

Text: Matthew 1:18-24

Title: “The Immanuel Factor ... God with us in our Confusion”

INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles today to the account of the birth of Christ found in Matthews Gospel ... Matthew 1:22-23. Let me lead us in prayer. Read text.

Matthew 1:22-23 (NIV) - All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

This Christmas season we're examining what I have called The Immanuel Factor. Because of what happened in Bethlehem's manger God is closer than we think.

ILLUSTRATION – I read last week about a dad and mom who were explaining to their 3-year-old son what Christmas meant. Dad asked him if he knew where Jesus lived, assuming he might say, "In my heart," or "In heaven." But the little guy thought about it and said, "He lives in the basement." That puzzled the mom and dad, at least until they remembered that that's where they stored their nativity scene.

God is not just in the basement. He's with us everywhere and always through Christ.

Now we saw last week how God is with us in our struggles. But the Immanuel Factor also means that God is with us in our times of confusion, when we don't know which way to go. In the times you are confused and don't know what to do or what to think you can let the Immanuel Factor work in your behalf.

ILLUSTRATION – By the way, I've been thinking about a new device that, if someone would start working on it, would be a huge success next Christmas season. You know cars have GPS systems that literally talk you to your destination. “Turn left 2 blocks. Turn right one block. Destination on the left.” That's great! Now what if you had a little device you could clip to your belt with Bluetooth technology so you could have a hidden ear piece. And instead of giving you driving directions, they could give you all kinds of directions.

For instance, when you meet someone in the mall and they come up to start talking to you and you can't remember their name. And you want to introduce them to the person you're with, but you can't, for the life of you, remember their name. Then comes a little beep in your ear piece that says “Name ... Cindy Smith.”

Or husbands, when you're looking for a gift for your wife, and you've walked every aisle at Home Depot wracking your brain trying to think which type of miter saw she would want, a little beep comes in your earpiece. “Dummy, you're in the wrong store. Go over to Kohl's or Macy's, to the women's department.” Wouldn't that be great?

The fact is, we really do need help making right decisions. Life is much more complicated than just remembering names or knowing what to get your spouse for Christmas. It's knowing what to do, what to think, when the doctor comes in and tells you that the diagnosis is cancer. It's knowing what to do, what to think, when your unmarried daughter comes in and tells you she's pregnant.

It's for these times that we need the Immanuel Factor to help us through the times of confusion in our lives.

Now Matthew 1:22-23 say that the circumstances surrounding the birth of Christ were the fulfillment of a prophecy found in the book Isaiah. What is happening is that Isaiah has gone twice to confront the wicked and idolatrous King Ahaz, who has made a bad decision. Being threatened by an invading force, the king of Judah does something very unwise. Without praying or seeking God, Ahaz forms an alliance with the evil kingdom of Assyria. And God sends Isaiah to Ahaz to say, "Trust God to protect His people. You don't have to resort to evil alliances to protect yourself."

Isaiah 7:14 (NIV) - Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

In Hebrew, the word Immanu-el means "God is with us." And the child would be a reminder to the people that God was with them. But this isn't the only time the word is used.

And it is this prophecy that Matthew turns to in order to communicate the important details about the birth of Christ. In an amazing way the Immanuel Factor is all over the circumstances of the birth of Jesus. He would be called Immanuel or "God with us" because His presence and everything associated with Him literally shouts to us that God is with us.

Now we read Matthew 1:22-23 earlier. Let's zoom out a little bit and see the context more completely. And as we do we see that for all the glory and awe of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus, it really was a time of confusion.

Matthew 1:18 (NIV) - This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

Now the real situation here gets glamorized in the manger scene. But this is a mess, from a human perspective. Mary and Joseph are in a pickle. Joseph must have been really confused when this all began to happen. Mary has announced "I'm pregnant." And Joseph begins to think through the right course of action.

Matthew 1:19 (NIV) - Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Joseph was a righteous man. There's a rich history behind this idea. The Hebrew word for a righteous man meant he was known for his uncompromising obedience to the Torah, the law of Moses. He had committed his life to doing the right thing.

Now this “righteous man” has a problem. The girl he has promised to marry is going to have a baby, and Joseph knows he is not the father. Mary has explained that the angel had come to announce to her that she would be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and would become pregnant miraculously to carry the very Child of God. But that doesn’t make things any easier for Joseph.

Nazareth is a small town, and word gets around quickly in a small town. In a small village like this everybody knows everybody's business.

The Jewish law had clear instructions about what to do to somebody in Mary's condition. A section in Deuteronomy 22 stipulated that if a woman pledged to be married is unfaithful, she was to be brought to the door of her father's house, and there the men of her town would stone her to death.”

Faced with these confusing circumstances Joseph began to really think about it. We see that in two places.

Matthew 1:19-20 (NIV) - Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

He’s a righteous man, which tells us that he really wanted to do the right thing in this situation.

v.19 – “He had in mind...” - βούλομαιb; βουλεύομαιa: to think, with the purpose of planning or deciding on a course of action—‘to purpose, to plan, to intend.’

v.20 – “He had considered this...” - ἐνθυμέομαι; βλέπωd; ἐμβλέπωb: to process information by giving consideration to various aspects—‘to think about, to consider.’

Some Joseph is doing the best he can to figure out the solution to this confusion situation. Now we see how the Immanuel Factor comes on the scene.

After all his thinking and planning, Joseph decides to divorce her quietly, the text says. A betrothal (an engagement) was a legal act in that day, so to end it required an act of divorce. In this way Joseph could minimize Mary’s disgrace, but still maintain his status as a righteous man.

Then God sends a message to Joseph:

Matthew 1:20 (NIV) - But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Note: "After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream." Why did God make Joseph wait until after he had to think and struggle with all this stuff? Why couldn't an angel come to him ahead of time and explain everything and remove that anxiety?

That's a great question. Maybe it has something to do with God's working in our lives in times of confusion. Could it be that "anxiety removal" is not God's number one goal for Joseph, or for us? Is it possible that in getting his world turned upside down, in having to struggle between what he thought a righteous man ought to do, and his longing to show compassion to this young girl, maybe Joseph was being prepared by God to come to a new understanding of what righteousness is?

You need to know that as a righteous person, a person indwelt by God Himself in the person of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, as you make decisions about life, God is with you.

Philippians 2:13 (NIV) - For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Joseph is thinking and trying to do the right thing. And because He is a righteous man, he stands a good chance of getting it right.

The circumstances revolving around the birth of Jesus were quite confusing to some of the key figures in the story. How does the Immanuel Factor help us in our confusion?

1. THROUGH GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN OUR CIRCUMSTANCES (Matthew 1:20-21)

You can be sure that Joseph was a bit confused. Mary, to whom he was engaged to be married, was pregnant. Joseph was in a quandary as to what to do. You can imagine his dilemma. But an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him:

Matthew 1:20-21 (NIV) - But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Notice all the instructions God gives to Joseph. It's like God is saying to Joseph, "I know you're shocked; I know you're confused, but you need to know that I am up to something here that's a lot bigger than you. You are part of an amazing mosaic of pieces that I'm going to put together into a beautiful work of art.

Friend, you must know that when you are in the middle of a mess, you are also in the middle of something God is doing. You are in the middle of the great activity of Almighty God. Be still and know that I am God."

Notice the prominent role that the angel plays here. Now God uses angels so often in giving direction. There's probably more angelic activity in and around the birth of Jesus than in any other

single period in history. Why? Because God was doing something very big, and He wanted all the human players to know what they were to do and where they were to go.

God's angel is saying, "Joseph, I know you're confused. But God is working here in this situation. Trust Him."

Years ago I memorized Psalm 32:8. It has brought me great encouragement that God was with me in my times of confusion.

Psalm 32:8 (NIV) - I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.

So God helps us in our confusion by His providence in all our circumstances. But the Immanuel Factor also helps us ...

2. THROUGH GOD'S GUIDING BY THE SPIRIT (Matthew 1:18,20; John 14:16-18)

Now the text does not specifically mention the guiding of the Holy Spirit in Joseph's life. But it is clear that the Spirit of God is working in the situation.

Matthew 1:18 (NIV) – “She was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 1:20 (NIV) – “What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

And we can be confident that the Spirit of God was working the invisible Guide in all this situation. And, dear friend, you must know that when you face confusing times, the Spirit of God is working to guide you. That's the promise of Jesus in...

John 14:16-18 (NIV) - And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

So you see the great work of the Holy Spirit is to be the presence of God with us to guide us.

Now how does this work out specifically? It happens as I pray and seek the Lord, He teaches me. I must pay attention.

ILLUSTRATION - I have never been scuba diving, but I'm told that it's a blast. Recently I read an article about a navy diver who talked about the perils of diving in really deep water. He said that he had been in situations so deep and dark that it was almost impossible to keep from becoming disoriented and confused. What a terrifying feeling, being under water, unable to see your hands in front of your face, not knowing which way is up, panic engulfing you.

He went on to explain how he managed to keep going in the right direction. He said, "Feel the bubbles."

“When it's pitch black and you have no idea which way to go, you reach up with your hand and feel the bubbles. The bubbles always drift to the surface. When you can't trust your feelings or judgment, you can always trust the bubbles to get you back to the top.”

And you must know that there is one thing that the Spirit of God uses in guiding us. It is another way that the Immanuel Factor helps us in our confusion:

3. THROUGH GOD'S COMMANDS IN THE SCRIPTURES (Matthew 1:22)

Sometimes in life we get disoriented and desperate. At other times, we find ourselves drifting aimlessly. God knew that we would need advice and instructions about how to live.

In the 66 books of the Bible we have a reality library—stories, letters, guidelines, and examples from God that tell us what is true and real.

Matthew 1:22 (NIV) - All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

Psalms 119:105 (NIV) - Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

4. THROUGH OUR OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S LEADING (Matthew 1:24)

Matthew 1:24 (NIV) - When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION - Anne Graham Lotz (Billy Graham's daughter) and her husband Denny have something in common with Nan and me. When you see Nan and me, you see the long and the short of it. The same is true for Anne Lotz and her husband Denny who is 6'7" ... he is a good bit taller than Anne. When Anne Graham Lotz and her husband, Denny, attend football games at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina, thousands of people cram in the parking lots, and she can't see where she's going. However, her husband can look over the crowd, so he takes her hand and leads them to their seats.

"The way I get from the car to my seat is just by holding his hand and following him closely through the crowd," Lotz says.

She follows the same procedure with the Lord. "I just try to faithfully follow the Lord step by step and day by day," she says. "Ten years from now, I just want to look back and know that to the best of my ability I have been obedient to God's call on my life."