

Matthew 1:18-25
The Gift of Christmas
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Christmas can be a risky Holiday. Sometimes the season is more like a disaster than a celebration. Just ask Kevin McCallister from the movie *Home Alone* what he thinks of the Holidays. He's the kid who was supposed to fly to Paris for Christmas with his family. But instead his family leaves without him and two robbers try and break in. Or if you don't think Christmas can be risky, you could ask Buddy. In the movie *Elf*, Buddy is a full-sized man who discovers he's not an elf. He realizes that none of the real elves like him and he's not very good at being Santa's helper. So he journeys to the land of New York City where he finds a father that also doesn't like him. Or what about *A Christmas Story* and Ralphie who just wants a Red Ryder BB Gun. But everyone keeps telling him, "You'll shoot your eye out, kid."

Or maybe some of you are familiar with the black and white movie, *Christmas in Connecticut*. It's the story of a woman who writes for a cooking magazine but doesn't know how to cook. One Christmas she hosts her publisher and a war soldier for the Holidays. She has to fabricate a whole life and almost loses her job and the man she loves. I bet many of you are familiar with Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. All the Whos from Who-ville know that Christmas can be tough. One year a green Grinch stole all their presents and tried to ruin their fun.

Now maybe your season doesn't feel like a grinch has stolen it. But for some, the Holidays can be a really difficult time. They remind us of those we have lost or those we can't be with. And instead of feeling better, many of us just feel worse. The Holidays are hard. The first Christmas was more like this than a celebration. It wasn't a picture perfect snow-white Holiday. A common man named Joseph was headed toward disaster. He discovers his fiancée is pregnant before their marriage. It seems as if she's had an affair so he prepares to separate from her. But God is about to work a miracle in the midst of heartache. He is about to give a gift to Joseph and us that will change everything. Let's read about this Christmas gift in Matthew 1:18-25.

Sometimes Christmas isn't much of a gift. (1:18-20)

The first Christmas was more trouble than joy. (1:18-19) A Jewish carpenter named Joseph is betrothed to a girl named Mary. Mary is only about thirteen years old but they will be married within a year. Joseph is probably a simple but good man who likes to work with his hands. But one day his world turns upside-down when he discovers Mary is pregnant. Being betrothed in that culture is more serious than being engaged ours. If you're betrothed, you're basically married to each other but not living together. Joseph and Mary have not yet moved into the same home or become intimate. But the only way their betrothal can end is through death or divorce. According to the law, Mary's unwed pregnancy was so serious Joseph could stone her. Or at the very least he could have publicly humiliated her. But instead he shows mercy to her which is why the text calls him a "just man." He decides to divorce her quietly without making a spectacle. The first Christmas was supposed to be a wedding celebration. But now it has turned into the heartache of divorce. The first Christmas was more trouble than joy.

So what happens to Joseph that changes everything? Who is able to change the story for the better? God interrupted the first Christmas with good news. (1:20) Verse 20 says, "But as he considered these things..." (ESV). The verb for "consider" is in the past tense. One suggested translation is "when he had

made up his mind.” (PNTC) Joseph has already decided he is going to divorce Mary but God has other plans. God interrupts Joseph and Mary’s tragedy with good news. “Behold!” Matthew says, “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...” He says, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (ESV). When the angel says “son of David” to Joseph he is referring to his genealogy. Joseph needs to take Mary as his wife to publicly show Jesus’ lineage to David. The Messiah, the savior of Israel, is supposed to come from the line of David. One of King David’s descendants will be the true and final “son of David.” This descendant is going to have an everlasting throne and kingdom (2 Sam 7:13). He is the promised one that the people of Israel are waiting for. The good news is that the savior of Israel, the Messiah, has come. Mary received the child by the Holy Spirit, not adultery. No longer does Joseph have to go forward into tragedy. Instead God has given him a son who will reign as king. God interrupted the first Christmas with good news.

You can watch some old color footage of World War II online. Many of these videos have shots of crowds celebrating the end of the war. If you’ve ever seen any old World War II movies you know the scene. Families are hugging and sailors are kissing girls they don’t know. There are horns and streamers and everyone is smiling. The crowds rejoice because the never ending war is over. The joy of peace has interrupted the despair of conflict. We too were in a war between God and man because of sin. The good news Joseph receives is the war is about to end. Mary is pregnant with the war hero, the Son of David, the king of kings. He will bring peace by ending the war between God and man. God wants to interrupt your Holiday with this same good news. No matter what you’re going through good news has come. It doesn’t matter how dark your New England winter feels. God has provided a way of hope for you and for me.

God interrupts Christmas with a gift of grace. (1:21-22)

The gift of grace is a savior child named Jesus. (1:21) God’s gift to humankind is his own son in the form of a baby. This baby Jesus has come to change our troubles into joys. The angel tells Joseph the child’s name is to be Jesus. He *commands* him in verse 21 “...you *shall* call his name Jesus.” Names in that culture were far more important than they are in ours (WBC). One commentary said they point to the “actual character and destiny of the individual.” Jesus’ name means he will save his people from their sin and rebellion against God. I’m going to explain why Jesus’ name is so important in the original language.

The name “Jesus” (Ἰησοῦς) in the Greek comes from the Hebrew “Yeshua” (יֵשׁוּעַ). “Yeshua” is a “shortened form” of the name “Joshua.” (WBC) “Yeshua” or “Joshua” comes from the Hebrew verb “yasha” (יָשָׁא), which means “to save.” Notice “Yeshua” is a longer form of the verb “yasha” so it means more than just “to save.” This is because “Yeshua” is a one-word sentence that includes both a subject and a verb. The first half of this word, the subject, is the divine name for the God of the Old Testament. The divine name for the God of the Israelites in the Old Testament is “Yahweh” (יְהוָה). So when I combine the name “Yahweh” and the verb “yasha—to save” I get “Yeshua.” Therefore, Jesus’ name “Yeshua” actually means “Yahweh is salvation” (WBC). This child Jesus can’t have just any name because he is the very salvation of God. Here at last Yahweh is going to provide the ultimate salvation for his people. God interrupts Christmas with a gift of grace—a savior child named Jesus.

But why is this savior child so important? How long have the people been waiting for him? God promised this savior child a long time ago. (1:22) Verse 22 says that all of this happened to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. The author of the Gospel of Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience. The Jewish audience would

have cared deeply about the fulfillment of Scripture. They have waited for hundreds of years for God to fulfill his promises to them. Here Matthew is saying that a prophecy made 700 years prior is being fulfilled in Jesus. The prophecy comes from Isaiah 7:14, which Matthew quotes in the next verse. Isaiah 7:14 says, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and (*she*) shall call his name Immanuel.” (ESV)

The prophet Isaiah gave this promise to a rebellious king named Ahaz. Isaiah calls King Ahaz to obedience to God and even promises him a sign. The sign God gives King Ahaz is that a virgin will conceive and bear a son. This child shall be called “Immanuel” and he will rescue his people. Although this prophecy could have been fulfilled in the actual time of Ahaz. We now see the ultimate fulfillment at the birth of Jesus in the New Testament. I’ll explain what “Immanuel” means in a moment, but I want you to first notice something. Notice the difference between King Ahaz’s response to God and Joseph’s response. Both are interrupted by God with good news, but only one believes, and it’s not Ahaz. We too are interrupted by God with good news and we have a similar choice. We may also believe or like King Ahaz we may reject God’s word. God promised this savior child a long time ago and he has made good on his promise.

Promises are a cheap commodity in today’s world. Politicians promise us health, wealth, and prosperity. New age religion promises us spiritual peace. Older religion promises to fix us. Hybrids promise a healthier environment. The Coke polar bear promises joy and happiness. Burger King promises we can have it our way. Disneyland promises it is the happiest place on earth. My college friends and I from business school made promises to each other. We promised to pay twenty bucks to the first one of us to make a million dollars. That was before I decided to become a pastor. Promises are a cheap commodity. But God’s promises are never cheap. He made a promise and he’s a God who keeps his promises. He promised a savior would come and he has. He promises that if we put our trust in him, he won’t disappoint us. He promises to use all of our life, even our struggles, for our good (Rom 8:28-30). The promises he makes us through his Word he will never break. Promises are never a cheap commodity in God’s world.

Sometimes the Christmas season is more difficult than we expect. But God wants to interrupt the best or worst of Holidays with his grace. He has a gift he wants to offer us anew this Christmas year. And it’s a Christmas gift that changes everything.

The gift of Christmas is God with us. (1:23-25)

The gift of Christmas is God with us. (1:23) Verse 23 quotes our passage from Isaiah 7:14, but it adds one line at the end of the verse. Matthew 1:23 says, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (*which means, God with us*).” (ESV) For those of us who don’t know, the word “Immanuel” is a compound. (Labosier) A compound is several words combined into one, like “butterfly, grandfather, or superhero.” The “im” in “Im-manuel” is the preposition “with.” The “manu” in “Im-manu-el” is the personal pronoun “us.” And the “el” in “Immanu-el” is a shorted form of “elohim” or “God.” This Hebrew compound word (אֱלֹהִים עִמָּנוּ) means “God with us.”

Now, Isaiah 7:14 literally says “... (she) shall call his name Immanuel.” (NASB) But our translation in Matthew says “... *they* shall call his name Immanuel.” (ESV) Unlike Joseph’s command to name him Jesus, I believe this one is implied for the rest of us. We are called by the angel to recognize who Jesus really is. We are called to believe that Jesus really is “God with us.” And it’s not just an intellectual belief. It’s a belief that

should change our whole lives. If God is really with us, who can stand against us? (Rom 8:31) If God really dwells with us, what troubles can overpower us? It doesn't matter if divorce, or death, or despair come your way. If God's presence is with us and he loves us, than nothing can quench your joy. This is why Christianity is worth believing in, not just because it's true. But because there is nothing more beautiful than a God who cares about us. The gift of Christmas is God with us.

Two year ago last July I was working in downtown Estes Park at Indian Village. The phone rang, and my brother who also worked there, picked up. What happened next my brother, myself, and the customers were not expecting. Whatever my brother heard on the phone caused him to react dramatically. I won't repeat the dramatic words that came out of his mouth. But it's fair to say everyone in the store stopped and stared. In a panic my brother raced to the back of the store to grab his backpack. And then he ran back up front heading straight for the exit. I stopped him and said, "Slow down, tell me what happened." He said, "Dad was in motorcycle accident and he's in the hospital." Then he raced out and left me standing there. And all I knew is that my dad was in a motorcycle accident. I didn't know how bad it was or if my father was going to die. So I went to the back of the store, hid in a closet, and got on my knees. And I prayed to a God who was with me. God gave me a deep peace that he was good no matter what came next. God was with me in that moment of deep uncertainty. Even if my Dad died, it was going to be okay. Because my father in heaven had it all under control. And if he's your father, you can have this same assurance. Do you know the assurance of a God who never leaves you? You can know this same peace even when life brings trouble. God is with us, his presence is real, and it makes all the difference.

That's what we need to hear this Christmas season. We need to hear that no matter what God is with us. God with us changes everything (1:24-25) Joseph was going to divorce his wife, but God changed the situation for good. Unlike King Ahaz in the old testament Joseph obeys what God commands. He takes Mary to be his wife but he does not "know her" intimately until after the birth. Matthew points this out because he wants us to know this is clearly God's child. Joseph believed this is God's child, but do you believe? Do you believe this child was conceived by the Holy Spirit? Do you believe this child can really save you from your sins? Do you believe this child is God in the flesh—God with us? You too can know that God is with you this Christmas season. And if you already know the presence of God with you, take him to those who don't. Take the good news about a savior child to those who don't know his peace. The gift of Christmas is God with us and God with us changes everything.

Maybe some of you have a favorite Christmas movie you like to watch every year. On Christmas Eve at the Romig's we liked watching the classic *It's a Wonderful Life*. The story is about George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, who goes through a hard time. He has lived all of his life in the service and care of others and has even given up his dreams. One Christmas season his coworker loses the cash belonging to George's lending association. Without the cash the association will go bankrupt and George will go to jail. With everything lost George wishes he were dead. He is about to throw himself off a bridge and into the river when an angel named Clarence saves him. This angel shows George what life would look like without him. The people George saved or influenced would all be dead or low down. And the town would be a much worse place without George. The movie ends happily as George changes his mind. He sees how wonderful his life really is and has a great Christmas.

Now there are many theological inaccuracies to this movie. An angel does not get its wings every time a bell rings. But something about this movie rings true. This movie is considered one of the best 100 films ever

made. ([wikipedia](#)) It's a classic because even Hollywood yearns for God. Like George we too go through times of loss and despair. And just like George we need the presence of heaven to save us. We want someone from up there to come down here to make things right. But unlike Hollywood's fictional stories, Christianity is true. God really has come to save us from our sorrow and heartache. He has not left us on our own but has come to pull us from the river. He has brought salvation and peace through a small child. And he promises to never leave or forsake his own. This is why Christianity is beautiful and true. Because God dwells with us. Because God is with you. And God changes everything. The gift of Christmas is God with us.