

18 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. 19 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. 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 be with child and will 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 had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (NIV84)

HE IS WITH YOU...NO MATTER WHAT!!

Steven and Ruth lay in bed one night crying in each other’s arms. It was a week before Christmas and the house, the tree, their lives seemed a little bare. Things had been pretty tight at home, but they were squeaking by, raising their family of four. They were planning a small, practical Christmas celebration, just a few gifts and a small ordinary meal. To provide that for their family they spent the credit card to the max. They weren’t pleased to have to do that, but it’s what they decided to do. They weren’t happy but they were comfortable that this was the right way to proceed.

That was until that next afternoon. Steven came home a lot earlier than normal from work. He could hardly speak. He came to the door and Ruth met him there. He was holding the pink slip in his hand. He was laid off. No warning, no severance, just a “we don’t need you anymore” kick in the shorts from his boss. Suddenly the comfort they had about their Christmas plans was gone too. Now they were not happy *and* not comfortable. What were they going to do? How would they tell their kids? Oh the deep impact on a person’s life that one simple announcement can make!

And then it set in that it would be more than just Christmas. The mortgage was due and there would be no pay day 2 days before. The credit card was coming due and they didn’t have enough to make even the minimum payment. As real and as raw as that drive home for Steven was, it was going to get a lot more serious with every passing day. Each new day would bring new responsibilities and obligations that they would be unable to meet. It was the worst possible news at the worst possible time.

Joseph received the worst possible news at the worst possible time. His fiancée was pregnant and it wasn’t from him. They were engaged, but even more committed than that! To use our social customs, it was like they had the ceremony but not the reception yet. They hadn’t signed the papers, hadn’t been announced publicly as man and wife, but they were in a lot of senses married. This

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wouldn't be an easy problem to undo. Joseph wouldn't be able to just walk away. He'd have to divorce her for her unfaithfulness. Could he ever trust her again?

Oh how a simple announcement can change a person's life forever! The positive pregnancy test is a life changer usually for the better. This was positively going to spell the end of what had been a wonderful relationship. The news hit him like a runaway train. Broken-hearted and betrayed, broken in a way that might never be fixed. He lay in bed, crying, not sure if he'd fall asleep, not sure how he'd go on. And then by God's grace and a dose (I'm sure) of exhaustion, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

And that's when God came down to Joseph. He sent his angel to speak to him. The angel came down, knelt at his bedside and whispered his name:

“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.”

Oh how a simple message can change a person's life forever! Joseph life would be different for sure. The wedding was back on, but being a father was an unplanned event for Joseph, at least this early in the journey. And, oh, by the way, being the father to the Son of God. Obviously not what Joseph and Mary talked about when they were dating. “How many kids do you want to have?” “Wouldn't it be cool if one of them were the Messiah?” It had been a roller coaster 24 hours for Joseph.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1). Joseph certainly didn't see this coming and even after it was there, he couldn't see it. What did it all mean? Was it really an angel? Is Mary telling me the truth?” It was faith that allowed Joseph to take the “seen” of worldly evidence and dispense with it for the “unseen” things of faith.

Martin Luther once said that Joseph's faith was the greatest miracle of the Christmas story. That Joseph believed Mary's far-fetched story to be a God-etched plan. That he boldly trusted his nighttime visitor and was willing to serve as step dad to the Savior. A great miracle of faith. A great example of trusting in the unseen.

God calls on us to trust him, even though there are many times that he and his plans for us are the unseen things of faith. Challenges and trials are a part of life. Small things and Life changingly big kinds of things. Little announcements that change our lives forever. And not always the good kind of change. When the doctor comes in and says, “Sit down, we need to talk!” When the job that we've relied on for years is no more, when the relationship that we've worked so hard to fix is broken in a painfully final way, when power to control ourselves is slipping to addiction, when our life's companion precedes us in death. Those are dark days – days where it's hard to see forward. Those announcements seem to do more than change our lives – at the time it seems like they might be the end of life as we know it. Hope seems lost, inescapably lost. Life's sometimes like a runaway train, leaving us paralyzed in its path, nothing we think we can do except brace for impact.

And sometimes that darkness leads us to doubt God. It leads us to question his love for us. Maybe we don't see him the way we want or often enough. Our lives aren't easy enough or happy

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enough. We start doubting if he's really on our side. The challenges of life push us further and further away from God.

And really that's where we belong. Away from God. That's where we deserve to be – left apart from God, drifting further and further from him each day. For our doubts and failures and sins we deserve to be separated from him. For our eagerness to trust in our own strength to get us through life and for our unwillingness to trust his plans, we deserve our own demise. We deserve pain, separation, death and hell. That's what we and every other sinner on earth deserves.

But a Christmas gift of undeserved love has been put under our tree and in our hearts. Wrapped in Mary's virgin womb is the Word of God made flesh. ***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.***

And how one tiny little message can change a person's life. Isaiah foretold the Savior's birth 800 years prior and Matthew recounts the fulfillment of the Lord's sure Word.

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

And one tiny little message had changed our lives. Immanuel – God with us. He came to be with us. He came to fight at our side and in our place. He came to win victories over those enemies that we are powerless to face off against. He came to flex his muscles and chase off all that would rob us of Christmas joy. He came for us. He came to be with us. He comes with power in his Word and with healing in his wings.

At Christmas we celebrate the incarnation – the birth of Jesus in the flesh. We rejoice in his flesh because he bore it for us. He bore human flesh so that he would stomp on Satan's head. He bore human flesh so that he could use his body always for the glory of God, to earn forgiveness for us for the times we've failed. He bore human flesh, so that he could offer that flesh to Roman nails and the crown of thorns, so that his flesh could be pierced that he could shed his human blood to pay for the world's sins. He took human flesh so that he could bear the marks of victory over sin and death, marks that are a source of unending, never escaping hope and joy. He bore human flesh so that he could be with you, that he could kneel at your side and whisper your name and words of peace and hope into your ears. He bore flesh so that a glorious body could be his and that he could announce that we will one day shine with the radiance of that same perfect glory.

As you face challenges in life, never forget Immanuel. **He's With You! – No Matter What!** He's at your side fighting and empowering and encouraging you! He's there to prop you up and pick you up when you fall. He's there to strengthen you when you are weak and heal you when you are sick. He's with you every step of this life and as you step over from death to life, he carries you. From this place of sadness to his eternal glory in heaven, **He's with you!** One day we'll sing with the angels, “Glory to God in the highest!” but until that day, remember every day – Immanuel – **God is with you!!**

I never shared with you how it ended for Steven and Ruth. They had a couple days of fear and doubt, wondering where the next check would come from, wondering how long they could survive on the resources that they had. But then the phone rang. It was a lawyer confirming their address.

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Steven's great uncle had recently passed away, but Steven never knew that he was written into his uncle's will. A frugal man who had never married, saved a lot and ran an extremely successful business, Steven's uncle left him half of his estate – totaling 1.5 million dollars!! Money would never be an issue for them again. They had a blood relative that loved them, and his gift took away in an instant the stress and strain, fear and doubt about their present and their future. Oh how one simple message can change a person's life forever!

We have a blood relative who loves us! He loved us enough to die for us and he left us an eternal inheritance – one that can never perish or spoil or fade away. And because of his gift of love, this life's problems sure seem to shrink away. They may not disappear, but we know they aren't what really matters. We have a Savior who is stronger than them all and **He is With Us!** What really matters is Jesus and the sure and certain promises that he has given us. Heaven is ours because of what he has done. We have Immanuel – God with us – in this world until it changes to - us with God - forever in heaven.

*Christ by Highest heaven adored. Christ the Everlasting Lord!
Late in time, behold him come – Offspring of a virgin's womb.
Vieled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the Incarnate Diety!
Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel!
Hark the herald Angels Sing Glory to the Newborn King!! (CW #61 St. 2)*

Amen.