

The Comfort of the Christmas Story

In my last article entitled, “The Greatest Gift,” we saw from our text in Matthew 1:18-25 that an “angel of the Lord” revealed to Joseph in a dream that Mary’s pregnancy was not the result of sinful actions but rather, “...that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” (vs. 20) Joseph is told by the angel not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Mary’s son will “save his people from their sins.” (vs. 21) Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, is the greatest gift because he is the answer to mankind’s deepest need. We’ve seen the *promise foretold*, let’s look now at the *prophecy fulfilled*.

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” (vs. 23) Notice the significance of the name given that was foretold by the prophet Isaiah (7:14). “Immanuel” is not typically seen as a proper name in the way that “Jesus” is, but it does underscore the fact that, in the person of Jesus, God is truly with his people. Let’s look now at verses 24-25:

“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son.” At this point I want to highlight another principle that we can see in this narrative. It’s the principle of *difficult obedience*. Theologian and pastor, John Calvin writes that obedience is, “the effect of faith.” In other words, obedience flows from genuine faith. Joseph gives us an example of obeying God’s word even when he can’t possibly see the future ramifications of that obedience. Joseph was given a clear word, but there still may have been any number of difficulties and trouble that could have come from his obedience. Someone might be tempted to flatter themselves and say, “If I’d been visited by an angel in a dream like Joseph I could obey too.” Is that really true? We’ve been given God’s clear word in the scriptures. Christians have illumination, conviction and enablement given by the Holy Spirit, and still we often seek to justify our disobedience (e.g., Eph. 1:18; 1 Thess. 1:5; Eph. 3:16). Obedience may bring difficulty into our lives but we must seek to obey God’s word.

The last portion of verse 25 reads: “And he called his name Jesus.” Jesus has come to “save his people from their sins.” (vs. 21) What a comfort there is in the Christmas story. Christians speak of these truths so often that there’s a real danger that they will become dull to our ears. The following is a list of some other doctrinal truths taught in this passage: The Incarnation, the virgin birth (or virginal conception); the deity and humanity of Jesus; the full sovereignty and providence of God; the doctrine of election (“he will save *his people* from their sins”). We see God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence as well as truths of miracles and angelic messengers. In a word, we see God working his perfect will to bring about salvation. What an amazing truth this is! What comfort it brings. The Savior has come into the world, and Christians are the recipients of his gracious, wonderful, glorious salvation!

The last principle that I want to call your attention to is the *Immanuel principle*. God is truly with us! Are you going through difficulty in your life? Are you facing financial or family problems? Are you fearful about the past, the present or the future? Are you relieved that 2020 is behind you? There is no need to fear. God is with us always! (e.g., John 14:15-17; Romans 8:9)

In my previous two articles we were introduced to the true story of a pastor and some Christians in Bethlehem who welcomed a Muslim family to their Christmas celebration—a family that might have been seen as enemies by many. At the party, several Christians came forward to share their personal testimony of God’s salvation and there was plenty of joyful singing about Jesus the Savior. The Muslim family joined in with the singing, clearly moved by the show of grace and expressions of joy unlike any they had ever experienced. The mother raised her arms in worship during the choruses as tears streamed down her face. This Muslim family experienced something that they had never expected that night. They were introduced to Jesus, the true Savior of the world. Now they regularly meet with Christians to learn more about new life in Jesus Christ. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.