

The Man Who Nailed His Line

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 December 2025

Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0 : 00] Well, thank you so much, Anna. And morning people, morning people, morning folks. Great to see you. If I haven't met you before, my name is Graeme and I'm the pastor here of the church. And it's always a delight on this Sunday in particular to welcome people to our church gatherings.

So a special welcome this morning if this is your first Sunday with us. Talking of nativities, here is one of my favourite bloopers from a school nativity play.

So picture the scene. Mary and Joseph have made it to Bethlehem. Baby Jesus has been born and he's lying in the manger. Silent night has been sung.

The shepherds have come and gone and it's the wise men and their turn to shine. Wise man number one pipes up. Baby Jesus, I bring you some gold. Nailed it.

Wise man number two pipes up. Baby Jesus, I bring you some myrrh. Nailed it. And in all, attention turns to wise man number three who cannot remember his line.

[1 : 03] But not being one to let the side down, he thinks I'll have a pop at this. And so he pipes up and says, Baby Jesus, I think Frank sent this. And if you asked me, I think he knew exactly what he was doing.

But here's what I want to do. I want to take us from a boy in a Christmas nativity who fluffed his line to a man in the original Christmas drama who absolutely nailed his line.

Come with me to this passage and see what's going on. Here is the man who I think is often the unsung hero of the Christmas story. And he's the man who's got so much, I think, to teach us about what it is to live as a Christian and live this life of faith.

And it's worth emphasizing before we get into this, that these are not events that happened in a galaxy far, far away. This is not the land of make-believe.

The setting for the birth of the narrative of Jesus is placed squarely in the context of secular human history. Do you see it? It's full of real people.

[2 : 14] It's full of real events. It's full of real places. And as we saw last week, if you remember Matthew, the first part of Matthew chapter 1, this is a real family tree. Full of all sorts of mess and complications and ordinariness.

Yes. You see, as Matthew tells us this Christmas story, he focuses in on this legal descendant of David who's called Joseph. Do you see that?

Got it at the end of verse 16. This young village carpenter who is pledged to be married to this girl called Mary.

And what we need to appreciate is that to be engaged or to be pledged to be married is more in this day than what we would understand to be engaged. In this culture, this means more like what we'd understand to mean it's already a done deal.

Here are Mary and Joseph. And what's remarkable about these two, see if you see it here. What's remarkable about these two is just how unremarkable they are. Mary's not climbing the corporate ladder.

[3 : 27] Joseph's not on course to complete his 15th Iron Man. Simon Cowell would not declare about these two. These two have got the X factor. Who are they? They are just two ordinary people.

But they're two ordinary people who I take it are trusting the promises of an extraordinary God. So we pick up Joseph's story at verse 18.

And here is the scene in front of him. Really simply, Mary's pregnant and Joseph knows that he's not the father. That's the scene. Sounds like something from Jeremy Kyle, doesn't it?

And sometimes we get so used to the story that we can become numb to the pain that's wrapped up in that discovery. This is absolutely crushing news for Joseph.

And the obvious path ahead of him, if you look at it there, verse 19. Because he's a faithful to the law kind of guy, the obvious path, I think you could probably say the expected path, is for him to call the marriage off.

[4 : 37] And so what has he done? Do you see he's decided, if you look at it there, that he's going to call it off behind the scenes. And then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, verse 20, have a look.

There's a choice before him. So this angel appears and this angel has got a message for Joseph.

Again, do you see it in the text? Verse 20 to 23, here's the message.

It's really simply two instructions followed by two names. Do you see it? Have a look at it. The two instructions. Firstly, Joseph, you need to be the husband that Mary needs you to be to her.

And second, Joseph, you need to be the father that this boy needs you to be to him. That's the two instructions. And here's the two names.

Again, do you see it in the text? Firstly, verse 21, his name is Jesus. Why call him that? Why not call him Joseph like his dad?

[5 : 40] Well, the angel tells us, do you see it again? Because that name means something. Now, boys and girls, if you were sitting there and you're not, I would have asked you, do you know what your name means?

Rhetorical question. Folks, do you know what your name means? Do you know what my name means? I'm always thankful for my mum and dad, who will likely be watching on the live stream for this. My name means gravel. Which might explain why in 2023 there were only 23 babies named Graham born in the UK.

And we're hanging on in there, just about. But here's the question. Why call him Jesus? Do you see it? Why call him Jesus? Because he will save his people from their sins.

Do you see it? And isn't that interesting? That before this baby is even born, God wants us to know about his death.

Isn't that interesting? Before he's even born, God wants us to know about his death. And it tells you everything you need to know about this child. That the life he's come to bring is all wrapped up in the death that he will die.

[6 : 49] Here's the second name, verse 23. He is Emmanuel. That just means God with us.

So these two names, Jesus, God with us, converging in this baby in the womb. And Joseph's told, you see, verse 20, that the life in Mary's womb is going to be God's doing, not man's.

Now here at this point is where we need to appreciate what's going on. And we need to not commit what C.S. Lewis famously called chronological snobbery.

Now Joseph might be from a backwater place. He might be from a different time. But make no mistake, this dude isn't gullible. And you see it in his reaction.

Do you see it? He didn't skip the birds and the bees at school. Well, he knows there's only one way for a woman to get pregnant and it ain't happened. He's all set to end it with Mary when he finds out.

[7 : 51] All of that shows us that this guy isn't gullible. And yet he's faced with this bit of news. What does the angel say? That she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

And what we've arrived at here, the station that we've arrived at here, is the virgin birth. And Matthew goes to lengths in this passage from different angles to make sure that we see that point. The virgin birth. And listen, maybe at that point you're here and I've totally lost you. I mean, that claim is up there with Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and the guy in the red suit and sleigh who's popular at this time of year.

Do you seriously expect us to believe in the year 2025? In something like a virgin birth. It's just an absurd suggestion.

Now let me just say, whoever you are here today, it is right that we think long and hard about the plausibility of the Bible. This stands up to scrutiny. And if you're here today and you're asking that question, it's a wonderful question to ask.

[8 : 59] Can we trust this? But let me put it to you that if there is an all-powerful God who created the world out of nothing, then this really isn't outside the realm of possibility for him.

Ah, you say, that's exactly. I don't believe there's a God. I don't believe in any of this miraculous stuff. Again, let me just lovingly suggest to you that whoever you are here today, you probably believe in more miraculous stuff than you think you do.

For instance, take the creation of the world. Here's Stephen Hawking. Try this one on for science. He said this, because there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself. Out of nothing.

And listen, while there's elements of truth in there, it still doesn't explain why there's something rather than nothing. I remember sitting in the biology class at school, listening to the teacher explain to us the how, and finding her reasoning intellectually unsatisfying.

Can I suggest that there's truth in the slightly mischievous words of Glenn Scrivener, who said this, if this is where you're at? He said, Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus.

[10:19] Atheists believe in the virgin birth of the universe. Choose your miracle. Choose your miracle. Choose your miracle. One worth thinking on, isn't it? Choose your miracle. But here's the thing.

That aside, that the virgin birth happened is one thing. Why it happened is quite another. And probably the thing that Matthew wants to emphasize as we're reading his gospel.

Why did it have to happen like this? And the answer is that the solution to mankind's problem, our problem, my problem, the answer to that problem is not going to come from the human gene pool. And history is a long testimony to that, isn't it? Here's late British historian Eric Hobsbawne. I think I've said that right. He referred to the 20th century as the most murderous in recorded history. But the answer is not going to come from us. God needs to step in here. Like he promised he would, the saviour that we need needs to come from the outside in.

[11:29] So he's not to be stained with our sin and all of our problems and all of our mess. He needs to come from the outside in. And at the same time, he needs to come from the inside out as it were.

He needs to be one of us to stand in our place and yet not tainted with our sin. And so the virgin birth, far from being a take it or leave it piece of the Christian jigsaw, is actually one of the key building blocks of the Christian faith.

It's like a game of Jenga if you're playing that over Christmas time. I would, but I've long given up trying to tidy up those bricks with kids. It's like a game of Jenga on Boxing Day.

You pull out this brick, you pull out the virgin birth and the whole thing comes crashing down. Here is Jesus, fully God and fully man. God promised that he would come mightily to save his people. And God promised that he himself would come gloriously to dwell with his people. And both of those truths so wonderfully converge in the baby in Mary's womb.

[12:36] And friends, it's all wrapped up in that word fulfilled. Do you see it there? Do you see it in the text? It's all wrapped up in that word fulfilled. This is what Matthew sees happening in this moment.

Matthew, this boy who would have been brought up, a Jew, made some bad calls in his life, ended up being a tax collector, but decided to follow Jesus, gets to know Jesus, looks back on his life and sees that God was faithful to fulfill his promise.

It means God's got a plan. God's got a plan. That's what that word fulfill means. A plan hatched in eternity past.

A plan playing out through the pages of history. And a plan one day that will return, as we'll see in a minute, with Jesus returning to make all things new. And here's how this impacted me this week.

My life, friends, feels very ordinary.

Is yours? Doing the dishes, again, sweeping the floor. Again, doing the school run. Again, taking out the trash. Again, turning on the TV.

[13:42] Again, making sandwiches. Again, does your life feel like that? Ordinary? Ordinary? And the thing is that Mary and Joseph find meaning in their ordinary lives when they get swept up in the story and plan of an extraordinary God.

And that's the comfort for us in this passage. If your life feels ordinary, it's chaotic, look to the God who knows the end from the beginning. And it's all wrapped up in that word fulfilled.

Do you see it? And Matthew's going to use it again and again and again in this gospel. Fulfilled.

Right here, it's unfolding right before Mary in Joseph's lives.

Truly, Bethlehem, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. But let's come back to Joseph. Let's try and get back to him a minute. Zoom out. See the big story?

God's plan? Zoom in on this man here. Joseph. And here's where we need to think back to the school nativity at the start and the boy who fluffed his line.

[14:47] You back there? With me? Back there? Well, here's Joe's, if I can call him that. Here's his one line in the original Christmas drama. Do you see it at the end of verse 25?

Blink and you might miss it, but do you see his one line that he's going to deliver? He's got one line in this. Do you see it? His name is Jesus.

That's his one line. And remember, he's still in that place of raw pain with this discovery. He's got real questions. Here's the big choice that's facing Joseph.

Will he lean the whole weight of his life on the word of the Lord here? Will he absorb every ounce of shame that's going to come his way because he chooses to associate himself with Mary?

And most of all, will he place his hope and his trust in the truth of who this Jesus is? Will he do that?

[15:50] Or will he walk away and break it off? It's his choice, isn't it? It's his choice. Really simply, will he walk by faith?

Or will he walk by sight? Love this guy. See what he does at verse 24. See him embrace the path ahead of him.

What does Joseph do? See verse 24 and 25. See in the text those two verbs. Number one, he did. You see that? He did. He did what the angel of the Lord commanded him.

He took Mary to be his wife. He did. Second verb. He gave. The child. The name.

Jesus. Do you see how he absolutely nailed his one line? And there were no parents out with their phone cameras. And there were no grannies out with their hankies.

[16:50] And there were no teachers encouraging everyone to stand up and clap saying, Encore, encore. Can we do it again? But boy, you've got to understand what they've been rejoicing in heaven as to what God was doing in this, the most glorious of moments.

Heaven is breaking in. It's amazing, isn't it? When angels turn up in the Bible, they are a bit like Edinburgh buses. You wait for ages for one and then four turn up at once. It is that kind of gig in the Bible.

But see when you see them, listen. Something magnificent is happening here. It's a glorious moment here. Glorious moment.

But here's the thing. We can easily get sentimental at this point in the story. Like this was some kind of first century version of love actually. It all ends happily ever after.

It's a few bumps in the road in this Christmas romance. But everything ends up happily ever, ever after. But let's not kid ourselves. Life from this moment on for this young family would have been anything but rainbows and unicorns.

[18:00] I mean, Nazareth, it isn't a big place. What you need to know about Nazareth is there's really nothing to know about Nazareth. It's always the deal.

It's not a big place. And people being people being people. A bit of juicy news like that would have got around the village pretty quickly. What we say in Glasgow, that would have been the talk of the steamy.

Right? What's going on here? And Joseph and Mary will likely endure years of looks and questions and mocking. But you see how as for them and their house, they're serving the Lord.

We're going to associate ourselves with this baby. Of course, it's true here today, isn't it? The shame that comes often when we associate ourselves with this baby.

Right there is the life of faith, isn't it? Trusting in and standing on and walking in light of the promises of God. And so here is Joseph showing us at this stage in Matthew's gospel what that looks like.

[19:07] To live by faith and not by sight. You know, the last time that we see Joseph mentioned in the Bible is when the 12-year-old Jesus is in the temple in Luke chapter 2.

Right? It's a story where they go to the temple and then they're walking home, as it were. Jesus gets lost and they go back and he's at the temple. You should have known to find me in my father's house.

That's the last time we see Joseph in the biblical narrative. And we don't read about Joseph after that. Which means in all likelihood, he died well before Jesus began his public ministry when he was 30.

Which I think means that Jesus knows, dear friends, if this is you here today, if there's an empty space around your Christmas table, Jesus knows what it is to lose a parent.

But just think about that for a moment. What did Joseph not get to see? He never saw Jesus perform miracles. He never heard Jesus teach.

[20 : 14] And he never saw Jesus fulfill everything that his name suggested as he saved his people from their sin as he died on the cross. Didn't get to see any of it.

And you see in passing how there's a wonderful parallel there, if you like, between father and son. Here is Joseph willing to embrace the shame that would come his way because he chose to associate himself with his bride.

And years later, Jesus wouldn't just embrace the shame, but he would absorb the shame, the guilt and the sin. Because he chose to associate himself with his bride, the church, as he dies on the cross for the sin of his people.

It's a wonderful parallel there between father and son. But Jesus never saw, Joseph never saw Jesus die on the cross. And Joseph never saw Jesus rise from the grave.

And Joseph never saw Jesus ascend to heaven where he is right now. He didn't get to see any of it. And yet you see how that was no barrier to him in this moment.

[21 : 22] Placing his faith in the identity of this child. You know, just as we close, do you know what the, what words were shouted in my ear this morning?

Not long after getting up. Daddy, daddy, can you help me find door number 14? Eve up bright and early warning her Advent calendar.

Grandma bought us, bought them a lint one this year. We are happy, happy kids in our household. But you know, Kate said at the start, and this is where I was going to finish and just remind us of this as we look at Joseph and him looking forward in faith.

Trusting in God's promises. That word Advent, it just means coming, doesn't it? When we open those doors, what we're doing is we're counting down, as it were, to the first coming of Jesus.

But today we're actually waiting for his second coming. So we find ourselves in history. So I always try to do that when we open those doors to remember his first coming. But to remember that we are waiting on his second coming.

[22 : 29] When he won't come as humble, mild, meek, baby Jesus. Actually, he'll come as victorious King Jesus.

And all wrongs will be put to right. Perfect justice will be executed. Every tear will be wiped away. And sin and death will be distant memories. Listen, we started by thinking about a boy in the Christmas nativity who fluffed his line.

We thought about Joseph in the original Christmas drama who absolutely nailed his line. But right at the end of the Bible story, we read another line. And it's the final line in the Bible, if you like, from the risen and reigning King Jesus.

A word to his people who are waiting for his coming. And that line is simply, yes, I am coming soon. And so like Jesus, friends, we might find ourselves in a different part of God's story.

Jesus has come. Jesus has died. He's risen. But like Joseph, we are waiting. And we're living according to the promises of God. Waiting for this Jesus to wonderfully return.

[23 : 43] And maybe even this morning as you hear this and respond to it. Maybe even this morning is a morning when you would put your faith in this Jesus. Knowing that he would do exactly what his name suggests.

As he would die for our sin on the cross. Born thy people to deliver. Born a child and yet a king. Born to reign in us forever. Now thy gracious kingdom bring. By thine own eternal spirit. Rule in all our hearts alone.

By thine all sufficient merit. Raise us to thy glorious throne. Let me pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you so much this morning.

For sending Jesus. The lights of the world. Emmanuel. The one who would come to save us from our sins.

[24 : 47] You sent him into our darkness. To save us. And we ask that you would help us to be the people. Who are faithfully waiting.

And who base our lives on the truth of your every word. Father, we thank you for all the joy. And all the wonder that this time of year brings to us.

But Father, may we just gaze upon once again the most wonderful gift we could ever hope to receive. That is the forgiveness and newness of life that is found in this one called Jesus.

So Father, thank you for this morning. We pray you'd be with us as we finish our time together. In Jesus' wonderful name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.