

Joseph's Line

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[0 : 00] Folks, let's pause and let's pray as we come to God's Word this morning. Let's ask for his help, shall we? Let's pray together. For the Word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. No creature is hidden from him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account. Father, thank you so much, Lord, for your Word.

It is your Word. We just take stock of that today. It is not a human invention. It is your living and active Word. And we ask that it would come and do, that you would, through it, do your strengthening and searching and encouraging work in our lives and in our hearts.

Father, we ask for your Spirit that he would come and help us as we turn to your Word now. Help us, Father, with these verses that sometimes are so familiar. Lord, to gaze once again at just the wonder of what we are reading and thinking about as we lead up to Christmas.

So, Lord, be with us, we ask. Thank you that you hear us because we pray in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Well, folks, let me encourage you to grab your Bibles and turn to verse 18 of Matthew chapter 2.

[1 : 22] And as we're turning there, let me tell you one of my favourite stories concerning funny things that have been said at a school nativity play.

So, picture the scene. The nativity is in full swing. We're at the point in the story where Mary and Joseph, they've 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 the wise men are up and it's their time to shine. So, wise men, wise man number one pipes up and he says, Baby Jesus, I bring you some gold.

Parents are clapping in the background. Yeah. Wise man number two pipes up. Baby Jesus, I bring you some myrrh. Again, yeah, parents delighted. Yeah, this moment.

Wise man number three pipes up. It's his big moment. But he pauses nervously. And at this point, what happens is every parent's nativity nightmare, right?

[2 : 24] The little boy's gone and he's forgotten his line. But he can vaguely remember something of what the line was. So, he thinks I'll give it a go and he steps forward and he says, Baby Jesus, I think Frank sent this.

Okay, Edward loved it. So, let me take you, as we turn to Matthew chapter one, let me take you from a boy in a Christmas nativity who fluffed his lines to the man in the original Christmas story who absolutely nailed his line.

Come with me to Matthew chapter one, verse 18. And to the guy who I always think is the unsung hero of the Christmas story. Right?

The man who doesn't get the spotlight. The man who doesn't get the plaudits. But as the man, as we see him here, has so much to teach us about the Christian life of faith.

Walking by faith. You see, as Matthew tells us the Christmas story, he focuses in on this man, this legal descendant of David. That's what Matthew's interested in.

[3 : 30] This legal descendant of David called Joseph. The young village carpenter who has pledged his heart to marry his bride-to-be sweetheart.

Now, if you look at verse 19, Matthew tells us that these guys are a couple who are pledged to be married to one another. That's what we're given.

They're pledged to be married. Now, it's probably just worth pausing at this point and appreciating just what that means. Because it is more than what we would understand today by engagement.

Because in this day, in the eyes of the watching world, if you are pledged to be married, you're as good as married. Right? And all you're doing really is counting down the days until you make your marriage official at your wedding ceremony.

So if you're going to call this off in this day, then this is a massive deal. Massive deal. And actually, it's treated as if it were a divorce.

[4 : 32] So here are this couple pledged to be married. Here's this young couple with the whole of their lives ahead of them. And I'd imagine like any young couple, they have at the outset of their marriage big dreams and aspirations for what their married life together will become.

What they're going to do. Who they're going to see. What they're going to build. Remember when we got married, before we got married, somebody gave us a big map of the world and said, just colour in the places where you're going to go. Oh yeah, we loved it.

That's what we're going to do. These guys are exactly the same. Big dreams for what their lives will be like as a married couple. But I think it's fair to say that life as they know it is about to change forever.

So we pick up Joseph's story at verse 18 and here's the scene in front of him. Really simply to his shock, Mary's pregnant and Joseph knows that he cannot be the father.

That's what we're told in the text. Now sometimes we get so used to this story because we see it and we hear it every year that we can become almost numb to the raw emotion of that discovery.

[5 : 37] This is absolutely crushing news for Joseph on so many levels. Try and get into the text, into this guy's head and into his life.

Okay, just imagine the shattered dreams. Just imagine the mental anguish. Just imagine the emotional turmoil as he chews that one over in his mind.

Because I thought she loved me and I thought I loved her. I don't understand what has happened. This guy's feeling the pain. And the obvious path ahead of him is to call the marriage off.

And I don't think it's just an option for him. I think it's probably fair to say that that is what is expected of him in this situation, in this culture. To officially divorce Mary and in so doing save his own reputation by exposing her to public shame.

But Matthew tells us, do you see, and I'm assuming just because of the kind of man that Joseph is, and because he really loves this girl, that he chooses that he's going to treat Mary differently.

[6 : 49] Do you see it? And so in his mind, he's considered this, which means that he's chewed this one over. He's decided that he's going to call off the marriage behind the scenes.

So that is the scene in front of him. And then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, verse 20, there's a choice before him. All of a sudden, this angel appears.

Right? Out of nowhere. I've got a friend who always says that angels in the Bible are often like Edinburgh buses, right? You don't see one for 400 odd years up until, bam, two appear at once in the Christmas story.

Here's this angel. And he's got a message. He's got God's message for Joseph. And it's quite simple, really. Do you see that there are two instructions? Followed by two names.

Right? The two instructions come with me. Firstly, Joseph, you need to be the husband that Mary needs you to be to her. Take Mary to be your wife. Don't be afraid. And secondly, Joseph, you need to be the father that the boy needs you to be to him.

[7 : 48] There's the instructions that are given. Probably combined in the one. Right? And the other instruction that he's given is to name the child.

And it's key to see that one. Name the child. So there's his two instructions. Take Mary. Be the husband and the father that you need to be. And name the child. And see the two names. Because the key is in the two names.

Right? What are the two names? Verse 21. Firstly, his name is Jesus. Now, the kids talk kind of spoiled my thunder here for me. Right? But the clue's in the name.

Jesus. I remember when Alex and I were in Malawi. I remember finding it really striking that some of the people that we learned to speak with, that we got to know, that we got to love, they had names like harmony and wisdom and honesty.

Right? Parents naming their children after things that they hoped they would become. I even heard of somebody tell me that they once met a King George V, which I thought was quite funny. Naming their children after things that they wanted them to become.

[8 : 51] Now, we do that sometimes in our culture as well, don't we? We call our little girl Grace. Naming their children after things that they hope their lives are going to be marked by. In Matthew chapter 2, this boy is named not in hopeful expectation of what he might one day become.

He is named in full knowledge of what he will one day do. His name means God saves. That's what his name means. God saves.

God rescues. God saves. And that is what he's come to do, to save his people from their sins. Those sins that had brought the wrath of God on all of humanity.

Here is Jesus come to deal with the problem. He is God's rescuer. He comes to save. And the second name, verse 23, is Emmanuel.

God with us. You see, Joseph's told, verse 20, that life in Mary's womb is God's doing, not man's. She is pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 53] Matthew gives us that twice, if you pay attention to the text. Here is the virgin birth. Why is that important? Is it important?

Friends, it is vital. It is crucial. It's one of the building blocks of our faith. Okay, why is it important? Well, you remember we saw last week as we looked at that long list of names in the genealogy. But Matthew's telling us that the answer to mankind's sin problem was never going to come from the human gene pool.

Right? That is a poor river from which to go fishing for a saviour. This saviour needs to come from out with us so as not to be stained by our sin.

He needs to come from out with us. But if he's to be our saviour, he needs to be one of us so that he can stand in our place and live the life of worship to God, of righteousness, the one that we couldn't live.

That is our saviour. He is fully God and fully man. This is what this text is telling us. Jesus Christ. So what we sing as we close this service.

[10 : 59] Heart the Herald. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity. As a saviour will find some of the richest Christian theology in Christmas songs.

Which is why I always find it amazing that some of the boys from my football team come to that service, the carol service every year. And they're singing this stuff. Just another little incentive to invite people to come next weekend.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity. Simply means look and see. Look and see. God in human flesh.

I remember a friend of mine when he was young. I was hanging out with him this week. And he was telling me that when he was young he went in for a major operation. And he looks back on that time as the moment in his life when he knew that his parents really loved him.

Right? He'd heard it before. He'd heard it all his life. But he didn't see it until this operation. And he was telling me that at the operation they were there for him when he went to sleep.

[12 : 06] And they were the first faces he saw when he woke up. And he learned from the doctors that his parents didn't leave his side the whole operation. And he said that I heard them tell me that they loved me.

But it was the time when I saw them that they were there. It was their presence that just hit their love to whole new levels in my life. Isn't it true that sometimes just to be there for somebody isn't it?

Our presence just communicates how much we love them. And this is what Emmanuel means in the ultimate sense. Here is God showing a world that preferred the darkness.

John chapter 1. That creature rejecting creator. We do not want you on this planet. And into a people. John chapter 1 again. Who did not receive him. His own.

Who did not want anything to do with him. And yet here is a God who is stepping into our human existence. And saying here I am. I love you.

[13 : 15] And I'm going to do exactly what I said I would do. Friends maybe this Christmas you need to stop and to think again. As you gaze at that baby in the manger. What it is screaming at us is just how much God loves us.

He loves us. That he would go to those lengths. For a people that wanted nothing to do with him. What love is that?

God says here is Emmanuel. Here I am. In the manger. And both of these truths. That God said that he would come mightily to save his people.

And that he would come gloriously to dwell with his people. Both of these converge in the one person. The baby born in Bethlehem. Jesus Christ. Of course isn't it Jesus?

He was God with us in the manger. And we don't have time to do this. But this is another sermon. What does he say? Matthew 28. Behold I am with you. To the end of the age. He truly is God with us.

[14 : 17] And so Joseph God is graciously and wonderfully doing something well beyond your capacity to fathom. Right here in this moment.

Truly Bethlehem. The hopes and the fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. And what's Joseph's role in all of this? What's his role?

Well he's got to be fully in this. And he's got to name this child Jesus. And here's where we need to think back to our school nativity at the start. And to the boy who fluffed his lines.

Right? Come with me. Here is Joe's line. This is his line. His one line in this Christmas drama. Do you see it? His name is Jesus. That's his line.

There's your line Joe. But if he's to deliver it. He's to be in it more than with just his lips. He's to be in it with his heart. In other words he needs to have bought into this.

[15 : 14] To bought into what God is doing in this moment. And so remember still in this place of raw pain and real questions. Here's the big choice facing Joseph.

Will he stand and will he embrace the message that God has given him through the angel? Will he lean the whole weight of his life on what God says is true?

Will he absorb every ounce of shame that will 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 child in the manger is?

Or will he choose to walk away? And have nothing to do with it. So what will Joseph choose? Really simply.

And this is where we start to kick in. Will he walk by faith? Or will he walk by sight? Of course that is the question that has marked God's people all the way through the generations.

[16 : 21] And comes to us today. Are we going to be people who will walk by faith? Building our lives on what God has said to be true. Or will we live life by what we can understand and fathom? What is Joseph going to do?

There's a choice before him. We'll see it. Verse 24. Joseph embrace the path ahead of him. I love this, right? What does Joseph do? Verse 24 and 25. See the two verbs.

He did. What did he do? He did what the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took Mary to be his wife. Massive, isn't it?

Considering what's going on. Massive. And secondly, he gave. Gave what? Gave the child the name Jesus. Do you see how he did it?

His one line of nativity play. The original Christmas. He absolutely nailed it. He nailed it. His name is Jesus. And the thing is, there were no parents out with their cameras.

[17 : 21] There were no grannies out with their hankies. There were no teachers out encouraging everyone to stand up and clap, saying, encore, encore. Let's do it again. No one's there saying, good job, Joe. No one sees this.

And yet, boy, would there have been rejoicing in heaven at what God was doing in this moment. And over this man who is choosing to stake his whole life on the identity of this child in this, the most glorious of moments.

And the thing is, we can easily get a bit sentimental at this point in the story. Like this was some kind of first century make of love, actually, that kind of ended. Laughing and smiling.

Everyone's friends again. Camera pans down. Curtain closes. And the game goes on happily ever after. But let's be under no illusions as to what it now means for this couple to live by faith and not by sight.

Right? Just think about that for a minute. The reality of what life is going to be like from this moment on is anything but rainbows and unicorns for this young couple. Okay, Nazareth, not a big place.

[18 : 31] Right? People being people being people. You get a load of that. A bit of juicy news. A bit of juicy gossip like that. Right? You can imagine that it's spread like wildfire. And Joseph and Mary, I'm sure, would have had to endure years of looks and questions and rejection and mocking.

But for them and their little unimpressive looking family, they are serving the Lord. And right there is the life of faith, isn't it?

You might be here today and you're thinking, my life looks unspectacular. It looks unspectacular. I'm just going through the same stuff every day. And yet, do you see how these guys model for us the life of faith?

Building our house on the word of the Lord. Trusting in and standing on and walking in light of the promises of God. And leaning our whole lives and staking it all on who Jesus truly is.

And being willing to embrace the shame and the looks of my world that looks on into our lives and says, why are you wasting your time? Why are you wasting your time?

[19 : 45] And here's what always strikes me about Joseph. I was getting into this this week. You know, the last time we see this guy mentioned in the Bible is when Luke tells us about 12 year old Jesus in the temple, Luke chapter 2.

It's the last time we hear about Joseph in the Bible story. We don't hear about him after that point. Which means in all likelihood, he died well before Jesus began his public ministry. Call it age 30.

Right? So what did Joseph not see in his life? What did he not see? He did not see Jesus before miracles. He did not hear Jesus teach. He never got to see Jesus heal the sick.

And he never got to see Jesus fulfill everything that his name suggested as he saved his people from their sin. As he gave his life for them on the cross. He never saw it.

Never saw any of that. And it's interesting on a wee wonderful parallel. You can have this one for free. There's a wonderful little parallel between father and son here.

[20 : 46] Right? If you look hard enough. Here is Joseph courageously willing to embrace the shame that's going to come his way. Because he's choosing to associate himself with his bride, Mary. Right?

And fast forward some years. And Jesus would do exactly the same. But he wouldn't just embrace the shame. He would absorb the shame. Because he chose to associate himself with his bride, the church.

Jesus, Joseph, sorry, never saw Jesus die on the cross. Right? He never saw him rise from the grave. He never saw him ascend to his father's right hand in heaven. This guy see none of that.

He see none of that. And yet do you see how this is no barrier to him placing his faith in the identity of this child. And so the call as we finish this passage sitting here today, the call and invitation are the same.

Exactly the same. Except the facts are fuller for us. Because sitting where we do in history with all of this written down for us in our language, in our Bibles, how much more reason do we have, brothers and sisters, to take a leaf out of Joseph's book and to stake our whole lives on God's promise and come and once again adore this Jesus.

[22 : 05] And in so doing, declare to our watching world that in light of who he is, I'm with him. Let me just encourage you again to just go inviting.

Right? Next Sunday we've put these services together to make them really accessible. We've got the nativity in the morning and the carol concert in the evening. Friends, let's get inviting. Because that's what we're doing. Maybe just a really practical way of putting this into practice this week.

As we hand this out, as we stand up, this is what we're declaring, isn't it? That we are with Jesus. We are with the baby in the manger. Everything that that means, yeah, we're there.

We're with him. So let me encourage you to grab these and let's get inviting and let's see this place absolutely full next Sunday. Take and invite. Just as we close, let me just tell you about some of the words that were shouted in my ear this morning, not long after getting up.

Okay, it's not bad. Don't worry. Daddy, daddy, daddy, daddy, can we open door number eight, please? Right?

[23 : 14] Heard it all this week. Mummy, mummy, mummy, mummy, can we open door number four? Daddy, daddy, daddy, can we open door number six? Right? Our girls have got picture calendars this year rather than chocolate ones, which they have taken remarkably well.

But we've been trying to explain to them what Advent means. Right? Girls, listen, what does Advent mean? What is it? It just means coming.

So when you're opening those doors where we're counting down the days to remembering the day when Jesus came. But do you know what? As much as we're doing that, Jesus, he's come and he's ascended.

And one day he will return. So we're opening these doors. And as much as we're remembering that he came once, we're remembering now where we stand in the story that he's going to come again. He's going to come again.

And when he comes again, he won't come as humble baby Jesus. When he comes again, he will come as victorious King Jesus to judge the world in righteousness.

[24 : 15] And all wrongs will be put to right and every tear will be wiped away and sin and death will be banished forever. I just encourage you again, Advent, this is what we're doing, isn't it?

He's coming again. You know, we started the service thinking about the boy in the Christmas nativity who fluffed his line. And we thought about Joseph, the man in the original Christmas drama who absolutely nailed his line.

Friends, at the end of the Bible story, we read another line. And it's the final line in the Bible from the risen and reigning and one day returning King Jesus, who says his line to awaiting people.

And it's simply this, yes, I am coming soon. Yes, I am coming soon. 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.

[25 : 20] By thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne. Here is Jesus. Here is Emmanuel. Let's pray together.

Father, I pray in the silence now, Lord. We read those words from Hebrews at the beginning about how your word is alive and it's active.

And Lord, as your word goes forth, your spirit takes it and applies it to our lives. And Lord, I pray that in the silence now that your spirit would be at work in all of our hearts. For us, helping us to grasp just a little bit more or maybe even just for the first time today, just how incredible it is.

That his name is Jesus. And his name is Emmanuel. And so gracious Father, help us to be those people like Joseph who base our lives on the truth of your every word.

And Lord, help us to be bold. Help us to be courageous. And Lord, help us to live for an audience of one as we once again remember Christmas. So Lord, thank you that you hear us because we pray in Jesus' precious name.

[26 : 42] Amen.