

Immanuel Jesus  
Matthew 1:1-25  
Key Verse: 1:23

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us')."

One of the names of Jesus is "Immanuel." This means "God with us." The phrase itself is very comforting to us. But sometimes it is hard for us to feel that God is with us. So when we hear "God with us," it can evoke a response of cynicism: "If God is with me, why do so many bad things happen to me?" Or, "God with us? Where is God in these terrible times in America?" Many, even Christians, cry in a quiet corner from time to time, feeling that God is not with them. I know one person who looks happy and strong around others. But when he is by himself, putting his head on his pillow, he sheds many tears in sorrow. Matthew and many people of his time must have felt the same way, as they experienced many tragedies and sorrows. But after meeting Jesus, and reconsidering God's history, Matthew was convinced that God was with his people. As we begin this Christmas season, let's lift our eyes from our immediate situations and survey with Matthew the panorama of God's history. Let's discover that God is with us, too.

Verse 1 says, "A record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham." Abraham, David and Jesus the Messiah are the pillars of God's salvation work. God made promises to Abraham and David and fulfilled those promises through Jesus the Messiah. God planted the seed of salvation in Abraham, it blossomed in David, and it bore fruit through Jesus the Messiah. God is the God of promise. He uses people who have faith in his promises to accomplish his world salvation purpose.

First, God with Abraham and the patriarchs (2-6a). Since Adam's fall, God had in mind to send the Messiah to save mankind from their sins (Gen 3:15). In terms of his promises, God began his redemptive work with Abraham. Usually when people recruit workers, they look for someone who is young and promising, ambitious, and with an excellent resumé--showing academic achievement and valuable work experience. But God's standard in choosing his servant was quite different. When we look at Abraham's resumé, he was an old man who was still very attached to his father. He did have a beautiful wife; but he had no children. He was in the line of the Semites, who called on the name of the Lord; but he lived among idol worshiping people in Ur of the Chaldeans. He was also very fatalistic because he had no son who could be his heir. He had no hope. Though he worked hard or achieved something, it would end at death without an heir. Why did God call such a man? We don't know. But we do know that it was God's sovereign will based only on his grace. Paul explains this by telling us of God's choosing Jacob. He said, "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works, but by him who calls...It does not depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Ro 9:11-16). By his mercy, God called Abraham and gave him promises: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3). Abraham put his faith in God and his promises. He obeyed and went. Wherever Abraham went, he honored God as God, and built altars to God. Whenever Abraham faced difficulties, God helped him overcome them by faith. God credited his faith to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). At last, God gave him a final exam by asking him to offer his only son Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham trusted God and obeyed, though God stopped him from carrying it out. And based on his faith, God confirmed his promise by swearing an oath (Gen 22:16-18). The key point of God's promise was that all nations on earth would be blessed through him. As Galatians 3:8 tells us, this was fulfilled by Jesus the Messiah.

God's promise was handed down from Abraham to Isaac--the second generation, and from Isaac to Jacob--the third generation. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all lived by faith in God's promise. They lived in tents, looking forward to God's kingdom (Heb 11:10). As Abraham did, Isaac valued God's promise and his spiritual inheritance most. Jacob eventually did also. God valued their faith and was proud of their faith. So God was not ashamed to be called their God: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob (Heb 11:16). This implies that when we live by faith, God is not ashamed to be called our God.

God's promise was further passed on to Judah, Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed and Jesse, who was the father of King David. We know very little about these people, with the exception of Judah, Boaz and Jesse. But they are in the genealogy of the Messiah. Not all genealogy members are famous. Moreover, they were not all firstborn sons in their families. But they were chosen according to God's sovereign will. God is not

bound by human desires and traditions; God weaves his history together in his own wisdom, according to his own sovereign purpose.

One of the striking facts about this genealogy is the inclusion of several women. In verses 3 and 5 we find Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. In Matthew's time and culture, women were not highly regarded. They were not even included when taking a census. Furthermore, these women were all Gentiles. At that time, Gentiles were regarded like domestic animals by the Jews. What is worse, both Tamar and Rahab were women of questionable morality. However, they were all women of faith in God. They were willing to risk their lives for the sake of their faith, overcoming their elements of fatalism. If they had not lived and acted by faith, they would have lived miserable and meaningless lives. But they were saved when they lived by faith. They also had strong commitments to the people of God. God highly valued their faith. God included them in the genealogy of the Messiah, despite people's prejudice of the times. God does not show favoritism. God sees our hearts and knows those who have faith in him. God includes those who have faith, regardless of human background. God is full of grace.

Second, God with David and the kings (6b-11). God's promise was passed on through the generations of the patriarchs to the time of King David. God had promised Abraham that kings would come from him (Ge 17:6). The kingdom concept was introduced to Moses (Ex 19:6) and realized through David and his kingdom. In this way, God fulfilled his promise. David was the youngest of eight sons of Jesse. Usually youngest sons are spoiled and irresponsible. But David was a shepherd boy who took care of his father's sheep. No one watched him; no one gave him recognition. But when a bear or lion attacked the sheep, David fought them, risking his life by faith in God. Bill Hybels, founder of Willow Creek Church, wrote a book titled, "Who You Are When No One Is Looking." It contains the following words: "Character, a wise person once said, is what we do when no one is looking. It is not the same as reputation--what other people think of us. It is not the same as success or achievement. Character is not what we have done, but who we are." David's character was formed and proved as a shepherd boy, when no one was looking. At that time, God was looking. God saw his faith and anointed him as King, the shepherd of Israel (1 Sa 16:13). Shortly afterward, David overheard the blasphemous words of the enemy champion Goliath, as he challenged the army of Israel. While everyone else was frightened, David's heart burned with holy anger and he challenged the giant by faith (1 Sa 17:26,48). God gave him great victory and delivered his people from the oppression of the enemy. In a time of political exile, David fought not only external enemies, but also internal enemies such as doubt, fear, depression, despair, hatred, vengeance and so on. These internal enemies were harder to defeat than the external enemies. When we see what he wrote in the psalms, we learn that he won the victory within through spiritual struggle. Thus, he was able to unite the kingdom, embracing all kinds of people, and defeating their enemies. He ruled with righteousness and justice--the mind of God. God was pleased and promised to establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sa 7:13). This promise was fulfilled by Jesus (Lk 1:31-33).

David was a great king. However, he once became complacent and then fell into the sin of adultery. To cover his sin, he lied and conspired to murder the woman's husband. David became a prisoner of sin who deserved God's punishment. At this time, God did not cancel his promise. Rather, God had mercy on him and sent Nathan the prophet to confront him about his sin. David repented sincerely with many tears (Ps 51). Then God forgave him and, through divine discipline, restored him as the shepherd of his people. In spite of his critical failure, God established David as the model king. David became the standard of all the kings of Israel who followed after him. David's descendants ruled primarily the kingdom of Judah. Among them, there were good kings and there were wicked kings. Good kings included Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah. Wicked kings included Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Jehoram, Ahaz, Manasseh, and Amon. God bore all their mistakes and sins for generations in order to keep his promise to send the Messiah through David's line (2 Ch 21:7). God is patient. God is faithful. God keeps his promises.

Third, God with Israel during the exile and beyond (12-17). The time from the exile to Babylon to the coming of the Messiah was the darkest period of Israel's history. Because of their sins of idolatry, and refusing to listen to God's word, God disciplined them by sending them into exile in Babylon (Jer 25:4 ff.). After that, they were ruled by Persia, Greece and Rome successively. It was a time of great humiliation. All their glory had been diminished. Then they realized that the most precious blessing they received was the promise of the Messiah. God purified their hearts. Hope for the coming of the Messiah began to burn in their hearts. They began to cry out, "O come, O come, Immanuel!" God was with them in the time of divine discipline. Isaiah 43:2 says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze." When we go through hardships, we may feel that God has abandoned us. We can feel sorry and lonely and even bitter. But in the very lowest moment, God is with us. The poem "Footprints," expresses this well: "One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the

Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there were one set of footprints. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints. So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?" The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints, is when I carried you." God has been with each of us personally. God has also been with our nation America. We have felt God's hand of discipline in many ways. Sometimes we think that God is sick and tired of our rebellion, immorality, greed and hypocrisy. We imagine that God has shut his eyes, closed his ears, and turned away from us. But God is still with us, hoping for this nation to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Fourth, God with us through Jesus' incarnation (18-25). Thus far, Matthew has reviewed how God was with his people from the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus. God kept his promise and sent the Messiah. The birth of Jesus is the culmination of God being with his people. "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah 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" (18). Jesus' conception was unique. Among all people who have ever been born, he is the only one who was conceived by the Holy Spirit. In this way, he became fully human, as well as fully divine. Theologically, we can say many things about this. But essentially it means that God is with us. God became a human being in order to have fellowship with us, understand us, communicate with us, and eventually offer himself as a perfect sacrifice for us. However, to bring about Jesus' virgin birth was not easy. A very understanding man was needed, like Joseph. Joseph was born in the line of David. He was a righteous man and faithful to the law. So he wanted to do what was right in the sight of God. Since he thought Mary had broken God's law by being unfaithful, he could not accept her as his wife. Still, he did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. He was merciful and compassionate even when he felt betrayed. So he decided to divorce her quietly. We can imagine how Joseph struggled. He must have been emotionally upset when he heard the news about Mary. Other men would have been furious and demanded justice. But Joseph prayed and prayed. During prayer, he fell asleep. In his dream, an angel of the Lord appeared to him 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. 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" (20-21). The angel's message tells us who Jesus is. Jesus is in very nature God. He is not a sinful man who inherited a sinful nature. He is God in the flesh, who had no sin in him. His mission was to save his people from their sins. Many people expect something from Jesus according to their temporal need, such as a job, a marriage candidate, or to pass an exam. If this expectation is not met, people lose heart and even begin to blame God. Most people don't know what they really need. What we really need is to be saved from our sins. That is why God sent Jesus into the world, and why Jesus died on the cross. Here we find the contents of God's promise to us: forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the glorious kingdom of God. By bringing these to all who believe, Jesus became the source of blessing to all nations.

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')" (22-23). God who fulfills his promise is God who rules history. God not only rules from outside, but he entered our history, becoming one of us, to be with us. Jesus' incarnation is the clear evidence that God is with us. At the time of Jesus, people were suffering from many diseases and demon possession. They were outcast and lonely. No one wanted to be with them. For example, there was a man with leprosy. He was crying because of his chronic disease. He was crying because of his extreme loneliness. He was crying because he was considered cursed by God. No one wanted to touch him or be near him. When people saw him they pelted him with stones and ran quickly away. But Jesus came to him with great compassion and touched him, saying, "I am willing. Be clean!" There are so many spiritual lepers whose inner man has been disfigured by the power of sin. Levi the tax collector was one of them. Though talented, he was a selfish and greedy person. He used his ability for his own benefit and ignored the suffering of his people. He was an incorrigible sinner. Nobody trusted him. Nobody wanted to be near him. But Jesus invited him as his disciple, saying, "Follow me." Jesus lived with him and bore his weaknesses. Jesus healed his wounds, and transformed him into St. Matthew.

After hearing the Christmas message in his dream, Joseph woke up. He took Mary home as his wife, but did not consummate the marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus (24-25). Joseph was obedient to God. Joseph put aside his own plans and standards. He protected Jesus and Mary at a most vulnerable time in that legalistic, moralistic society. May God grant us many men like Joseph in our times.

Matthew teaches us that God is with us. His gospel begins with "God with us"--Immanuel, and ends with "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:20). God is with us in the time of adversity, as well as in the

time of prosperity. God is with us in the time of sorrow, as well as in the time of joy. God is with us in the time of suffering, as well as in the time of well-being. God is with us in the time of failure, as well as in the time of success. God is with us when we are at home, at work, at school, or wherever we are. Jesus is Immanuel--God with us. Thank you, Jesus!