some level of sympathy but deep down it doesn't seem to help a lot.

it's great to know that people are there and they're acknowledging your pain but it doesn't seem to help a lot but then we meet someone who's been through a similar thing that we've been through and we pour our heart out to that person and they listen they listen there's a connection and we start to listen to their opinions because they've been through the same thing it's like you journey with them in that moment the coming of God into this world ultimately means that he suffered and that he in fact triumphed through suffering and therefore he has infinite power to comfort the sufferer this God is unlike the

God of any other faith in this world so have you been betrayed do you feel abandoned and lonely have you been destitute facing death even so has he he's been through it all Jesus has been all the places that you are right now including mental health his mind nearly broke in the garden of Gethsemane he's been in the darkness that you are now and much more he has suffered and he has the power to comfort he has the power to strengthen and he has the power to bring you through it because thirdly he's with us not just momentarily but he is with us you see

God's plans were infinitely greater than a short visit gifting us with a good example of how to live life and a bunch of helpful teaching his plan in becoming human was to always be human and to always be with us Jesus chose a 12 apostles disciples initially and appointed them so that they would be with him chosen to be in his presence conversing with him learning from him having his comfort moment by moment you see in Jesus the unapproachable God becomes a human being who can be known and loved and frankly that reality does not stun us as much as it should moment by moment you see in the

[25:20] Old Testament God appears to Abraham as a smoking furnace to Israel his people as a pillar of fire to Job as a hurricane and when Moses asked to see the face of God he was told if I showed myself to you it would kill you so great and high and holy is and unproachable is God and yet the message of Christmas means that through Jesus you can see God you can meet God you can know him personally without any terror at all

when God showed up in Jesus Christ he was a baby this time he came not to bring judgment but in fact to bear judgment to pay the penalty for our sin to take away the barrier between humanity and

God so that when humanity faced God if that barrier stayed we would be obliterated Jesus is God with us and so I ask you are you really with him do you know him or just about him!

God there is one crucial trait necessary for having a personal relationship with Jesus one crucial trait and in actual fact it's probably the trait that is most overlooked an intimate relationship with Jesus always requires courage courage we cannot know Jesus personally as I've just outlined it here unless we have the courage to admit that we are sinners morally flawed admit that we have chosen to live life rejecting our creator God and live life our way you see

Jesus entire mission is summed up there in verse 21 he's Emmanuel God with us why he will save his people from their sins you see first and foremost that's what he came for he took on human flesh to forgive us and so it's courage it takes a lot of courage to admit I am a moral failure I don't love God with all my heart my soul and my strength and my mind I don't love my neighbor as myself and therefore I am guilty and I need forgiveness and pardon before anything else that's what I need from God God it takes an enormous amount of courage to admit those things it means throwing out the old self image that you've made for yourself and getting a new one through Jesus and that admission that I am morally flawed and I need

Jesus as my savior is the very foundation for all the other things that this God wants to bring into your life all the comfort all the hope all the joyful humility and everything else the only way that we would have such courage the only way we would get the strength to be courageous and admit that is by looking to Jesus himself he's the only source of that courage he's not just the source of our comfort and our salvation and our hope but he is the source of the courage you see if it takes courage to be with him consider consider that it took infinitely more courage for him to be with us infinitely more courage apart from Christianity no other religion says that one of the attributes of the divine is courage he became mortal he became vulnerable so that he could suffer be betrayed and killed he faced our darkness so that we can have the light of life and that means that because he's done that for us it enables us to face any darkness ourselves and still have the light of hope and he did it all willingly for us it's there actually in the

[30:31] Christmas carol we haven't sung it well I'm sure we're going to sing in the next few weeks but the Christmas carol hark the herald angels sing there's a line in that carol which where we sing mild he lays his glory by what that means is he voluntarily did it he willingly did it he lovingly did it no one forced him to lay his glory aside to come into this world and love us he faced unimaginable pain and death and darkness out of love for humanity and so why did Jesus have the courage to do what he did for us love how do we get the courage to admit that we're sinners and we need his forgiveness and a relationship with him exactly the same way by looking to him and seeing all that he has done for us that consistently looking at him and what it cost him will draw out love for him and then we will have the courage to put him into the centre of our lives and then he will be with you and you with him that's

Christmas and so two really quick implications for us this morning if you're someone here and you don't know Jesus I want to call you to be courageous this morning he has come to you come to him this morning admit that you're a moral failure come to him and find in him mercy and grace and love and forgiveness secondly if you're someone who does know Jesus you've already come to him I want to call you to have courage this Christmas I want you to have courage to pray for someone that they might come to Jesus this Christmas and courage to follow through with that personally and invite them to church and so we've got the Christmas invites out there on the

Christmas station near the kitchen and can also there's a little basket there these are feet by the way it's a bit hard to cut the toes out so what I'd encourage you to do is to have courage and to go there get one of these and put the name of the person just their first name or a you know whatever a friend of mine and put their name and just stick it on the wall this is the person that I'm praying for for Christmas this is the person I'm going to invite this Christmas so do that after the service let's pray invite the band up gracious loving heavenly father we thank you for sending your one and only son the Lord Jesus Christ we thank you for his love his mercy his forgiveness we thank you that

you're a

God not just of justice but a God of deep mercy and forgiveness and so if there are any here this morning who are wavering with that courage to come to you Holy Spirit send the light of life into their hearts right now and bring them to you and for those of us who do know you help us to courageously take our next step leading into your love this Christmas and we ask it for your sake
Amen