

Immanuel Comes to Mend Broken Hearts!

(Matthew 1:18–25) ¹⁸ 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 pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet 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. 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.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

In Christ Jesus, our Immanuel, dear fellow redeemed,

We’re going to start with a quick word association game today. I’m going to say a word and you hold on to the first image that comes to mind. The word is “Christmas.” Do you have a thought? Let me guess. Maybe you thought of Baby Jesus in the Manger, or a Christmas tree, or some beautifully gift-wrapped presents. Am I close? Tell me this, did any of you think of or imagine a broken heart?

I’m guessing not, not many of us anyway. That’s because we tend to think of Christmas as something wonderful, beautiful, awe-inspiring, and, of course, it is all things and more. That’s the vision of Christmas we get in Luke 2. But Matthew 1 gives us a very different glimpse of Christmas. We see Christmas through Joseph’s eyes. And for him, Christmas is the story of a broken heart, but happily it doesn’t end with heartbreak for Joseph or for us. You’ll see what I mean as we consider Matthew’s Christmas account, guided by our theme: Immanuel Comes to Mend Broken Hearts!

Have you ever had a broken heart? I don’t mean heartbreak as in they canceled your favorite TV show, or your favorite sports team threw away its season weeks ago. I’m talking about someone breaking their bond with you. It happens when someone cheats on you or decides they’re not in love with you anymore. You hurt so bad that you find it hard to breathe. You have no appetite. You can’t sleep. You ache in every way imaginable, and you’re convinced that you’ll never be happy again.

That’s how Christmas began for Joseph. He had found the love of his life. He proposed to her, and Mary said, “Yes!” In Jewish culture of that time, the accepted marriage proposal was followed immediately by an exchange of vows. The man and woman publicly pledged lifelong faithfulness to each other, and so, were regarded as husband and wife. But the man and woman did not start living together as a married couple. They did not consummate their marriage. Instead, for the next number of months, the man would prepare a place for the couple to live. The woman and her family might use that time to gather a dowry that would get the new family off to a good start financially.

Only after these things were taken care of, would the groom, with a parade of family and friends, would go to the parental home of his bride and bring her to the new home they would establish

together. Then, and only then, would they begin to live as husband and wife and enjoy all the blessings that God intends for marriage.

Here's where Joseph's got his heart broken. Somewhere in those months between the public vows and the wedding celebration, **"...before they came together, (Mary) was found to be pregnant..." (Matthew 1:18)**. News flash: Joseph wasn't the father. Imagine his shock. There could be only one explanation, right? The person he thought he knew so well and cared for so much had been with someone else. How could she? Mary might as well have ripped Joseph's heart from his chest and stomped it into the ground.

If you found yourself in Joseph's sandals, how would you react? We're told that Joseph was "faithful to the law." That means he was a man who knew and followed the law of Moses, which, when it was the law of the land, called for adulterers to be put to death. At this time, however, the Jewish nation lived under Roman rule. Roman law provided Joseph with two options. Under the first, he could seek a public divorce and use it to shame Mary in a way that would result in her being shunned by her community. No man would ever think to have her for his wife. She would live out her days alone. There was a second option. Joseph could choose to divorce Mary quietly. In essence he could have their marriage vows annulled. That would allow Mary to protect her reputation in some way. Maybe she could slip away to another town and let everyone assume she was a widow, raising her child alone. Maybe she could have some semblance of a normal life. It was all up to the man with the broken heart. He could justice or he could choose mercy. Joseph chose mercy.

In this way, Joseph's story illustrates the Christmas Story – not the story of a Jewish carpenter with a broken heart, but the story of our brokenhearted God. Have you ever thought of Christmas in this way?

When humanity rebelled in the Garden of Eden through the sin of our first parents, it was not simply a case of careless creatures disappointing their Creator. Nor was it a case of silly servants annoying their Master. We are, of course, creatures and servants, but God made us to be so much more, and because he did, our sin caused him such great grief. With our sin, we broke the intimate bond God had established between himself and humans. You might say, we broke his heart in the same way that an unfaithful wife breaks the heart of her husband. In fact, this is the very word picture that God draws for us in Scripture to portray the relationship he wants with us.

This picture of bride and bridegroom helps us to understand the effect of our sin on that relationship. For example, think of the worship service as a special date that God has thoughtfully arranged so that we can spend time with him. How does he feel when we stand him up? When we don't pray to him, he's like the husband whose wife refuses to talk to him. When we profess our love for him, but then spend our days ignoring what he says to us in his Word, and we instead live like the unbelievers around us, it's like the husband who professes to love his wife, but comes home to her every day with the scent of another woman's perfume on his skin and clothes. This doesn't merely annoy our God. This is unfaithfulness. This is heartbreak.

Is any wonder that God tells us that he is a jealous God who is not of a mind to let us give our love and allegiance to another. He wants us for himself, so much so that the penalty for our unfaithfulness, the wages of our sin is death in hell where God, as the offended Spouse, has the right to shame and shun us for all eternity. This is his right! And yet, our holy God has mercy on us instead – not like Joseph had mercy on Mary. God's mercy is infinitely greater! Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly. God doesn't want to divorce us. He wants us back! So, what did he do? He decided to remove the sin that came between him and us. He determined to mend his broken

heart by repairing our sin-broken relationship with him. How? In a way that no one could possibly imagine, as Joseph was soon reminded by a special visitor.

It's hard to sleep when your heart is broken but having decided to show kindness to Mary, Joseph managed to nod off. That's when it happened: **“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.’” (Matthew 1:20).** As one familiar with God's Word and promises, Joseph would have realized that this messenger from God was reviewing and renewing a promise God had made seven centuries earlier when he announced to a rebellious king that one day, a virgin, never having had sexual relations with a man, would conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit and give birth to a son who would be both human and divine. He would be born the God-man, and so be given the title, “Immanuel” which means, “God with us.” Let that soak in for a minute. This would not be God masquerading as a human, but God as one of us.

“God with us” to do what? Spy on us? Tattle on us? Never. The angel explains: **“(Mary) will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21).** The name, “Jesus” says it all. It means, “He saves!” God sent his own Son to carry out a rescue mission that no one else could. Only Jesus could keep from breaking God's heart. Only Jesus, by his sufferings and death in hell, could pay our debt of sin and break its deadly curse. Only Jesus could pledge his holy life to us, his bride, and dress us in the robe of his righteousness before God. Only Jesus could live and die for us and then rise from death to love us through all the heartbreaks we experience on this side of heaven.

That's what the unborn Jesus did for Joseph. On that night long ago, Joseph went to bed heartbroken. But the promise of Immanuel mended his broken heart – not just because he found out Mary had been faithful to him, but because he learned firsthand that God is faithful to his promise to love and save us sinners! That news gave Joseph courage to face the realities of life in this sinful world. **“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” (Matthew 1:24).** Do you know how hard that must have been? For months and years to come people would have questioned his manhood. Imagine what they said about his wife, Mary, and the slurs they used to refer his adopted son. But Joseph endured it all, unafraid, because Immanuel isn't just a title – it's reality.

It's your reality. Ours in a “with us” God. If you ever doubt that, stop, and in your mind's eye, peer into our Savior's cradle. What do you see? You see our God who loves us so that he was willing to put on the flesh and blood of his creatures in order to claim our sin-curse as his own and give us his holiness as our own. Your God is with you. Your God is for you. And as St. Paul puts it so well, **“If God is for us, who (or what) can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).** You know the answer. It's found at the cross. There Jesus defeated your every enemy. There he gave you a new outlook on life. Has someone or something broken your heart? Jesus will mend it with his promise that he is our “with us” God. The One who died for you lives to love you through the troubles you are having: health issues, financial difficulties, relationship troubles, you name the hardship, concern, or worry, our God is with you to care for you and turn your problem into a blessing.

Believe it, my friends! Immanuel comes to mend broken hearts – your broken heart. In love, he has taken you for his Bride in a marriage where not even death can part you from him. Instead, he will stay at your side up to and including that day when he brings you home to your great wedding feast, the one that will last forever. Amen.